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Gender and Participation in the Arab Gulf

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Gender and Participation in the Arab Gulf

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain the significance of women's participation in government-supported organizations in the Arab Gulf states. Looking especially at the official women's government-organized non-governmental organizations, it questions how they assist government objectives and influence change. In this endeavour, it suggests looking beyond the usual rentier-state paradigm by using broader frameworks for the study of state-society relations. With the aid of governmentality literature, it illustrates how women's participation through such avenues serves to reconfigure the state. It further demonstrates that these organizations have the ability to play a significant role in development, and, in fact, function as the most important modality of state governance.

INTRODUCTION

The Arab Gulf emirates are rapidly developing states, with women increasingly taking up places in their governments and positions in business. They are now regularly in the headlines of local newspapers for historic achievements in public life. Women's associations attest to the strides made in women's development and success. However, the few existing authoritative works on women in the Gulf are quick to show that women in fact continue to struggle for basic political rights and are subject to inferior citizenship rights. Important, therefore, in bridging the gap between success that is claimed and the struggles that occur is an investigation of the relative political power of women and the significance of their participation.

This paper seeks to understand the political roles of women in government-supported organizations in the Arab Gulf states. With reference to the governmentality literature discussed here, the paper investigates the positions women occupy in assisting state objectives and effecting change. The process of a specific type of government, referred to as 'rentier government' in the Arab Gulf, is discussed in the light of various strategies of the state.

Such an enquiry is crucial on three fronts. First, dominant theoretical frameworks in the Arab Gulf, in particular, rentier-state theory, inadequately explain or capture important political developments. Second, it is essential to understand what processes are shaping the kinds of selves which support state-directed objectives; we shall then be in a better position to understand

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processes and strategies of co-optation and encompassment of civil society. Third, women have been viewed as tangential to political action and depicted as passive actors in the Gulf and in the Middle East in general. Thus it is important to know how women respond to these processes with strategies such as the possible subversion of specific policies. We can then also learn in which ways these strategies and women's participation have an impact on political liberalization and on any moves towards democracy. Appreciably, we can gain a better understanding of the significance of women's participation through an unconventional approach to studying the Arab Gulf. To this end, I shall use literature on governmentality and situate the practice of governmentality in a rentier state.

This study has been accomplished primarily through fieldwork over four years while living in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates (UAE), and travelling extensively within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Research included visits to a few dozen organizations and groups, most of which were women's organizations and many of which were government-organized non-governmental organizations (GONGOs), conducting more than 100 interviews with the participants and interviews with experts and other academics in the region, and holding hundreds of informal talks with men and women, local and non-local, activists and others, which provided a broad understanding of the political positions and general outlook of various groups.¹ In addition, this work is supported by local and non-local literature, speeches and other documents.

GOVERNMENTALITY

'Governmentality' was first introduced by Foucault to describe how government regulates the conduct of others or oneself (Hindess 1997: 106; Dean 1999: 17, 18), or in other words, 'the conduct of conduct' (Dean 1999: 10). It is concerned with the different mentalities of government (Dean 1999: 16) and the various ways in which human conduct is directed by calculated means. Importantly, governmentality is not characterized only by discipline and regulation; rather, it emphasizes a productive dimension (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). This means that instead of punishment and direct coercive measures, the state can use various other mechanisms of control, such as the entitlements and welfare allocations typically found within

¹ For more details on methodology see Krause (2007), pp. 47–52, 298–310.

the Gulf countries. Foucault was interested in the mechanisms of government found within state institutions and outside them, or that transcend state, civil society and the family (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). Here, I use the concept to signify the diffusion of modes of governance, such as state feminism, beyond the boundaries of the state and the 'imbrication of all kinds of social actors such as GONGOs in the project of rule' (Sharma 2006: 62).

More recently, 'governmentality' has been used to describe a process of neo-liberalism in which a transfer of government operations to non-state entities occurs 'that can produce a degree of "autonomization" of entities of government from the state' (Barry, Osborne and Rose 1996: 11, 12). A new modality of government is operative; the state creates mechanisms that work on their own to achieve government results. Because of the authoritarian nature of many developing states, one would need, however, to understand that the process of governmentality might look different in contexts outside the West.²

As Dean (1999: 67) notes, programmes of empowerment are particularly clear examples of neo-liberal governmentality that seek to operationalize a decentralization of power. Although the governmentality theorization is borne out of Western contexts, where a decentralization of power is said to occur and may be viewed as specific to those contexts, the corporatist models applied to the Arab Gulf are insufficient for analysing the productive dimension of individual conduct in line with fulfilling state objectives. As such, one needs to look at how the process of decentralization and 'empowerment' may actually give greater powers to the authoritarian state, especially that of a welfare or rentier state. How are different groups hierarchically connected with one another, and what problems are to be solved and objectives sought (Dean 1999: 30)? What practices, strategies and forms of influence are used by way of solving these problems or reaching these objectives? Thus how do the GONGO associations function as institutions that assist government? One needs to investigate how the state is produced through bureaucratic practices, interaction between state and societal actors, and public cultural representations.

² Dean emphasizes that Foucault's idea of governmentality has been influenced by his interest in the changing status of liberal government and the receding of the welfare state ideal, but warns that the genealogy of the concept of governmentality has not developed within a vacuum of meanings (Dean 1999: 2).

THE RENTIER STATE

As the Arab Gulf countries have characteristics of the rentier state, being oil-wealthy and with low populations, how the rentier state is produced is of special interest here. Rentier-state literature is concerned with the political consequences that result from a state's reliance on natural-resource exports, such as oil. Such a state is concerned domestically with 'distribution', 'circulation' or 'allocation' (Ayubi 1996: 227). Here, a rentier state is defined as one that obtains at least 40 per cent of its gross domestic product (GDP) from foreign sources or 'rents' (Meulen 1997: 7, 51).

Rentier state scholarship forms two categories – one considers the political effect of rents, and the other concerns the economic effect of a state's dependence on natural-resource exports. Subsequently, the principal claims of the first category suggest that oil wealth is an obstacle to civil society; the scholars of the second category suggest that oil wealth is an impediment to effective economic development. Economic restructuring can have a direct effect on women's social development if, as individuals and members of their community, their well-being and autonomy are enhanced (Yamani 1997: 274). Thus while this paper engages directly with the scholarship of the former group, the latter cannot be ignored.

The Arab Gulf states are accused on the basis of their rentier-state status of squashing civil society and providing obstacles to political and economic development. The argument is that oil allows the state to subdue and contain civil society activism by providing the services that they would normally perform or that they had performed in the past. As is generally the case in the region, a rentier state often provides resources to its citizens, from jobs or free housing to electricity and water. In many of the Arab Gulf states citizens may be provided land for housing or business activities (Ayubi 1996: 229; Al-Fahim 1995).

The study of women in government-supported organizations is also discussed in the light of the literature on the rentier state, since it is claimed that rentierism has had a considerable influence on the politics and economics of the Gulf societies (Meulen 1997: 6). Rentierism has produced what is called a 'rentier society', in which citizens are said to have an income without sometimes working. So a kind of 'rentier mentality' may be expected to prevail in such a society (Ayubi 1996: 227).

PROBLEMS WITH THE RENTIER STATE THEORY

Discussions concerning the rentier state in the Gulf states are dominated by the view that associational life is ineffective, if it is present at all. The problem with this is that rentier state theory cannot account for how a rentier state can witness openings created by civil society actors, or really for any other meaningful processes in the other direction. This is because, according to the theory, a state labelled 'rentier' is incapable, first and foremost, of liberalizing politically. But if changes are in fact manifest, either in giving greater voice to people or the opposite, the theory cannot stand alone in explaining the political processes of the Arab Gulf region.

Some scholars are now pointing out that other variables have been excluded in favour of attesting to the role of oil wealth, and that the rentier state theory has become stretched too far. The Arab Gulf is a difficult place to test the claim that oil is an impediment to civil societal expansion, because almost all oil-rich Middle Eastern governments have been highly authoritarian since gaining independence (Ross 2001: 331). Herb (2002) reminds us that poverty is a part of all Gulf rentier states, since they have emerged from a background of poverty. Needless to say, rentier state theory 'ignores' the possibility that oil revenues might have positive effects on civil society, which, as Clark (1997) argues, is the case for political liberalization and even democratization.

Moreover, there is evidence that civil society sectors are not subdued, as has been perceived in the literature. Change, even if incremental, has come about through individuals organizing, activists' activities and various forms of lobbying.

