



Gulf Research Centre Cambridge

Knowledge for All

Workshop 14

## **Women, Nation Building and Modernization Projects in the Gulf: Explorations in State Instrumentalization of Women**

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### **Abstract**

Women in the Arabian Gulf today, are taking *central stage* in representing and occasionally spearheading the ongoing process of “nation”-state-building, as well as they contribute to the dynamic reorientation of the large-scale state-modernizing projects across the Gulf. While the current advancement of women in the region is transcending beyond the existing political, professional and leadership stage of women empowerment, their symbolic presence is now rapidly moving towards new unprecedented and “unimagined” spaces, specifically for these women as Arab and Muslim from the Gulf. Until very recently, for example, the Gulf states were the bastion of conservatism but now are parting with its traditional reading of gender roles. Conversely, women’s representation in the public across the Gulf—as strategically

framed by the local Gulf officials and media—is also now transforming, formulating women’s embedded positionality and image as part of a broader state agency agenda. More particularly, the state is rapidly yet cautiously advancing women’s multiple roles in all aspects of its diverse tapestry: young leaders, soldiers, educators, sportswomen, fighters, pilots, and “Spartan” mothers (mothers of the young soldiers of the nation). Therefore, women in the Gulf are symbolically emerging as the new ideological “instruments” of the state-led campaign to construct the multilayered vision of the nation-state building agendas and potentially to contribute to this construction and its direction.

The workshop broadly examines the new state-sponsored policies, initiatives, regulations and projects aiming to enhance the public roles, positions, and representations of women in the Gulf in diverse fields, including politics, education, art, economy, army, culture or natural sciences. This workshop additionally aims to explore and synthesize the evolving features, dimensions, and types of female agency by empirically and theoretically looking at grassroots emancipatory activism in the Gulf. By dissecting these processes from a comparative perspective, this workshop intends to uncover complex and multiple interconnectivities and divergences between the two and to explore the implications in the approach towards female empowerment in Gulf states, as well as the dynamic state behaviors in attempting to capitalize on these outcomes.

## **Description and Rationale**

### **Objectives and Scope**

This workshop aims to expand our knowledge on women’s role, position and function in the state-led endeavors towards modernizing the countries and building the nations in the Gulf and advancing the individual nation’s reputation and cultural capital at home and abroad. Observing the shifts in women’s status in state agendas during the past few years, one has to note a departure, in many Gulf countries, from the traditional state positions of conservative empowerment regarding the role, opportunities and spaces available for women in the region, towards the creation of an emerging space of opportunities. The GCC countries, to various degrees, for a long time were globally criticized, commended and positioned based on a mixture of variables, including the status of women in these countries and their female empowerment agendas, projects and policies. Further complicating the investigation of women contribution to nation building in the Gulf is the sensitivity of the status and place of women within Gulf societies as a politically, religiously contested issue about which populist traditional discourse is historically dominant.

The contestation is played out amongst the state, important traditional, political and religious elites within the countries (Featherstone 1990) and the women rights groups and NGOs around the world supported by political elites, the media and occasionally the governments in the United States and Western Europe (Pinto 2012). The ideological and traditional limitations imposed by religious authorities or tribal traditionalists hindered women empowerment and participation on the levels of public discourse and state policy. Since their formation, the states in the Gulf have led women empowerment projects, in which they balanced the countries’ need for women participation, international pressures and demands for more inclusive and gender sensitive policies,

on the one hand, and the national imperative to keep the restraints on women necessary to maintain conservative forces within the society at bay, on the other.

The GCC countries are in continuous pursuit to reproduce their own version of citizen participation and the spaces and restrictions on them, managing a combination of -often contradictory- national, regional and international pressures and demands. The increase in the pace and scope of the region's globalized economies and foreign relations demanded shifting the global perception of the regimes, their modernization efforts, and their citizens. Necessary for these shifts is the change to the position of, opportunities for and conditions of women in these countries, especially with the acceleration of global discourse on gender gaps, gender equality and women empowerment in the past few decades. As of 2017, the World Bank reported that women constitute more than half of the population in the GCC, yet do not exceed 25% of the workforce in these countries (World Bank 2017, September 29)

This workshop will open the investigations of motivations, historical variables and international pressures that have contributed to the emergence of women as a state priority in the nation-building processes in the Gulf. Historical consideration of women role and position within the Gulf countries and the dynamics that have led to current changes are essential to advance our understanding of the national, regional and global imperatives of the changes occurring to women's role and position. Knowledge that is sensitive to regional forces and country specificities and historical moments, locally contextualized and globally informed.

The scope of this workshop also includes the study of effectiveness of these policies in promoting women's resources, economic and symbolic powers as important agent in the process rather than tools that could be replaced or marginalized under new circumstances which are not necessarily compatible with women role.

