

The Feminist Movement in the Gulf

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Introduction

The feminist movement in the Gulf appeared long after its Egyptian or Bilad al-Sham counterparts. This was due to the weight of social traditions, which denied women presence and participation in public life, and to the delay in starting girls' education compared to the education of boys. Gulf states did not begin educating girls until after the oil surge, which helped them set the pillars for modern states. The first state school for girls in Bahrain was inaugurated in 1938, over a quarter of a century after the inauguration of the first boys' school. It was not until the early '70s of the past century that girls' schools were inaugurated or spread in the Sultanate of Oman and some emirates on the Omani Coast (the United Arab Emirates today).

The beginnings of the feminist movement in the Gulf, particularly in Bahrain and Kuwait, were influenced by the cultural movement in Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, and by the writings of intellectuals who tackled women's issues such as Rifaat al-Tahtawi, Qasim Amin, and others. The movement was also influenced by the pioneers of the Arab feminist movement such as Hoda Sha'rawi. The '40s of the past century witnessed the emergence of some

male and female writers who called upon women to participate in the Renaissance movement (*An-Nahda*), and for their emancipation from the constraints of obsolete traditions.

In this article, we will attempt to study the history of the feminist movement in the six Gulf Cooperation Council states, i.e. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Sultanate of Oman and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

I. The Feminist Movement in Bahrain

Education played an important role in the emergence of the feminist movement, whose beginnings can be summarized as an increase in women's self-awareness, and their attempt to overcome the situation imposed upon them by traditions and customs. The press also played a major role in bringing new issues to the Gulf scene, for example the necessity to educate females, the call to unveil, and the opening to women of different work opportunities. On another level, professionals from other Arab countries, many of whom worked as teachers in girls schools, played a prominent and essential role in increasing women's awareness and encouraging them to create their own associations. Female teachers returning from abroad, who taught in al-Hadaya al-Khalifiya School for Girls (currently known as Khadija's Great School), founded the Help Orphans Association. Some daughters of rich families later joined this small group.

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In 1953, the Bahrain Women's Society was founded, presided over by the British Chancellor's wife, Lady Belgrave, with the help of relatively well educated upper-class women such as "Al-Fadila" Aysha Yatim (secretary), and Ms. Salwa Al-Omran (member of the Board). The Society was aimed at organizing charity events, helping the poor and the needy as well as teaching women skills such as cooking and sewing.¹ The Society was harshly criticized in certain newspapers and mosques as an abomination and a violation of traditions and custom. A group calling itself Call for Islam (*Al-Da'wa ila al-Islam*) issued a statement which included the following excerpt: "Boycott this abomination and declare an all-out war on its organizers, men and women alike. Kill it in its cradle before it sees the light, otherwise woe unto us all for it will be the end of us."²

On the political scene, this period witnessed the creation of the National Union Society, which led all national actions, particularly the 1945-1965 movement. Historians consider this society to be the first political party in the Gulf area.³ Researchers link the beginning of the feminist movement to the emergence of the National Union, and particularly underline the two sisters Shahla and Badria Khalfan's role in urging women to participate in anti-colonial demonstrations, and the speech one of them made to a gathering of thousands of protestors in which she demanded that women be granted their rights, and called for their unveiling. This call struck a powerful chord among young educated men who began urging their wives to follow this woman's footsteps. Nonetheless, its influence was transient and came as a result of the political movement's influence at the time, as well as the support and enthusiasm expressed by women. The Khalfan sisters soon disappeared from the scene, and the national movement was also dealt a heavy blow, and its leaders placed under arrest.

The press took a special interest in women's rights, offering Arab and Bahraini writers the opportunity to write in its columns. In this regard, the late Aziza Al-Bassam says that the Lebanese writer Rose Ghorayeb wrote in the *Voice of Bahrain* magazine, and played a role in introducing several modern social opinions. The press also underlined the necessity for women to join the workforce and hold government posts. Some newspapers tackled the issue of unveiling, and demanded that women be granted their rights. This was also the period when the term 'feminist movement' was used for the first time, and there was a call to link the Bahraini feminist movement to similar feminist movements in the Arab nation and the world.⁴

In spite of this, the weight of traditions and custom was stronger than these calls, which were not properly used so

that women could become part of the framework of a female advocacy movement. At the same time, the leaders of the national movement expressed their discontent with the Women's Society not only because societies were considered the preserve of men, but also because the Society was led by the wife of the British Chancellor, the symbol of British colonialism in Bahrain. Consequently, Abdul Rahman Al-Baker, one of the most prominent leaders of the 1945 – 1956 movement, called for the creation of a feminist association akin to those in Egypt and Bilad-EI-Sham to replace the Bahrain Women's Society. Many merchants associated with the National Union were compelled to forbid their daughters to participate in the society.⁵ The women in charge of the Society thought that the best way out of this predicament was to establish a women's charity, known as Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society, which opened in 1955, and became the first women's organization in the Gulf.⁶

Much as in Egypt and Bilad-EI-Sham, where feminist movements were led by elite women able to acquire an education and be in contact with the outside world, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society attracted mostly the educated daughters of big merchant families. For example the Society's president, Ms. Aysha Yatim, held a degree from a British university, while two other members had studied nursing in Iraq, and others had been taught in Bahrain by teachers from Lebanon and received a degree in primary education or its equivalent.

