Advancing Women's Political Representation in Gulf Governance

A Systematic Evaluation of Strategies Leveraged by GCC States to Increase Women's Political Participation in the Executive, Legislative, and Judicial Branches of Government
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This report examines the policies and strategies utilized by the Gulf Cooperation Council states to increase the political representation of women in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) consists of six nations: Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Since the late 1990s, GCC states have pursued various initiatives to increase women’s representation in national politics. This action represents the convergence of a heightened domestic policy focus on women’s rights and the solidification of gender-equitable political representation as a global development objective. This report examines the efficacy, magnitude, substantiability, and impact of these strategies on rates of women’s representation across branches of government in Gulf states.

Analysis of national case studies reveals regional trends crucial to understanding the strategies leveraged by Gulf nations, the barriers to women’s participation, and the status of women’s representation in governance since the turn of the 21st century. Regional analysis revealed:

- **Gulf states have achieved a significant increase in women’s political representation.**
  In the past three decades, the GCC states enfranchised women and facilitated a historic increase in women’s political participation. Though gains have occurred across branches of government, they are largely concentrated in legislatures. In the 21st century, the average rate of women’s representation in Gulf legislative bodies increased by nearly 15 percentage points. This increase indicates an unprecedented degree of political and societal will to enable women’s participation in national governance.

- **GCC nations have started the practice of gender mainstreaming.**
  Arab Gulf nations have begun the pursuit of gender mainstreaming, the integration and consideration of gender equity in the formulation of domestic policy. Gulf states have included gender equity goals in national development
plans and established governmental organizations responsible for women's affairs. These initiatives illustrate a growing recognition of the centrality of gender equity to effective governance.

Disparities in women’s representation between elected and appointed houses in bicameral parliaments remain.

In the Omani and Bahraini legislatures, the only bicameral parliaments in the region, rates of women’s participation in the elected lower house are significantly smaller than the appointed upper house. Currently, this disparity is roughly fifteen percent in Oman and 7.5 percent in Bahrain. This discrepancy contradicts the assertion that appointments quickly normalize women’s political participation and reduce the impediments to women’s electoral success. Instead, it exposes the continued existence of barriers to women’s participation in elected bodies, and reveals differential governmental and societal sentiment regarding women’s representation in legislatures.

Women are starkly underrepresented in regional judiciaries.

Representation reached nine percent in Bahrain, but remains at one percent or less in the rest of the GCC states. This underrepresentation is a response to the dominant focus of media, international development organizations, and academia on women’s participation in legislatures at the expense of cabinets and judiciaries.

Quotas have not facilitated cross-branch gains in rates of women’s representation.

The Saudi state has thus far confined women’s political participation to the Shura Council, with no women serving in ministerial positions and one woman serving in a quasi-judicial position. In the United Arab Emirates, women amount to 16.6 percent of the cabinet and less than one percent of the judiciary despite 50 percent representation in the Federal National Council. This data denotes that quota implementation does not effortlessly generate cross-body gains in women’s political participation.

The region is overly dependent on appointments a strategy to increase women’s political participation.

Highly publicized appointments have been the primary strategy utilized by Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait to increase women’s political representation. However, data from these nations confirms that isolated appointments do not engender meaningful, stable levels of representation.
Instances of state co-optation of women’s empowerment occur.

Across the region, Gulf nations utilize women’s political participation as a strategy to strengthen and legitimate the power of the state. This calculated, and at times superficial, engagement with women’s political empowerment is a response to GCC states’ awareness of international pressure to democratize and liberalize.

Based upon the aforementioned analysis and consideration of regional and global best practices, the report recommends a series of policy actions to encourage the consolidation, diversification, and strengthening of women’s political participation in GCC states. These recommendations are substantiated by the binding commitments made by Gulf nations to ensure women’s full participation in public life and by the robust body of evidence indicating the positive effects of women’s representation on governance at large. The GCC states, international development organizations, and academics are recommended to:

• Shift focus to cross-branch strategies to increase, equalize, and diversify women’s political representation across forms of governance.

• Explore barriers and solutions to women’s electoral success.

• Pursue substantive, accountability-driven strategies with clear numerical commitments for rates of women’s representation.

• Make efforts to diversify the voices amplified by appointment to reflect socio-economic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural diversity.

The findings from this research enable comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the divergent policies and regional strategies utilized by Gulf states to increase women’s political representation. Further, they elucidate the present gaps in political empowerment. This research allows the reformation of policy and resource provision of states and intergovernmental organizations to address areas of underrepresentation and encourage continued development in women’s representation.
Introduction

The United Arab Emirates held its first elections for the Federal National Council (FNC, the Emirati legislative body, in 2006. In that election, Amal Al-Qubaisi became the first Emirati woman elected to public office. Following her victory by the electoral college, Al-Qubaisi noted, “It took women in America and Europe 100 years just to run in the elections... For [Emiratis] to have women in the [Federal National Council] in such a short period is a huge achievement.” Just four years later, Amal Al-Qubaisi served as the deputy speaker of the FNC. Following, in 2015, she was elected as Speaker of the legislature, becoming the first woman in the entirety of the Arab world to lead a parliamentary body. While exceptional, in many ways the unprecedented career trajectory of Al-Qubaisi epitomizes trends occurring in women's political participation across the Gulf region: the momentous growth in rates of women's representation over the past several decades, the international and regional focus on historic achievements of individual women over substantive policy change, and the concentration of initiatives for gender equity in legislative bodies at the expense of cabinets and judiciaries.

Exemplified by the 1995 promulgation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by the United Nations, the late 1990s and early 2000s represented a defining moment for the global mainstreaming of gender equity in international development. Women's access to and participation in public life has long been recognized as a fundamental human right. Notably, the late 20th century represented a critical shift in dominant justifications for women's political participation, sparking a modern emphasis on efficiency, growth, innovation and global progress.

