Women, Peace and Security
Gulf Perspectives on Integration, Inclusion and Integrity

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Executive Summary

In recent years, governments in the Gulf have mobilized their resources and political clout to lower the institutional barriers that limit women's inclusion in the public sphere. Much ink has been spilled exploring the reforms impacting the participation of women in the workforce, but comparatively little scholarship has investigated how reform efforts have influenced women's engagement in the national security apparatus. This report aims to fill that gap.

Although many Gulf states have achieved profound progress with regards to the inclusion of women in the workforce, they still fail to fully integrate women in peacebuilding and security. Government reforms should include the treatment of gender as a crosscutting issue; facilitating the participation of women in political processes and institutions; and incorporating appropriate language across institutions to counter narratives that undermine integration. It would be beneficial to have these recommendations intimately linked to Gulf states' broader development plans.

In the Women Peace and Security Index 2021/22, an assessment of women security and inclusion across the globe, most Gulf states were ranked below the global median. While the UAE ranked 24th, higher than some members of the European Union, Iraq and Yemen were among the lowest five, ranking 166th and 168th respectively. Qatar and Bahrain tied for 97th, Saudi Arabia was placed 102nd, Oman 110th, Kuwait 123rd, and Iran 125th. Although such indices sometimes conflate important details and fail to give a full contextualization of the reality on the ground, they offer a starting point for delving deeper into issues such as WPS.

What follows—a fusion of three expert roundtables and scholarly research—presents a number of key findings with focus on nine states: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) member-states, Iraq, Iran, and Yemen. This report does not constitute a verbatim rendition of discussions and expert opinions. Additionally, we appreciate that each state operates within its own socio-political context. The recommendations are not meant to be a comprehensive survey of issues in all nine states, but rather a general overview of key findings and recurring themes pertaining to WPS across the region.

This report investigates whether “state feminist” policies can promote meaningful women participation in the security field. Gulf states have relied on top-down initiatives, such as gender quotas, to boost the representation of women in government. However, few of these efforts have been applied in the realm of national security. As a result, comparatively few women work in the field, and those who do often fail to rise in the decision-making hierarchy. Moreover, some scholars have questioned whether merely increasing the quantity of women in a particular domain actually improves the quality of their engagement.

In the GCC states, women's inroads in education have begun to shift their standing in society, but it is doubtful whether progress in academia has translated to progress in employment in the peacebuilding and the security sectors. Depending on dominant educational narratives, it can enhance the status of women or be an obstacle to their progress.

The report also evaluates the state of grassroots feminism in the Gulf. Hesitant to dismiss the important work of women's rights advocates in the region, scholars acknowledge that the dearth of large-scale, organized grassroots activism has stymied deeper and wider women empowerment in the Gulf, leaving the state to dictate the terms of women's advancement.

Some scholars primarily blame the Gulf's deeply rooted patriarchal traditions for limiting the progress of women empowerment. Social barriers are particularly firm in the national security arena—the most traditionally masculine segment of patriarchal societies. Masculine attitudes and narratives alienate women within the security sector and prevent many from joining in the first place. Other scholars resist pleas for integration along Western lines, arguing that solutions to such issues should be more sensitive to domestic norms.

The report also explores how integrating women into the security sector could be a remedy for gender-based violence. More women in security means less insecurity for women in these societies. It also assesses the role of women in areas of the region plagued by conflict, such as Yemen. It finds that women are disproportionately impacted by violence, but tend to be at the forefront.
of resolving it; consequently, including women in diplomatic dialogues represents a major step forward for peacemaking efforts.

This report offers a number of policy recommendations to improve the meaningful representation of women in Gulf national security.

**Recommendations**

- Ensure full, equal, and meaningful participation and representation of women at all levels of peacebuilding and security.\(^2\)
- Systematically integrate a gender perspective that avoids patriarchal narratives and embraces intersectionality at all stages of analysis, planning, implementation and reporting, including in educational curriculums and national visions.\(^3\)
- Hire gender advisors specifically for the peacebuilding and security sector.
- For economic statecraft and aid distribution, demand that women be included as requisite for assistance.
- Capacity-build through a hybrid top-down, bottom-up approach that ensures representation along lines of class, race, or other identifiers.
- Lower broader social and cultural barriers to the participation of WPS efforts by extending campaigns beyond security institutions to other cultural areas such as secondary and tertiary education.
- Institute micro-empowerment initiatives to provide resources to women involved in security on a local level.
- Establish gender quotas for positions at higher levels of government, granting women more concrete influence over policymaking.
- Minimize structural barriers to women employment through more targeted job training, family care subsidies, and other reforms.
- “Increase the number of civilian and uniformed women in peacekeeping at all levels and in key positions,”\(^4\) possibly by instituting recruitment targets or exploring the extension of national military conscription to women to reduce the gender gap.
- Explore the non-military and non-masculine aspect of conflict resolution by analyzing conflict through the lens of gender in security studies, enabling an exploration of multidimensional aspects of peacekeeping and conflict resolution. These aspects should be incorporated in strategic plans.
- Continue with best practice exchanges with the international community on WPS that enhances the public life of indigenous women on the ground. Ascertain that it does not devolve into unhelpful “virtue signaling.”

