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Women's Empowerment in Bahrain

By Fakir Al Gharaibeh¹

Abstract

In Bahrain, the role of women can be determined by examining their activities in all sectors of society. Traditions and laws primarily hold women back from their full participation in the economy and politics of the nation. Discrimination that has carried forward into the constitution of the land was caused by adherence to historical remnants of a society that does not really exist anymore. This study presents the social, economic, and political reality of Bahraini women in light of applicable legislation, and the barriers women face in achieving equality. The objective is to examine these realities within the context of Bahraini traditions, cultural norms and expectations, legislation, and the political process. The outcomes include the identification of specific barriers and some possible ways forward in the social experiment that has begun in Bahrain of equality and empowerment for women.

Keywords: Bahrain, Women, Empowerment, Arab Society, Discrimination, Legislation, Political Process, Traditions.

Introduction

Bahrain is a small Arab gulf country made up of a series of islands adjacent and connected to Saudi Arabia by a causeway. It has a total population of 738,004 (growth rate: 1.2%; birth rate: 16.8/1000) and an area of 700 Sq. kms. Islam is the state religion, and 84% of the total population is Muslim. Even though the leadership of Bahrain is comprised of Sunnis who dominate it politically and economically, and live primarily in cities, the majority (60%) of the population is Shi'i.¹ For centuries, Bahrain has been a major entry point into Arab soil from the Persian Gulf. While Islamic Sharia is the law of the land, and the Qur'an dictates the rhythm of life and the relationships of men and women, Bahrain is also a mix of cultures and religious backgrounds, more so than other countries in the region.

Bahrain achieved its independence from Britain in August of 1971, and its constitution was promulgated on December 6, 1973. Since then, the Bahraini government has moved forward on the path towards a modern state, by planning to take full advantage of the capacities of women, according to the Constitution, in recognition of the role that can be played equally by all Bahraini citizens in the renaissance of the state.²

Discrimination against women is one key indicator of the failure of a political system in the democratic process, while participation is considered to be one of its most important elements. Women's freedom to enter the public sphere reflects to a large extent the nature of the political and social system of a country, and their equal access to

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political processes reflects the principles of social justice in a society. Women and political participation in Bahrain was one of the main demands in the pre-National Action Charter, which was essentially the recognition by Bahraini society of the role women played and are still playing in the social and economic life. At the same time, it was an expression of an enlightened mentality and a wide vision of both the leaders and the people of Bahrain.³

In Bahrain, there is a conflict between two views that concern women's roles: the 'religious-tribal perspective' and the 'modernizing perspective.' The first advocates keeping women at home and preserving the traditional arrangement of men dominating the public sphere, while female roles are limited to the private sphere. The second promotes a partnership between men and women in public life, with citizenship rights and duties for both.⁴ In addition, there is a third element: a chasm between the principles expressed in the constitution that call for the empowerment of women, and the social, economic, and political realities of modern Bahrain.

The objective of this paper is to examine these three aspects of women's lives within the context of Bahraini traditions, cultural norms and expectations, legislation, and the political process. The objective is to clearly identify specific barriers and map out potential solutions that are crucial to the success of the social experiment that has begun in Bahrain of equality and empowerment for women.

Bahraini Women and Their Social Roles

The factors considered in this section are education, health, citizen's rights, family roles, and displacement as the outcomes of non-marriage and divorce, and state and religion-condoned domestic violence against women.

Education

Women's education in Bahrain has been achieved as a step towards equality of access and opportunity. The first public school for girls was established in 1928. This date marked the beginning of formal education for women. Bahrain was first among Arab countries in the field of primary education for girls.⁵ The following table outlines positive and negative aspects of education in the Gulf States, and specifically shows the progress made in women's education in Bahrain.

Table 1: Similarities and Differences in the Educational Systems of the Gulf States.⁶

Similarities	
Women in Education	Women are increasingly getting a chance to pursue an education in the Gulf states. Although not all of the countries are on the same level of allowing women to study with men, they are allowed to go to school.
Sex-Segregated Schools	All of the Gulf state countries have sex-segregated schools, due to the influence of Islamic culture.
Universities	All of the Gulf States have a university for citizens to acquire an education.