The early 21st century marked a comparable point of transition for women's political rights and participation in GCC states. In response to the proliferation of international initiatives for women's empowerment, women's political rights were increasingly integrated into state rhetoric and policy prerogatives. Gulf nations enfranchised women, witnessed the inaugural participation of women in national elections, established governmental institutions focused on gender equity, and appointed women to unprecedented positions in executive branches, parliaments, and judiciaries. Subsequently, the GCC states developed distinct strategies to increase women's political representation and participation.
An authoritative body of research affirms that women’s representation and inclusion is transformative to political institutions. Women’s representation shapes national policy prerogatives, increasing emphasis on quality of life, health, and education. Further, women’s political participation is correlated with a focus on protecting the rights of women, families, and minority groups. Diverse, gender-representative institutions are more responsive to citizens’ needs, cooperate more effectively across ethnic and party lines, and enhance citizens’ perceptions of governmental legitimacy. As women’s representation is central to equitable, effective governance, the pursuit of gender-representative institutions is a vital objective for GCC states.

Yet, little research examines the strategies leveraged by the Arab Gulf nations to increase women’s political participation. Due to the region’s conservative social policy, previous research mistakenly assumed that GCC states are absent of developed, distinct strategies to increase women’s representation in governance. Consequently, it is crucial that both individual, national strategies and region-wide approaches to women’s political empowerment are illuminated to extrapolate regional trends and best practices.

This report aims to address the previous gap in research by systematically exploring and evaluating the policy tools utilized by the GCC states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates), to enlarge women’s representation in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. While by no means a comprehensive measure of political participation, the metric expresses women’s representation at the highest level of governance. Further, the measure allows clear regional and global comparison.

Structurally, the publication begins with a conceptual discussion of state feminism and quotas, two fundamental approaches to women’s political empowerment in the region. Subsequently, a case study is included for each GCC state. Lastly, the report extrapolates regional trends and offers relevant policy recommendations.

Each case study includes data on the historic and present rates of women’s representation in the executive branch, legislature, and the judiciary. Additionally, key dates and advancements related to the political participation of women are noted. The data is contextualized through a synthesis of academic research on developments and barriers to women’s political participation. Following, the case studies identify key domestic trends and evaluate the effectiveness, substantiability, and impact of strategies utilized by the state to increase women’s political participation. Each case concludes with brief recommendations to increase women’s representation in governance given national history and political context.
Despite each Gulf nation pursuing a unique strategy to enhance the political participation of women, strong regional patterns and trends persist. Since 2000, the Gulf has achieved substantial gains in women's representation, closing the gap between GCC states and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region at large. Predominantly, Two nations, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia instituted reserved seat quotas in their legislative bodies. Despite strong gains in appointments and the concentration on women's participation in legislatures, rates of women's representation in elected bodies remain low. This pattern prevails even within bicameral parliamentary structures with significant rates of representation in the appointed upper house, denoting the continued existence of strong barriers to women's electoral success. Further, due to the primary emphasis on increasing women's representation in legislative bodies, women remain starkly underrepresented in regional judiciaries.

This report argues for the pursuit of cross-body, accountability-driven strategies with clear numerical commitments to increase, diversify, and solidify women's political participation in GCC states. Shifting the near exclusive focus of Arab Gulf nations, academics, and international organizations from legislatures will allow a more accurate and holistic view of women's role in governance, encouraging increased representation of women in regional judiciaries and cabinets. Further, numerically-oriented strategies will encourage consolidation of women's gains in representation by holding Gulf states accountable to rhetorical commitments to women's rights. Additionally, the report recommends the continued exploration of the barriers to women's success in elected bodies, allowing more effective provision of resources by women's organizations and governmental initiatives. These recommendations will diversify women's modes of political participation, equalize women's participation across government branches, and compel continued action by GCC nations to increase women's representation across government.

As the Arab Gulf is an incredibly unique social, political, and cultural environment, the regionally-focused research is vital for contextual, historically-informed understanding of developments in women's political representation. This research allows comprehensive understanding of the Gulf's regional trends and divergent domestic policies. Further, the findings elucidate the present gaps in women's representation and political empowerment. Regionally-informed recommendations are vital for reformation of policy and resource provision to increase, coalesce, and diversify women's political representation in GCC states.
The Importance of State Feminism and Gender Quotas

State Feminism

The primary mechanism for the political empowerment of women in Gulf nations is state feminism, but feminism constructed or sanctioned by the state. The use of quotas, establishment of governmental organizations focused on women’s empowerment, and the appointments of women are all state-controlled instruments to increase women’s political participation. These top-down strategies are central to the ongoing processes of national development and narratives of liberalization and democratization in GCC states.

State feminism is often criticized as an inauthentic co-optation of the feminist cause to strengthen the reputation, image, and ideological viability of the state. Further, it allows governments to monitor, control, and shape feminist movements to ensure they are palatable and regime-supporting. In the Gulf, states have reinforced centralized power structures through a consistent pattern of elite patronage of women’s organizations and initiatives. However, state feminism also allows decisive, ambitious action on behalf of women’s empowerment. According to an interview with an anonymous Kuwaiti scholar, state-led initiatives can effectively increase women’s representation in government despite traditional cultural values and low political will for women’s representation among citizens. State feminism has the potential to normalize women’s political participation and shift societal views at a faster rate than a grassroots civil-society driven feminist movement.