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
Introduction

On December 19, 2021, 137 women applied to join Kuwait’s armed forces. If accepted, they would be the first women in the emirate to serve in the military. A few months earlier, the Kuwaiti minister of defense announced that the country’s armed services would open its doors to women enlistees for the first time. The policy shift, marketed by government officials as a milestone in the advancement of women’s rights in the country, follows the Gulf-wide trend of state-driven integration of women into the national security enterprise in recent years. Only a few months before Kuwaiti military recruiters began to evaluate their first women applicants, Saudi Arabia graduated its first cohort of women officers. In January 2023, Riyadh appointed four new women ambassadors to increase the number of Saudi women ambassadors to a total of five; representing their country in the United States, the EU Mission, Sweden, Finland, and Norway. The kingdom officially allowed women to take internal security jobs in February 2021, following through on a reform promised two years earlier.

Other Gulf countries with longer histories of women’s involvement in the security sphere have also expanded opportunities in recent years. The United Arab Emirates established the region’s first all-women military academy in the early 1990s. Women fighter pilots have since flown sorties against the Islamic State (ISIL) terror group in Iraq and Syria, and Emirati women now account for half of all engineers in the country’s defense industry. Qatar swore in its first women commissioned military officer in 1987 (only to wait nearly two decades before appointing another). In 2018, Qatari Emir signed a decree allowing women to volunteer for the Qatari armed forces. In 2017, the Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani appointed Her Excellency Lolwah bint Rashid Al Khater as the first women spokesperson of the Qatari Foreign Ministry, and in the broader GCC. Two years later, she became the most senior woman throughout GCC foreign ministries. She was appointed as Assistant Foreign Minister and shortly thereafter promoted to Minister of State for International Cooperation in 2023. Yemen experts observe that Yemeni women have taken on leading roles in repairing their war-torn country, coordinating the delivery of humanitarian assistance and participating in conflict mitigation efforts.

The reasons for this integration are manifold and intersecting, according to regional experts. For Gulf governments, opening new avenues of public and professional advancement for women is a sign of modernization, an essential attribute of national state rebranding projects (and also a helpful lure for vital international investment). Women’s empowerment and gender equality as broad concepts are stated pillars of most of the GCC states’ national “vision” strategies. Analysis of the Gulf media landscape reveals that state-owned outlets have spared no words in recent years extolling the virtues of “women’s empowerment” and government efforts to promote it. There are also other pragmatic, if less optics-driven, rationales at play. Gulf women tend to be very well educated, especially compared to their male counterparts. Furthermore, surveys indicate that young Gulf women are particularly eager to join the workforce. Letting this skilled and motivated demographic go to waste would be politically and economically imprudent. Easing women into the security establishment also helps Gulf armies wean off foreign military assistance by relieving personnel shortages and, in turn, “localizing” their security industries. At a more basic level, many Gulf women feel a strong desire to serve their countries.

However, women question the intent and impact of these efforts. Indeed, many recent policy changes have been little more than superficial, cosmetic reforms. Though a growing number of women throughout the Gulf are now able to enlist, the scope of their involvement remains

15 Alomar, Dana, and Sarah Glubb. 2022. “Saudi Women Prove that ‘We Can Do It’ as Their Participation in Military Grows.” Arab News. 18 March.
The modest representation of women in security studies, peacekeeping, and conflict resolution in general is endemic in international relations (IR). From the perspective of feminist scholars, accounting for gender—an often neglected dimension of policy—offers a more complete picture of security threats and paths to peace. This framework counters the misconception that security studies is a “masculine” field that should emphasize only hard power, war, and conflict. The definition of international relations and security from a feminist perspective is slightly different from the conventional definition of security, which is centered around state security and conventional defense methods. IR feminists define security more broadly, highlighting the importance of countering and deterring all types of violence—domestic violence, rape, poverty, gender subordination, and ecological destruction.¹⁹

Reckoning with these concepts is not just a stimulating academic exercise. Conflict disproportionately victimizes women and girls.²⁰ A wealth of research in recent years has shown that increasing women’s participation in government and conflict resolution significantly improves the prospects for peace. When women are involved in a meaningful capacity, states are less likely to fight, and those that do are more likely to achieve lasting peace.²¹ The costs of excluding women from the Gulf security establishment are real and severe, and the benefits of integration are potentially transformational.

The analysis that follows attempts to address these issues through a synthesis of contemporary scholarly research and insights provided during a series of roundtables of women academic, experts and policy practitioners from the Gulf region specializing in the intersection of gender and security in the Gulf. Their identities have been anonymized, in accordance with the Chatham House Rule.

This report is organized as follows. First, it discusses state feminism, weighing in on the benefits and drawbacks of attempting to drive change through a top-down, state-led policy. Second, it addresses how grassroots movements can impact integration. Next, it turns to an analysis of the social factors impacting equity and women’s integration in security, with a discussion of tribalism and conceptions of masculinity. Fourth, it evaluates the role of education on the integration of women in the field of security and opportunities for improvement. Then, it addresses how the inclusion (or lack thereof) of WPS issues into regional security efforts affects violence against women. Sixth, it delves into the role of women in conflict and peacebuilding, with emphasis on Iraq and Yemen. Finally, the report offers recommendations to improve the integration of women into the national security enterprise of the Gulf.