Differences	
Government Spending on Education	Qatar and UAE pay for citizens to study abroad, while Oman and Bahrain do not.
Limitations for Women	Women are not treated the same as far as what type of education they pursue at the college level. In Oman, women cannot pursue an education at a university in Agriculture or Engineering.
Trends	In Oman, men tend not to pursue a college education because they want to obtain a job earlier in life; women prefer to get married at an earlier age rather than go to college. In comparison, a higher percentage of Bahraini women (62-70%) attend college.

Source: ABEGS, Arab Bureau of Education for the Gulf States, December 19, 2010 (12:00 a.m), <http://www.abegs.org/Eportal>

By 2001, the number of government primary schools in Bahrain grew to 203, of which 103 were for girls. 50% of the students in public schools and 44.5% in private schools were females.⁷ In addition, the percentage of female students enrolled in secondary education was 87% compared to 77% for boys.⁸ The illiteracy rate in the 21-nation Arab League is currently estimated at 35.6%; nearly double that of the global rate of 18%.⁹

In 1983, the Bahraini Ministry of Education opened a special department for adult education to offer women and men the opportunity to complete their basic education. By 2001 the number of adult education centers in Bahrain had reached 52 (15 centers for males and 37 centers for females). Access to education has had a profound effect: it reduced the percentage of illiterate women from 76% at independence in 1971 to only 17% in 2001 and to 11.7% in 2006, statistics that are nevertheless still below world average.¹⁰ In contrast, Iraq's male illiteracy stood at 43.4% at the end of 2006, and female illiteracy was as high as 74.8%. Palestinians in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip had the lowest illiteracy rate in the Arab region, at 5.8% at the end of 2008. The rate was 2.8% among men and 8.9% among women. Kuwait had the second lowest rate of 6%, followed by Qatar with a rate of 6.9%. Jordan had the fourth lowest rate of 7.9%, while the UAE and Bahrain had the fifth and sixth lowest rates of 10.2% and, as stated above, 11.7% for females. Female illiteracy rates were in the double digits in all Arab nations except Kuwait, Qatar, and Palestine, with Iraqi having the highest rate, followed by Yemen, with a female illiteracy rate of 61.4%.¹¹

Bahraini women clearly have good access to university education. They began to enroll in foreign universities in the 1950s when the government offered scholarships to gifted female students to complete their studies in Lebanon. In addition, parents sent their daughters to Egypt, Iraq, and Syria for tertiary studies. In 2004, of the 18,000 students at Bahrain University, 66.1% were female, and at Gulf University in 2002, female Bahraini students represented 63% of the total Bahraini student population.

Leadership of educational institutions in Bahrain has also taken a small, but important leap forward. Sheikha Mariam bint Hassan Al Khalifa has assumed the Presidency of Bahrain University, and Dr. Jawaher Al-Modheki is the Vice-President for Administrative and Financial Affairs. Furthermore, a growing number of women hold master's and doctoral level degrees. In 2001, 190 Bahraini women obtained PhDs. Males, however; still outnumber females two to one in completing PhDs.¹²

While the male/female imbalance at the PhD level is apparent, in Bahrain access and equal opportunity for women have been achieved in general education in such a way that less than 12% of all women are considered illiterate.¹³

Health Care Rights

The area of women's health needs to be considered as women's demands for unique health care services increase, especially in regard to chronic illness, presently a challenge for the health care system. There are more demands on health centers and comprehensive health services for women throughout their life span.¹⁴ Connected to the provision of services, but also as a reflection of the traditional role in society, Bahraini women lack involvement in planning health care services and health policies, and there is limited research and literature regarding women's health. Mukhaimer (2010) examined the perceived and actual health status, health practices, and needs of Bahraini women aged 18 to 64 in a sample of 258 women selected from local health centers. The perceived health status scores for Bahraini women were similar to other Arabian populations, but different from the population of the United States. Obesity, anemia, hyperlipidemia, diabetes, and hypertension were identified as the most common women's health problems in Bahrain. 70% of the women were overweight or obese, and the number of chronic conditions they had was a significant determinant of their health status. Furthermore, they did not make use of preventive services in any great numbers: only 16% received mammograms, and 31% received Pap smears.¹⁵

Despite the concern for chronic and lifestyle-related diseases, the health statistics in Bahrain indicate some positive changes. Maternal mortality rates decreased significantly to 14 cases per 100,000 births, according to 2001 statistics. The rate of women receiving pregnancy health care services in centers, and government and private hospitals was 69%.