If bottom-up activism is a factor in changing dynamics, then not only should these be given due attention but also the way in which the state responds to groupings and collaborations belonging to such sectors. Concerning the assumption that meaningful activism has 'shut down' inside the rentier state, Curtis notes how '[t]he unfortunate corollary of this has been the development of the rentier state model that regards "societal" influence on decision-making as an irrelevance' (Curtis 2001: 45).

Therefore the greatest problem for the discussion on women's government-supported organizations in the Gulf is in the focus of mainstream rentier-state theorists on the state. A complete picture of state-societal interaction must include analysis of spheres to be found outside the statist formulation of the state. Rather than focusing on the state in order to

understand change, it is imperative also to look at sectors that may produce the state itself and achieve state goals, as well as at sectors that communicate with, bargain with, put pressure on and respond to the state. As power is not the sole domain of the state, it is essential to study how power manifests itself in spheres that are depoliticized because they have been allocated a place outside the imagined boundary of the state. As Navaro-Yashin notes, '[t]he state ... is also generated from within the agencies of what is called (and reified as) society' (Navaro-Yashin 2002: 135).

Rentier state theory is excluding significant components of a comprehensive understanding of political refigurations. Therefore this paper diverges from the mainstream view of rentier state theory that the state perpetuates itself and its interests through recognized state apparatuses (Navaro-Yashin 2002). To illustrate further the paucity of such a dominant framework for study of the Gulf, the paper will focus on a major locus for control and change – government-supported women's organizations.

RENTIER GOVERNMENTALITY

Drawing especially on the theoretical works of Foucault, Dean, Ferguson and Gupta with regard to governmentality, the paper scrutinizes women's government-supported organizations and their role in government conduct and production. The following sections are concerned with the programmes and strategies used to influence the actions of others towards certain ends. Arab Gulf states construct themselves through particular imagery and symbolic devices, such as the (re)articulation of culture and tradition. This process is illustrated here through the agency of the state's official women's organizations. Employing the terms of verticality and encompassment,³ the paper delineates the way in which the state and official women's associations (re)configure the state and civil society sectors in terms of hierarchy and space.

Within the larger theoretical development in which GONGO associations have been viewed as part of the neo-liberal process, and in which the nation-state cedes power to what are usually state-developed agencies and institutions, this study shows that GONGOs are, in most

³ 'Verticality' refers to the state as an institution that is somehow 'above' civil society, the community and family. State planning consequently will be top-down and state actions directed to manipulating from above, while grass-roots actions are contrasted with those of the state because they are initiated from below. With the idea of 'encompassment' the state is located within an ever-widening ripple of circles, starting with family and local community and ending with the system of nation-states (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 982).

ways, empowered to fulfil the functions of the welfare (specifically rentier) state. As Rose explains,

Political forces seek to give effect to their strategies, not only through the utilization of laws, bureaucracies, funding regimes and authoritative State agencies and agents, but through utilizing and instrumentalizing forms of authority other than those of the 'State' in order to govern – spatially and constitutionally – 'at a distance'. (Rose 1996: 46)

Yet, in contrast to the theoretical underpinnings of neo-liberal governmentality, a decentralization of power is not at stake in the case of the Arab Gulf emirates. In fact, the state bolsters its powers through the vertical encompassment⁴ of civil society sectors, made possible largely through rentierism and authoritarian strategies of governmentality.

Authoritarian governmentality occurs when the state 'does not rely on the choices, aspirations or capacities of the individual subject' (Dean 1999: 145). Inducements and coercion are typical techniques of power implemented by these governments alongside a watered-down version of neo-liberal ruling techniques, and are used solely with the aim of taking greater control over civil society. Power in the Gulf states is exercised most predominantly through resources controlled by the ruling elite, which have simultaneously been used to build a 'modern' society in a very short time. In this context, state leaders in the Arab Gulf embrace the potential of women by providing large amounts of funding for their activities, and publicly hail women as pivotal to development. The large amounts of oil money these Gulf states have at their disposal to control the activities of civil society provides a unique case for a governmentality approach.

Hence I refer to the rationalities of rule of the rentier state, which aims for greater control over civil society through strategies of cooptation, facilitated predominantly through rentierism but also through coercion, as well as through techniques of neo-liberal governmentality, assisted by a limited and controlled form of 'responsibilization' – 'rentier governmentality'.

THE STATUS OF WOMEN AND THEIR PUBLIC PRESENCE

To best contextualize the participation of women in the respective associations and assess the role of these associations in public and private life using the governmentality approach, I shall

⁴ The ways in which the state represents itself as a reified entity with particular 'spatial' properties through specific sets of metaphors and practices (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 981, 982).

first provide an overview of women's status in the Arab Gulf. It is discussed according to general study and work conditions, recent gender reforms and personal status laws.

Access to education has not been a major concern. Women have made significant strides in the areas of literacy and university education. In fact, in most of the countries women have reached the same or better literacy levels and enrolment numbers in higher educational institutions as have their male counterparts. For example, adult male illiteracy in the UAE exceeded female illiteracy, at 25 per cent compared with 21 per cent in 2000 (UNDP–POGAR 2006). In Qatar, 96 per cent of girls and 95 per cent of boys were enrolled in primary education in 2000; adult illiteracy was 19.6 per cent for men and 15.6 per cent for women in 2002 (UNDP–POGAR 2006).

As a further example, in Kuwait women comprise two-thirds of university-level students. Over 67 per cent of Kuwait University graduates are women (UNDP–POGAR 2006); in Bahrain 72 per cent of students at the Arabian Gulf University are women (Ahmed 2009: 23), as are 68 per cent of those graduating from post-secondary education in Qatar (Breslin and Jones 2009: 75). These statistics are similar to the UAE, where 75 per cent of the student body at the National University in Al-Ain is female. However, directly after 2001, when males returned from overseas because of the 11 September terrorist attacks on the United States, the number of males at universities grew significantly, and in some cases enrolment was slightly greater for males. Thus the larger proportion of women enrolled in higher education is in part due to more men travelling overseas for study.

Compared with the other Arab Gulf countries illiteracy remains a national problem in Oman; however, a dramatic shift in literacy is evident, and women have achieved gender parity with men in education. In 1970 there were no schools for girls in the country and in 1984, 84 per cent of adult women were still illiterate. As of 2002, that has been reduced to 34.6 per cent (UNDP–POGAR 2006). Still, only 64 per cent of girls and 65 per cent of boys were enrolled in primary education in 2000 (UNDP–POGAR 2006).

Participation rates in the workforce are increasing across all the Arab Gulf countries at varying rates. State leaders have vigorously encouraged women to participate in the formal economy. Typically among the Arab Gulf countries, the vast majority of women employed are in

the public sector. With comparatively high rates of participation in the workforce, in 2001 Kuwaiti women constituted 31.8 per cent (UNDP–POGAR 2006) and 51 per cent in 2007 (Kelly 2009: 8). In Bahrain women constituted 21 per cent in 2000 (UNDP–POGAR 2006) and 31 per cent in 2007 (Ahmed 2009: 23); and in the UAE, 15 per cent in 2000⁵ and 41 per cent in 2007 (Kelly 2009: 8). In Oman women comprised 18 per cent of the labour force in 2007 (al-Talei 2009: 51). Even though in Oman female participation in the workforce and female university enrolment are comparatively low, on the ground, female youth tend to express far greater aspirations for participation in public life than their counterparts across the border in the UAE. In Qatar, women comprise 15 per cent of the total labour force (UNDP–POGAR 2006). The majority of Qatar’s citizens oppose women taking an active role in public life (al-Talei 2009: 51). As in the other Gulf States, however, women in Qatar exercise more decision-making power in the home as compared with their sisters in other Arab countries, a phenomenon shown little understanding in Western feminist epistemology.⁶

Women do not generally receive equal pay for equal work in private-sector jobs, and cases of discrimination in this sector abound, such as in the distribution of various perks and benefits. Discrimination in promotion is still reported in the public sector. Women are encouraged to go into jobs deemed ‘feminine’, such as teaching, and labour laws prohibit women from working in what are seen as dangerous jobs and overnight shifts, except in the medical field. Education and most workplaces generally remain segregated by sex. However, segregation is also a means by which women are encouraged to take part in public life. In other words, without segregation at universities and in the public sector a much smaller percentage of women would be studying and entering the workforce.

The central cause for international concern has been political rights and, in particular, voting rights for women in the Arab Gulf. Great strides have been made in this area for women; however, challenges still exist.