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Debates Surrounding State Feminism

In the Gulf, the task of women's empowerment has largely fallen to the state. This brand of feminist activism—in which governments are primarily responsible for molding and enforcing feminist narratives—is aptly labeled “state feminism.” “Feminism,” in broad terms, describes a group of connected intellectual and political movements seeking to promote justice for women and end sexism in all its forms.22 The concept of “state feminism,” in a Western context, refers specifically to collaboration between government agencies and non-state feminist actors designed to advance feminist goals.23 However, in regions lacking substantial non-state feminist activism, such as the Gulf, state feminism instead refers to the government's promotion of programs and regulations it deems to be “feminist,” often contravening dominant cultural norms.24 In recent decades, Gulf governments have employed a wide array of policies from the state feminist toolbox to further their visions of women empowerment, including direct appointments, gender quotas, and the creation of government organizations and initiatives focusing on women's issues.

Benefits and Drawbacks of State Feminism

The merits and drawbacks of state feminism in the Gulf have been hotly contested by activists and scholars. Proponents of state feminist policies credit these initiatives with forcibly opening avenues for public and professional women advancement that would have otherwise remained shut.

Studies of Emirati state feminist policies, for example, find that they have expanded opportunities for Emirati women to pursue leadership roles in the country's economic and cultural spheres.25 Gulf state initiatives to improve women access to education have likewise resulted in impressive levels of women educational attainment in recent decades. Although some social attitudes

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
are difficult to measure, preliminary evidence suggests that fast-tracking women to prominent leadership positions can help reverse stigmas about women working in positions of authority.

Lana Nusseibeh has represented the UAE at the UN since 2013.27 Saudi Arabia appointed its first woman ambassador to the United States in 2019, and in January 2023, Riyadh appointed four new women ambassadors to Norway, Sweden, the EU mission, and Finland.28 Appointments like these, optimists hope, will normalize the presence of women at higher levels of national security decision-making and governance more broadly.29/30

Skeptics of state feminism, meanwhile, claim that its benefits are overblown. Numerous studies of state feminism in the Gulf cast doubt on its ability to change negative social attitudes about women in government. Critical scholars and activists also warn that state feminism is at its core a vehicle for furthering the political and social interests of the state. Policies professing to empower women can, in fact, inhibit their advancement by promoting a limited and decidedly patriarchal conception of women's rights. Limitations on Kuwaiti women soldiers are one example of this phenomenon.

Top-down efforts at promoting women participation in the workforce also usually ignore diversity along lines of class, race, or other identifiers. Intersectional feminism, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, provides a framework for understanding how women liberation ties together with other forms of oppression and discrimination.31 State-led feminism programs generally neglect the intersectionality of women empowerment.32 Consequently, critics argue that existing programs have really only benefited well-off women from select classes, races, or tribal backgrounds who already occupy society's higher echelons, while overlooking women from economically marginalized communities.

Nominal inclusive reforms weighed down by patriarchal caveats can ultimately amount to more subtle forms of exclusion. While tokenism causes superficial women representation, it does not lead to genuine change, as the voices of women remain marginalized in workspaces heavily dominated by men. Embedded patriarchal authorities can also deflect demands for further integration by pointing to cosmetic reforms.

Scholars also warn that increasing the visibility of women in public life can only accomplish so much, especially when women are confined to positions that hold limited decision-making power, such as ambassadorial posts. Ultimately, many women policy practitioners who have been able to make inroads in Gulf defense circles do not feel they have a right to be involved in the process; they have merely been granted a favor by male leaders who, when political tides shift, can revoke their position at a moment's notice.

**Gender Quotas**

Gender quotas, which allot a certain percentage of positions to women, have become a topic of particular scrutiny in recent years. Gender quotas are more commonly found in legislative bodies (it is unclear if and to what extent Gulf governments employ them specifically in the national security enterprise), and several states, including Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Iraq have dedicated a minimum number of seats in their respective parliaments to women.33 The UAE has gone to particular lengths to incorporate women; twenty members of its forty-seat parliament are women by default, and the Emirates Securities and Commodities Authority has instituted a requirement that all publicly-listed companies include a woman on their board.

A sizable body of scholarship has testified to the effectiveness of gender quotas at increasing the representation of women in politics. Repeated studies have shown that when implemented, quotas increase public perceptions of women lawmakers’ qualifications, giving them greater credibility in politics and leading to increases in women legislative representation, even after the quota systems end.34/35 Proponents of implementing quota systems in the Arab world note that countries lacking them, such as Kuwait, have dismal track records of women representation in parliament (only two of the Kuwaiti National Assembly’s 50 members are women). They also point to organizations like the Kurdish armed forces, where women, thanks in large part to progressive state policies, play prominent roles on the battlefield.27

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28 Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington, DC. “Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al Saud.” Embassy of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in Washington, DC.


