



**Gulf Research Centre Cambridge**  
Knowledge for All

Workshop 9

GRM 2023

## **Women in the GCC: Negotiating Leadership, Power, and Change**

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### **Abstract**

The status of women in the Gulf States (Khaliji women)<sup>1</sup> is a recurring theme in academia and policy circles. This workshop examines the role of Gulf women in the public square. The workshop will highlight current roles women play, methods of integration into local affairs (political, economic, social, religious, or other), and the challenges that ensue.

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<sup>1</sup> This proposal uses the terms Gulf and Khaliji women interchangeably.

The Gulf States are prioritising their national interests in a shifting world order. New strategies and sectors are emerging due to a host of internal and international changes. Amid these rapid transformations, women in the Gulf are increasingly finding their way into new roles. Despite the ever changing character of politics, business, and other sectors in the region, the status of women remains arbitrary. Women are often left out of the “boys club” while confronting ongoing challenges: discrimination, domineering patriarchy, exclusion, and harassment. Navigating through these persisting social structures and power struggles while the region undergoes socio-economic change makes women’s roles more difficult. This workshop will inject an intersectional lens to the way women negotiate opportunities and barriers related to their role in the public sphere, bringing to the surface the nuanced experiences of women in the Gulf.

## **Description and Rationale**

Within a shifting geopolitical climate, state-society relations in the Gulf States are changing to face emergent regional and global challenges and opportunities. As this relationship develops, women’s participation in the public sphere across the Gulf States is rapidly evolving. It varies considerably depending on the government structure and state policies in each country. Some states have been more keen on negotiating spaces for women in the past, such as Kuwait and Oman. Other states, Saudi Arabia in particular, have more recently made significant strides to narrow the gender gap in women’s participation in politics and the labour market. Despite these positive shifts, the position of women remains contentious in both social and institutional structures. Their status wavers: it is either deteriorating in states where women once held more political capital, or they are increasingly viewed as a threat to the status quo in other states even when they are gaining political clout and more freedoms.

Women’s presence in ministerial positions and elected legislative bodies has varied considerably in the recent past across the six Gulf States. Gulf cabinets in 2022 have featured women ministers at varying rates: [UAE 27%](#), [Bahrain 20%](#), [Qatar 16%](#), [Oman 13%](#), and [Kuwait 12%](#). [Saudi Arabia](#) is the exception with no women ministers yet, even though the government appointed a [vice minister](#) in 2022. Therefore, Khaliji women’s representation in government is growing, despite it traditionally being far below other Arab States and global statistics. Moreover, it has been relatively recent that women gained suffrage in the Arab Gulf States. The first country to grant women’s suffrage was [Oman in 1994](#), followed by [Qatar in 1998](#), [Bahrain in 2002](#), [Kuwait in 2005](#), the [UAE in 2006](#), and [Saudi Arabia in 2011](#). Despite

women voting, it is important to also consider the different forms of political participation and whether this leads to more empowerment. The right to vote in the Gulf States does not always translate into an elevated status or tangible outcomes for women, and they have frequently lost out in elections [in the past decade](#). In fact, labour force participation rates illustrate that the right to vote does not necessarily lead to more economic opportunities, as illustrated below.

The six Gulf States scored among the lowest 25 countries out of 146 countries in the economic participation and opportunities subindex of [the Global Gender Gap Index 2022 \(Page 10\)](#). Kuwait ranked (123), followed by Saudi Arabia (128), Bahrain (131), UAE (132), Qatar (133), and finally Oman ranked (137). This indicates a barrier to effective participation in different areas across the public domain.

Women's labour force participation within the GCC averages 18.87%, which is below the [global average of 39.3%](#). As of 2021, [according to the World Bank](#), Kuwaiti women have the highest labour force participation rate (as a percentage of the total labour force), representing 25% of the labour force. This is followed by Bahrain (21.1%), Saudi Arabia (20.4%), the UAE (16.6%), Qatar (15.3%), and finally Oman (14.8%).

Focusing on the economic participation of women is essential, as the number of women in productive jobs is set to [more than double by 2030](#). Properly integrating women into a changing workforce will require an investment in their physical, cognitive, social and technological skills.

Anecdotal evidence (and limited organic upward mobility) suggests that encouraging women's participation in the public and private sectors is often considered a convenient [box-checking activity](#) by the men that dominate these spaces. This is evidenced by the more frequent appointment of women into positions of power compared to climbing the ladder through well-deserved promotions. Women leaving their fate to men inevitably restricts their agency and control over the opportunities they have. It reinforces the mainstream belief that women are ill-prepared for decision-making positions. While women strive to claim ownership of their social and political roles, they are often side-lined and pushed into positions that are deemed gender appropriate, or met with a [glass ceiling](#) that limits their growth into ultimate decision-making positions.