According to the UNDP’s assessment, Kuwait has made greater progress than most Gulf states towards improving the status of women (UNDP–POGAR 2006). Significantly, on 16 May

⁵ UAE, 1999 (last accessed 9 Nov. 2003).

⁶ Interest in this phenomenon has culminated in discussions with Qatari women and men via informal interviews, London 2009. See also Crystal (2005).

2005, the Kuwaiti parliament approved a law giving Kuwaiti women full political rights including electoral rights. Kuwait had previously received international attention regarding female suffrage in 2003, when the cabinet approved draft legislation granting women full rights to vote and to run as candidates in elections. The legislation was blocked, however, given the predominance of Islamists and social conservatives in the legislature. Similarly, the parliament had blocked a decree issued in 1999 by Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah granting women the right to vote and run for office in the 2003 parliamentary elections.

Thus, although Kuwaiti women have made greater advances they do have greater challenges in the form of this Islamist influence. Some reformists attest that the best strategy for dealing with both 'extremist' Islamists and 'traditional' members of government is dialogue, in order to shift perceptions and notions. The argument is that changes must necessarily occur from the inside out in the law, entailing one avenue through which participation is channelled in Kuwait and the wider region.

Other women instead try to build consensus through gathering international support and the help of lawyers and male activists. Certainly, the series of protests and especially the organized demonstrations in March 2005 against the exclusion of women from politics attracted the international attention needed to put pressure on the parliament, so that two months later women were granted full political participation. However, this avenue proves extremely frustrating because of the controls of the state over civil society, as will be discussed.

Gains in the government sector remain steady. On 12 June 2005, for the first time in Kuwait's history, a woman was appointed minister of planning and administrative development and later appointed minister of health. A second woman was appointed minister of education and higher studies. That year, two further women were appointed to the sixteen-member municipal council. In 2007, a woman was again appointed minister of education and higher studies and in 2008 a woman was appointed minister for housing and administrative planning. A woman currently serves as under-secretary of education and several ambassadors are women.

Until 2002, Bahraini women had no political rights. They could neither vote nor stand in elections. The constitution was amended in 2002 so that women were allowed to run in the 2002 municipal and parliamentary elections, although none won a seat. One female candidate won an

uncontested parliamentary seat, becoming the first elected Bahraini female deputy in parliamentary elections held on 25 November 2006. In 2004, a woman was appointed as minister of health, in January 2005 a second woman was appointed minister of social affairs, and in 2008 a woman was appointed minister of culture and information. Significantly, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani issued a decree on 26 April 2007, appointing a woman as a judge in the constitutional court. Bahrain appointed its first female judge on 6 June 2006. Furthermore, in June 2006, when Bahrain was elected head of the United Nations General Assembly, a woman was appointed as the assembly's president, becoming the first Middle Eastern woman and the third woman in history to take the post. However, political gains in Kuwait and Bahrain have also come about with grass-roots pressure.

Political gains in the UAE and Qatar have been largely led by the rulers and, in particular, the wives of the rulers – Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, wife of the late Sheikh Zayed, and Sheikha Mouza bint Nasser Al-Misnad, wife of Sheikh Hamad. Although women had long held positions in the local, Sharjah, parliament, the UAE had been one of the slowest to allow women into key federal government positions. On 1 November 2004, the United Arab Emirates appointed a woman as minister of economy and trade. A woman was then elected to the Federal National Council, and eight others were appointed in 2007, representing 22.5 per cent of the parliament and instantly sweeping the UAE up to a ranking of having one of the highest representations of female parliamentarians in the world! Following Bahrain, beginning in 2008, women could also be judges and public prosecutors. In March 1999 Qatar held the first elections in the country's history, although no women won seats. The first female elected official won in the second municipal elections held in April 2003, and then a woman was appointed minister of education. Previously, Sheikh Hamad's sister had held the highest position given to a woman – deputy chair of the Higher Committee for Family Affairs. In 2007 a woman won a seat on the Central Municipal Council.

Oman had been one of the forerunners in supporting women to public office in the Gulf region. Nonetheless, the parliamentary elections for the Majlis al-Shura (Consultative Council) in October 2003 were only the first in which women were free to participate without restrictions; none won, however, while the two female incumbents were both re-elected, keeping the female

representation the same. Sultan Qaboos appointed to his seventy-member Majlis ad-Dawla⁷ fourteen women in November 2007 (al-Talei 2009: 52). In 2003, the sultan appointed Oman's first female minister; women currently fill three other ministerial posts,⁸ and women have served as ambassadors from as early as 1999.

Progress is being made with regard to personal status law across the Gulf, but women continue to face legal inequality. The Family Law, promulgated by the emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad al-Thani, on 29 June 2007, consists of 301 articles addressing domestic issues not based entirely on Islamic law nor confined to interpretations of one Islamic school of law. The law gives the wife the right to end the marriage under certain conditions and, significantly, banned 'temporary marriages'.

Aside from unequal citizenship rights, women face practical obstacles and discrimination in divorce and inheritance decisions. Women's testimony is not given equal value in court proceedings, except in Oman as of 2008. Women are generally prohibited from taking up employment without permission from a male guardian. In cases of divorce, custody laws differ, but a woman usually loses her right to custody upon remarriage. A man need not have a reason for divorce, and recently women have controversially been divorced by Short Message Service (SMS, i.e. texting), whereas women themselves must provide very specific reasons and undergo the usual lengthy process or else give up certain often substantial entitlements through the provisions of *khula* (divorce initiated by a woman). In none of the countries are women allowed to confer citizenship on their spouses or children. In fact, women in the UAE risk losing their citizenship on marriage to a non-GCC foreigner, although in the UAE and recently Bahrain, a sheikhly or emiri decree allowed the passing of citizenship for confined cases. The rules governing domestic issues do, however, vary. Moreover, discrimination is practised normatively in rulings between persons of different status, such as a rich and a poor woman or a local and a domestic servant.

In Bahrain and Kuwait, differences exist in the personal status code for Sunni and Shi'a women. For example, Shi'a women are treated more equitably in divorce and inheritance proceedings than their Sunni counterparts, who, on the other hand, receive more favourable

⁷ The Majlis ad-Dawla serves as an advisory body that reviews draft laws proposed by the government.

⁸ Sultanate of Oman, Ministry of Information.

custody verdicts. Only the Sunni needs to have a male guardian sign a marriage contract, while in Kuwait Shiite women face less favourable custody outcomes than Sunni women. However, differently from Qatar since recent amendments to the law and similarly to the UAE, divorce decrees and procedures are often solely dependent on the personal approach or on the prejudices of the judge presiding over the case. Furthermore, personal status laws are not always enforced in practice.

Marriage to a foreign woman is argued to be a problem in the Gulf states in terms of stability and is obviously a challenge for local women, who face practical obstacles, in terms of norms and familial acceptance, and government laws, when marrying foreign men.⁹ In 1998, 28 per cent of marriages in the UAE were between UAE men and foreign women. The marriage of one man to more than one woman continues to be a challenge to many women. Some 50 per cent of marriages of locals in the UAE are to more than one wife, although many marriages are not registered (Krause 2007: 101, 102); this is a phenomenon that exists across the Gulf, albeit usually with lower numbers.

Violence against women continues to be a pressing issue. Domestic violence has only recently been studied, and there is now growing awareness of its prevalence. Nonetheless, extreme few local women report spousal abuse to the police, and it is often kept within the family or, more recently, sometimes discussed under great secrecy with appointed women in some of the GONGOs. Family honour and reconciliation are priorities. There are many reports of women being sent home from police stations for reconciliation. Spousal rape is not a criminal offence in any of the countries. Across the Gulf there are, furthermore, reports of violence against and rape of domestic servants. Incidents are rarely reported because the servants' livelihood depends on their employment with the host family, as well as those whom they support in their home countries. Furthermore, a recent Freedom House report (2009: 14, 19, 20, 24, 56, 73, 74, 91, 92, 93, 111, 112) has found the forced prostitution of young women brought over on false passports or who are lied to over work descriptions to be an 'increasing' problem that GCC governments have made efforts to address. Women's personal status is dictated by Islamic laws as to be viewed according to each country's or emirate's interpretation of its stated

⁹ Across the Arab Gulf concerns are increasing over women unable to find marriage partners.

madhab (Islamic school of law). Due to the existing interpretations of Islamic law and for other reasons, all countries that have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) have done so with reservations on some points. The CEDAW was ratified by Kuwait in 1994, Bahrain in 2002, the UAE in 2004 and Oman in 2006; as of May 2009 Qatar had not ratified it.