38 International IDEA, 2021.
Many scholars and practitioners doubt, however, whether simply increasing the quantity of women in politics can improve the quality and scope of their engagement. Accusations of tokenism abound. Iraq's 2005 constitution guarantees women at least 25% of seats in parliament, and women currently hold 29% of legislative seats.38 Experts find, however, that women legislators are largely confined to legislating on "women's issues," such as education and healthcare, while security matters are almost entirely reserved for men. Moreover, irrespective of women's involvement in legislative bodies, the most important national security decisions in most Gulf states continue to be influenced by an entourage of male ministers and advisors that commonly surround rulers. To the extent that women participate at this level, they are handpicked by a man or group of men and are expected to align their agenda with their backer's. This exclusion of women from genuine leadership roles can become self-reinforcing; if women are not given the chance to take on leadership positions, they cannot acquire the skills and experience needed to climb to higher levels of authority or help other women fill their shoes. Unless women can break into these cloistered and exclusive groups, their contributions to the security field will remain marginal.

**Resolution 1325**

The United Nations has created many legal frameworks for national plans to squash gender discrimination and integrate women in the security sector. The most notable are UN Security Council Resolution 132539 and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

While all Gulf states except Iran have signed and ratified CEDAW, there has been comparatively little work on adopting Resolution 1325. None of the Gulf states, with the exception of Iraq, have worked toward integrating the resolution into a national action plan. Both the Federal Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), in collaboration with a roster of national and regional agencies, established a cross-sector task force to develop a national plan. The task force featured twenty-two representatives from civil society, government ministries, parliamentarians, security forces, and experts, and they adopted a national plan in 2013.

At the same time, most GCC states have initiated important steps to include women in the security and defense structure, simply not under the umbrella of Resolution 1325. In Saudi Arabia, where women's participation in the labor force was negligible prior to the accession of King Salman, women now comprise 33% of the labor force, owing to a greater diversity of jobs available to women and their expanded role in the public sphere. These advances have translated to improvements in the security sector. Prior to 2015, women's work in security was limited to serving as airport security guards; today, women participate in the Saudi army, navy, air defense, missile forces, and cybersecurity services. Although questions remain over women's access to decision-making power at the highest level, the changes at the entry level in less than a decade are steps forward—and are due in large part to the Kingdom's Vision 2030 plan. The Saudi case also illustrates the value of top-down empowerment programs in changing social attitudes in some areas.

For this reason, many Gulf leaders genuinely believe their state feminist programs can succeed. Nevertheless, top-down programs without grassroots input can often cause unintended consequences. If they fail to change social attitudes, they can also inadvertently poison the well for organic grassroots organizing that can produce better outcomes for women's empowerment in the security sector.41

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38 The resolution reaffirms the important role of women in the prevention and resolution of conflicts, peace negotiations, peace-building, peacekeeping, humanitarian response and in post-conflict reconstruction and stresses the importance of their equal participation and full involvement in all efforts for the maintenance and promotion of peace and security.


Scholars and practitioners from the Gulf region recognize that heavy-handed, state-driven feminist initiatives often struggle to move past superficial forms of women’s empowerment. Strides towards parity and advancement must be fueled, at least in part, by grassroots initiatives. Repeated analyses of feminist movements across the Middle East and North Africa suggest that the most productive and sustained advancements in women’s rights are achieved when organic social movements inspire shifts in social attitudes. Laws enshrining gender equality are most effective when they come after, rather than before, public acceptance.\textsuperscript{42,43}

Existing scholarship on grassroots feminist movements in the MENA region has lauded their effectiveness in creating organic social change. A 2020 report published by Rice University’s Baker Institute for Public Policy detailed how women activists advanced labor reforms and anti-harassment laws by pressuring otherwise-unsympathetic institutions, sparking national dialogues about the issues they supported.\textsuperscript{44} Although activists consistently struggled to alter patriarchal mentalities, weakening the impact of legal changes, scholars nonetheless maintained that grassroots mobilization remained the essential first step in the policy process. Evidence shows that “micro-empowerment” initiatives, or programs calibrated specifically to increase women’s capacity in local areas through social and professional training, became integral to broader trends in women empowerment nationwide, suggesting that similar programs could find success in other countries.\textsuperscript{45}

The sociopolitical environment of the Gulf has inhibited the growth of vocal and influential grassroots feminist movements, despite the best efforts of women activists and scholars. Strong centralized governments with near-omnipotent control over the societies they govern have limited the growth of civil society. Additionally, perfunctory and infrequent elections limit outlets for political activity.

\textsuperscript{44} Norman, ed. 2020.
Some countries in the Gulf have exhibited more promise in this arena than others. Kuwait, where citizens enjoy considerably more political liberties than elsewhere in the GCC, has witnessed tense battles between a fledgling yet vocal women-led movement and a political establishment bent on maintaining the status quo. A string of high-profile femicides in Kuwait between 2020 and 2021 triggered outpourings of anger from Kuwaiti women online and in the streets. Young women spearheaded anti-government protests in Iraq between 2019 and 2021, and their leadership likely played a large part in the unusual success of female candidates during the 2021 parliamentary elections. Iraqi women have also mobilized at the local level; organizations like the Basra Feminist Team, based in the eponymous southern port city, have collaborated with law enforcement to combat gender-based violence. Perhaps, with loosened constraints on civil and political discourse, similar trends may surface across the region.
Social Factors Impacting Women Empowerment

Some women in the Gulf doubt whether political liberalization will sow the seeds for greater women’s empowerment. They contend that deeply rooted patriarchal social norms, rather than government institutions, have limited the meaningful integration of women into the national security establishment. In many cases, they argue, the state has pushed forward changes that society at large has been unwilling to accept. Many Gulf citizens and policymakers wish to promote women’s inclusion, but have been reluctant to do so when such changes would conflict with the Gulf’s traditional social values.

