

Gender (Im)Balance in Gulf Societies Overview

by Amira Sonbol, Theme Editor

Perhaps the most significant commonality today that joins women of the Arabian Gulf together continues to be family. Central to the social foundations of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, it is safeguarded in the various constitutions that reflect traditional structures dearly held on to by societies that are undergoing rapid cultural and structural change. It is in the laws and the transformations of family structures, relations, and lived realities that gender inequality is most evident—and where resistance to it is most pronounced. Although GCC governments are moving toward raising the standard of living for their people, spreading education, and opening the job market to women, there are still obstacles yet to be bridged.

The constitutions of GCC countries include articles stating rights to citizenship and general statements of equality between men and women. At the same time, certain laws cancel out the freedoms that are implied by citizenship guarantees. For example, by basing the marital relationship on the woman's right to marital support in exchange for obedience and acceptance of patriarchy guarantees inequality between the sexes no matter what improvements and transformations take place. The same is true for other elements including defining the place of the mother as being in the home; insisting her prime responsibility is toward her children and her husband; and requiring that her obedience is first to her father, brothers, and other male guardians and then to her husband once she is married. These laws constrain Gulf women and establish boundaries in the parameters of their lives. While women are told what to do, men are told what not to do; while husbands can take a second wife at will, wives have little power to stop it; while wives are not allowed to keep their children from a first marriage without their husband's approval; men can keep their children at will. And so gender inequality exists at all levels of the marital relationship.

These unequal power relations between men and women, extended and strengthened by law, are also enforced by cultural traditions. Men are allowed both to marry outside their tribal group and nationality, but women are consistently expected to marry within the clan—often cousins or from tribes closely allied to their own. Marriage to non-nationals is rare and may require judicial consent. Gulf nationals generally support family and the traditions that guide it. But women increasingly find themselves torn between a system and values they believe in and want to hold on to at all costs, and the actual transformations, difficulties, and inconsistencies that challenge them on a daily basis.

The gender imbalance that women face are best illustrated by demographics. The literacy among women of the Gulf is the highest in the Arab world and among the highest in the world (reaching 97% in Qatar), but women still play a relatively small role in almost all high-level jobs. The only exceptions are the few female members of the political and business elite who work within their family businesses or in service of educational, social, and cultural sectors.

In addition, although marriage and raising a family are regarded as a woman's top priority, the number and rate of unmarried women is rising in all GCC countries. This is due to several factors, among them men who delay marriage, a lack of grooms considered of equal status to women, and the financial burdens of matrimony that largely fall on men—which is also pushing them to marry outsiders who are not as financially demanding. Significantly increasing numbers of women are also choosing to delay or shun marriage altogether, in large part to complete education, advance their careers, and ensure some sort of independence.

The extent of change in the GCC states can be readily seen in the infrastructure projects found in mega-urban centers across the region. What is being achieved is both impressive and sustainable. While inequalities still persist, there is an awareness among both society and policymakers that issues of class and gender must be tackled. The reform programs introduced in the Gulf region in the last few years took other parts of the world generations to realize. But the challenge continues to be how to preserve elements of family life and culture while addressing the inevitable shifts and changes that economic development brings. The efforts to provide women with advanced education and training, open avenues for cultural and artistic development, and welcome them into the job market are all bearing fruit today. How far this trend will go and what its impact will be on laws that dictate family relations has yet to be seen.

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