



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 7

## **Women and Globalization in the GCC: Negotiating States, Agency and Social Change**

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### **Abstract**

Existing research points out that global processes have improved the labor force participation of women in the GCC. They have also improved levels of education and access to leadership positions. The globalization of the economies of the Gulf has also increased access to markets and motivated many women to start their own businesses and expand their entrepreneurial activities. Moreover, women's empowerment and leadership have become the cornerstones for many national and regional development initiatives. However, despite the large gains in women's status experienced by some countries in the region, many contradictory trends relating to the position of women still remain. For example, there are numerous institutional and socio-cultural barriers which continue to thwart the integration and utilization of women in their country's social and economic development. Indeed, globalizing flows may actually strengthen some of these barriers and require new ways of addressing challenges to gender equality in a globalized context. This workshop aims at problematizing the position of women in the GCC by situating their experience within the framework and rhetoric of globalization in order to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the diverse institutional and cultural mechanisms that influence gender dynamics in the region. The overarching questions posed by the workshop are: How do the ways the GCC responds to the demands of globalization impact the position of women in these societies? At the same time, how do the women themselves utilize the institutions and rhetoric of globalization to improve their own position in society? And, more generally, what are the dynamics of the interaction between women, globalization, states and societies in the Gulf region and what are the outcomes of these diverse forms of interaction?

### **Description and Rationale**

Globalization, understood as the product of economic, financial, cultural and political interconnectedness, is replete with contradictions. On the one hand, globalization is understood as increasing interconnectedness between peoples and cultures and is associated with the spread of democratic values, individual freedoms, material wealth and global identities. On the other hand, globalization is understood as increasing economic inequality, and ethnic and social conflicts. Yet, our complete understanding of women's movements and participation in their economies and societies cannot take place without taking global processes into consideration. The understanding of gender in particular localities (cities, nation-states, communities) needs to take global forces into account. Tohidi (2002) explains this relationship in the case of women in Afghanistan, whereby women's status and rights cannot be understood without analyzing the interaction between local histories, geographies, political economies, cultures and Afghani women's agency, and the global factors that include foreign interventions, regional powers and the subsequent interventions of international human rights groups and feminist organizations.

The Gulf countries have developed mixed attitudes about globalization. For many, the material benefits that result from their advantageous economic integration into the world market outweigh the threats posed by cultural and political transformations. According to Abdulla (2006), political and cultural processes of globalization are perceived by GCC governments as an undesirable intrusion and a threat to deeply held social values. Yet in none of the Gulf States has there been a flat rejection of globalization in all its manifestations. Such an endeavor may prove to be practically impossible with an increasing percentage of their populations having been educated in English speaking schools and having been socialized since their early childhood into the ideologies of global consumerism and culture. Indeed, as a result, the next generation of rulers and leaders will be even more drawn into the cultural reality of globalism. However, when it comes to the status of women, GCC states have been unwilling to accept global discourses on rights and freedoms as reflected in women's lack of legal rights and protection from discrimination, political rights, as well as women's personal status and autonomy in almost all GCC countries. While governments in the GCC may choose to adopt a partial embracing of globalization, it is hard to assume that their efforts are likely to be embraced by all members of society given the elusive character of global influences. As a result, it is important to investigate the relationship between global processes and the position of women in the Gulf region and understand the various forces that are at play in shaping the existing cultural and institutional dynamics.

This workshop aims at situating the experience of women in the GCC within the framework and rhetoric of globalization. How do the ways the GCC responds to the demands of globalization impact the position of women in these societies? At the same time, how do the women themselves utilize the institutions and rhetoric of globalization to improve their own position in society? And, more generally, what are the dynamics of the interaction between women, globalization, states and societies in the Gulf region and what are the outcomes of these diverse forms of interaction? Such investigations would expand our knowledge of the process of integration of the GCC within global society and enhance our understanding of the social and cultural transformations in the region.

Existing research points out that global processes have improved the labor force participation of women in the GCC. They have also improved levels of education and access to leadership positions. The globalization of the economies of the Gulf has also increased access to markets and motivated many women to start their own business and expand their entrepreneurial

activities. The expansion of women's private business has allowed many women to form national and regional business associations to expand their access to business networks and markets and promote and advocate for furthering their business interests. However, it may be too soon to assume that the general impact of globalization on women's lives is only positive as other global dynamics such as competitive market forces, political clientelism, and social polarization bring about negative consequences to societies in general and women's lives in particular.

In some respect, the polarizing effect of globalization on women is taken to create contradictions and conflicts of interest among women of different social classes. El Baz (2003) argues that accompanied by justifying ideologies, these divisive social and political mechanisms would prevent the emergence of a dynamic national women's movement with a comprehensive national agenda for gender equality. This is partially evident in the GCC as, despite the numerous initiatives to promote women's leadership, entrepreneurship activities, education and public participation, the region has yet to witness organized social movements that advocate for gender equality and more general social changes. In almost all countries of the region, legal barriers imposed on the formation of civil society organizations drastically limit the potential for organized activities that would promote large-scale social transformations.

The Arab Human Development Report 2005 argued that the full empowerment of Arab women is a crucial facet for the future development of the region and its participation in global society (UNDP 2005). The empowerment of women is defined as granting women equal access to participate in politics, society and the economy. Despite the popularity of women's empowerment in development discourse and regional initiatives, and the large gains in women's status experienced by some countries in the region, institutional and socio-cultural barriers continue to thwart women's full integration and utilization in their country's social and economic development. As a result, future research on women in the region needs to move beyond descriptive analyses of the status of women and encourage a more critical analysis of institutional and cultural mechanisms that complicate our understanding of gender dynamics in the GCC region. The understanding of the contradictory trends shaping the position of women in the GCC cannot be complete without accounting for the impact of global economic, political and cultural processes and the way they shape the economies and societies of the Gulf region.