Tribalism and Conceptions of Masculinity

Tribal identity permeates culture across the Gulf, and traditional tribal-centric views on women’s empowerment continue to dictate a woman’s place in society. In pre-existing tribal norms, it is incumbent upon the nation’s defenders (men) to protect women. Moreover, tribal norms for conflict resolution automatically exclude women, making it difficult for integration. Attempts to increase their participation will inherently face great resistance as long as the Gulf’s existing interpretations of tribalism remain at odds with such efforts.

The widespread perception that national security and warfighting are the domain of men—a product of deeply rooted tribal norms—limits the advancement of women in peace and security. Though the exact impact of these lingering beliefs may be difficult to substantiate, misogynistic beliefs remain stubbornly ingrained. One conservative Kuwaiti lawmaker who helped lobby for restrictions on women engagement in the military, for example, described combat as something that “does not fit with a woman’s nature.” While the feats of Mariam Al-Mansouri, the UAE’s first women fighter pilot, were widely celebrated abroad, many Emiratis treated her accomplishments with skepticism and disdain. Instead of discussing Al-Mansouri’s military career, most commentators within the UAE focused on her tribal identity, which many claimed she had misrepresented.

The security sector in Gulf states, researchers observe, is inseparable from masculine attitudes—both indigenous and foreign. Moreover, the predominant flavor of masculine behavior within the security services is “hegemonic,” defined generally as attitudes and practices that legitimize male superiority and women subjugation in society. Scholars and practitioners from the region have argued that this culture makes the military an unwelcome space for women and reinforces the narrative that men are the only ones capable of protecting society.

Women from the Gulf have noted that it is sometimes women keen on preserving traditional practices and filial honor who most vocally denounce feminist reforms in the region. They posit that many women in the Gulf (and elsewhere in the world, generally) are preservers of the existing patriarchal hierarchy and can be hindrances to women’s empowerment and their integration in the peacebuilding and security sector. More progressive observers have challenged these conservative reactions, arguing that avenues for equity and power should be available to women who seek them.

The rise of masculine nationalist narratives in some Gulf states could also hinder women’s advancement. Some women from the region emphasize that Gulf conceptions of “nationalism” are inherently patriarchal. Scholars and practitioners from the region argue that modern understandings of nationalism have always been male-dominated, and women have consistently been relegated to familial duties within it. Indeed, nation-building narratives across the Gulf often stress the importance of “family values,” implying that women can best serve their countries by being good mothers and wives rather than CEOs or generals. For example, the UAE’s Vision 2021 plan makes preserving the Emirates’ “unique culture, heritage and traditions” and “social and family cohesion” a top priority.

Those women who do penetrate the security sector in the Gulf are expected to adhere to existing cultural attitudes and social views. Iran, for instance, has integrated women into narrow areas of its security forces—most notably the IRGC’s Basij-e Khaharan (“Sisters’ Basij”) militia units—but to the extent that women are allowed to meaningfully participate, they are expected to fit into the country’s existing narrative of transnational security along Islamist lines.

49 Agence France-Presse, 2022
Women who do not adhere to the government’s preferred Islamist security narrative are marginalized and targeted by clerical authorities, depriving them of security and peace. Ultimately, some political and military leaders in the Gulf—particularly those of a conservative tilt—resist calls for broader and deeper gender parity as un-Islamic, unpatriotic, and destabilizing.
Education and Integration

Education is one of the realms of public life in the Gulf where women have made substantial inroads. In fact, women across the GCC attend and graduate from university at higher rates than their male compatriots. For example, women constitute around 52% of university students in Saudi Arabia. Three-quarters of the students who enrolled in Qatar Foundation universities in 2021 were women. A similar trend is playing out in the UAE, where women comprised 80-90% of the student body at two of the Emirates’ three federal universities in 2017. However, scholars and practitioners from the region remark that improved educational opportunities for women have not necessarily translated to empowerment in other areas.

Even the Gulf’s most educated women still struggle to make headway in the industries they study. Across the region, women labor force participation lags well behind male rates, especially in the private sector. Only 41% of tertiary-educated Saudi women found employment after school in 2018, compared to 94% of tertiary-educated Saudi men. As of 2018, Emirati women make up only 28% of the total Emirati workforce. This disparity is particularly pronounced in the military sector. Despite relatively high-levels of women STEM education among Emirati women, for example, their presence in STEM-focused areas of the armed forces, such as non-proliferation, is meager.