In 1960, the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society (*Jamiyyat Ri'ayat al-Tifl wal-'Umuma*), was founded.⁷ During its inception phase, members belonged to the ruling family, and the families of rich merchants and high-ranking public servants. The two associations concentrated their efforts on charitable and social activities. The Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society opened the first-ever women's literacy class in Bahrain. Then the associations expanded their welfare services and inaugurated a kindergarten. The Child and Mothers' Welfare Society opened a center for handicapped children and a children's cultural center. In the '80s, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society included girls who had gone to university outside Bahrain, mainly in Kuwait, Cairo, and Beirut. These young women had worked in students' movements and were influenced by the political movements of the period. Consequently, their membership had a great impact on the Society's orientation, and on its concern for women's rights and demands.

Although the Awal Women's Society (*Jam'iyyat A'wal al-Nisa'iyya*) (AWS), was founded following the June 1967 debacle, it was not officially registered until 1970, almost ten years after the registration of the Children and Mothers Welfare Society. Members of this Society

belonged to the middle class and most of them were teachers or employees. Active in this Society were girls who had studied abroad and had participated in student activities and political movements. Some of them had taken part in national political organizations such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Gulf and the Arabian Peninsula, which conducted armed operations from the Zafar province in the Sultanate of Oman; the National Liberation Front, which is the Bahraini wing of the Communist Party; and the Socialist Arab Baath Party. The political background of the AWS's constituent body had the greatest impact on the Society's orientations, making it reject the kind of charitable and welfare work prevalent until then, and concentrate its efforts on advocating women's rights and demands.⁸

The same year, 1970, the Al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society was founded. Its members were employees, particularly teachers. Its early orientations were somewhat similar to those of the AWS, particularly in regard to advocating women's rights as regard the personal status code, as well as political rights. Nonetheless, it was forced to shift to charity, particularly after the National Assembly was dissolved and the state security law was promulgated whereby every movement calling for women's rights was deemed political. In 1974, the Women's International Association was founded by women belonging to the richer merchant class, the wives of diplomats, managers and foreign businessmen.

Women Political Rights

As mentioned before, women in Bahrain were influenced by the 1945 -1956 movement, but their role was limited at that time. As mentioned before, they were also influenced by national movements in the Arab world. Clandestine organizations operating in Bahrain, connected to Arab or communist organizations, attempted to organize their female members, but they gave little attention to women's issues. Women were also influenced by the 1965 movement, which lasted in Bahrain for almost six months. Female students participated in demonstrations all over the country, giving them an opportunity to leave the confines of home and school, and call once again for the emancipation of women.⁹ Bahraini instructors recently graduated from Arab universities played a significant role in this regard, steering female students towards politics, increasing their critical and progressive awareness.¹⁰ Their role came to an end, however, after the 1965 movement was struck down. From then on they ceased to influence the feminist movement.

The AWS played a prominent role in asserting women's right to vote and run for office, aided by the Al-Rifa'

Cultural and Charitable Society and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society. They launched an awareness campaign amongst women to assert their political rights and, with the help of members of political pro-women movements, they organized seminars and meetings in clubs. They also sent a signed petition to the President of the National Assembly and the Emir. This petition was signed by most women's societies, with the exception of the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society. Emile Nakhleh believes that the latter's abstention was due to its members' family origins, for they stood to gain most from the status quo, hence were more understanding of the government's denial of women's political rights.¹¹

At that time, in 1973 to be precise, the AWS, the Al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society fought proposals by MPs from the religious bloc to stop mixed reunions in all public places (including work places), to stop women from teaching boys in elementary schools and kindergartens, and female nurses and physicians from treating male patients. The women's societies regarded this proposal as a "suspicious attempt aimed at undermining the citizen's personal freedoms, using women as a means to exploit slogans and outbidding."¹²

The short-lived National Assembly did not give women's societies the opportunity to develop their experience. With the dissolution of the National Assembly and the promulgation of the state security law, women's activism regressed, stifling the hope of creating an effective feminist movement. Nonetheless, we must note some shortcomings in women's activities at the time:

1. The societies' incapacity to communicate effectively with the mass of women in cities and villages.
2. Delay in taking action until only days before the promulgation of the election law which denied women their political rights.
3. Failure to address certain women who played a prominent role in women's activities, or to appeal to the country's most powerful leaders.
4. Failure to keep up action during the formation of the National Assembly at the same pace as when operating parallel to the Constituent Assembly, which drafted the Constitution.