Similar trends in women's participation, rights and challenges can be seen across the Arab Gulf, even when laws have been passed earlier in one country vis-à-vis a neighbouring state. Although laws have become a focus for parties outside the Arab Gulf in most assessments of rights and freedoms, the practical result of restrictions on women's day-to-day activities needs also to be factored into a comprehensive assessment. For example, even though Bahrain has not had a family law passed, it, alongside Kuwait, performs slightly better than the other Gulf states overall in terms of women's freedoms.

Interviewees often point to Kuwait and Bahrain as leading the way in terms of women's freedoms. The descriptions of the situation of women offered up in *halaqas* (study circles), *khutbas* (Friday sermon) and women's organizations across the Gulf offer the same conclusions as a qualitative assessment. This basic finding is corroborated by Freedom House, which places Bahrain first and Kuwait second, followed by the UAE, Qatar and Oman, with Saudi Arabia last by a wide margin. The criteria for Freedom House's placement are the degree of state and/or non-state actors' restrictions on women's freedom to exercise their human rights and the degree of gender-based discrimination.

A more precise breakdown places Bahrain and Kuwait as leading the other Gulf countries in terms of non-discrimination and access to justice, although by a narrow margin, Saudi Arabia excepted. In terms of autonomy, security and freedom of the person, Freedom House orders Bahrain as best, followed by Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar and Oman. For economic rights and equal opportunity, it lists Kuwait and the UAE as first, then Bahrain and Qatar, with Oman last. For political rights and a civic voice, it orders Bahrain first, followed by Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar and Oman. And finally, for social and cultural rights, it places Kuwait and Bahrain at the top, followed by the UAE, Qatar and Oman. In all categories the differences are extremely minimal (Freedom House 2009: 138–41).

An overall assessment that women have very few to adequate human rights protection and that they occasionally to often face gender-based discrimination is generally accurate also.¹⁰ The statistics offered by Freedom House, however, could do better by factoring in the violations of freedoms and rights among three specific sectors of women, although country studies authors have made a commendable effort to note some of these issues. These violations are among the increasing volume committed against the tens of thousands of women trafficked into these countries, and the hundreds of thousands of domestic workers and others from south-east Asia with low-paid jobs. Although laws have recently been issued, there still exist too many loopholes enabling trafficking to grow and employers to continue mistreatment. Interviewees from these two sectors have made it abundantly clear that their voices are stifled and that the violations of their personhood and most basic human rights are extreme and widespread.

A Human Rights Watch report (1995), among others, has brought to light a third sector, comprising thousands of *bedoon* (local residents without citizenship) who have no legal status and thus are living without any legal rights in these countries. As of July 2009, however, Kuwait has drawn up proposals to address the issue.¹¹ An accurate analysis of human rights for women must necessarily factor in all those living within the area for which conclusions are drawn, for example, by integrating the 2008 US Department of State's *Trafficking Report* using a grading system for each country, even if international interest rests predominantly in the political rights of the local populations.

AN OVERVIEW OF GOVERNMENT-SUPPORTED WOMEN'S ORGANIZATIONS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

In the Arab Gulf there are various forms of organizations, a number of which receive some form of funding from the state. There are, furthermore, numerous kinds of women's organization, ranging from the various expatriate organizations to various Islamic groupings and a few Islamist ones. Networks are also a growing form of organization. Many forms of organization are informal and therefore remain unregistered with the government. How they all differ is primarily in their relationship to government. This paper is interested specifically in women's GONGOs.

¹⁰ Saudi Arabia receives a much lower assessment.

¹¹ *Kuwait Times* (2009).

In Kuwait two women's associations were founded by the merchant class in 1963 – the Cultural and Social Society (CSS) and the Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS) – and remained the only two associations for a decade. Although the two had a brief union, the CSS (today known as the Women's Cultural and Social Society, WCSS) mainly saw its role in terms of providing entertainment for its members and charity for the poor, whereas the AWDS tried to modernize society and raise the status of women. In 1975 a further association was established, made up of individuals mostly from the al-Qinaie family, called the Girls Club. The AWDS was dismantled in 1980 after its calls for equal rights and equal opportunities (al-Mughni 2001: 68). In the early 1980s two Islamic women's organizations were founded – Bayader al-Salam and the Islamic Care Society (ICS) – bringing the total number of organizations to five. The ICS is of special interest here, as it was formed by the wife of the prime minister (al-Mughni 2001).

However, the largest associations today are the WCSS and the Federation of Kuwaiti Women's Associations. The federation is supported and tightly regulated by the Kuwaiti government. It is the only women's group allowed to represent Kuwait internationally (UNDP–POGAR 2006). Many of the organizations, such as the Women Affairs Committee and Kuwait's Union of Women Societies, have organized campaigns and conferences to protest against the exclusion of women from the political arena.

The United Arab Emirates has the largest volume of government-run women's associations. The six UAE organizations had already become modalities of governance by 1979, when they were subsumed under Sheikha Fatima's umbrella organization in Abu Dhabi, the al-Ittihad al-Nisa'i (Women's Union). This made a total of seven official women's organizations in the UAE. Each emirate organization is led by a sheikha (or sheikhas) of the emirate in which it is located; and each has branches located in other cities or villages of its respective emirate. They total around thirty-three, although this number changes depending on needs within rural areas.

Lessons, lectures, conferences and seminars within associations focus on four main areas: religion, health and beauty, family issues and general skills development. Great emphasis is placed on Islamic education. The associations focus on the same issues at mostly the same levels of concentration, but differ depending on the emirate, the leaders' goals, the size of the association and available funding.

The first women's association in Qatar was created in 1982; it was the women's branch of the Red Crescent Society, called the Qatari Women's Association and funded by the state. Sheikha Mouza, wife of the emir of Qatar, established and heads the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, an umbrella organization which was founded in 2002 'as an embodiment of the political leadership's aspiration'.¹² This council presides over organizations categorized as non-governmental that relate to women's issues, termed 'family affairs' in many Arab Gulf associations.

Two of the six organizations over which it presides are the Family Consultation Centre and the Qatari Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children. The Family Consultation Centre offers the same services as the UAE women's associations described above. The Qatari Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children states that its objectives are to offer a legal framework as guidance for the rights of women and children and to protect women's constitutional and legal rights, to protect them from domestic abuse, and to provide social awareness of women's and children's rights. As with the members of the UAE organizations, members of this organization are also involved in the drafting of legislation related to women's and children's rights. It coordinates activities with other women's GONGOs in the region.¹³

In Bahrain, four new women's organizations, including the Union of Bahraini Women and the Bahrain Women's Society, were founded in 2001, adding to others that had already existed. Currently the total number is nineteen, although twelve are part of the umbrella Bahraini Women's Union, created in 2006. They participate in political societies and other associations. Women's associations help illiterate mothers by providing day-care facilities for their children, and by contributing to educational activity at literacy centres throughout the country. The Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain announced a 'national strategy for advancement of Bahraini women' on 8 March 2005. The work plan of the Supreme Council aims at achieving full participation of women in the workforce, enabling them to occupy leadership and decision-making positions in both the public and the private sectors, as well as changing the stereotypical picture of women and eliminating all forms of discrimination against them.

¹² Qatar, Supreme Council for Family Affairs.

¹³ Qatari Foundation for the Protection of Women and Children.

In Oman, the Ministry of Social Affairs, Labour and Vocational Training is responsible for women's issues at government level. The ministry supports women's affairs by funding and supporting the Oman Women's Association (OWA) and grass-roots women's organizations. The ministry, furthermore, provides services through the OWA,¹⁴ which has a reported twenty-three branches all over the country with a total membership of 3,000 women (UNDP-POGAR 2006). OWA activities are very similar to those of the UAE Qatari associations. The OWA provides an informal counselling role for women with divorce-related difficulties, girls forced to marry against their will and women and girls suffering from domestic abuse. There are also fifty affiliated groups throughout the country (UNDP-POGAR 2006).