Government-financed education for women in the Gulf—an example of state feminism in action—has had a mixed effect on women’s empowerment. On the one hand, government efforts to advance women education have provided women with new ideas and tools; in some cases, however, educated women are socialized to be subservient to the patriarchal system. Scholars and analysts from the region agree that bolder policy changes are needed to bridge the gap between the classroom and the board room. Reinforced by educational curricula

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and national vision plans, efforts at promoting women participation in the workforce often reinforce patriarchal norms by edging women into industries more in line with "traditional" women roles, such as in the education and healthcare sectors. Studies of state-sponsored women entrepreneurship programs can sometimes reinforce gender-based sectoral segregation. For example, Oman and Qatar find that the initiatives pipeline women into traditionally “women” industries—e.g. textiles and culinary arts—instead of elevating women to positions of greater authority and impact. Many scholars attribute the dearth of women in top national security circles to the unwillingness of male leaders to break the tradition of exclusion. That same resistance has made the presence of women at large international negotiations a rarity. Some scholars from the region go as far as to suggest that these impressive levels of women educational attainment represent a civic form of conscription. Through their education, the logic goes, women are implicitly agreeing to guard their country’s culture and knowledge. Careers involving physical protection—through military service or other forms of national security policy-making—are thus seen as outside of their duty. This dynamic can implicitly hinder re-imagining women as possible military protectors of the country. Therefore, although education is commonly framed as a gateway to women’s empowerment, it may actually restrain their progress in the national security field.

58 Findlow, 2013.
59 Ennis, 2019.
When it comes to preventing gender-based violence (GBV), the leaders of the Gulf states have a undeniable interest in accommodating more women in the overall security domain. Gulf states aspire for strong external security, but in order to make conditions within the country safe for women, states must also devote resources toward internal security. The integration of women into the security field is key to these efforts, but it often coincides with simultaneous exclusion. As noted earlier, Kuwait allows women to join the army with the permission of a male guardian, but forces them to wear headscarves and bans them from carrying weapons.

Internally, the Gulf states need more women protecting women. Femicide—the targeted murder of women—are still rampant in the region. Experts estimate that 400-500 women are killed every year in Iran to protect men's “honor.” A Kuwaiti government survey conducted in 2022 reported that more than half of the country's women had been the victims of physical violence at some point in their lives. Recruiting more women police officers, scholars and practitioners argue, could help stem this tide of gender violence. Recruiting women from diverse backgrounds should also be a priority. The higher the degree of social integration across the lines of class, race, or other identifiers, scholars argue, the more secure Gulf societies will be.

While limited reforms have been instituted with regard to GBV across the Gulf region over the past half-decade, serious obstacles continue to prevent women from accessing justice. Most of the Gulf states retain a “guardianship” system in which women require permission from their husbands or male relatives to participate in some aspects of public life. Several nations, including Kuwait and Iraq, also allow men to receive a lesser sentence for murdering a woman family member if it can be shown that they had “honorable motives” in doing so, and Kuwait allows rapists to escape punishment if they marry the victim with the permission of her guardian.

The legal regime allowing for violence against women is particularly controversial in Iran, which has no law against domestic violence and where parental abuse is explicitly permitted “within the customary limit.” The Mahsa Amini protests in Iran from September 2022 onward can therefore be understood as a reaction by women to reclaim their safety and security from a government that has failed to protect them. The government's violent crackdown on demonstrations has only seemed to bolster demonstrators' case. It is important to remember, however, that not all Iranian women feel deprived of security under the Iranian government. Indeed, thousands of Iranian women have expressed support for the Islamic Republic or participated in counter-protests in support of the ruling authorities.

The events in Iran showcase two opposing security-driven narratives: the first derived from women who view the current security status as violating their rights, and the second from women who view Iran's transnational Islamist rhetoric as providing security for them. A clash between the two sides is not inevitable, and the Iranian government might institute changes to its ideology, perhaps through the greater incorporation of women into different roles in government, as a way to mitigate the mass unrest. However, if the Iranian state fails to incorporate the diverse voices of women, state-society relations will continue to deteriorate.

61 Ennis, 2019.
Although armed conflicts are primarily fought between men, women are still disproportionately impacted by the negative consequences of a breakdown in law and order. Because women are among the greatest victims of war, they have a clear interest in successful peacebuilding efforts and are among the greatest advocates for peace. It is therefore ironic that women have a minimal presence in peacemaking efforts across the Middle East. In 2018, fewer than 5% of the UN's peacekeeping forces are women, and the Gulf states' conflict mediation teams are nearly all men. Women invited to these dialogues usually fulfill minor roles and rarely access positions where they could alter the outcomes of negotiations.

The dearth of women's participation in these efforts is unfortunate, as studies have shown a clear link between the genuine participation of women in peace negotiation efforts and the subsequent success of those efforts.

Resolution 1325 encourages UN member states to increase women's roles in conflict prevention, facilitate their participation in peacebuilding efforts, protect their rights during and after armed conflicts, and respect their specific needs during resettlement, repatriation, and post-conflict reconstruction. International efforts to achieve the goals of Resolution 1325, including by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), have included attempts to strengthen women's peace coalitions to help prepare them for engagement in peace processes, work with peacekeepers to help detect and prevent conflict-related sexual violence, and support the construction of justice and security institutions that protect women and girls from violence.

It is striking that women have remained effectively absent from politics in the region's conflict zones. Increases in GBV are linked to increases in more conventional forms of violence, and women also suffer from a host of connected humanitarian consequences of war. These problems are compounded in traditional areas where a woman's ability to participate in public life is limited.