97% of births occurred in equipped centers and hospitals, and doctors and midwives handled 94% of them. Maternal mortality during childbirth is considered to be very low, at 0.22 per 100 births. The number of health centers in various regions of the Kingdom rose to 22. They provide women with free services in family planning and reproductive health. Medical care, including primary health, maternity services, and mother care are freely available in government hospitals and health centers.¹⁶ One outcome of these improvements to women's health care is that the average life expectancy for women at delivery increased to over 76.3 years in (2003).¹⁷

Unequal Treatment Under the Law

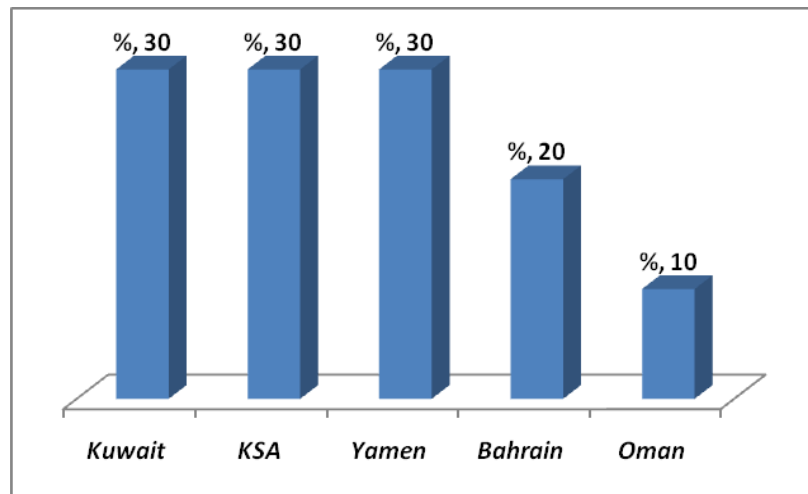
Under the original Bahraini Citizenship Law, a man had the right to grant his citizenship to his foreign wife and his children, but a woman could not grant her citizenship to her foreign husband and her children. In April 2004, the parliament changed the law to allow Bahraini women to sponsor their foreign husbands and children.

This positive change allows male spouses to work in the country without the need of a work sponsor.¹⁸ While education and some health issues for Bahraini women are improving through legislation and government programs, it is problematic that women are not partners in Bahraini economic and political life. And while the constitution guarantees equality, traditional and religious attitudes may be seen as barriers to women's full participation in the growth and development of Bahrain. Marriage and traditions, the rights of women, state and religion-condoned violence against women, the definition of family from both legal and religious perspectives, and the growing concern over divorces in Bahrain will illustrate the main problems.

Marriage and Traditions, and the Rights of Women

The number of unmarried women over the age of 30, while not an issue in other areas of the world, is a rights-related issue in Bahrain and other Gulf states. The chief problem is directly connected to the economy and the rules that place wealth in the hands of men. Women are not allowed to accumulate wealth on their own - this is the duty of the male member in charge of the family. Hence, if a woman is not married because of economic circumstances, or is divorced, she and the children she might have will face difficulties. According to Zyoud (2007), single women of marriageable age represent 20% of the female population in Bahrain. These data are comparable to 35% in Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. The percentage declines in both Saudi Arabia and Yemen, but it is the same in Sudan and Somalia. Oman and Morocco are much lower, at 10.9 %, and the percentage of unmarried women in Palestine is only 1%. At the end of 2007, the number of unmarried women over the age of thirty in Jordan was 100,000.¹⁹

Figure 2: Percentage of Single Women in the Gulf States



Source: E, Zyoud, *the Problem of Single Women in the Arab World*, Jordan. (Amman, 2007).

Violence against Women

According to research by the Bahraini Women's Association, a group that assists women who have experienced violence at the hands of their men, violence in all forms remains a problem in the country. Women suffer the harmful, life-threatening effects of traditional and cultural practices that continue under the guise of cultural and social conformism and religious beliefs that discriminate between genders. One set of statistics for NGOs in Bahrain reported 928 cases of domestic violence against women in the first half of 2010. May was the most violent month with 153 cases. Violent beatings and tongue-lashings came to only 10% of the cases, and violence against women was primarily by beating. These statistics also show that wives are the most frequent victims of violence, with boys coming in second place.²⁰ Figures collected from women's groups, shelters, and police for 2007 and 2009 account for 7503 battered women who were subjected to psychological or physical violence, including sexual abuse.²¹ The Center for Women's Complaints in the Supreme Council for Women also noted the increasing number of women abused during the first part of the year in 2010: 272 cases of battering. The following table shows the types of violence against women in Bahrain in 2010.²²

Table 3: Types of Violence and Number of Cases for Bahraini women in 2010

Type of Violence Against Women	Number of Cases
Physical	145
Psychological	94
Verbal	14
Sexual	4
Neglect	14
Total	272

Source: Dunya, Ahmed, Center for women's complaints in the Supreme Council for Women Violence against Women, (Bahrain, 2010).