STATE REPRODUCTION AND THE QUEST FOR STABILITY

The Gulf states put an impressive amount of effort into building up legitimacy and the reproduction of their identities. Given the rapid development over recent decades and the heavy force of globalization having shifted many local practices, legitimacy and identities are generally fragile across the Gulf, to varying degrees. All the Gulf states have embarked on strategies to take control over internal security, economic threats, and perceived attacks on local culture, to a large extent imposed by the high volume of expatriates and what are often deemed foreign practices in most of the region. Foremost of these initiatives is engaging in a discourse of unity and nation-building. This is channelled largely via media forums (from local newspapers to Islamic television programs). Importantly also, state feminism becomes an indispensable means of achieving unity, identity-building and stability. This is achieved through women's educational empowerment, establishing the framework within which women are expected to take up public roles, and the various resources and practices of governmentality unique to a rentier state.

Unity and nation-building

There is a need, as Davidson argues (2005: 77), to legitimize and reinforce the ruler's position. In the face of globalizing forces, it is furthermore essential to restore and embellish the past in order to anchor and strengthen a local identity. Relying on a balance of personal, patrimonial, cultural and religious resources (Davidson 2006: 11), these governments utilize a number of techniques of governmentality to achieve their goals.

¹⁴ US Department of State (2006).

The project involves the application of various symbols and a ‘controlled-consociationalism’ (Ayubi 1999: 245). Visual symbols are used to bring the past into a collective consciousness. For example, in the middle of several cities across the Arab Gulf one can find roundabouts decorated with sculptures of oysters with pearls, dedicated to the memory of pearl diving. The pearling industry’s history is also captured through sculptures of vessels and the restored ships that line the harbours within cities. Within the cities and along the coasts, traditional forts and towers are being restored.¹⁵ Museums have been given a greater role in reviving an imagined past in the face of globalizing forces. As Khalaf argues, there is now a crucial need for the development of ‘living museums’ and ‘imagined communities’ (cited in Davidson 2005: 78) or what Davidson calls the production of ‘living memories’. Examples of such constructs of the past may be found at the Dubai Heritage Village, the Pearling Village, and the Hatta Heritage Village in the UAE. The government’s cultural production is integral to maintaining legitimacy (Davidson 2005: 263). Camel racing, a national sport unique to the region, is a further symbol that has an emotive quality, and thus functions as a unifying force for the Gulf countries. To preserve part of the Bedouin heritage, the rulers have invested in racing circuits, prizes and racing camels (Davidson 2005: 78). As Abu ‘Athira noted, ‘Camel races used to be run [only] on special occasions such as weddings; now they are sponsored by governments to help people keep their camels and not lose their traditional way of life’ (quoted in Davidson 2005: 78).

Allied groups have occupied different locations within a vertical order comprising the ruling families at the top of the pyramid and then tribal, commercial and professional groups, in previous times, predominantly the merchant class (Davidson 2005: 78). Through pacts and laws, control is exercised. In this context, strict laws regulate self-organizing groups, limiting their means and ability to pursue interests or debate social issues that may conflict with the interests of the leaders. For example, in the UAE, all organizations must by law be headed by a national. In Kuwait, the state retains the decision-making power over who may control an association. As al-Mughni (1997: 195) notes, the current control of women’s groups by elite women is by no means

¹⁵ Davidson found that the buildings on some of these sites, such as the fort on Futaisi Island off the coast of Abu Dhabi, had been prefabricated (Davidson 2005: 78).

accidental, since they worked together to exclude women from the lower classes from even creating associations.

The inclusion of Islamic groups has also formed part of such allied groups. The state poses as the protector of Islam and of an Islamic identity. It vigorously incorporates those Islamic groups whose aspirations fit neatly with traditionalist views on a range of issues, especially women's issues, and especially so given the increased concern over globalizing influences. However, the more extreme, and violent, Islamic groups are among the major political threats to the ruling elite and the greatest sources of internal security problems in the region.

Gulf states have embraced capitalism and economic liberalization as an inevitable process, with Kuwait, Dubai and Qatar embarking on strategies to take full advantage of globalization. As Davidson suggests, this route upsets the patrimonial, cultural and religious resources that make up the 'ruling bargain' between the state and its citizens (Davidson 2006: 11). Among those who have long opposed any form of liberalization that serves Western interests, one can hear individuals beginning to question the benefit of the capitalist or democratic path, especially so-called Islamic hardliners. Hence there is a crucial need to incorporate mainstream Islamic resources (Davidson 2005: 79).

Oil has been instrumental in enabling the state to structure existing groups into a patron-client order (Ayubi 1999: 247). Rentierism among the citizen population is a notable facet of state governmentality in the Gulf. A rentier-based 'ruling bargain' is forged between the elite state actors and the technocrats of the new middle class that are typical of Gulf countries. Relative autonomy is accorded to the technocrats by expanding their role towards the promotion of modernization. Importantly, however, this ordering is meant to ensure a source of legitimacy (Ayubi 1999: 247). Incorporating mainstream Islam also includes funding the building of mosques and overseeing and controlling the lessons that take place. Importantly, there is funding for lectures and speakers who, for example, highlight issues that are deemed 'apolitical' in substance. Simultaneously, certain Islamic orientations will be sidelined through the unfair distribution of funding, as in the case of Bahrain.

As has been recognized of allied groups, support of organizations related to family issues is one of the most effective means of securing legitimacy, security and stability. The most effective organizations are women's organizations, as they function as the major means through which the government, in practical terms, pursues its state feminism. State feminism is used in much of the literature to refer to the process by which the state takes on women's interests.¹⁶ However, the following demonstrates that state feminism, as exercised largely through the state-run women's associations, illustrates numerous contradictions in its commitment to women's issues. And although the organizations are set up and funded to serve strategic interests, the women participating do not all share the same commitments and actually may use these avenues to subvert the frameworks within which they are working.

Either large investment or laws have been made to enable the growth of organizations to support or even bolster government objectives. For example, among some of the associations provided with larger facilities, the Women's Union in Abu Dhabi was granted a new building in 1998, worth AED 22 million, and its main branch (Bateen) was also provided with an impressive new building complex in 2003. Sheikh al-Maktoum, ruler of Dubai, provided the Dubai Women's Association with AED 20 million for its new building whose construction started in 2000. Not all similar associations enjoy the same level of funding, but at least in the UAE women's GONGOs have received more funding than any other form of organization. In Oman, forty-seven of a total of sixty-six registered associations existing in the country are women's associations. Women's associations are able to register somewhat more quickly because the associations require approval only by the minister of social development, as opposed to the Council of Ministers for all other forms of organization.¹⁷ In both Oman and the UAE no other organizations exist that extend in the way that these women's associations do, from urban areas into very rural regions, with their numerous branches subsumed under each country's single umbrella. In Bahrain, Shi'a are generally hindered from forming formal organizations in which they can promote ideological perceptions or organize on a social level. Shi'a women are therefore prevented from expressing their experiences of social injustice through formal

¹⁶ Lovenduski, however, explains that state feminism is also defined in terms of referring to feminists or democrats in government and government institutions that push a feminist agenda through the state (Lovenduski 2005: 10–12).

¹⁷ US Department of State (2006).

organization. Shi'a women activists have tried to organize themselves in charitable organizations but have been denied the permits to do so (Seikaly 1997: 140).

'Women's issues' in identity building

Women's government-supported associations across the Arab Gulf share many striking similarities in their approach to dealing with women's issues and the directing of women's participatory capabilities and desires. One major observation is the drive for development and for control over any activity that may disrupt security and stability, a concern explicitly expressed through laws governing the formation of associations and the role of the media. In this respect, aside from the by-laws governing associations that state that they may not engage in political activity, most government-supported women's associations direct their activities to areas they regard as 'apolitical'. As evinced in the various GONGOs across Gulf countries, women attend regular lessons on Qur'an recitation and *hadith* (prophetic narration), and speakers have included influential scholars. Topics vary, but often include women's familial roles, society, the environment, *da'wa* (Islamic call), prayer, mysticism, charity, fasting and child-raising. Religion is often felt to be a subject that women should grasp better than men. Women are producers of the nation and pass down knowledge; hence, Islamic knowledge is emphasized in such associations.

In addition, lectures and courses are given in the area of 'health and beauty'. Programmes are also developed to raise women's awareness of illnesses. As women are the prime care-givers, there are also lessons on children's nutrition and general well-being, drug administration or use, vaccination and breastfeeding. Beauty courses are offered including make-up, the use of henna, or tips for hair care. More significant in numbers and emphasis are the conferences and lectures dealing with women's roles, parenting and how to be a good spouse. General skills development is achieved through literacy classes. Specialized courses may include computer skills, painting, drawing, cake decorating, baking, etiquette, fruit carving, cooking or flower arranging. Significant also is the initiative to revive 'traditions', through learning to make handicrafts, dressmaking, and other sewing activities.