The Rights of Working Women

Advocating working women's rights is an essential objective in the charters of the AWS and the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society (following the amendment of the Society's first constitution). Nonetheless, they failed to translate this objective into clear plans and strategies. Their actions were mainly an immediate reaction to prob-

lems faced by women in the workplace, and had no follow-up.¹³

The Personal Status Code

Women's societies and other concerned organizations, as well as some individuals, multiplied their efforts for the passing of a personal status code. A Personal Status Committee was formed to launch awareness campaigns among women and in newspapers. These efforts failed until recently, when committees were formed to discuss the draft family law before it is submitted to the National Assembly. The Personal Status Committee did succeed in suspending the rule of obedience enacted by the police, and in restricting arbitrary divorce. Now divorce is only legal before a judge.¹⁴

Moreover, the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society and the AWS each established a center for legal and family consultancy, which constitutes a pioneering step in improving women's status. The Child and Mothers' Welfare Society also created a center for studies of women and children, which includes a specialized library. However this center still lacks specialized researchers and sufficient human and financial resources.

The Feminist Movement in Bahrain since the 1990s

Interacting with the events that took place between 1994 and 1999, the women's intellectual elite signed a petition to the Emir, Sheikh 'Issa bin Salman Al-Khalifa, calling upon him to answer the population's claims for democracy and the creation of a parliament. The government fought this movement and threatened the signatories with dismissal should they refuse to apologize and retract. Indeed, two women were dismissed, Hossa al-Khoumayri and the late Aziza al-Bassam, while Dr Mounira Fakhro, a professor at Bahrain University, was suspended from her duties, and not reinstated until after the political reforms of 2001.

Women also joined the Shi'ite opposition movement in the 1990s, and some of them were arrested and tortured in detention camps. One of them was killed; others were exiled. However, the movement's religious aspect and its restriction to one confession did not give way to a clearly defined female advocacy movement. On the contrary, the focus of attention was women's inferior status, and Shi'ite women were not regarded as partners in the national struggle but as subservient to Shi'ite men.

Following the political reforms of late 2000, including the return of the exiled, the freeing of political prisoners, and greater public freedoms, associations of all kinds - politi-

cal, social and religious - proliferated. Women joined the new political formations, but failed to recognize the necessity of asserting their own rights and issues, and to convince these groupings to put women's issues at the core of their concern. Add to this the turmoil of accelerating events, which prevented the associations from organizing their internal affairs, and setting their priorities.

At the same time, several women's branches of political associations were founded. Their work pattern was not any different from that of other women societies: visiting the elderly, and organizing seminars restricted to the female elite. Religiously-oriented women's societies or committees affiliated to religious associations enjoy a wider popular base; but they remain prisoners of the parent association, and cannot break free, particularly in issues such as gender equality, the unified personal status code for Sunnis and Shi'ites, and mixed gatherings.¹⁵

II. The Feminist Movement in Kuwait

The beginnings of the feminist movement in Kuwait date back to the 1940s when the education of girls spread in spite of constraints imposed by opposing conservative forces. In late 1948 some women writers emerged calling women to participate in public life. Some male figures also wrote articles supporting women's right to freedom. In 1953, a group of young women advocated unveiling, calling their meeting "The Conference on the Veil". This group gave rise to several supporting and opposing reactions, but its activities were restricted to meetings and newspaper articles. It did, nonetheless, incite women to consider founding their own societies, modeled after other Arab associations.¹⁶

Women's societies in Kuwait were founded years after the establishment of their counterparts in Bahrain. This was due to the absence of a powerful political movement in Kuwait and to economic prosperity, as well as the weight of custom which made women reluctant to take such a step or to remove the veil, even though returning graduates regarded it as oppressive and a symbol of the society's backwardness. This feeling was expressed by a woman writer: "In a country where people are still firmly attached to ancient traditions and where the older generation still watches every woman who moves to break the shackles of traditions... (t)his obstacle has such a great impact that it compels us to wait and ponder, once again, whether to remove the veil."¹⁷

In the early 1960s, returning women graduates attempted to create a women's association called the Kuwaiti Women's Society. Ms Lulwa Al-Qatami, a leading women's rights activist, says the Society's aim is "to organize efforts through a legal and social entity which can

achieve their [women's] aspirations in bringing about social and cultural changes that embrace Kuwaiti principles and values, favor the majority of the country's women, and can help empower them to play their proper role as citizens, mothers and wives."¹⁸