Further, it is important to note that even within the bounds of state feminism, women are not merely submissive and reactive, and no state, or society, is a monolithic entity with a unified vision. Women in the Gulf shape the initiatives undertaken by the state and the narratives regarding their political participation.
Gender Quotas

Quotas are an increasingly utilized policy tool to increase women’s political participation across the globe. Though only two countries in the Gulf have instituted gender quotas, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, approximately one half of countries in the world have adopted gender quotas in their governments. Though there are three types of quotas, both Gulf nations with quotas instituted a reserved seats quota, a legally binding regulation of the number of women elected to the legislative body. Reserved seats quotas are most often instituted in countries facing strong international pressure for reform on issues of women’s political participation.

The global proliferation of quotas, strongly advocated for by the IMF, World Bank, and United Nations, is due to the ease of implementation for states and the mechanism’s effectiveness for increasing women’s participation. A wide body of research suggests that as a country’s ties to the global polity increase, the likelihood of quota adoption increases. Quota implementation is largely dependent on political will and clearly demonstrates a nation’s commitment to democratic development without being too politically costly. For female candidates, the mechanism addresses the high institutional barriers women face when entering government, ensures the consolidation of consistent rates of representation, and normalizes the political participation of women. Further, quotas are the strongest predictor of rates of women’s participation in national legislatures. In fact, all countries with greater than 30 percent representation of women in their legislative bodies instituted quotas.

Despite relatively recent implementation, quotas have proven an effective policy tool in the Gulf. After Saudi Arabia’s quota adoption in 2013, the nation has upheld the quota and maintained 30 female representatives in the Shura Council. Prior to quota adoption, no women served in the legislative body. Thus, the quota facilitated a large, unprecedented increase in women’s representation. Further, due to publicity surrounding the quota, continued adherence appears highly likely. In the United Arab Emirates, quota adoption facilitated an increase from women composing 22.5 percent of the Federal National Council in 2015 to 50 percent of the Council in 2019. Due to the quota, the UAE has the highest regional rate of women’s representation in a national legislative body. However, due to recent implementation, the full impacts of quota adoption in the region are yet to be fully understood.
The Kingdom of Bahrain

Historical Background
The Kingdom of Bahrain began the pursuit of women’s political participation and enfranchisement in conjunction with a series of democratic reforms under the rule of King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa. After five years of popular protest under the rule of his father, Sheikh Hamad encouraged women’s empowerment and democratic reform as symbols of the distinctiveness, modernity, and liberality of his reign. The Kingdom staunchly opposes the use of quotas as a mechanism to increase women’s political participation as they are viewed as unconstitutional, undemocratic, and contrary to the interests of women. Women were first appointed to the Shura Council in 2000, participated in drafting the 2001 National Action Charter, and were granted the right to vote and run for office in the nation’s 2002 constitution. The Supreme Council for Women (SCW), the nation’s primary vehicle for governmental promotion of women’s rights and political participation, was established in 2001. Five years later, the first woman was elected to the Council of Representatives in 2006. Historically, Fawzia Zainal was elected as Speaker of the Council of Representatives in 2018. Her election, made possible by the votes of 25 parliamentarians, signifies a willingness for women to serve in positions of power not only alongside but presiding over men.

Key Facts on Bahrain’s National Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bicameral Legislative Branch</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Lower House: Council of Representatives/Chamber of Deputies</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 40 elected members, 4 year term</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Upper House: Shura Council/Consultative Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 40 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Appointed by King, 4 year term</td>
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Discussion & Analysis of Strategies for Women’s Political Participation

Strongly opposed to the introduction of gender quotas, as indicated in Table 2, women have been consistently appointed to constitute over 20 percent of the Shura Council since 2006, indicating consistent political resolve to ensure women comprise a sizable minority of the body. Further, Bahrain leads the GCC with women serving as 9 percent of the nation’s judges. In the cabinet, representation of women is more inconsistent. Despite gradual progress prior to 2014, culminating in 14.8 percent of ministerial positions being held by women, since 2015 women’s representation has fallen to a single ministerial position. In spite of the recent decrease of women’s representation in ministerial roles, the kingdom’s high-profile appointments are generally indicative of a sizable female minority in governance at large.

Women’s electoral gains in the Council of Representatives are comparatively modest as demonstrated in Table 1, attesting to both strong cultural and institutional barriers, and the capacity for gradual progress. Through the Supreme Council for Women, the government has provided resources aiming to improve women’s electoral success. After no women were elected in 2002, the SCW developed the Political Empowerment Program in conjunction with the United Nations Development Program. The program provides female candidates technical support, training for election preparedness, and includes campaigns on altering negative
attitudes and stereotypes for women. According to the SCW, the organization is demonstrative of the government's desire for women to succeed in elections democratically and organically, without the assistance of a quota, and the work of the SCW is partially responsible for the gradual increase in women's representation in the Council of Representatives since 2002.

The case of Bahrain speaks to the possibility of gains in women's political participation without the introduction of quotas. However, barriers to equitable representation of women in the Council of Representatives remain. Since 2002, female candidates have reported facing threats, intimidation, criticism, and the destruction of campaign materials in an attempt to dissuade their participation. Yet, the nation's cross-branch gains achieved through appointments, elections, and the initiatives of the SCW represent a crucial combination of political determination and societal openness to continued growth in women's representation.