Unlike associations in many developing countries that have embarked on programmes focusing on empowerment goals and specifically naming them as such, the majority of

associations, especially in the UAE, Qatar and Oman, articulate their work within the term 'development'. Women are developing themselves, their children and their nation. Children's activities are offered; kindergarten and summer programmes for children are typical. Such associations actually convey the idea that there is no need to empower women in relation to men or religion, as women are often quick to emphasize when discussing the terms 'empowerment' and 'liberalization'. As such, the purpose is building a national identity and filling women's time with concerns other than politics and their lack of rights.

The Bahraini Ghada Jamsheer, listed one of the top ten most effective women in the Arab world in 2006 by *Forbes* magazine, has called Bahrain's reforms 'artificial and marginal', in its quest to use the family law issue, which remains unconsolidated, as a bargaining tool with opposition Islamic groups. She further points to the High Council for Women, headed by the king's wife, as the means through which the state has hindered non-governmental women's associations from forming or functioning.¹⁸ The family law issue is so pivotal because its institution would mean that judges would be forced to deal systematically with domestic concerns, such as marriage, divorce custody and inheritance, in a way that is thought to protect women from issue-biased decrees that are mostly unfavourable to women. Although some argue that not much would change with a family law, the greater difficulty in reaching a fair system for family law is the proposal that clerics draft the laws and the laws then be approved by an outside force, Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani, a Shi'ite leader in Iraq. To complicate the issue further, any proposal must be accepted by both Shi'a and Sunnis.

There is increasing tension between roles as defined by Western feminism, looked upon less favourably, and traditional roles. Between these two poles, debates on the roles of women in society take various interpretations. The outcome of this, alongside the fear of an eroding identity, is a vigorous attempt to develop and protect local practices, religion and tradition. Notably, the speeches among leaders draw a clear link between a woman's natural propensities and her duty towards her nation, thus directing the aspirations for action and establishing the parameters for the kinds of employment women should take up. The late Sheikh Zayed defined the kind of work that was suitable for women: 'I encourage women's labour at work sites that is

¹⁸ Jamsheer, cited in Chan'ad Bahraini.

congruent with their nature and which preserves [their] dignity and honour as mothers and generation makers' (ZCCF 2000).

Women are thereby entering fields traditionally allocated for men. Emirati women have joined the police force, the armed forces and other regular troops. Entrance to the armed forces also took place following the invasion of Kuwait in 1991, when Kuwaiti women demanded to be allowed to protect their country, if need be, along with men (Khatib 1994: 231–3). Women are also infiltrating other fields of work, including engineering, computer science, the media, academia and business. In some instances women are managers, heads of departments, under-secretaries, assistants within ministries, or own their own businesses. In terms of the UAE military, however, Sheikha Fatima has clarified that the woman's role has 'more to do with nursing wounded men, arranging their dormitories and preparing their food' (ZCCF 2000). With this, women are made responsible by being given the duty of ensuring their desires are congruent with feminine jobs and as protectors of their nation.

In this way a woman's identity and approach are shaped by the discourse not only of her environment but also by dominant state-directed discourses on national women's duties towards their nation. However much the state may also fabricate an enemy, the state leaders have reason to worry that their traditions and identity (in its ongoing formulation) will evaporate with the large non-local population found throughout the Gulf (with the exception of Oman). A 'plan' in this endeavour is explicitly referred to in Qatar as the Qatarization Plan and, most recently, in Oman as the Omanization Plan. Part of the plan implemented through the media and associations is not only to produce the type of individual likely to adopt a feminine role in development but to secure loyalty. In the opening ceremony of the Arab Thought Forum on Arab Woman and Future Horizons, held in 2007, Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassem Bin Jabor al-Thani, prime minister of Qatar, stated,

You are certainly aware that our societies are still governed by conventions and behaviours of the social heritage as well as by religious teachings long established as well as by various social, economic and political characteristics that are considerably different from prevalent ones. Thus, we face challenges that are not easy at all and spring from the new concepts of sustainable development and globalization, especially in those aspects related to the social values system and traditional behavioral patterns as well as intellectual trends on women's empowerment. Nevertheless, we have managed to alleviate the impact of such challenges foremost of which is the belief that concepts are relative in their nature and we should

address the content rather than the form. Consequently, there is need to strike a balance between the modernization process and the elements of originality possessed by society in terms of cultural and civilized heritage. Without such balance, we lose our identity and, hence, we become merely recipients rather than contributors to the building of the human civilization.¹⁹

Securing loyalty entails establishing identity within a constructed family and the attendant responsibilities as members of this family.

The head of state, typically seen as the nation's 'father', leads his 'children' to prosperity and the good life within the national 'family' that transcends the private and public often espoused by governments in the Gulf. Through these associations, a specific model is promoted as the ideal woman along with her ideal roles. The leaders of these associations construct the idea that a woman must sacrifice for the sake of her country and family. The family is thought of as the basic unit of the society. The woman is responsible for the functioning of this basic unit or 'family' and then, by extension, the country. As with Mughni's case study on Kuwait, where political power is hereditary, 'the assimilation of the concept of family with that of *watan* (nation) is crucial to the perpetuation of the regime' (al-Mughni 1997: 147). Organizational participants are directed to embody a desire that has been fashioned through their subjectivation within a discourse on *watan* and duty. '[I]ndividuals are to fulfil their obligations not through their relations of dependency and obligation to one another, but through seeking to *fulfil themselves*' (Rose 1996: 57, emphasis in original).

Important in the endeavour for stability and national development is the use of education as a woman's weapon. Sheikh Zayed established the view that women were indispensable to the development of the country and the preservation of its heritage and identity. His speeches emphasized that Emirati women had a major responsibility for shaping future generations and UAE society. For women to carry out these responsibilities, he emphasized that they had to arm themselves with education:

Education is like a beacon lighting your way in the darkness. It teaches you many things, the most important of which is to know your duties towards your nation, homeland, families, and the realities relating to your present, future, and your past. (quoted in al-Hamed 2002: 262)

¹⁹ Speech of His Excellency Sheikh Hamad Bin Jassem Bin Jabor Al Thani Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs at the Opening Ceremony of the Opening Session of Arab Thought Forum on Arab Woman and Future Horizons, Amman, 5-6 November 2007.

He confirmed that women were not only half of society in terms of numbers, but half in terms of their participation in shouldering the responsibility of the upbringing of generations:

Woman is one of the pillars of the UAE society, because she is the daughter, the sister and the mother who nurtures and raises the new generation ... I am sure that women in our prospering country realize the importance of preserving our original customs which are derived from the true teachings of Islam. A woman is the foundation on which a family is built and the family is the force which propels the whole society ... The relationship between man and woman is one of participation and co-existence; their destiny is one... Therefore, true development in any society will never be positively achieved unless it targets the two of them and is based on equal participation between them. (quoted in al-Hamed 2002: 262)

The speeches of the elite systematically emphasize a woman's primary roles and duties to her family and nation.

Establishing women as 'mothers of the nation' with responsibility for 'maintaining the traditional family structure' (Dresch 2005: 24) is one of the crucial means through which the Gulf states pursue their project of identity building. The states fear not only the security implications and instability caused by the flood of expatriates, but their impact on the culture, hearts and minds of the local population. Armed with education, citizens are expected to nationalize – that is, for example, to 'Emiratize' or 'Kuwaitize'²⁰ a country overflowing with migrants. But, more importantly, women are directed to use the tools with which the state has provided them to contribute to the project of identity building and internal stability. This project builds on the idea that the citizens are the ruler's children and the ruler is seen as their 'father' (al-Mughni and Tétreault 2005: 207). In line with the national family structure, women have a defined role to play in a general project of Gulf states. It is true across the Gulf, as al-Mughni and Tétreault have argued for the Kuwaiti case, that the education of women has been a matter of national security, given a face of emancipation as being associated with modernization (al-Mughni and Tétreault 2005: 207; al-Sabah 1983).