However, the authorities refused to allow them to work, due to traditions which opposed the idea of a women's society. The group consequently resubmitted its application to found a women's association under the name the Women's Cultural Social Society, which was officially registered on February 10, 1963. A few days before, on January 17, the *An-Nahda al-'Arabiyya al-Nisa'iyya* Society, which had changed its name to an-Nahda al-Ousariya Society, was given permission to operate.¹⁹

The Cultural Society focused on women's rights such as constitutional rights, and on raising women's awareness of their legitimate rights, while seeking to change statutory laws and social customs that violate women's rights. It did not neglect charitable work but this was not its main concern.²⁰ The objectives of the *An-Nahda al-'Usariyya* Society, on the other hand, were more general and included helping young Kuwaiti women by raising cultural and scientific awareness, advocating their rights, treating social problems, increasing awareness of the importance of families, and being informed about women's renaissance movements (*An-Nahda*) in the other Arab countries. Charitable work was not among its objectives due to Kuwait's higher income levels, and welfare services to the poor.

The two associations both provided social welfare and awareness services. They created kindergartens, launched cleanliness and health awareness campaigns in the rural areas of Kuwait, initiated literacy classes, and organized conferences and seminars to raise family and social awareness. Their charitable work was mainly outside Kuwait, and included building the Hanan Villages for orphans in Sudan, and supporting Arab efforts to liberate Palestine. The two associations also participated in Arab women's movement meetings, with *An-Nahda al-'Usariyya* Society representing Kuwait in the Arab Women's Federation. They also helped form a Women's Action Committee for the Gulf and the Peninsula, to create a regional women's network. However, the Committee's activities were restricted to holding conferences, and it came to an end following the Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis.

In 1974, the two societies tried to form a women's union to integrate Kuwaiti women's activities into a single framework and further their demands. But the Union was short-lived, dissolved by order of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs in 1977, following the Cultural Society's withdrawal. Between 1981 and 1990, a period

which witnessed a surge of Muslim associations, two such societies were formed in Kuwait: the *Bayader al-Salam* Society and the Islamic Welfare Society. The Kuwaiti Women's Society for Voluntary Work was founded following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

The first two of these societies do not focus on women's political rights or their participation in parliament, but are mainly concerned with raising Islamic awareness, memorizing the Qur'an, organizing charitable work and crafts training for girls, and establishing kindergartens. The Kuwaiti Women's Society for Voluntary Work tries to raise women's awareness of the importance of voluntary work, care for children and mothers, charitable work, and to strengthen feelings of loyalty to the country.

In 1994, a new union was registered, the Kuwaiti Union of Women's Societies, led by the Crown Prince's wife, Sheikha Latifa. This Union included the three societies mentioned earlier, in addition to the *Nadi al-Fatat* Society. The *An-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya* Society did not join since it considered the Union a manoeuvre intended to weaken and restrain its movement. As might be expected from the member societies' orientations, the Union was not active on the feminist scene, restricting itself to coordination between the three member societies,²¹ resolving potential disagreements, and representing women in and outside Kuwait. The Union is supported by the Government but the Cultural Society's refusal to join it, and its disregard for women's claims, makes the Union just another society whose activities and orientations resemble those of its member societies.

Women's Political Rights in Kuwait

In lobbying for their political rights, particularly their right to vote and run for seats in the National Assembly, Kuwaiti women referred to article 29 of the Constitution which stipulates: "All people are equal in regard to human dignity. Under the law, all people have equal rights and duties; regardless of their sex, origin, language or religion." However, the election law restricted the right to participate in the National Assembly (*Majlis al-Umma*) to male citizens, thereby denying women three basic rights: the right to run for office, to vote and hold a cabinet position.²²

As Nuriya al-Sidani writes, Egyptian women's experience from the beginning of their struggle led by Hoda Sha'rawi was similar to that of Kuwaiti women: "Here in Kuwait, it is as if history is repeating itself after eight decades have gone by. The same means that were used then are used now in Kuwait...the historical moments that Kuwaiti society witnessed from 1973 till 1982 are the same as those that Egyptian society witnessed at the beginning of this

century, with the use of the same means, from the press to the parliament... Even when it comes to women's lobbies, they are the same as the Egyptians', since Egyptian women's journey also started with women's associations in 1924." This writer underlines the effect of the 1967 June debacle in making her reconsider the activities of Kuwaiti women's societies: "The shock of 1967 made me change my lifestyle and way of thinking. The path to adopt is not holding charitable events or exhibitions, clapping, and endless other stupidities... The first point in this new line of thinking is for Kuwaiti women's societies to throw off the shackles of charity."²³

Four years after this statement, on December 15, 1971, a general women's conference was held in Kuwait, making it the first conference in the Gulf region to raise women's real demands. Issues pertaining to women's political and social rights were discussed, and following the conference a list of seven claims of women's full political rights as well as participation in public life and personal status demands were submitted to the National Assembly. Reading these demands makes it clear how poor Kuwaiti women's situation was at the time and how much it has improved since then, at least as to participation in public life.²⁴ Women have become lawyers and businesswomen, and they can now enjoy a personal status code.

