



Two students study in a hallway at Education City at Northwestern University in Qatar on November 2, 2015.

## The Challenges of Teaching Women's and Gender Studies in the Gulf Region

*by Huda Alsahi*

**T**he women's studies and gender research scene in the Gulf states is still in its infancy. While the field has finally begun to gain some visibility, the recognition of women's and gender studies as an autonomous field of research and teaching has not been structurally integrated, nor institutionally anchored, in the majority of universities in the region. There is currently no single university in the Gulf countries that offers a stand-alone undergraduate level program in women's or gender studies (with the partial exception of the American University of Sharjah, which offers a minor in women's studies).<sup>1</sup> As for the graduate level, only two universities offer relevant degrees: Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar, which runs a Master of Arts in Women, Society, and Development;<sup>2</sup> and Zayed University in the United Arab Emirates, which has a Master of Arts degree in Muslim Women's Studies.<sup>3</sup> When it comes to just coursework, Qatar University's Department of International Affairs offers four undergraduate courses that tackle gender studies: Women and Islam, Gender in International Perspective, Women and Violence, and Gender in Law.<sup>4</sup>

Nonetheless, women's and gender studies face ongoing challenges. Institutional inertia in the field of higher education, particularly the red tape imposed on inserting any new discipline or additional curriculum, makes it difficult to strengthen women's and gender studies offerings in the region. Moreover, the preoccupation with tying education to the needs of labor market structures makes many disciplines within the social sciences—including women's and gender studies—vulnerable to market demands, as many assume that they have no tangible employment benefits.<sup>5</sup>

### Gender studies' activist roots

In many countries across the world, elements of the educational systems have been specifically crafted to reinforce existing political and social norms. The Gulf states are no exception—the overall education policy has traditionally emphasized promoting loyalty to religious values, the head of the family, and authority in general. Rote learning, rather than encouraging critical debate, is promoted in the classroom setting.<sup>6</sup>

Academic institutions in the Gulf region are a microcosm of the larger society, and they remain highly gendered institutions that are constantly restrained from embracing too much nonconformist thought.

But women's and gender studies, if responsive to its historical roots, cannot avoid being political. As a body of knowledge, the discipline seeks to emancipate women and deconstruct the main foundations of patriarchy. This is unsettling to many people, especially when it comes to applying a feminist critical lens to challenge certain beliefs and practices such as polygamy, unequal inheritance for women, compulsory veiling, and the male guardianship system, among other taboo issues.

The controversy that unfolded at Qatar University in November 2016 is one such illustration of the cultural challenges posed by teaching women's and gender studies in the Gulf region. The controversy began when Dr. Hatoun al-Fassi, a Saudi academic at Qatar University and a prominent commentator on women's issues in the Gulf region, was scheduled to debate a male professor from the university's Sharia College on the subject of women and Islam. The debate was to take place one month after al-Fassi was heavily criticized for endorsing an article written by two of her former students arguing that Qatar did not grant women their full rights yet.<sup>7</sup>

When news spread about al-Fassi's participation in the announced debate, some students launched a Twitter campaign demanding she be sacked. They also criticized Qatar University for giving al-Fassi a platform, as many thought her views were threatening to Islamic values and Qatar's conservative social fabric.<sup>8</sup> The president of Qatar University promptly cancelled the scheduled debate, posting a statement of its cancellation on Twitter.<sup>9</sup>

This was not the first incident involving al-Fassi. In the fall of 2014, students filed a complaint against her Women and Islam course which featured the controversial writings of the late Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi and Virginia Commonwealth University professor emeritus Amina Wadud.<sup>10</sup> Mernissi and Wadud's work demonstrate that what is popularly believed to be religiously ordained in Islam is not and in need of debunking. Both scholars also argue that gender inequality in the Middle East is rooted in the male-dominated culture, not in Islam per se.

The teaching methods in al-Fassi's Women and Islam course included close feminist readings of religious texts to challenge much of our received knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Specifically, students were encouraged to choose one Quranic verse that talks about women's rights in Islam, and then read various interpretations of that same verse ranging from the 9th century Muslim historian al-Tabari to the mid-20th century leading Islamic theorist Sayyid Qutb.<sup>12</sup> This comparison was aimed at making students critical of the ways in which Islamic ideals have been translated into our contemporary laws and practices, and that many patriarchal discourses were incorrectly attributed to Islam itself.