Beyond education, the 'stable family' has also been a project aimed at social development and identity building. Finding a suitable marriage partner for local women has been fraught with difficulties. The project for stable families has alleviated some of these difficulties by making marriage to local women financially easier through programmes in various Gulf

²⁰ As with other Arab Gulf countries where the main feature of the plan is slowly to replace its workforce of expatriates with locals.

countries.²¹ At the beginning of 1994 Sheikh Zayed created a marriage fund to encourage male nationals to marry female nationals, to lessen the burden of expensive weddings and help promote stable families (since no funding is provided for subsequent marriages). Similar marriage funds exist in Bahrain and, more recently, Qatar. As Dresch has noted, 'The Fund represents a massive attempt at social engineering. Nor is it just "top-down" ... [I]t does a remarkable job not just of organising talks and seminars but of intervening as a social service and mobilising other services to solve family problems' (Dresch 2005: 148). By organizing society's private sphere as the state sees fit, the state has made private interests into public matters, subject to control and containment. However, with the state's constricted definition of a citizen, such strategies, aimed to protect unity and build identity, are in the interests of the common good of its citizens.

Leaders of associations point to emirates hosting larger immigrant populations and vigorously supporting initiatives for diversification as corrupt and therefore draw from them proof of the need to develop programmes and services aimed at protecting culture and local traditions. It is often, however, in these very Gulf states where campaigns are launched to resist actively assimilation and moral degradation. The activities of the women's GONGOs demonstrate that they have a correcting or counterweight function within a society that is undergoing rapid change due to globalizing forces and capitalist interests. Al-Mughni (1997) found that the Kuwaiti state has attempted throughout its existence to manipulate women's groups to maintain its stability and continuity; while Joseph (1997) describes the politics of women's organizations as the means through which the elite reproduce their interests.

FURTHER MECHANISMS OF RENTIER GOVERNMENTALITY AND ITS LIMITS

Aside from ensuring that 'participants' execute roles to which they have been assigned by means of being paid a salary, the state reproduces itself through further mechanisms of control. It selects and appoints from government ministries leaders of the associations, and formulates the

²¹ In the UAE, a male national is granted up to DH 70,000 (about US\$19,000). Men were increasingly turning to marriage to non-locals, as many could not afford the high dowries often demanded by a girl's family. On average, DH 100,000 is given as a dowry to the bride's family and DH 250,000 is spent on the bride's trousseau of clothes, cosmetics and jewellery. The cost of parties and wedding receptions, which can range from DH 50,000 to several millions, in addition to other expenses needed for the wedding, could take years to repay. Mass weddings have also been encouraged and supported by the fund.

agendas that participants are required to pursue, including the nationalization plan. Hence participation through these state-run associations is contributing extensively to state priorities, not simply through the techniques of governmentality, but also through direct forms of corporatism. Participation in these organizations enables wider state powers over sectors of society.

Tribal elite actors, who dominate key positions in government, are especially interested in harnessing the intermediary spaces between the state and society as a means of control, and have, in fact, become exceptionally successful. In the media and on the ground, common reference is made to the supremacy of the sheikhas who lead the association as devisers of organizational plans or to their generous help in running these associations. A sheikha is the wife (or daughter) of a sheikh, in this case, a leader or leader's family members, as broadly categorized. A sheikha is expected to act in a way that is in line with the support of her husband's or father's political and economic interests. They often view themselves as occupying highly significant political positions without necessarily having any political titles. Their allegiance is to family first and to all that entails stability and security for the country and its rulers. Therefore their elite status will complicate identification with women of other social groups. The prestige attached to an association is dependent on the leaders of the associations, whether sheikhas or important class figures.

The sheikhas' creation and endorsement of associational activities positions the associational actors in a way that enables them forcefully to blur the boundaries between the state and civil society and to situate one over the other. Further, the idea formulated by the elite state actors and perpetuated through the associational actors is that it is the state's duty to initiate greater rights for women. In terms of vertical construction, the state is produced by actors embedded within the state and its associations. The notion of reliance on the state for one's rights is a construct of rentier governmentality, which in effect produces dependency, not self-reliant individuals.

Elite state actors produce the state discursively, when women are constantly reminded of the role of the ruling family in giving women their rights. This occurs through the media and the associations, the latter of which are visited frequently by the sheikhs to give speeches. It is quite

typical for Gulf sheikhas to point out how their ‘women feel a strong sense of allegiance to their great leader’, and how ‘without the rulers, many of the great strides that have been made by women today would not have been possible’.²² Thus the associations rely heavily on the monarchies, under which the women’s associations have been formed, to guide and fund their agendas.

The most important link between many of the associations and government are the sheikhas or women from the merchant classes. But contributing to this link are other women in high-level positions, such as those in managerial jobs, who have often been appointed to their posts by the ministries in which they worked, or directly through a sheikha’s office or council. Often participants are paid by the association. But, more significantly, some participants receive their salary from the ministry, having worked previously in a ministry. Such a mechanism of encompassment has direct impact in blurring the boundaries of the state.

Corporatist politics, such as government appointments in all Gulf countries, ensures that goals devised at government level are implemented in the organizations. Having a person from the ministry or a sheikha’s council present in the association at the managerial level enables her to take firmer control over activities on the ground. Through close scrutiny, she can ensure that participants conform to the objectives of the leadership. In practice, the ability of a state appointee forcefully to invade the participants’ space for the purpose of monitoring the organization’s programmes defines the hegemonic positioning of state over society. Furthermore, participation is constrained from the top down, in which participants are monitored through state appointees.

The state ensures that the chosen person fulfils ‘her duties towards her nation’ by means of further mechanisms. Several of the women at the highest levels under the sheikhas’ leadership are chosen on the basis of their family lineage; the family names of upper-level women sometimes reveal that they belong to elite tribal or merchant families related to the ruling families either through marriage or other forms of ongoing familial collaboration. As such, many of the appointed women have a vested interest in protecting family interests that are not distinct from the interests of the ruling elite.

²² UAE Interact (2002).

Also, being appointed through the ministry or handpicked by the sheikha entails a sense of responsibility to honour the distinction given by the royal family, which takes precedence over a woman's possible other goals. State actors invest the role of serving the sheikh/a with symbols of prestige and honour. As such, a participant may have a sense of compassion towards women as a group, but if there is a conflict between duties to women and those to the state, she is unlikely to risk her government job, not to mention the trust of her leaders, for the sake of women's solidarity.

However, just as the state consists of persons who implement the goals of the ruling sheikhs while pursuing other agendas, women in these associations must also be recognized as individuals whose agency is a product not only of the dominant programmes of the ruling families, but also of other influences and priorities. Just as some women give priority to ruling tribal clans in their activism within the associations, others base their participation on allegiance to less powerful tribes, economic circumstance, a sense of a common good that extends beyond a good formulated for nationals, or Islamist group embeddedness. As Al-Oraimi (2004: 316) points out in the case of the UAE, while the majority of elite women (most often not from the ruling class) do not feel that they can effect change through these associations, some attempt to work through these organizations to promote their goals of 'bringing about the new balance of political power'. They do this by taking a non-confrontational stance with government, and acting as 'a hub for positive leadership'.

Islamist women in some of these associations sometimes demonstrates a 'quiet' disavowal of the nationalist agenda pursued, a subjectivity that has been awakened by the fact that their identities as women or Muslims have not provided a cause for solidarity with their elite co-participants. Some openly pursue Islamist activities at the expenses of the state, enabled through the very mechanism by which the state seeks to control society and secure its legitimacy. These associations function as a state organ that controls society through vertical encompassment, but they can also be used by women as a legitimate avenue for pursuing various interests 'behind the backs of or against the wills of even the most powerful actors' (Ferguson 1994: 18).

Nonetheless, some of those women wanting greater political reform opt to use other means, such as protest. Instances of protest are, however, very limited in comparison to those occurring historically in the other Middle Eastern states. There are the instances in Saudi Arabia in 1991, Bahrain in 1994 or Kuwait in 1999. At the time, more than anything else these protests garnered international support. In Kuwait women gained greater political rights in 2005, but only as a result of the combined efforts of males and females, activists, lawyers and politicians. Asked if these protests helped to resolve the issues they were meant to, the vast majority of women hold the position that women's agency through protest has had its drawbacks. Many still believe that change is more likely to be consensual and stable if those in positions of power are addressed through a non-confrontational stance. There remains the fear that political gains can be lost where extremist Islamist positions and traditional opinions regarding women have a stranglehold. This is a serious concern because Islamist opinions are shifting to the more conservative or extreme across all Gulf states.

There is much talk among the elite and that is echoed in the local media that the lack of women's voting rights and ministerial positions had been cause of embarrassment internationally. Granting women the vote probably has therefore been more than anything else a bid for international acceptance. However, it was also a strategic move for stability when pressures were mounting within the states through some of the organizations and lawyers in Kuwait and Bahrain and alongside journalists and liberals throughout the Gulf. The challenge for each individual state, again according to talk among the elite, is that when one state makes certain allowances in favour of women, it places the other states in a precarious position in that women and liberalists may start to point to their own lack of rights and greater international pressure will ensue. Moreover, women cannot be vigorously encouraged to take an active part in nation building and the economy without acquiescence in women having some political say.