The women behind these demands may be criticized for not really pursuing them, in spite of intermittent attempts at organizing seminars or launching awareness campaigns about women's political rights among female university students. Such campaigns failed to reach the broad-based female population in their homes, or the districts where movements opposing women rights flourished.

In February 1977, a petition signed by 395 women was submitted to the Crown Prince. This document contained several demands including women's full political rights. But the National Assembly refused to concede these rights in its January 19, 1982 session, nearly nine years after receiving the demands of the women's conference mentioned above.

Nuriya al-Sidani believes that the women's societies failed to serve women's cause by not making a move before the National Assembly session. She summarizes the reasons for the failure as follows:

1. Lack of coordination between the women's societies.
2. The disintegration of the Kuwaiti feminist movement.
3. The non-involvement of the *An-Nahda Al-Ousariya* Society, one of the most important pillars in advocating women rights.
4. The limited experience of new societies such as *Nadi al-Fatat*.
5. The absence of proper planning that would have

enabled the societies to become influential lobbying groups.

6. The societies' failure to adopt a systematic strategy for women's actions.

7. The failure to exert pressure in crucial moments, and the absence of women from the January 19 session during which women political rights were discussed.

8. The frustration felt by the Arab nation in the 1970s and 1980s.

9. The domination of religious movements opposing women's rights on the Arab scene.²⁵

Following the Kuwaiti crisis in 1990/1, and in the absence of the National Assembly, the Kuwaiti Crown Prince issued a royal decree granting women their political rights, in appreciation of their efforts in defending Kuwait during the occupation. The re-elected National Assembly, however, ruled that the decree was illegal, and by a simple majority rejected women's political rights. Even people known for their liberalism voted against women's rights in order to remain in the political arena.²⁶

Women tried to organize themselves and operate as a lobby, while a few of the female elite tried to register their names in voter registration centers, or to resort to the Constitutional Court to obtain their political rights. But the latter ruled that this would be unconstitutional. This suggests that Kuwaiti women's struggle for the suffrage is a lengthy road that requires women to be patient and persevering. It also calls for them to concert their efforts to raise awareness among the broad-based female population, to attempt to win the support of moderate Muslim movements, and to coordinate and cooperate with all civil society's institutions to achieve their goals.

III. The Feminist Movement in the Other Gulf States

Except for Bahrain, Kuwait and to some extent the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, there is no movement lobbying for women rights in the Gulf States. This is due to young state institutions in those countries, the delay in beginning to educate girls, the influence of the central government, and the absolute loyalty to the head of the state and the government.

Despite harsh constraints imposed by the social and political system on Saudi women, the latter are ahead of their counterparts in other Gulf States as they have founded women's societies, though these are mostly led by Saudi princesses, and their members are mainly the wives and daughters of the Kingdom's wealthier strata. The Women's Charitable Society was founded in Jeddah on February 28, 2002. Its main objective is charitable work, including aid to needy families, providing homes for the

handicapped, orphans, and the children of prisoners. The Society also tends to the welfare of children, mothers, and girls, and strives to educate girls through seminars and conferences.²⁷

There are currently 19 women's charities throughout the Kingdom. These associations firmly adhere to the objectives stated above, to government regulations, and to social custom. Saudi women do, however, express their rejection of these constraints through literature and art. They are also active in the business sector but, in spite of their good education and high qualifications, they are still confined to 'women's professions'. Any female advocacy movement, however restrained, is firmly suppressed by the authorities and clerics.²⁸ Although the Kingdom adhered to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, it had reservations about core items of the convention, and did not change women's legal status.