### **Contribution to the Gulf Studies**

The workshop intends to largely contribute to the growing multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary literature on Gulf studies by specifically focusing on the changing, dynamic relationship between women and the state in a context of nation-building processes. While the current literature on women in the Gulf and state has strongly highlighted the limited yet increasingly expanding roles of women in mainstream Gulf societies, the workshop aims to problematize and challenge such embedded assumptions and critically dissect the actively growing status of women in the Gulf across public and private spaces, and how their power, agencies, subjectivities, and positions are currently being subjected, negotiated, and determined by state forces and agendas within the broader context of nation building process in the Gulf region.

The growing high instrumentalization of women's role in public and private spaces has also become the cornerstones for many states' national and regional development initiatives. However, despite the large gains in women's status experienced in the Gulf region, many converging and diverging trends and outcomes relating to the position of women still remain. In fact, the complex relationship between the state and women in the Gulf has also constructed and fashioned to become more dynamic and critically relevant feature in understanding the future economic, social, and political development in the Gulf region. While existing scholarship has extensively explored the multiple social, cultural and economic barriers that have thwarted the integration and utilization

of women's incorporation in economics, politics and culture in the Gulf, further empirical and theoretical analyses are crucial to examine the symbiotic relationships and interaction between the state and women in the Gulf, and how the state constructs, frames, and incorporates gender relations in its nation-building process in a globalized world.

In an economically, politically, militarily and culturally globalized region, the Gulf societies are going through magnificent changes that are worth research and investigation. There is a great body of literature on the Gulf that is particularly focused on the dichotomies of traditionalism and modernism (Kassim & Habib 2011; Eben Saleh 1998) in politics, society, culture and economy. There is a real room for contribution to the public knowledge and conversations on the particularities, potentials and limitations of the societies in the Gulf and especially women beyond the above dichotomies in the context of the current shifts in state efforts to towards nation branding and nation building real or imagined.

Overall, the recent shifts in women reality in the GCC and social perception of their role, intellect and status are worth a close and critical examination that is the focus of this workshop. This is especially vital as the familial, national and global articulations of these shifts, capitalization on them and interpretations of their outcomes are yet to materialize and are largely under-investigated. There are several studies related to the focus of the workshop that can be a source of data to researchers interested in advancing our knowledge on the workshop topics. There is an important data source from the European Parliament on the status of women rights in the GCC. The study includes comparative data sets and country-based data on women economic rights, gender equality rates in education, employment, health and others (Seikaly, Roodsaz, & van Egten 2014).

Nation building in the GCC appeared in the 1950s and 60s in reference to “the process of national integration and consolidation that led up to the establishment of the modern nation-state-as distinct from various forms of traditional states.” Nation building is “an architectural metaphor, that strictly speaking implies, the existence of consciously acting agents- architects, engineers, carpenters and the likes” (Kolsto 2018).

The workshop will seek to advance our understanding and trigger critical analysis in both the motivations of the Gulf states to invest in advancing women role and position in nation building and the gains these regimes and their societies/ countries are enjoying nationally, regionally and globally. Another expected discussion will be focused on these gains of women empowerment and emancipation on the social /public level and the family private level. It is also necessary to examine how do the empowerment reforms tally with emancipatory movements, if any and whether they bring about change in the perception of their role among women themselves and about changes they seek within their immediate environments, for example, family, work, personal aspiration etc.

In their study of the women integration in the post conflict nation building efforts in Afghanistan Benard, Jones, Oliker, Thurston, Stearns & Cordell (2008) recommended a “more engendered approach to nation building”. Although their study focused on Afghanistan in its “post-conflict” era, the second section of their study looks at the effectiveness of women integration into state building efforts and unpacked several

working strategies. One of their most important recommendation is the integration of women in the process of economic construction. In addition to being “goal-oriented” (Bernard et al 2008; 129) in their programs and efforts; they enable the contribution of civil society organizations; integrate data into their programs for women and advance the quality of data collected; “resolve contradictions” between “preexisted and newly created social systems” (135) which can happen even in “developed societies” (136) as a result of the shifts in power distribution amongst actors and the changes in their agencies. This requires according to the authors, diligence and continuous reevaluation of the outcomes.