Again, the women's organizations can be relied on to fulfil the function of a counterweight by holding lectures where such moves or women's modes of protest are criticized and women can be reminded of defined roles and capacities. Where the state intervenes in the Friday *khutbas*, lectures also abound, criticizing the emerging women's 'freedoms' in order to halt new pressures. In all, the states must always maintain a delicate balance. Since security and

stability are priorities, a state feminism in the Gulf must be designed in such a way as to resolve the complications of international pressure and globalizing forces that disrupt local lifestyle and values, and raise the educational levels and productive abilities of women in a way that empowers them to take an active role in public life without destabilizing home life or political legitimacy. Although striking this balance is a gamble, given the greater pressures of globalization and the rapid rate of transformation, the Kuwaitization, Bahrainization, Emiratization, Qatarization or Omanization Plans cannot afford to have women staying at home.

CONCLUSIONS

The modality of state feminism as part of a mechanism of governmentality has enabled women to acquire some form of greater independence and self-development. Indeed, the leading figures have helped women to enjoy several achievements, including education and work possibilities. Certainly, the organizations have also been the means through which women have been able to attain certain competencies and skills through their submission to organizational practices. Because they are crucial to the development of the country, the associations channel women's actions so that an empowerment process will occur in several areas. Women have acquired the sort of skills that are sometimes commensurate with challenging or high-profile positions. Some of the (elite) women who have been part of these organizations have moved on to take up prominent positions of responsibility outside the organizations.

However, the leaders, being mostly the sheikhas among the ruling elite and women from the merchant class, lead the associations towards the goals that are congruent with the political aspirations of the state. The associations play a key role in supporting state feminism as the modality of governmentality, since they function primarily as state organs and officially as the places in which women develop their selves. As such, while empowerment does result in certain areas, other aspects of their actions will lead to the disempowerment of women. They operate within a framework in which women's actions are directed to nationalist interests, to which women may be steered through emotive techniques or from which they may benefit through a 'ruling bargain'. The constraints placed by a modality of governmentality on women's empowerment through state feminism may be understood through the strategies implemented within the associations. These often include building a consciousness that women rely on the

guidance of leadership to initiate any cause on their behalf, often establishing that ‘women’s nature’ cannot permit them to function as their male counterparts, as evinced in ongoing seminars and some Islamic lectures, and channelling talk and activity towards issues devoid of any controversial legal or political content.

Indeed, an institution directed by the ruling elite cannot criticize the ruling elite, especially in countries in which the laws criminalize a person who criticizes state actors. Disempowerment, furthermore, may result when women’s agency is directed to acts of complacency because they learn that in order to achieve a goal they must rely on an authority whose primary interest is its own perpetuity and survival. Disempowerment, however, will not be uniform across all classes and groups, as some of the women who strive to protect state interests through the associations seek also to secure their positions of advantage within the social hierarchy.

On the whole, there is little evidence of a strategic plan of action within the majority of associations for tackling patriarchy or unequal power relations, on either an intellectual or a practical level.²³ Rather, women in managerial positions apply a glass ceiling to other women by reminding them that they are not permitted to step outside some imagined ‘boundaries’, and by referring to patriarchally dominated religious discourses and discourses on biological gender differences. The idea is pursued through lectures and materials distributed among association attendees, and the discourse is continued partly because the women understand their status and position as being naturally subordinate to men’s. Indeed, through the agency of those in management positions, the state often succeeds in keeping women’s actions within specific parameters. Consequently the very associations which claim to promote women’s involvement in public life also marginalize their roles by confirming notions of gender difference. Disempowerment takes place when women’s immobility prevents them from functioning as full citizens.

Associational programmes to teach women domestic skills have contributed to better productivity, some aspects of self-esteem and a sense of purpose. At the same time, however, these courses, along with religious lessons and ‘beauty classes’, are used to ‘fill women’s time’.

²³ Al-Oraimi similarly finds that in the case of the UAE, associations have little commitment to gender issues (Al-Oraimi 2004: 321).

Most are purposefully empty of any contentious, legal or political ramifications. Because of the large amount of funding allotted to many of these organizations, the rulers can direct them to implement this technique of power and the shaping of a greater proclivity towards consumerism. Rights and issues concerning women, especially those in marginalized groups, may become sidelined for the sake of the state's pursuit of national development, identity-building and stability. Opposition among women in both Kuwait and Bahrain to the Islamist stance that persisted in government to the effect that women should not be permitted to vote was sidelined by most of the official women's instruments in both countries. Because the associations are socially stratified and represent the concerns of locals, problems such as rape and abuse faced by maidservants, or foreign women forced into prostitution, are often disregarded.

Although these associations have strikingly similar objectives, there is very little cooperation exhibited between the various organizations, both regionally and inter-regionally through collaboration on projects. Cooperation rather takes place at the highest levels among the elite actors, where decisions are made which are then implemented. Cooperation does exist when, for example, members are chosen by a director to be sent to learn from another organization. No one represents the organization without strict permission, and the individual is always carefully chosen. On one hand, this is an evident strategy of control; on the other, in cases where women in larger settings have been asked to put forward their suggestions for projects and the like, it is observed that they are reluctant to voice their opinions and make suggestions. Elite actors have pointed out such instances as proof that they are making efforts to be more inclusive. However, such an apparent lack of participation may also be a result of the dependency mentality sustained through the various top-down mechanisms.

As a result, dialogue in favour of decisive moves towards greater freedom does not exist among all the female participants of an organization. Often the managers will meet in a closed room where strategies will be discussed. The problem is that while all participants are aware of such meetings, these are not even usually the ones where the real decisions are made. This does not mean that paradigm shifts are impossible. There are among the sheikhas those who have a vision for genuine reform. Also, when change occurs in one region it becomes a matter of concern and discussion among the other sheikhas and those in elite positions. For example, at

one point a lot of discussion broke out over the need for female ministers in the UAE and over the country's public image in the Gulf when, among other states, Oman was forging ahead in this respect. However, strategy will never allow for any major shift where this can be controlled, as it will create instability. Security and stability are intimately intertwined with women's freedoms and rights.

Precisely because independent women's groups are so tightly monitored and controlled so that the major avenues for discussions lie in these GONGO organizations headed by the wives of state leaders, greater hope and pressure for reform might be placed by international bodies both on these avenues and on government. Many of the more grass-roots and local points of discord will undoubtedly be lost because the parameters of local challenges are defined by the elite. Nonetheless, many core issues for international bodies, such as voting and political rights, have been and will continue to be addressed. The Arab Women's Organization did expand on these issues in the 2008 biennial conference, although states have been slow to address recommendations. It will be interesting to see whether, given that the conference theme was human security in an international context, goals beyond the increase in female members of parliament will prove to be taken seriously, both by the women's organizations led by many of the attendees and by governments. Such goals include vigorously tackling human rights abuses, in particular of women trafficked into these countries and forced into prostitution.

In sum, through rentier governmentality the official women's organizations have mostly been co-opted. They are secured through direct corporatist politics, such as on occasion large provisions of state funding, operating under the auspices of an individual of the elite or ruling class, and being controlled through the appointment of ministerial employees of the organizations to sensitive and powerful positions. Salaries are normally included as an incentive for the majority of 'participants'. Furthermore, techniques of control operate through the shaping of roles, purpose and identity. While such shaping produces empowered women in many ways, a client mentality is also fashioned. The women's GONGOs are invaluable because despite the ambitions for better conditions for women, the strategies of the state mean that they provide a crucial means of 'governing at a distance'. The conventionally defined boundaries of the state are shown to collapse as these associations reconfigure state powers.

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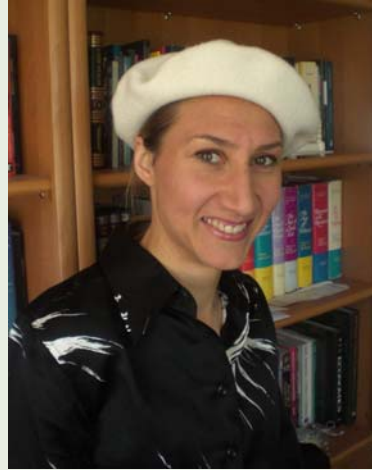
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