Recommendations

The SCW has focused almost exclusively on women's representation in the legislative branch. An expanded organizational focus including the judiciary and the cabinet would facilitate essential cross-branch gains in women's representation. Through the provision of resources and training, the SCW would assist in preparing female candidates to fulfill these positions and place increased pressure on the King to consistently appoint women to positions outside of the Shura Council. Furthermore, continued analysis of the barriers women face in elections would allow consolidation of the progress demonstrated in the Council of Representatives in 2018.
Advancing Women's Political Representation in Gulf Governance

Historical Background

Kuwait has long been described as a regional aberration in regards to its liberality and steps toward democratization. The Emir has attempted to address this dichotomy through the use of prominent appointments. Emir Jaber Al-Sabah first issued a decree to grant women political rights in 1999. However, the National Assembly denied the 1999 decree and did not enfranchise women until 2005, after international attention coalesced around domestic women's protests, pushing the parliament to act. In the same year, Massouma Al-Mubarak was appointed Minister of Planning, the first female cabinet member in the nation's history. In 2009, the first four women were elected to the National Assembly. Despite demonstrated political will for the inclusion of women in the legislature, the National Assembly has witnessed highly sporadic representation of women since 2006 as noted in Table 3. Women, including incumbents, have been unable to consolidate their political gains and amass consistent electoral support. Some scholars attribute this inconsistency to the repeated dissolution of the National Assembly, forcing unexpected elections in a compressed time frame, and theorize this disadvantages women who struggle to organize their campaigns, amass resources, and mobilize voters. However, there is not consistent evidence to support this claim. Though the assembly was dissolved in March 2009, in the May 2009 election women were able to win four seats, the highest rate of women's representation in the body's history. Strong cultural barriers remain to women's electoral participation, particularly in the conservative fourth and fifth districts, where a single woman has been elected since 2006.

<table>
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<th>Key Facts on Kuwait's National Assembly</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Unicameral Legislative Branch</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 65 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• 50 elected</td>
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<tr>
<td>• 15 appointed cabinet members</td>
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<td>• 4 year term</td>
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In the executive, women’s representation has consistently increased by means of appointments, demonstrating governmental devotion to the creation of gender-representative institutions. Rates of women in ministerial positions have increased from 6.7 percent in 2018 to 13.3 percent in 2018 and most recently, 21.4 percent in 2020. Though representation in the judiciary lags behind the cabinet and legislature, Kuwait intends to appoint its first three female judges in August 2020.

Kuwaiti women’s organizations like the Women’s Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) claim to be active in advancing women’s political participation. However, organizational agendas suggest many women’s organizations are primarily a tool for the class consolidation of the elite, as they ignore the pressing issues of middle and lower class Kuwaiti women.

**Recommendations**

Ultimately, women striving to participate in politics face an absence of federal institutional support and structural support and must combat the perception of incompetence in a conservative political culture. In order to consolidate women’s progress in all branches of government, it is crucial that the Kuwaiti government act upon its rhetorical openness to policy change and institute measures which ensure women’s political participation in the judiciary, cabinet, and legislature.
The Sultanate of Oman

Historical Background

In the Gulf region, Oman distinguished itself as a pioneer for women’s political participation, integrating women into political institutions upon their inception. In 1994, Oman became the first Gulf country to enfranchise women, and two women were elected to the Shura Council, the nation’s lower house of parliament. Immediately upon the establishment of the State Council in 1997, four women were appointed, comprising a near ten percent of the upper house. The Oman Women’s Association (OWA), the primary state funded organization aiming to promote women in social, political, and economic life, was established in 1971. Today, the sultanate derives legitimacy from its “enlightened” gender policy despite little improvement since the mid 2000s.

Key Facts on Oman’s Shura Council

Bicameral Legislative Branch
- Lower House: Shura Council/Consultative Council
- 86 elected members, 4 year term
- Upper House: State Council
- 85 members and Chairman
- Appointed by Sultan, 4 year term

Graph 3. Percentage of Women’s Representation in the Council of Oman by Year (1991-2019)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
Discussion & Analysis of Strategies for Women’s Political Participation

State efforts to enable women’s political participation in the legislative branch have comparative regional longevity. However, Omani women have been unable to consolidate electoral gains in the Shura Council, represented in Table 4. Despite the historic electoral success of two women in 1994, no more than two women have ever served in a single term, and no women were elected in 2007. In the State Council, as demonstrated in Table 5, after gradual growth in the appointments of women from 1997 to 2003, 14 women were appointed in 2007, a striking jump in representation to offset the unexpected underrepresentation in the lower house. This gap in rates of representation between the two bodies, illustrated in Graph 3, is indicative of the differential will among political leadership and Omani citizens for women’s political participation. Further, it clarifies the continued existence of strong cultural and institutional barriers for women in the electoral process, which must be addressed for continued advancement.

The sultanate has worked towards women’s development in conjunction with regional and international organizations, and has been praised for its positive record in adhering to human rights conventions and integrating women’s development into national development strategies. The OWA, the Directorate for Women and Children’s Affairs, and the Ministry of Social Development have assisted women’s organizations, provided electoral support, and trained women on managing the electoral process. Despite these initiatives, which are critical for women’s success in elected bodies, representation in the legislative branch remains stagnant, and women are unrepresented in the judiciary.

In August 2020, Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, successor of late Sultan Qaboos, appointed two additional women to ministerial positions and devolved numerous powers to the newly formed cabinet. These notable changes suggest the possibility of further transformation to the nation’s governmental institutions and norms for rule as well as increased political will for women’s participation in the cabinet. In the legislature, the sultanate has consistently encouraged women’s political representation through appointments to the State Council and has indicated willingness to adopt quotas. However, Oman lacks a clear policy or procedure for the consolidation of existing progress, to ensure continued growth in women’s representation, and to address the barriers to women’s participation in the elected Shura Council.

Recommendations

Acting upon stated openness to quotas would equalize the representation of women in both parliamentary houses. In the Shura Council, a quota would allow unprecedented gains in women’s representation. In the State Council, a quota enables the consolidation of women’s progress and publicly commits the sultanate to the consistent empowerment of women. Outside of the legislature, the expansion of the OWA’s work to focus on cross-branch representation and address negative cultural perceptions of women’s competency in politics would create more societal willingness to elect women and normalize women’s participation in governance.
The State of Qatar

Historical Background

Over the past two decades, the State of Qatar has largely focused on nation-building, constructing gendered national development projects centered on educational attainment and workforce participation. In conjunction, Qatar has utilized a strategy of historic appointments to project images of women’s progress and integration, such as the appointment of Sheikha Ahmed Al-Mahmoud as Minister of Education and the nation’s first female cabinet member in 2003. Though outside of the scope of the legislative, executive branch, and judiciary, the Qatari state notably appointed Lolwah Al-Khater as Spokesperson of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2017 and subsequently as Assistant to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in 2019.