### **Potential Research Contributions and Anticipated Papers**

This workshop aims to further investigate the position of women in GCC countries within the framework of their countries' global economic and cultural integration. This would allow for expanding our knowledge of the general process of integration of the GCC within global society and enhance our understanding of the social and cultural transformations in the region. We believe that this line of inquiry would enhance Gulf Studies by utilizing contemporary theories and analyses of globalization in understanding the social and cultural transformations that are affecting women in the region. Furthermore, a global framework would facilitate comparative analyses that are significantly important in understanding gender dynamics in the region.

We encourage analytical contributions that would strengthen our understanding of the gender dynamics in the region, both empirically (individual case studies or comparative ones) or

theoretically. Specifically, we seek to encourage contributions that would attempt to answer these questions:

- How do the forces of globalization play out differently for different groups of women in the Gulf region (i.e. those with different class, ethnic or national background)?
- What is the impact of nationalization policies (Emiratization, Qatarization, Omanization, Bahrainization and Saudization) on the position of women in society?
- What is the relationship between the state sanctioned changes (the advancement of women's education, business ownership and political participation) and the more transformational social processes (advocacy for social justice, women's political, legal and civic rights and cultural change)?
- What role do women leaders play in shaping their surrounding cultural environment? And what discourses do they utilize to strengthen their leadership and promote their social interests in the context of global flows?
- How do the various international organizations (MNCs or non-governmental organizations) in the region interact with other institutions in ways that are likely to affect gender dynamics in their societies?
- To what extent do women's organizations utilize regional and global networks? And how do these networks participate in general social transformations that affect the position of women?
- What are the potential contributions of and challenges to domestic forms of Islamic feminism in changing the position of women in the region?
- What aspects of globalization may promote or alternatively hinder gender equality (for example, technology, consumerism or global education)? And how do these processes interact with regional cultural and social dynamics (such as Islam, rentierism or tribalism)?
- What is the impact of the current global economic crisis on women's position and advocacy in the Gulf? In particular, how are immigrant women affected by the current crisis?
- How do women in the Gulf define and interact with processes of globalization? How do they understand the different effects it has on their lives?
- What are the potential threats that may be posed by processes of globalization that also weaken the position of women and contribute to institutional forms of oppression?
- What impact does an understanding of globalization as equivalent to modernization have on our understanding of gender in the GCC? What other understandings or definition of globalization may be deemed more useful in our assessment of the field?
- Are global influences in the GCC different from other parts of the Arab World? How can these differences be understood? In addition to the diversity in the forms of influence, are there common processes that can be detected that apply to the Arab World in general?
- To what extent are the effects of globalization on women in the Gulf different from men? Is globalization empowering in general to both men and women? Are there particular effects of globalization that benefit women and not men?

The desired outcome of the workshop is the production of an edited volume. Towards that purpose, original contributions are encouraged from diverse disciplines and methodologies.

## Workshop Director Profiles

**May Al-Dabbagh** is the Founder and Director of the Gender and Public Policy Program at the Dubai School of Government where she has taught and published on a variety of topics including cross-cultural and social/organizational psychology; theory and method in assessing the relationship between the self and context; cultural and gender differences in leadership, decision-making, and job-related outcomes. Al-Dabbagh is also a research associate with the Harvard Kennedy School's Women and Public Policy Program and is currently heading a multiyear research project on "Intersections between culture and gender in negotiation" which focuses on gender and globalization in negotiation in the Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries. Al-Dabbagh is a member of the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, the International Association for Conflict Management, the Middle East Studies Association of North America, and the Academy of Management. She is a board member of the Banawi Industrial Group in Saudi Arabia and has been selected as a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum in 2011. She has publications in Arabic and English and her work has been featured in over 40 local, regional, and international media outlets. In 2006, Al-Dabbagh earned a Ph.D. in Experimental Psychology from the University of Oxford. She earned her B.A. degree in psychology from Harvard University, where she graduated in 1999 with high honors.

**Dalia Abdelhady** is a Senior Research Fellow at the Center for Middle East Studies at Lund University in Sweden where she is also the Academic Coordinator for the Women for Sustainable Growth Initiative hosted in collaboration with Yale University in the US and Zayed University in the UAE. The general theme in Dr. Abdelhady's work deals with the ways globalization shapes the lives of individuals in various ways. One line of research looks at immigration as an important aspect of globalization. Looking at Arab immigrants and their children in Europe and North America, she investigates the complex ways immigrants integrate to their new societies, maintain ties to their homelands and construct global solidarities and cosmopolitan identities. Most recently, her book *The Lebanese Diaspora: The Arab Immigrant Experience in Montreal, New York and Paris* was published by NYU Press. A second line of research investigates the impact of globalization on gender dynamics in the Arab World with particular emphasis on the Gulf region. Studying women's public roles, Dr. Abdelhady highlights the interplay of Islam, local traditions and global cultural ideals in shaping women's experiences in the region. Pursuing this line of research, Dr. Abdelhady is the guest editor for a special issue of the *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* on Women and Social Change in the GCC, forthcoming in the spring of 2013.

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