Bahraini legislators have passed legislations and recommended sentences aimed at protecting women from violence, specifically for attacks on pregnant women, rape, and sexual harassment. However, while Article 344 of the Bahraini Penal Code stipulates life imprisonment for any person who engages in sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent, Article 353 of the same Penal Code discriminates against women in that there is no punishment for a person who rapes an unmarried woman if he marries her after the rape. Moreover, while Article 333 stipulates life imprisonment or the death penalty for the crime of murder, Article 334 allows the penalty to be reduced for the man, without specifying the duration, if he murders or assaults his wife for the accusation of adultery, or if he assaults or murders one of his sisters for the accusation of fornication. As evidence suggests, this practice of so-called 'honor crimes' more often than not offers repeat offenders the opportunity to escape punishment.²³

Women in Bahrain do not report domestic violence, except when the violence reaches intolerable levels, because there is a lack of legal protection. Instead, the international media more and more often reports the abuse. A study carried out by Penh Buzboun reports 281 physical assaults committed by husbands among 712 violence cases

recorded by the Military Hospital in Bahrain in 2001. While only a few domestic violence victims are granted divorce, judges often consider violence against women committed by parents, brothers, and husbands to be in accordance with religious and state laws. Article 16 of the Penal Code, for example, states: "Nothing is considered a crime as long as it is the exercise of a right granted by law or custom."²⁴

Bahraini law contributes to domestic violence against women since it does not accept the testimony of relatives, or of only one woman. Most of the assaults occur at home where, if there are any witnesses at all, they are usually mothers or relatives. Consequently, the woman who has been assaulted is not able to prove the occurrence of the incident. Not only are women subjected to violence in the absence of witnesses, but also, due to pressures exerted by male members, in many circumstances they are forced to be silent and cannot press charges.²⁵

Labor laws in Bahrain cover sexual harassment against women in the workplace. Both Article 350 and 351 of the Penal Code stipulate imprisonment or a fine for whoever commits any indecent act with a woman either by words or actions, in private or in public, or by any form of communication, including the phone. However, women often feel embarrassed to complain, and as a result they remain silent because they know they will not be supported, and because they fear of sullyng their reputation or ruining their career.²⁶

Divorce and Family

Divorce affects the psychology, social life, and work environment of Bahraini women, who still live in a traditional society that blames them for being the cause of divorce and its consequences. According to statistics from the Ministry of Justice and Islamic Affairs (2010), out of 5,000 marriages in Bahrain, annually 1,000 end in divorce.²⁷ This is a large number considering the small population of the country. Reasons for divorce, as monitored by the Supreme Council for Women during the period between 2007 and 2009, are illustrated in the following table that describes the situation in Bahrain.²⁸

Table 4: Numbers of Cases and Reasons for Divorce Between 2007 and 2009

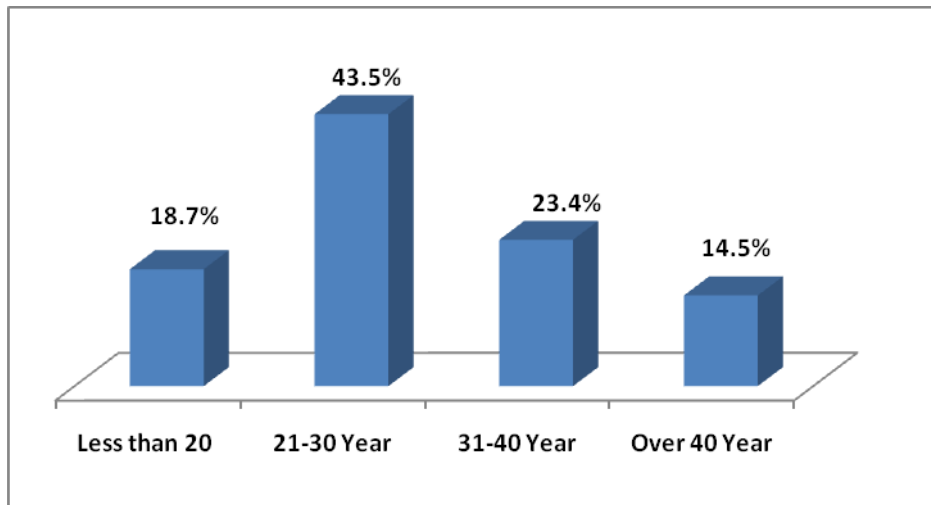
Reasons for Divorce	Number of Cases
Physical violence against women	155
Bad treatment of women	134
Infidelity	85
Verbal violence against women	53
Total cases	427 cases