As opposed to more recent participation of women, during Yemen's Arab Spring uprising, women remained mostly absent from the political negotiations. Although two constitutional committees established in 2014 each instituted gender quotas, those who participated...
did not go on to prominent positions in government or peacemaking efforts. As of 2023, eight years after the onset of Yemen's civil war, there are no women ministers on either side of the conflict.

The work of Yemeni women in conflict zones highlights the capacity of women to organize and pursue peace, even in the most dire circumstances. However, women have remained active in peacemaking and humanitarian efforts throughout Yemen's eight-year civil war, playing critical roles in health, education, and local peace-building efforts. They serve on the front lines as medical personnel, organize advocacy efforts as members of civil society groups, and have even helped negotiate prisoner exchanges.

Interestingly, women contributed to peacebuilding differently based on their degree of access and privilege. For example, less educated rural women in Yemen have commonly provided assistance and mutual aid within their respective communities. On the other hand, privileged wealthier and educated women have greater access to resources and opportunities, thereby allowing them to participate in civil society and coordinate their efforts with the international community. Therefore, efforts promoting women's participation in the peacebuilding also needs to be more inclusive along lines of class, race, or other identifiers.

Women have fought for a place in Iraq's post-2003 political system throughout the conflicts that have engulfed the country over the last two decades. Despite the extreme forms of GBV and sectarian conflict during the 2006-2007 civil war and the invasion of ISIS in 2014, Iraqi women led the country's first modern protest movement in 2003, demonstrating against the new political elite's attempt to overturn the Personal Status Code, the basis for legal rights of women. They succeeded in pressuring the parliamentary blocs and political parties to block bills that could have imposed dress codes on both women and men and limit gender mixing. When Iraq's Islamist political elite attempted to put in place a sectarian legal code, women's protests were critical to its defeat. In spite of this early setback, some conservative Islamist parties have constantly renewed attempts to update the Personal Status Code, but Iraqi women have fought against these proposed changes at every turn.

The eruption of Iraq's nationwide protest movement in October 2019 brought the country's women to the forefront of the popular demonstrations. Despite physical threats and assassination attempts, as well as mounting societal and political pressure to block women from partaking in Iraq's first grassroots political movement since 2003, women were present and active in both protests and negotiations with officials to implement economic and political reforms. Women protesters varied greatly in age, religious background, and educational attainment. They participated in all facets of the protests, from helping to feed demonstrators to participating in constitutional law debates. In spite of their differences, they shared a common space and collaborated on strategies to effect meaningful change. One notable chant from the protests—"Don't say it's shameful, a woman's voice is a revolution"—speaks to the subversive nature of women's presence in street movements.

One step that the Iraqi government has taken to incorporate women into the nation's security services has been through the recruitment of women into the country's civilian police force, with positive consequences for stability at a local level. However, as in other Gulf nations, Iraqi women have not meaningfully engaged in community meetings on peacebuilding, conflict mitigation, and reconciliation. These meetings are traditionally dominated by male tribal elders, religious leaders, and local officials. Policy measures intended to change these dynamics, such as Iraq's second WPS national action plan, have not yet translated to real increases in women's participation in decision-making on the ground.

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Policy Recommendations

Through research and input from women from the region with expertise in WPS, we propose a number of reforms to improve the integration of women into the national security enterprise in the Gulf. Although we are keenly aware that each Gulf state has its own unique circumstances, we based our recommendations on recurring themes regarding women and security across the region. These recommendations are general suggestions, not comprehensive ones, and only touch the surface of a deeply rich and contested topic.

Minimizing Structural Barriers to Employment

Gulf nations should establish the full, equal and meaningful participation of women at all levels of peacebuilding and security by integrating a gender perspective into all aspects of the respective institutions, including the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programs. States can facilitate women’s broader entry into security and peacemaking fields by minimizing structural barriers to women employment. Gulf governments can accomplish this through more targeted job training, family care subsidies, and other reforms.

To combat systemic discrimination and harassment—in the military and beyond—Gulf states can improve communication channels allowing women to report harassment or discomfort to their superiors. One practical step is to hire gender advisors specifically for the peacebuilding and security sector. These advisors can assist in strategizing on how to identify and reduce gender gaps by gender mainstreaming in a manner conducive to cultural norms.

While women currently serve in most of the Gulf states’ militaries, where and how they can serve remains severely limited. Gulf states should increase the number of civilian and uniformed women in peacekeeping at all levels and in key positions. This should begin by easing the direct integration of women into their militaries. Integration could be facilitated by a conscription program or by instituting recruitment targets for their respective defense ministries. Although conscription would likely lead to backlash in many Gulf states, some of this backlash could be ameliorated through promises to maintain existing conditions subject to the comfort level of women. These steps would significantly reduce existing gender gaps in Gulf militaries and provide their nations with a broad pool of personnel with military skills that could be valuable for work in security policymaking. In turn, it could assist in “localizing” their security industries.