State rhetoric has framed women’s political participation and the formation of gender-representative institutions as secondary outcomes which will naturally result from modernization initiatives.

Key Facts on Qatar’s Shura Council

Unicameral Legislative Branch

- Shura Council/Consultative Council
- 41 members
- Appointed by Emir, 3 year term

Graph 4. Percentage of Women’s Representation in the Qatari Shura Council by Year (1991-2019)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
Discussion & Analysis of Strategies for Women’s Political Participation

Qatar’s political appointments have remained rare, preventing growth in women’s representation across government branches. Despite the historic appointment of Sheikha Ahmed Al-Mahmoud in 2003, women’s representation in the cabinet has not yet exceeded a single ministerial position. In the judiciary, women comprise less than one percent of judges. The appointment of four women to the Shura Council in 2017, noted in Table 6, is an encouraging indication of increased political will to enable women’s representation in the consultative body. However, the uncertain occurrence of elections for the Shura Council, which have been promised and delayed since 2006, make the consolidation of women’s progress following the 2017 appointments unpredictable. According to the nation’s constitution adopted by referendum in 2003, the Consultative Council should be reformed to a legislative body which consists of 30 elected and 15 appointed members. Though the Emir formed an election organization committee in 2019, it is unclear whether elections will occur, to what extent the political will to appoint women will be sustained, and how women would fare in the Council’s first election.

Initiatives which focus explicitly and independently on the empowerment of Qatari women have occurred under the Supreme Council for Family Affairs, a supervisory body under the Council of Ministers. In 1998, the Supreme Council for Family Affairs established the Women’s Affairs Committee to propose policies, plans, and programs to enhance women’s cultural, economic, and political participation. The existence of a specific governmental organization dedicated to women and family is an important step in the advancement of gender equity, and enables intentional partnership with international organizations to implement international human rights conventions and develop national action plans. However, the Council’s action plans address women’s political participation tangentially and primarily focus on women’s health, education, and economic participation. Thus, the efforts of the Women’s Affairs Committee have not resulted in the formation of gender-representative governmental institutions or continuous, consolidated gains in women’s political participation.

Recommendations

While integration of women’s issues into national development rhetoric is crucial in the mainstreaming of gender equity, the primary barrier to women’s increased political participation in Qatar is the absence of a definitive policy explicitly focused on women’s representation in government. It is vital that Qatar move from isolated, sporadic appointments of women in key positions to the development of a comprehensive national policy plan focused on increasing women’s political participation across government.
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Historical Background
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has pursued the controlled, strategic political empowerment of women since 2011. Following September 11, 2001, the state faced a new imperative for international legitimacy and began to recognize gender policy as a tool to reform its international image. However, it was not until 2011, compelled by the Arab uprisings and the fear of regime destabilization, that King Abdullah announced women would be allowed to vote and would be able serve as full voting members of the Shura Council. Two years later, a royal decree appointed 30 female members and established a 20 percent quota for women in the consultative body.

Key Facts on Saudi’s Shura Council

Unicameral Legislative Branch
- Shura Council/Consultative Council
- 150 members, 1 speaker
- Appointed by King, 4 year term

Graph 5. Percentage of Women’s Representation in the Saudi Arabian Shura Council by Year (2005-2016)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
Discussion & Analysis of Strategies for Women’s Political Participation

The gender integration of the Shura Council and the institution of a 20 percent quota allow women unprecedented legislative participation in Saudi Arabia, shown in Table 7. As the kingdom has a history of promising and delaying women’s enfranchisement and participation, quota adoption serves as a crucial mechanism for accountability, consistency, and the concretion of women’s progress in the legislative branch. King Salman demonstrated his capacity for observance of the quota in 2016, appointing 30 women to the Council. Due to the intense international media attention garnered by the quota and the strong desire of the Saudi state to cultivate an image of liberalization, adherence to the quota in future appointments appears highly likely.

Within the Shura Council, members serve on legislative committees. In Committees, female Council members have strong representation in several conventionally male-typed legislative arenas. Women account for two of eleven members in the Committee on Economy and Energy and the Committee on Foreign Affairs and a striking four of eleven members in the Committee on Security Affairs. Committee gender representation, roughly proportionate to gender representation on the Council at large, demonstrates women are not being exclusively segregated to traditional feminized topics like health, youth, and family affairs. This inter-committee gender integration signals the kingdom’s acceptance of women’s legislative participation for a wide range of issues. However, women remain unrepresented in the Committee on Hajj, Housing and Services as well as the Committee on Islamic and Judicial Affairs, indicating the existence of some inter-committee gender segregation regarding issues of religion, law, and housing.