Source: Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain, (Bahrain, 2010).

Ironically, one of the main reasons for the increase in divorce is tradition. Historically, the ideal marriage was tribal: a man married a woman relative, and their offspring would then be encouraged to marry cousins or other relatives in order to increase and strengthen the tribe. These arranged marriages came with the binds of family

and tribal connections that were and are still very important in Bahrain. Against this traditional scenario there are new variables that cause more and more people to seek divorce as a solution to domestic violence. 17.8% of divorced women were married before they reached their 20s, while women who did not tolerate violence represented 43.5% and were between 21 and 30 years of age (See figure 5). Bahraini law allows for divorce, but it is not easy, nor is it an equal process for women and men. Men are free to divorce their wives whenever they want to, while women must appeal to the complex and prolonged procedures of the religious courts to get a formal judgment.²⁹

Figure 5: Age of Divorced Women in Bahrain



Source: Sabeeka Al Najjar, *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Arabic Translation*, (Freedom House, 2006).

Women's Participation in the Economy of Bahrain

There are some successes to report regarding women in the labor force of Bahrain. Businesses owned by women rose from 24.3% in 2001 to 30.6% in 2002, with the number of female members of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry rising to 1785.³⁰ In addition, Bahraini women accounted for 34.3% of the total labor force recorded in the Civil Service Bureau. This is the highest rate in the Gulf Council Countries, and approximates that of the European Union countries.³¹

Table 6: Women's Contribution to the Labor Market
From the Fourth Quarter of 2002 to the First Quarter of 2009

Year	Government Sector	Private Sector
2002	14467	14562
2009	19532	26657
Change Rate	35	83

Source: (LMRA) Labor Market Indicators (Bahrain, 2010)

Both the government and the private sector have shown a dramatic increase in the numbers of women employed in the years from 2002 to 2009, as shown in Table 6. However, the total number of unemployed in June 2009 was 5508, divided into 971 males and 4537 females, i.e., the proportion of unemployed women constitutes 82% of the total unemployed. There are challenges still facing the larger integration of women into the labor market, where women represent the largest proportion of the total unemployed, as indicated by the statistics above (data insurance against unemployment for June 2009).³²

The establishment of the first Association of Businesswomen in the Kingdom of Bahrain in 2000 encouraged these government efforts. The association, which is the second of its kind in the Gulf Council Countries, is a positive example or progress towards a non-biased gender economic environment, and a confirmation of the presence of women in the economic sphere.³³ The government has provided a number of programs to motivate Bahraini women to participate in the economy. One example is the state providing loans to micro projects that women have fully embraced so they can generate family income. In 2002, 81% of the total participants were women, and because of these micro loans, the number of Bahraini families headed by women reached 84 % of the total number of families, with an unemployment rate of 10.5%.

Women are discriminated against in the workplace based on their gender, despite their broad participation in the workforce. Discrimination occurs subtly as well as blatantly. An example of subtle discrimination is in the choice of careers. Female students in Bahrain tend to specialize in areas that qualify them to work in government jobs such as teaching, as the working hours offer them the opportunity to harmonize their family duties with their work.³⁴ This choice, though not inherently wrong or bad, reinforces traditional women's roles and maintains a separation between what women and men are expected to do.

An example of more blatant discrimination occurred in 2001 / 2002. An entire group of female university graduates majoring in chemical engineering could not obtain work that was suitable to their qualifications in the private sector because of their gender. The Bahraini Assembly for Human Rights suggested that this was a case of gender bias, and pointed out that the government, in turn, has not taken any action against the employers involved in this discrimination based on gender.³⁵ In addition to the discrimination in employment appointments, female workers in Bahrain often receive lower salaries than men, despite their doing the same job.³⁶ These discriminations based on gender occur because there are no labor laws against them.