It's hardly surprising that in a socially conservative society with little tradition in the critical approach to education has al-Fassi attracted considerable controversy—being accused of criticizing the Quran and twisting it to favor women. Thus, in the aftermath of the November 2016 controversy, she was put under surveillance and the university's administration recorded her lectures to maintain close supervision. A

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committee of mostly male scholars from the Sharia College also ended up reviewing and then revising the syllabus of her Women and Islam course. She was eventually barred from teaching the course altogether, and a male professor was assigned to take her place.<sup>13</sup>

### Women's studies in male-dominated societies

One can't dismiss that academic institutions in the Gulf region are a microcosm of the larger society, and they remain highly gendered institutions that are constantly restrained from embracing too much nonconformist thought.<sup>14</sup> Gender norms are deeply entrenched, and efforts to promote feminist knowledge—as seen in the case of al-Fassi—are met with anything from implicit to active resistance at the individual, group, and/or institutional level.<sup>15</sup>

Most Gulf states have in recent years begun to focus more on women's issues. Yet the political and institutional focus has tended to be directed toward family-oriented policies rather than seeing women as independent legal subjects.<sup>16</sup> While public discourse celebrates female role models, there is little, if any, discussion of issues that make up a typical feminist agenda. The fact that feminism remains a controversial topic and is widely considered to threaten family cohesion does, more than any other factor, prevent women's and gender studies offerings in the Gulf states from finally breaking out of its nascent state. The region's universities would do better to take these dynamics into account and adopt best practices in teaching and research.

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<sup>1</sup>"Minor in women's studies," American University of Sharjah, accessed January 5, 2018, <https://www.aus.edu/cas/departments-of-international-studies/minor-in-women%E2%80%99s-studies>.

<sup>2</sup>"Master of Arts in Women, Society, and Development," Hamad Bin Khalifa University, accessed January 5, 2018, <https://hbku.edu.qa/en/program/college-humanities-social-sciences/master-arts-women-society-and-development>.

<sup>3</sup>"Master of Arts (M.A.) in Muslim Women's Studies," Zayed University, accessed January 7, 2018, [https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/iivs/programs/graduate\\_program/MA\\_Muslim\\_Women\\_Studies.aspx](https://www.zu.ac.ae/main/en/iivs/programs/graduate_program/MA_Muslim_Women_Studies.aspx).

<sup>4</sup>"Course Description," Qatar University, accessed January 5, 2018, [http://www.qu.edu.qa/artssciences/international\\_affairs/courses.php](http://www.qu.edu.qa/artssciences/international_affairs/courses.php).

<sup>5</sup>John Willoughby and Fatima Badry, "Higher Education Reform in the Gulf," *Gulf Affairs* (Spring 2017), [https://www.oxgaps.org/files/gulf\\_affairs\\_spring\\_2017\\_full\\_issue.pdf](https://www.oxgaps.org/files/gulf_affairs_spring_2017_full_issue.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>Jane Kinninmont, "Future Trends in the Gulf," Chatham House, February 2015, [https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field\\_document/20150218FutureTrendsGCCKinninmont.pdf](https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20150218FutureTrendsGCCKinninmont.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>Ursula Lindsey, "Women and Islam: A Topic that Troubles," *Al-Fanar Media*, March 10, 2017, <https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2017/03/women-islam-topic-troubles/>.

<sup>8</sup>Shabina Khatri and Riham Sheble, "Qatar University postpones 'Women in Islam' talk over controversy," *Doha News*, November 3, 2016, <https://dohanews.co/qatar-university-postpones-women-islam-talk-controversy/>.

<sup>9</sup>Ursula Lindsey, "Women and Islam: A Topic that Troubles," March 10, 2017.

<sup>10</sup>Hatoon Alfassi, "Women studies in the Gulf universities and the crisis of academic freedoms," Presentation at the Women Academics in the Arab Gulf States workshop at Kuwait University, Kuwait City, Kuwait, May 2, 2017.

<sup>11</sup>Nelly Stromquist, "Gender studies: A global perspective of their evolution, contribution, and challenges to comparative higher education," *Higher Education* no. 41: (2001) 373–387.

<sup>12</sup>Hatoon Alfassi, "Women studies in the Gulf universities and the crisis of academic freedoms," May 2, 2017.

<sup>13</sup>Ursula Lindsey, "Women and Islam: A Topic that Troubles," March 10, 2017.

<sup>14</sup>Hanan Ibrahim, "Women's studies and transformative politics: an Arab-Muslim perspective," *Learning and Teaching in Higher Education: Gulf Perspectives* 9, no. 2 (2012): 1-17.