Instituting a Feminist View of Security

Owing to pressure from the international community, most Gulf governments and societies have had some exposure to the principles of WPS, reflected in UNSC Resolution 1325 and other documents. However, in part because of domestic pressures, most Gulf states have not incorporated these principles into their strategic documents. Unfortunately, this oversight has significant consequences. Because women are uniquely affected by the negative consequences of violence, they have a clear interest in successful peacebuilding, and have much to add to the male-dominated field.

Women’s involvement in peacebuilding and security must be multitiered. There is a clear imperative for women to be involved in such efforts at the national level, where high profile policies are decided on. Women must also be present at a local level, where conflicts begin and ultimately end. If women peacemakers are embedded in their communities to monitor the implementation of national WPS policies, those policies are far more likely to succeed.

Moreover, conventional discourse surrounding security studies focuses on violence or outright armed conflict—the purest expression of a breakdown in security. If security were redefined to encompass peace, prosperity, or sovereignty, the field would take on far wider implications. Indeed, food security, water security, energy security, and climate change remain vital to the well-being of states, but peacemaking efforts in the Gulf are too often restricted to preventing violence. Their exclusion from traditional conflict resolution efforts not withstanding, women also lack meaningful participation in discussions on food and water security, even as they find themselves more severely impacted than men in these areas. Broadening the concept of security and planning for the meaningful participation of women could provide significant benefits for the nations of the Gulf.

73 Kaufman, Rachel, “Women and Social Media: Key Drivers of Protests in Iraq,” 2021, Wilson Center, December 22
74 Sharland, 2021.
75 Alomar & Glubb, 2022
Capacity Building through Hybrid Top-Down, Bottom-Up Approaches

While state-led feminism can be credited for progress in women's participation in public life, instituting a hybrid top-down, bottom-up approach could offer the best of both worlds. It is undeniable that the states are major drivers of change. Top-down change comes from a state or national level since governments are able to produce and enforce laws, impose punishment, and incentivize socially acceptable behavior. At the same time, grassroots initiatives have the potential to reflect societal needs at a more intimate level and can transform the lives of marginalized members of society. This approach is an effort where NGOs, social entrepreneurs, traditional businesses, and private citizens working from the bottom up collaborate closely with the government to ensure the full, equal, and meaningful participation of women in peacebuilding and the security sector. This also can ensure representation across the lines of class, race, or other identifiers.

Another approach is the introduction of microempowerment initiatives to provide resources to women involved in security. Micro-empowerment initiatives have been successful at capacity-building on a small scale in other Arab nations, notably in Morocco. These successes could be repeated within the GCC states, Yemen, Iraq, or Iran, as long as financial, humanitarian, or military assistance (if applicable) is tailored toward the specific conditions of each country and the needs of local women.

In order to codify the strategic aims of this program, each country's leaders should also incorporate a national plan that includes recommendations from UN Security Council Resolution 1325. Such plans could be introduced under the auspices of the GCC states' existing national “Vision” development initiatives.

National Strategies: Changing Discourses to Lower Social Barriers to WPS

Gulf governments must also make concerted efforts to lower broader social and cultural barriers to their participation. As long as Gulf societies stigmatize women's participation in security affairs on in both informal and institutions, any efforts to reform—whether bottom-up or top-down—are likely to only achieve shallow or tokenistic results. In order to ensure genuine social change, Gulf states' efforts should extend beyond security institutions to other cultural areas such as secondary and tertiary education.

By instituting a school curriculum that empowers women and avoids reinforcing patriarchal ideology, Gulf states could strengthen public acceptance of women's greater participation on security issues. Gulf governments should explore the non-military and non-masculine aspects of security and conflict resolution and incorporate them into their national security strategies. Strategic plans, such as the “Vision” plans of the GCC, should incorporate a gender perspective while remaining amenable to local needs and intersectionality.

Furthermore, within these important strategic plans, the language should eschew masculine narratives across institutions and curricula that could hinder women's advancement in the peacebuilding and security field. This will enable an exploration of multidimensional perspectives that serve states' national interests, while promoting the treatment of gender as a crosscutting issue.

Establishing a Meaningful Quota System

Although gender quotas on their own are insufficient to bring about broader change—often leading to tokenism when poorly implemented—the Gulf states should nonetheless incorporate them at higher levels of government to grant women more concrete influence over policymaking in the short term. Implementing workplace gender quotas coupled with other mentioned recommendations in this report could fast track progress in gender equality for WPS and cause a “shock effect” on embedded male-dominated institutions in the security sector. Furthermore, the positions allocated to WPS should be ones of substance with full, equal, and meaningful participation addressing diverse, important national security issues. For example, women should have a seat at all peacebuilding negotiation tables.

Continued Engagement from the International Community

While the Gulf states have agency, continued engagement from the international community—both from foreign governments and NGOs—has historically played a positive role in advancing women’s rights in the region. However, international groups should attempt to enhance the public life of indigenous women on the ground rather than engaging in unhelpful “virtue signaling.” Nevertheless, to help build upon recent progress, these organizations can continue to advocate for these reforms, perhaps by making financial aid (if applicable), agreements, and other benefits contingent on policy reforms that decrease the gender gap. In addition to pushing for policy changes, the international community should attempt to collaborate with indigenous and grassroots feminist movements, while remaining sensitive to the needs of women on the ground, the political context and local social norms.
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