Another area where discrimination occurs is with maternity and with the laws that govern employers' responsibilities towards women employees who become pregnant. According to the labor laws in Bahrain, female workers in the public sector have the right to a 45-day maternity leave, starting from the date of their child's birth. The 45-day-leave policy does not comply with the standards of the International Labor Organization, but at the very least there is a law. In addition, the law states that when women return to work they are allowed an hour per day for four months to breastfeed. However, the law also has discriminatory sections. Article 63 of the Labor Code states that it is permissible to dismiss women who are working in the private sector, because of marriage, pregnancy, or during maternity leave (Bahrain Labor Code). This Article empowers employers who are often not willing to pay for maternity leave, even though women are entitled to it under

another section of the law. Furthermore, female workers are not permitted to work between 8 pm and 7 am, with the exception of work in hospitals.³⁷ These laws effectively limit job possibilities for women.

Increased participation of women in the labor market in both the public and private sectors from 2002-2009 is evident in Table 1. However, there is still reluctance, especially among women, to work in certain economic activities or professions. This is attributed to the biological makeup of women, the impact of social and educational circumstances, religious beliefs, and the conditions in which women are not permitted to or are unwilling to work in a double shift system in the private sector, which reduces their contribution in this sector.³⁸

Other problematic areas are the (lack of) freedom of movement and inheritance issues. There are social constraints that restrict women's independence, security, and personal freedom. For instance, they must ask the permission of the household men to travel outside the home. There are also religious constraints imposed by both the Sunna and Shi'ite sects regarding land or property ownership. Women are entitled to inherit from fathers, brothers, and husbands, in accordance with Islam, but non-Muslim women cannot. According to Shi'ite sectarianism, a Shi'ite spouse is entitled to inherit chattels only, not land. In the same vein, Shi'ite sectarianism entitles daughters, if they have no brothers, to inherit from their father, whereas in Sunna sectarianism, a paternal relative would share in a father's property, if there were no brother.³⁹ Therefore, not only are their religious laws discriminating against freedom of movement and property ownership, there are also different interpretations of those rules, depending on whether women are Sunna or Shi'ite.

Women and Politics in Bahrain

Article (1) of the Bahraini Constitution states that all citizens have the right to participate in all public affairs and enjoy all political rights. Women and men in any democracy (Bahrain proclaims itself to be a constitutional monarchy) exercise their right to vote, to stand for public office, to participate in unions, and to enjoy freedom of speech and equality before the law. The Bahraini Constitution is no different than other states in which the law guarantees not to discriminate between men and women in political, social, economic, and cultural life.⁴⁰ The Bahraini government endorsed the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW convention, March 2002). Moreover, the government encouraged women to participate in the municipal and parliamentary elections of 2002. At the same time, the Higher Council of Women, which is the umbrella group for all activities related to the rights of women, sought women's right to divorce, marriage, and custody of children.

Women in Public Life

Senior positions in government are as yet a rare occurrence in Bahrain. Nevertheless, there have been some successes. Sheikha Haya Al Khalaifa was appointed ambassador to France in December 1999. In addition, Lula Al Awadi was appointed General Secretary of the Higher Council of Women with the rank of Minister in November 2002. The King appointed six women to the State Council, giving them the opportunity to access legislative power. However, in 2004 the first Bahraini woman was

appointed Minister of Health in recognition of the role women play in this sector, where women account for 55% of the workforce.⁴¹

There are two other areas of public life where women have made some progress. Women represent 50% of the total workers in public radio and 30% in television. A full 50% of local editors in the daily newspapers are women, with numbers working in journalism associations increasing steadily.⁴² As for the legal profession, the State Department report for human rights for the year 2009 stated that there were 10 women members in the Bahraini State Council, one woman member in the parliament, three women ministers, three women judges in the criminal courts, and a woman judge in the constitutional court. In spite of these examples of progress, women have not moved into decision-making positions: only three women have been appointed as ministry assistant secretaries, and from a total of 286 managers in government service, only 31 women have senior roles to play.