Systemic transformation in Saudi women’s political participation is largely confined to the legislative branch. The kingdom has not undertaken quota-adjacent efforts in the executive or judiciary to advance and normalize women’s representation. The nation currently has no women in ministerial-level positions. In the judiciary, women comprise less than one percent of all judges, as only one woman holds a quasi-judicial position as an arbiter in commercial court. Despite the June 1 announcement of the appointment of 50 women as public prosecutors, women remain highly underrepresented in the judiciary. These low rates of representation outside of the Shura Council reflect the dominant focus of media, scholarly research, and the work of international development organizations on the representation of women in legislative bodies instead of governance at large. This focus, along with the sizable progress achieved through the Shura Council’s quota, allow the Saudi state to claim transformative gender reform internationally while also upholding a narrative of gradual reform domestically, maintaining legitimacy as an arbiter between Islamist and liberal women’s movements.
Recommendations

In order to continue to substantiate the kingdom’s rhetorical commitment to women’s political empowerment and move beyond isolated and symbolic appointments, it is vital that quota-adjacent measures are adopted to ensure a sizable degree of women’s representation in the judiciary and cabinet. The present de facto restriction of women’s political participation to the Shura Council strongly limits their potential impact of gender integration in governance. Further, a guarantee of women’s representation on each Shura Council committee would eliminate any possibility for inter-committee segregation and diversify women’s legislative impact. Lastly, a gradual increase of the Shura Council’s 20 percent quota, to reach the Beijing baseline of 25 to 30 percent, would ensure women represent a sizable enough minority in the legislative body to enact change. These steps would encourage the Saudi state’s continued pursuit of gender equity in political institutions.
The United Arab Emirates

Historical Background

Since 2005 when women were first permitted to stand for election in the Federal National Council (FNC), in 2006, the nation held its first elections for the FNC through an electoral college. Though just one woman was elected, Amal Al-Qubaisi, 8 women were appointed by the ruling sheikhs, setting a standard for sizable appointments. In 2015, the election of Al-Qubaisi as speaker of the FNC marked the first female leader of a national assembly in the entirety of the Arab world. Three years later, President Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan issued a historic royal directive calling for the institution of a quota to ensure women account for 50 percent of the legislative body.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has vigorously pursued state feminism in an attempt to position the Emirates as a global model for gender equality.

### Key Facts on the UAE’s Federal National Council

**Unicameral Legislative Branch**

- Federal National Council
- 40 members
- 20 elected 20 appointed by Ruler of each Emirate, 4 year term


Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
Discussion & Analysis of Strategies for Women’s Political Participation

The UAE has distinguished its brand of state feminism through unprecedented, ambitious initiatives to ensure high rates of women’s political participation. Prior to the FNC’s gender quota, the representation of women in the Council was largely attributable to a strategy of consistent appointments that constituted a sizable female minority in the legislative body. In 2018, the quota’s announcement and subsequent implementation represented a shift in the dominant policy for women’s political empowerment. Due to the quota’s requirement that the rulers of each emirate allocate a number of seats for female candidates with the highest number of votes, the election of 2019 witnessed a striking increase in the number of women elected and appointed, as illustrated in Table 8.

In comparison to the gender-representative FNC, the cabinet and judiciary have less robust levels of representation. Since 2010, women have consistently comprised from 16 to 29 percent of ministerial positions, a significant minority. Yet, women’s representation has had an inconsistent growth trajectory, fluctuating from 29 percent in 2018 to 16.7 percent in 2019. In the judiciary, women constitute less than one percent of female judges, a striking departure from levels of representation in the cabinet and legislative branch.

The initiatives of the General Women’s Union (GWU, the official representative institution of women and the national mechanism for women’s empowerment and leadership, have focused strongly on ensuring women’s participation in parliament. In 2004, the organization launched the program “Enhancing the Role of Arab Female Parliamentarians” which builds awareness about parliamentary work and empowers women’s participation in the electoral process. In subsequent elections the GWU hosted intensive political training programs and provided platforms for women in emirates to present their electoral programs. In 2015, the Gender Balance Council was established to ensure federal institutions reach gender balance targets and move to integrate women into development.

Recommendations

The primary focus of the UAE on women’s participation in the FNC can be attributed to the import media, scholarly research, and the international community place on women’s representation in legislative branches. It is vital that the UAE continue to consolidate the gains of women in governance by shifting policy and resources to the cabinet and judiciary. The fluctuating rates of women’s representation in ministerial positions and the underrepresentation in judicial positions can be addressed through the application of quotas, ensuring consistent representation across branches and enabling more comprehensive and integrated participation of women in governance at large.
Regional Trends

A Significant Increase in Women’s Political Representation

Undoubtedly, the Gulf region has achieved tremendous progress in the representation of women in politics since the late 20th century. In this period, all of the GCC states enfranchised women, allowed the inaugural participation of women in elections, appointed women to unprecedented, high-ranking positions, and promoted an increase in women's representation across government. These changes indicate fundamental transformations to state and cultural narratives regarding citizenship, national membership, gender, and political participation.

Initiatives to increase women's political participation have resulted in dramatic changes to rates of representation across the region as demonstrated in Graph 7. In 2000, the average representation of women in all Gulf legislative bodies, both elected and appointed, was 2.85 percent. This figure increased to 10.34 percent in 2010 and most recently reached 17.59 percent in 2020. The GCC average still falls behind the global average of women's representation in national parliaments, 25 percent. Yet notably, rates of women's representation in the Gulf have caught up to rates of women's representation in the MENA region at large, closing a longstanding disparity. Though the Gulf figures contain many more appointed than elected bodies and are positively skewed by the UAE's 2018 quota adoption for the Federal National Council as indicated by Graph 8, the consistent increase in rates of representation since 2000 demonstrates a degree of stable political resolve from GCC nations to increase the representation of women in legislative branches.
**Graph 7.** Average Regional Percentage of Women’s Representation in GCC Legislative Bodies by Year (1994-2020)

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database

**Graph 8.** Rate of Women’s Representation by GCC Legislative Body in 2020

Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
The Introduction of Gender Mainstreaming

All of the GCC nations, albeit to varying degrees, have begun to pursue gender mainstreaming, the process of integrating gender equality into planned action taken by the government. In the Gulf, epitomized by Qatar, gender mainstreaming has primarily manifested in the integration of gender focused goals into official national development plans promulgated by the state. Secondarily, gender mainstreaming has been pursued through the work of governmental or quasi-governmental institutions explicitly focused on women's development like the Qatari Supreme Council for Family Affairs, the Bahraini Supreme Council for Women, and the Emirati General Women’s Union. This gradual normalization of the consideration of gender equity in spaces of governance and national development promotes an understanding of the implications of policy on gender equity. It is vital that GCC states continue to pursue gender mainstreaming. However, the inclusion of women in national development narratives and the establishment of governmental organizations dedicated to women illustrate the growing willingness of Gulf nations to address women's empowerment through state means.