Nation state theory emerged with the publication of Stein Rokkan’s seminal book in 1964 that is focused on western European democracies. Rokkan’s work was contextual and considerate of historical territorial, political and economic formation of these states and the political role of their citizens. His model was inclusive of “the entire history of state formation, nation-building, and mass politics in Western Europe. It represents an attempt to identify the crucial variables in the long and complex process that led up to the current constellation of territories, economy and political alignment systems.” (Flora, Kuhnle & Urwin Eds. 135) “Despite the limitations on the use of this model beyond the fully western styled democracies of western Europe, yet, many scholars used it to examine nation branding efforts in Russia and post-Soviet collapse nations (Kolsto 2018). John Gultang argues that nation-building “is big and weighs heavily on the shoulders of those who carry the major burden: the peasants, the workers, the women.” (5)

## **Anticipated Participants**

This workshop is soliciting proposals related to Gulf states’ bids to integrate and instrumentalize women in their nation building projects. Empirical research and insightful scholarship are welcome. Participants are encouraged to address any aspect of the main theme of the workshop which focuses on (but not limited to) the below topics:

- GCC-wide studies based or critical comparative historical narratives and case studies.
- Analytical papers of the personal, professional, national or global leverages that lead to women instrumental presence in the national state projects in the Gulf in the past few years; particularly uncovering patterns of inclusion in state projects or exclusion from these projects.
- The role of these initiatives, programs and policies in promoting each Gulf country and its impact on its foreign relations.
- Nation branding, women and Gulf states, women and nation building: how efforts and discourse of nation building is contributing to nation branding? Can national branding campaigns impact or advance the nation building process in the Gulf?
- State initiatives, policies for and discourse on advancing the role of women in education and higher education organizations in light of nation building projects in the Gulf.
- Women mobility and access to the public space in the gulf as part of the state modernization and nation building efforts of the states.

- Observable shifts in women's roles in the family sphere as appears in state discourse on nation building. The case of "spartan women" in the UAE, for instance.
- The great emphasis on the militarization of women in the public sphere, and the high state support of women to join the military rank and files.
- The state promotion of motherhood and the Mother of the Nation role and symbol of women status in the state ideology
- The sharp shift in Gulf states from denying women the right of the public space, and particularly to an almost overnight shift to promoting women in modernized spaces.
- The role of presence and appearance of women as a national symbol, and the very creation of their image as national icons or attractive symbols and imagined national icons
- State initiatives, policies and discourse in promoting women in politics and empowering them to reach political positions and the impact of women in these positions.
- States initiatives, programs and policies in empowering women in cultural projects and heritage related areas.
- State supported projects or initiatives for women in media and marketing communication.
- States efforts in advancing women artists, scientists and medical doctors, and engineers in light of their national projects.
- Shifting state and societal perceptions of gender roles in state building in the Gulf.
- Emerging and traditional grassroots discourses, in the cyberspace, on women's contribution to nation building.
- The role of cyberspace in enabling a state amplification of its discourse on women and nation building to both internal and external publics.
- The use of cyberspace in women emancipation and agency in the context of the nation building.
- Women as an instrument for soft power and cultural capital in the GCC.
- The instrumental use of stories, images and discourse on women by the Gulf States to projects certain image of the country (brand)

## **Workshop Director Profiles**

**Dr. Abeer AlNajjar** is an Associate professor of Mass Communications at the American University of Sharjah- United Arab Emirates, Research Fellow at CAMRI The University of Westminster 2018-2019. She earned her PhD from the University of Edinburgh in 2003, was the Dean of Jordan Media Institute 2011-2012 (Amman, Jordan). Abeer served as a member of a UNESCO advisory group of experts (2013/14) for "World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development". Dr. AlNajjar's research focuses on political communication, international and transnational news media, media and political conflict, popular culture, gender and political Islam. She published two books and several journal articles and book chapters including "From Women Empowerment to Nation Building: A Case Study from the United Arab Emirates". International Journal of communication (2017).

**Dr. Magdalena Karolak** (Ph.D. in Linguistics, University of Silesia, Poland) is Associate Professor and Associate Dean of the College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Zayed University, UAE. Her research interests include transformations of societies in the Arabian Gulf and comparative linguistics. Dr. Karolak has published more than 30 journal articles and book chapters on the shifting gender relations, social media, culture and identity and political system transformations in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. She is the author of two scholarly monographs. Contact: [Magdalena.Karolak@zu.ac.ae](mailto:Magdalena.Karolak@zu.ac.ae)

**Dr. Rima Sabban** is an Associate Professor of Sociology, currently the Assistant Dean for Research and Graduate Studies at Zayed University (UAE). Received her Masters from Georgetown University, and PhD from the American University (Washington D.C.). She has four chapters out of Press (2018): two in *Arab Family Studies*, by Syracuse Press, edited by Suad Joseph. The other two: one out of Brill on UAE Family and Domestic Work, and the later out of MacMillan on Domestic Slavery. Sabban is the author of two books *Maids Crossing* and *Motherhood*, and multiple other book chapters and journal papers on Youth, Globalization, Gulf civil society, Migration, Domestic work, Family, Women and gender, State and Civil society. She received multiple National and International grants awards: LSE-MEC, JSPS, DIFI, SSRC, ECSSR, NRF, RIF and start-up (from ZU). Previously served as Chair of GED at the UD, and was Dean of Student Affairs at the AUS. Active in the UAE community, and quoted in Arabic and English Media. Contact: [rima.sabban@zu.ac.ae](mailto:rima.sabban@zu.ac.ae)

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