Women's associations are absent from Qatar, where women work through the Supreme Council of Family Affairs, presided over by the Crown Prince's wife. Founded by a royal decree in 1998 (no 35), the Council filled an institutional gap in the family development sector, and enhanced coordination between the ministries and various institutions concerned with social development. The Council groups a number of qualified Qatari females, particularly instructors from Qatar University. On March 5, 2000, the Committee of Women's Affairs was formed in order to handle women's rights and duties, to underline women's role in sustainable development, to ensure women's right to participate in leadership roles and decision-making positions, to enhance the role of civil society, and enable it to implement women-related programs.²⁹

In spite of the recent nature of women's organizing in Qatar, Qatari women enjoy some support from the political leadership, as they have been granted the right to stand in elections, and to run for a seat in the central municipal council. Women's right to vote and run for office summarizes long, hard years spent trying to convince politicians of women's rights and competence to hold leadership positions, and participate in political life.³⁰

Female candidates were greatly opposed by this conservative society, as their participation in elections was deemed too huge a leap for Qatari society to assimilate, particularly with ultra-conservative traditions that refuse changes that other Arab and Muslim societies have accepted, such as mixed gatherings and women drivers. Consequently, introducing social changes in favor of women requires the concerted efforts of conscientious men and women alike. It also requires " the elimination of

women's traditional psyche, as well as the social value system, and some of the social legacy",³¹ not to mention the freeing of the creative forces in society and allowing the latter to form its civil organizations, providing for greater freedom of opinion and political diversity. The political leadership will not succeed in its work with the popular bases unless it is supported by a strong and efficient civil society that is truly free and democratic.

In the UAE, women's societies sprang up immediately after Independence, and the creation of the Union of the seven small emirates, the largest and richest of which is Abu Dhabi. Women's societies fulfilled the image and requirements of a modern state. They also fulfilled this young state's need to provide women with some welfare services such as education, vocational training, and raising awareness among families. Women's societies in the UAE have garnered such complete governmental endorsement that they have become akin to governmental institutions rather than NGOs. They are mostly presided over by the rulers' wives or relatives.

The *Nahdat al-Mar'a al-Zabaniya* Society (February 1973) was the first women's association in the UAE. Five others were formed which " followed the *An-Nahda al-Nisa'iyya* Society's footsteps in order to achieve their common goal of improving women's situation and status."³²

In March 1975, the Women's Union composed of six societies was officially registered, led by the head of state's wife, Sheikha Fatima. This Union aims at improving Arab women's spiritual, social and cultural status, expanding women's activities to reach all the state's emirates, supporting the country's full national development, pursuing the establishment of good relations with other women's societies and unions in the Gulf and Arab region, and cooperating with international women associations.³³ The activities of the Union and its member societies are mainly aimed at providing welfare services such as raising health awareness, raising religious awareness, carrying out charitable work, and vocational as well as crafts training for women.

Prior to the accession of Sultan Kabous, women's journey in the Sultanate of Oman differed from the rest of the Gulf. Omani women took part in the armed struggle led first by the Zafar Liberation Front, then by the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Arab Gulf. The latter included women's issues in its program, but poverty, illiteracy and the conditions of political life prevented the achievement of this program. The Popular Front concentrated on eradicating women's illiteracy. Omanis owe the achievement of this goal to the Bahraini militant, Layla Abdullah Fakhro, a member of the Popular Front who ran schools for girls in the Zafar province, south of Oman.

Many in the Sultanate still remember her efforts.

After Sultan Kabous came to power and the Popular Front was dissolved, the Sultanate evolved at a great pace and girls' schools sprang up. In modernizing its political and educational system, the Sultanate resorted to educated Omani citizens who returned to their homeland and held leadership positions. Among them were women with university degrees from Cairo, Beirut, Kuwait, Bahrain and Zanzibar.

With the establishment of a modern state in the Sultanate appeared the need to create an institution capable of communicating with women in distant, rural areas. For this purpose, 25 women's societies joined hands under the banner of the Omani Women's Society, which covered most of Oman's provinces. The first one was formed on September 23, 1970, in the capital Muscat (officially registered in 1972), and the last one was founded in 1994 in Khusb (registered officially in 1999).³⁴

Women's associations in the Sultanate of Oman today hardly differ from their counterparts in the UAE. Their objectives and activities mainly serve the welfare of children and mothers through similar programs. They underline the importance of respecting local traditions, which is why they have not done anything to fight female circumcision, a common practice in Oman, nor have they lobbied for women's rights. Much like the associations in the UAE, they completely coordinate their work with the

Directorate of the Affairs of the Woman and Child (*Mudiriyyat Shu'un al-Mar'a wal Tiff*), which is part of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

Conclusion

The feminist movement in the Gulf still has to overcome several problems, the most important of which is that the authorities control the women's societies to such a degree that they cannot undertake any action without the authorities' consent. Financial aid is dependent on the quality of a society's relationship with the authorities. Associations led by figures close to the regime benefit from financial support from the government as well as from private institutions, while other societies suffer from insufficient financial and human resources.