Efforts to change the political involvement of Bahraini women showed some progress in the 2010 Gender Gap Index issued by the World Economic Forum.⁴³ Bahrain was fourth among Arabian countries but still 110th internationally in the Forum's assessment of gender inequality. The report attributed improvement for women moving into legislative positions and senior ministerial positions, but the ranking was based on 2008 figures, which corresponded to a small surge in women moving into positions of power in Bahrain. However, in the parliamentary elections conducted October 23, 2010, only one woman was elected to the State Council versus 39 men.⁴⁴ Table 6 in the next section describes nine women candidates in the election, only one of whom was elected unopposed. Bahrain will lose ground on the Gender Gap Index in 2011 unless this situation changes.

Women and Participation in Elections

Women were prevented from participating in the first democratic election held in Bahrain in 1973, and after the dissolution of the National Council in 1975. There were no parliamentary elections until 2002 when women were finally allowed to participate in politics and vote the first time.⁴⁵ In that election and the following one in 2006, females represented approximately half of the total voters, which indicate that they were willing to participate in the decisions of their country. With that level of interest and with women candidates in many districts, there was an expectation that women would be well represented in government. However, in 2006 only one woman, Lataifa Alqoud, succeeded in taking a place in the Gulf Council Countries election. The question is why only one. A study conducted by the Higher Council of Women, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (2010), noted that the major political organizations did not nominate women candidates. Their chances of success were substantially reduced because most women ran as independents or for less popular parties. The study stated that 19 of the female candidates (95%) did not belong to any of the political associations, and only 5% of the women represented mainstream political associations. Table 6 lists nine out of nineteen women candidates in the 2006 election, their affiliation, and the results. Lataifa Alqoud was the first woman of any of Gulf Council Countries to win a seat in parliament in the 2006 election. She continued in parliament with a win in the 2010 election as well.⁴⁶

Table 6: Nine of the Women Candidates in the 2006 Election.⁴⁷

Number	Candidate Name	Political Party	Election Area
1	Basema Saleh	Independent	The capital
2	Huda Almudawa	Constitutional Assemblage	Al Muharq
3	Rajja Jafar	The National Free Thought Assembly	Al Muharaq
4	Inas Shabeeb	Independent	Al Muharaq
5	Muneera Fhkro	Waad Assembly	Central
6	Zahra Haram	Independent	Central
7	Laila Rajab	The Free Thought	Central
8	Maryam Alroyi	Independent	Southern
9	Lataifa Alqoud	Independent (unopposed win)	Southern

Source: Bahrain Elections, 2010, January 25, 2011. (12:00 a.m),
<http://jazeera.com/news/world-news/11345-bahrain-elections2010.html>

Failure to make it to political office was also partly due to being new to politics. The study of the Higher Council of Women, in cooperation with the United Nations Development Program (2010) pointed out that there were a number of obstacles facing women candidates, such as the inability to join an electoral alliance, lack of funds to campaign, lack of good advice on how to manage a campaign, no professional, efficient, and loyal team of supporters, and lack of knowledge of the electoral process. However, there were more reasons for failure, as identified by the candidates themselves. Almost 30% of women candidates thought their failure in the election was attributable to the influence of religious leadership, which exercised some social and spiritual control over the voters. More specifically, religious leaders argued against women standing for the legislative council.

There is also the suggestion that many people did not want to be represented by a woman. This attitude is based on the traditional role of women subservient to men. Another 19% of the failed candidates regarded the power of political associations and the obstruction of the electoral process as the key factors in their failure. 9.6% reported mismanagement in their electoral campaign, while 4.8% stated the reason lay in the weakness of electoral financing.⁴⁸

Civil Society Institutions and Women

In spite of the increased number of nongovernmental associations in Bahrain, as well as the activities performed by women's associations since 1955 to promote and defend the rights of women, the Bahraini government still refuses to publicize the Women's Union in Bahrain, working to support the rights of women and exercising pressures on the government to issue laws that meet the international standards and principles of the CEDAW convention.