## Objectives

This workshop aims to understand how Gulf Women navigate through social and institutional challenges and opportunities to gain power in the public domain. It aims to:

- Highlight local perspectives on women's development and positionality within domestic politics in the Gulf States,
- Examine key policymaking domains that women mainly contribute to,
- Study the impact of the unprecedented openness in some of the Gulf States on the next generation of women leaders in spaces beyond policymaking,
- Amplify the voices of Khaliji women actively participating in decision-making,
- Give voice to women who are left behind,
- Shed light on the contradictions, pathways and opportunities that are emerging in today's geopolitical landscape.

## Scope and Agenda

The workshop welcomes papers that consider the role and status of Khaliji women in politics and policymaking, the economy, science, the arts, and academia, to name a few fields. It also welcomes papers that examine the strategies that women draw on to navigate social barriers, power struggles and access to positions of leadership. The workshop further welcomes papers that question women's impact on the current status quo and their role in future state and social developments. Papers can address topics such as:

- Women in government and legislative bodies
  - Women's representation in national politics
  - Women's roles in local and national governance
  - Geographic/regional inequalities at the state level
  - Women members of parliament experiences and legacies
  - The role of civil society in promoting women's representation in government and parliament
  - State Feminism
- Legal status of women
  - The shifting legal status of women
  - Women in the judiciary

- Women in the military
- Islamic family law
- Socio-cultural status of women
  - Power relations and negotiation dynamics
  - The role of women in public and private spaces
  - Role of Islam: how religion shapes women's decision making
  - Perceptions of women's role in society
- Economic status of women
  - Women's representation on boards and in industries
  - Role of women in the creative industries
  - Women leaders in science, technology, medicine, and other fields
  - Feminine and masculine depictions of talent and work
  - The role of women in education
  - Entrepreneurship and enterprising efforts
  - Market Feminism

## **Workshop Contributions to the field of Gulf Studies**

The workshop aims to bridge the academic and policy worlds by both contributing to the literature and informing policymakers. The workshop addresses gender in vital policymaking areas away from rentierism and the oil curse discourses. It employs a holistic approach that tackles the implications and challenges of the political culture, political economy, changing state-society relations in the Gulf, and international influences on Khaliji women. The workshop will bring together multi-disciplinary researchers from higher education, gender studies, comparative politics, the humanities, cultural Gulf studies and beyond to facilitate a conversation across a wide range of paradigms. This is timely given the recent and rapid changes in economic statecraft and the regional challenges that warrant women's inclusion in national affairs.

While there has been impactful and important scholarship on women in the Gulf, there is room to contribute to this literature by situating new studies in the current geopolitical and local political contexts. Studies on women in the Gulf include policy-oriented research by think tanks and international organisations, which is helpful in reporting on progress in social, legal and employment statuses. Yet robust academic interrogation of the current state of affairs and new

empirical evidence will help further our understanding of the nuances driving women's experiences.

## **Publication Plan**

Edited Book

The workshop directors are planning to bring together an edited volume containing contributions from the GRM Meeting 2023, *Women in the GCC: Negotiating Leadership, Power, and Change*. The book is envisioned with Springer Publishers, Gulf series.

*We Acknowledge and Agree to the Workshop Director and Publication Guidelines.*

**Suggested Readings** (organised thematically, but note that some themes overlap):

### **Policy-oriented Studies**

- [Aaboutsleiman, Issam. "Women in the Gulf Countries: Perceptions and Reality." In Arab Voices, World Bank Blogs, Washington, DC, 2019.](#)
- [Al-Hussain, Mira. "Re-Examining Women's Empowerment in the Gulf." Sada, Carnegie Endowment, 2022.](#)
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- [Buttorff, Gail, Bozena Welborne, and Nawra Al-Lawati. "Measuring Female Labor Force Participation in the GCC." Baker Institute for Public Policy, Rice University, 2018.](#)
- [Fakih, Marwa. "Hadil Al-Moosa: Women Entrepreneurs in Oman." Washington, DC: The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, 2019.](#)
- [Mufarreah, Saadia. "Gulf Women Have Come a Long Way." AlJazeera, 2019.](#)
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### **Work, Education, and Healthcare**

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- Kemp, Linzi J., Susan R. Madsen, and James Davis. "Women in Business Leadership: A Comparative Study of Countries in the Gulf Arab States." *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management* 15, no. 2 (2015): 215-33.

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### **Women and Religion**

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