The other dilemma these societies face is lack of volunteers and human resources, and weak technical capacities, which makes them unable to set up modern strategies and programs. The majority of them still cannot reach women in villages and distant regions. So their activities are concentrated in the capital and restricted to the intellectual elite, which makes them the preserve of the privileged. Most Omani women's societies have failed to attract younger women as members; in consequence their leaderships have not changed (as in most Arab countries) in almost 30 years. Should this situation remain, there is fear that these societies might become extinct.

ENDNOTES

1. Al-Bassam, Khaled, *Niswan Zaman* (Beirut, 2002), p 45 – 46.
2. Al-Bassam, Khaled, *Those Days* (Bahrain, Pnoram Publishers, 1987), p 64.
3. For more information about this movement, see Al-Baker, Abdel Rahman, *From Bahrain to Exile*: Saint Helen, 2nd edition (Beirut, Al-Kounouz Publishers, 2002).
4. Al-Bassam, Aziza, "Al Mar'a al-Bahrayniyya Waqe' wa Tatallu'at Nahwa Mu'tamar Pekin fi al-Mar'a al-'Arabiyya – Al-Wade' al-qanuni wa al-Ijtima'i.," Tunis, *Al-Ma'had al-'Arabi li Huquq al-Insan*, p 83.
5. Al-Najar, Sabika, "Al-Isham al-Nisa'i al-Tatawu'i", unpublished paper, AWAL Women's Society, p 3.
6. Al-Sidani, Nuriya, "Al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya al-'Arabiyya fi al-Qarn al-'Ishrin 1917 – 1982" Kuwait, March 1982, p 35.
7. The Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society and the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society disagree on which one of them was founded first. Leaders of the second organization argue that theirs was established before Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain. After consulting contemporary documents, including publications issued by the Child and Mothers' Welfare Society itself, it became clear that the Nahdat Fatat al-Bahrain Society was founded immediately after the Women's Society was dissolved, whereas the Children and Mothers Welfare Society submitted their registration application in 1960.
8. Though the Awal Women's Society tried to downgrade charitable work and concentrate on women's rights, the authorities only allowed it to work on condition that that charity remained its fundamental and explicit objective. This was probably due to their fear of the Society's orientations, deemed revolutionary at the time.
9. Al-Najjar, Sabika, "Al-Haraka al-Nisa'iyya fi al-Bahrayn – Al-Mar'a fi Muwajahat al-'Asr", working paper submitted to a seminar Women Confront the Era, Cairo, November 17 – 20, 1995.
10. Ahmad Abdullah, Fawziya, *Al-Mar'a wa al-Musharaka al-Siyasiyya fi al-Bahrayn fi al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya - Nidal Sha'b al-Bahrayn min ajil al-Dimuqratiyya* (Bahrayn, Dar al-Wihda Al-Wataniyya, 1977 p 95.
11. Nakhleh, Emile, *Al-Tatawur al-Siyasi lil Bahrayn fi Mujtama' Hadith* (London: Lexington Books, 1976), p 53–54.