Disparities in Women's Representation between Elected and Appointed Houses in Bicameral Parliaments

In Oman and Bahrain, the two Gulf countries with bicameral parliaments, the lower elected house has demonstrably lower rates of women's representation than the appointed upper house. Bahrain's Council of Representatives, since the election of the first woman to the body in 2006, has had sizable, relatively consistent gains in women's representation, most recently culminating in 15 percent representation. However, in comparison to the appointed Shura Council, with rates of representation consistently between 22.5 and 27.5 percent, the Council of Representatives lags behind. Women's representation in the Omani Shura Council, an elected body, has never surpassed 2.4 percent. In stark contrast, women have consistently comprised more than 15 percent of the appointed State Council since 2007.

This pattern indicates the continued existence of roadblocks to women's successful electoral participation despite intervention by the state and women's organizations. Women's sizable gains in the Council of Representatives, likely due to the campaign support and political training offered by the Supreme Council for Women, are an encouraging sign of progress. Yet, they signal the slow pace of change in institutions operating without appointments. Further, this disparity reveals the differential attitudes of government and citizens in regards to women's political representation. The disparate rates of women's representation in bicameral parliaments imply that government appointments do not quickly or fundamentally increase the willingness of voters to elect female representatives.
Underrepresentation of Women in Judiciaries

As Bahrain leads the region with 9 percent of female judges in the nation’s judiciary, women remain vastly underrepresented in Gulf judicial branches. In Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates women comprise one percent or less of judges. Oman and Kuwait currently have no female judicial representation, though Kuwait plans to appoint the nation’s first female judges in August. This absence of representation likely reflects the dominant emphasis of the media, development goals, scholarly research, and international organizations on women’s participation in legislatures. In turn, this shapes the priorities of states for women’s empowerment and participation. The primary focus on parliaments limits a comprehensive understanding of women’s possibilities for political integration and representation, especially within the judiciary.

Lack of Cross-Branch Proliferation in Women’s Representation through Quotas

The introduction of quotas in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia have not yet resulted in cross-branch proliferation in rates of women’s participation. Despite the institution of 20 and 50 percent quotas in the Saudi and Emirati legislative branches respectively, women remain far less represented in the cabinet and judiciary. Notably, in Saudi Arabia, women’s participation is almost exclusive to the Shura Council, with no women holding ministerial positions and a single woman holding a quasi-judicial position. In the UAE, women holding 16.6% of ministerial positions and less than one percent of judicial positions stands in stark contrast to the 50 percent representation of women in the Federal National Council. This imbalance in representation indicates that quotas do not lead to immediate gains in women’s representation across branches of government. Further, it implies that the institution of quotas in legislative bodies are not a silver bullet strategy to increase women’s participation holistically. However, as both quotas were implemented relatively recently, continued attitudinal change inspired by quota implementation and leading to cross-branch gains is possible.

Overreliance on Appointments

Across the region, strategic, highly publicized appointments of women have been used as a substitute for meaningful policy change. Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait have relied heavily on prominent appointments as a tool to demonstrate women’s progress to the international community. While appointments of women to unprecedented positions are historic and deserve recognition, they do not ensure the consolidation of women’s progress or sizable rates of representation, especially in elected bodies.
Co-optation of Women’s Political Participation

While concerns with status and international reputation differ for each Gulf country, there is a trend among Gulf nations of using women’s rights to consolidate political power, improve international reputation, and distract from unfavorable domestic events. GCC countries are explicitly aware of the external pressure from nations and international organizations to liberalize and democratize, and often engage with these narratives strategically and at times, superficially.

Various nations in the region have utilized women’s political participation to advance the interests of the state. In 2011, responding to the pressure of regional civil unrest from the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia announced women’s ability to participate in the Shura Council. The announcement, which was not acted upon until 2013, was likely a strategy used to placate oppositional voices and stabilize the control of the ruling family. In Bahrain, the introduction of women’s political participation and the establishment of the Supreme Council of Women by King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa were utilized as evidence of the progressivity of his rule. After years of popular discontent and state crackdown on oppositional voices under the reign of his father, the appearance of liberality was vital for Sheikh Hamad’s desired reformist reputation. After several Arab nations cut diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar in the summer of 2017, known as the Gulf Crisis, Qatar appointed the inaugural women to the Shura Council in November. In the midst of a heated diplomatic crisis, the historic appointments projected an image of social reform. For the United Arab Emirates, ambitious initiatives for the political empowerment of women are integral to the state’s pursuit of international prestige and status.

Yet, regardless of the intent behind gender reform, actions to increase women’s political participation are fundamentally beneficial. The inclusion of women in governance upholds international human rights law, improves governmental institutions, and normalizes women’s political engagement. Despite instances of co-optation and state tokenization, women and nations benefit from political empowerment.
In order to expand, substantiate, and diversify women’s political participation, women must be sizably represented in Gulf legislatures, cabinets and judiciaries. The primary focus of academics, international organizations, and Gulf governments on women’s participation in parliament has hindered the development of cross-branch strategies to holistically increase women’s representation. It is vital that Gulf nations recognize areas of underrepresentation and act to shift resources and strategies to appropriately address deficiencies.