Table 7: Names and Strategies of Bahraini Women's Associations⁴⁹

Association Name	Year of Establishment	Association Strategy
Bahraini Young Women's Development	1955	Adoption and defense of women's issue and rights
Awaal Women	1969	Development of women, and work on their access to rights
Bahrain Women	2001	Establishment of qualitative projects and programs for the advancement of all segments of society
Women's Future	2001	Improvement of volunteer work to advance the status of women
Bahraini Women's Development	2002	Establishment of development projects
Hamad Town Women	2002	Support the status, rights, and issues of women according to the constitution.
Bahraini Women's Union	2006	Increase awareness of the importance of women's participation in civil society institutions

Source: Women's Associations in Bahrain January 5, 2011(3:00 p.m), <http://www.northern.gov.bh/modules.php?op=modload&name=socest&file=007>

The declared aims of the associations in Table 7 -women's political and social equality- have not held a place on the agendas of these associations. Furthermore, women in Bahrain are generally unaware of their political rights because they lack information: the topic of political rights of women is not available in public libraries, and the term does not even exist in the Arabic language. The work of nongovernmental associations concerned with awareness and political action only takes place in major cities, and does not reach a large portion of women in small communities and rural areas.⁵⁰ Moreover, the law in Bahrain states that non-governmental associations must have permission before

organizing national meetings to discuss sensitive issues related to women, and the government does not allow these associations to obtain international funding, according to a report of the United Nations for the Human Development in 2004.

Women and Equality in Bahrain

There are barriers as well as potential solutions to the issue of women and equality in Bahraini society. The barriers rest primarily in the traditional attitudes of both men and women towards the roles expected of women, defined and delimited by household responsibilities, raising children, the husband. While these roles are honorable and fundamental in Islamic cultures, when law, religion, and traditions do not permit women to fully participate in Bahraini social, economic, and political life, new solutions must be found. The conflict lies between the traditional religious/tribal perspective that keeps women at home, and the modern perspective that wants to establish the framework that will allow women to take their place as equal partners in the new Bahrain.

In the social sphere, health demands are not being fully met, and throughout their life women need more comprehensive services. Traditional approaches to women's involvement in decision making has meant that crucial decisions on health care are not being made by women; there is little evidence to support changes, a lack of involvement by women in planning health care services and health policies, and limited research and literature regarding women's health, especially for chronic diseases. Overall, it is sad to see the low numbers of women who take advantage of available preventive services.

There are also issues regarding marriage and traditions, women's rights, violence against women, and perspectives on divorce in Bahrain. Honor crimes remain part of the law. Legal protection for women is not enough to halt the large number of physical assaults that take place every year, the majority of which are perpetrated by husbands. Another example of the unreasonable nature of the law is that admissible testimony in assault cases does not include the testimony of relatives or of only one woman. Divorce remains a contentious issue since in this traditional society women are still blamed for the divorce and its consequences. When divorces were few it was not an issue, but now that 20 percent of marriages in Bahrain end in divorce, problems such as how women will support their families are emerging. Furthermore, when women seek divorce they have to appear before a religious tribunal, while men do not.

There has been a large increase in women working outside the home. However, they are discriminated against based on gender, and discrimination occurs over maternity issues and the laws that govern employer responsibilities towards women employees who become pregnant. According to the labor laws in Bahrain, female workers in the public sector have the right to a 45-day maternity leave, starting from the date of birth of their child.

Female workers are also limited by the times of the day in which they are permitted to work. Not being able to work in the evenings or at night, except in hospitals, restricts the number and range of jobs open to women who want to work. Another problematic area that restricts women is their lack of independence and mobility.

Politically, women are more active now than at any other time in the history of the region. The issue is that women are not able to run as candidates for the major political associations because they lack the funds to campaign, lack management and support, and face the ignorance of the electoral process. All these factors have led to their failure to

make significant inroads in government. In addition, there is concern expressed by the candidates themselves about the influence of religious leaders who exercise social and spiritual control over the voters. The government could do more to assist women but refuses to publicize the women's associations and puts a stop to meetings at which political status might be discussed.

Conclusion

The challenges to empower Bahraini women lie in their social and cultural inheritance, deeply rooted in Bahraini traditions and now, in the constitution and parliamentary framework of the country. The Bahraini government has not yet provided mechanisms and clear programs to enable women to participate equitably in the social, economic, and political life of the country. This happens at a time when civil society associations and political organizations are pushing for equal rights.

There may be some reluctance on the part of women themselves to change their roles so rapidly and so dramatically. If there is some hesitation in women engaging in employment and political activity, that hesitation may slow the progress of Bahraini women to exercise their rights effectively. The solutions lie in women's and men's education about political processes, religious leaders and men in general re-thinking about the traditional roles of women, and changes in the laws of Bahrain that would promote equal rights for women to the full social, economic, and political spheres of the country.

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