12. Unpublished papers and documents preserved by the AWS. See also Al-Banay, Fatima, "Dawr al-Jam'iyyat al-Nisa'iyya fi al-Bahrayn fi ta'ziz huquq al-Mar'a munthu 'am 1955," working paper submitted to a seminar entitled "Ru'ya li Waqi' al-Mar'a fi Qadaya al-'Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya," December 5 – 7, 1987.
13. A case in point is fixing the maternity leave for women working in the Bahrain Telecommunication Company. Associations that brought this issue to the courts were instrumental in establishing this right for working women in the private sector.
14. Al-Najjar, Sabika et al., Jam'iyyat A'wal al-Nisa'iyya - an-Nash'a wal Injazat - A Documentation Study (Bahrain: Arabic Institution for Printing and Publishing, March 1989), p 46.
15. New associations include: The Future Society, the women's wing of Al-Wifaq al-Islami Society (a Shi'ite political association), the Bahrain Women's Society and Fatat al-Rif, both the women's wing of the National Democratic Tribune Society (formerly known as The National Liberation Front with communist orientations); also the Bahrain Women's Society, affiliated to al-Soufara, a religious group. Sunni political organizations and charities created branches for women's action independent of the parent association. Note that the AWAL Women's Society was founded in 1970 as the women's wing of the Popular Front (Marxist), but has been independent of the Popular Front since the 1970s, following its own path, and advocating women's rights.
16. Abdullah, Muhammad Hassan, Al-Haraka al-Adabiyya wa al-Fikriyya Fi al-Kuwayt (Kuwait: Authors' League, 1973), p 87–93.
17. Quoted by Al-Najjar, Bakr "Al-Jam'iyyat al-Ahliyya Fi Mintaqat al-Khalij al-'Arabi – Al-Tarikh Wa al-Mujtama' ", paper submitted to the Conference on Arab Civil Organizations: Participation, Giving and Development, Cairo, October/November, 1989, p 226.
18. Al-Qatami, Lulwa, "Masirrat al-Jam'iyya al-thaqafiyya al-Ijtima'iyya al-Nisa'iyya – Rub' qarn min al-'ta' ,1963 – 1988," Kuwait, p 18.
19. Al-Hajji, Saad Ahmad, "Al-Jam'iyyat al-Nisa'iyya al-Ijtima'iyya bi Duwal al-Majlis al-Ta'awun li Duwal al-Khalij al-'Arabiyya", Kuwait, 2000, p 782.
20. Op.cit., p 783 - 784
21. The Nadi Al-Fatat Society withdrew because it did not conform to membership conditions.
22. Article 1 of the Kuwaiti election law stipulates: "Every 21-year-old Kuwaiti male is entitled to vote." Article 125 of the Constitution stipulates: "He who holds a cabinet seat must be eligible to vote." Since women do not fulfill this condition, they cannot hold a cabinet post. See Al-Sidani, Nuriya , "Al-Masira al-Tarikhyya li al-Huquq al-Siyasiyya lil Mar'a al-Kuwaytiyya Fi al-Fatra Ma Bayna 'Amay 1971 – 1982" Kuwait.
23. Op. cit., p17–18.
24. The demands can be summarized as follows: Women's unconditional right to vote; equality between men and women in all work fields, and the necessity to give women the opportunity to advance and hold higher administrative positions; equality between working women and men employed at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the necessity to allow women to join the diplomatic corps; granting female civil servants all bonuses, including child support; requesting that Kuwaiti lawyers be also women, particularly in personal status and juvenile affairs; restricting polygamy and demanding that the second marriage be held before the court; depriving the husband of his second wife's child support in case the first spouse has born children. See Al-Sidani, Nuriya, "Tarikh al-Mar'a al-Kuwaytiyya - Min Muzakaraty Khilala Sab'at 'Ashara 'Aman wa Nisf" 1963 - 1980 part II, page 94
25. Al-Sidani, op. cit. p 99–100.
26. In a meeting between this writer and an influential figure in the Kuwaiti National Assembly, the latter justified his opposition to women's political rights by the power of religious currents in Kuwaiti politics. The same man also argued that should women be granted suffrage they would vote with clerics and against progressives, which would mean that the liberals would lose their seats in the Assembly in favor of backward-thinking movements.
27. Al-Hajji, op cit. p 331.
28. On November 6, 1990, 47 women, most of them highly qualified and working in the education sector, drove through the streets of Riyadh to ask for their right to drive, both to reduce the expense of hiring a foreign driver, and to face the possibility of war and the absence of men. But they were treated harshly, with some being dismissed and others defamed. See the Committee for Supporting Women in the Arabian Peninsula, "Women in the Peninsula: Kingdom of Saudi Arabia", Al-Jamal Publications, 1991, p 9–13.
29. Al-Mir, Jihane Abdullah (The Supreme Council of Family Affairs), "Al-Majlis al-A'la li Shu'un al-'Usra, Mashru' al-Stratigiyya al-Wataniyya li Takadom al-Mar'a fi Qatar", paper submitted for the seminar on Women and Politics and their Role in Development, April 12 – 3, 2002, Doha, p 6.
30. Al-Souwaydi, Wadha "Al-Mar'a al-Qatariyya Wa al-Tajriba al-Dimuqratiyya", paper submitted to the seminar on Women and Politics and their Role in Development, Doha, 2002.
31. Al-Najjar, Bakr, Al-Mar'a fi al-Khalij al-'Arabi Wa Tahawulat al-Hadatha al-Asira, Beirut: Arab Cultural Center, 2000, p 142.
32. The other associations in the UAE are: Al-Nahda al-Nisakiyya Society in Dubai (1973), Al-Ittihad al-Nisakiyya Society in Al-Sharja (1973), Umm al-Mukminin Society in Ajman (1974), the Women's Society in Umm al-Kouyouin (1973), Al-Nahda al-Nisakiyya Society in Ras Al-Khayma (1979). See the Women's Union, "Masirat al-Mara Fi al-Imarat Fi 12 Aman Min al-Najah", p15, 125 – 144. See also Women in the United Arab Emirates, "Al-Mar'a Fi Dawlat al-Imarat al-'Arabiyya al-Mutahida" a brochure issued by the Women's Union in the United Arab Emirates.
33. Ibid. p 11.
34. Al-Hajji, op. cit. 557 – 558.