Exploration of the barriers women face in the electoral process would allow Arab Gulf States and domestic women’s organizations to better understand and address women’s underrepresentation in elected bodies. While it appears that the Bahraini Supreme Council for Women has had a degree of success in increasing women’s representation in the Council of Representatives, it is unclear whether this success is replicable, and if it is due to providing resources to female candidates or addressing biases against women in the electorate. Further investigation of the barriers women face in elections would facilitate more targeted policy solutions and efficient provision of resources.

Continued growth in rates of women’s representation is dependent on substantive, accountability-driven policy solutions. The reliance of many Gulf states on isolated, sporadic appointments will not produce continuous, consolidated growth in women’s political participation. Where appropriate, the institution of quotas can be critical in overcoming institutional barriers of entry to women’s political participation. Quotas encourage consistent state compliance by setting explicit standards for representation, and are the strongest predictor of rates of women’s representation in legislatures. Simultaneously, efforts by states and women’s organizations to train female candidates and support their campaigns are vital to allow women the requisite resources to run as competitive candidates.
Amplification of Diverse Voices

As the representation of women in governance continues, it is crucial that states seek to diversify the voices they are amplifying through appointment. Pursuit of gender-based, socioeconomic, racial, ethnic, linguistic, ideological, and cultural diversity in governance creates better institutions better able to adhere to standards of good governance. Women’s political representation in Gulf states must reflect that women are not a homogeneous entity.
Since the late 20th century, the GCC states have employed various national policies and strategies to facilitate gains in rates of women’s representation in the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government. These differential approaches, varying in effectiveness and substantiality, include appointments, quota adoption, and the establishment of governmental organizations for women’s affairs. While the GCC states have achieved tremendous gains in rates of women’s political representation as a whole, nations and institutions have highly divergent outcomes due to distinct domestic policy formulation and implementation.

The GCC’s focus on legislatures has proven fruitful, resulting in sizable increases in women’s representation over the past two decades. Regional gains in women’s legislative participation have been driven significantly both by the adoption of quotas in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates and also increased rates of appointment in Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain. However, lags in representation persist in Omani, Bahraini, and Kuwaiti elected bodies. This disparity speaks to the continued existence of strong social sentiment against women’s political representation and indicates the continued existence of cultural and institutional barriers to women’s electoral success. Continued academic research and exploration of policy solutions to improve women’s electoral performance in GCC states is essential to the continued pursuit of gender equity in governance.

Concurrently, a shift from near exclusive focus on legislative bodies is crucial for the region’s continued gains in women’s representation. Due to an absence of gender policy in judiciaries and cabinets, women’s gains have been largely inconsistent and limited. A cross-branch framework for understanding women’s political engagement, equally focused on participation in cabinets, judiciaries, and legislatures, will encourage GCC states to pursue women’s representation outside of appointed legislative bodies. Emphasis on accountability-driven strategies with clear numerical commitments in cabinets and judiciaries will allow the diversification of women’s representation in regional governance.
Holistically, the GCC’s advancements indicate not only strong executive will to ensure women’s political participation, but also awareness of the growing centrality of women’s representation in governance to international development objectives. Gulf states have proven a degree of responsiveness to shifting international norms for governance and gender equity, affirming the impact of academic research and advocacy by international development organizations on regional policy formulation and implementation. Thus, continued research on the barriers to women’s success in elections, the long-term implications of quota adoption, and the impact of women on national policy prerogatives in the Gulf is vital. Careful, regionally-oriented academic investigation and attention will enable more effective intervention and policy reform by states and more robust advocacy by international and domestic organizations.

Thus far, the early 21st century has been a defining moment for the orientation of Gulf governance toward gender equity. In many GCC states, women have been catapulted to positions of international prestige and profound influence unimaginable just three decades ago. Presently, the Arab Gulf states stand at a critical juncture, having achieved extraordinary gains while also facing ample challenges to the pursuit of gender-representative institutions. Enduring growth in women’s political empowerment is contingent on the reaffirmation of GCC nations to gender equity and reorientation of existing policy. Finally, demands of continued development through attentive research, rigorous analysis, and astute policy by academics, researchers, international development organizations, and the global polity will encourage the continued transformation of Gulf governance.
Endnotes

41 Graph 1. “Percentage of Women’s Representation in the Bahraini National Assembly by Year.” Ibid.


54 Graph 2. “Rate of Women’s Representation in the Kuwaiti National Assembly by Year (2006-2016).” Ibid.


Graph 4. “Percentage of Women’s Representation in the Qatari Shura Council by Year (1972-2017).” Ibid.


99 Ibid.


The United Arab Emirates General Women’s Union. Woman & The Parliament in United Arab Emirates. https://www.uaew.ae/encyclopedia/attachments/2k2dm32g7i8JZTvLqhlf1533447460.pdf


Graph 8. “Rate of Women’s Representation by GCC Legislative Body in 2020.” Ibid.

Graph 7. “Average Regional Percentage of Women’s Representation in GCC Legislative Bodies by Year (1994-2020).” Ibid.

Graph 6. “Rate of Women’s Representation by GCC Legislative Body in 2020.” Ibid.


## Appendix

**Table 1: Representation of Women in Council of Representatives**

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<th>Year</th>
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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database

**Table 2: Representation of Women in Shura Council**

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
### Tabel 3: Representation of Women in National Assembly

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Women Elected</th>
<th>Number of Women Elected</th>
<th>Percentage of Women Total</th>
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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database

### Tabel 7: Representation of Women in Shura Council

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
### Tabel 8: Representation of Women in Federal National Council

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Source: Inter-Parliamentary Union Parline Database
About the Author

Sheridan Cole is a Visiting Research Fellow at Gulf International Forum and a Boren Scholar. Her research interest is focused on gender representation in the Gulf’s political systems.