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**Women's Political Participation in the Gulf: A Conversation with Activists Fatin Bundagji (Saudi Arabia), Rola Dashti (Kuwait), and Munira Fakhro (Bahrain)****What are the obstacles to greater political activism by women in the Gulf?**

**Dashti:** There are many interlinked factors related to the religious and social environment as well as the attitude of political leaders, who have not taken a clear position: should women have a role in public life, private life only, or a mix of the two? In the Gulf, there is a conflict between a modernizing and development-oriented perspective and a religious-tribal perspective. The latter fights to keep women at home and preserve the traditional arrangement of male domination of the public sphere and female limitation to the private sphere. Men have succeeded in the public sphere to the extent that they are giving up their roles at home. The modernizing perspective promotes a partnership between men and women in public life, and citizenship rights and duties for both. The struggle between these two trends remains unresolved, and here the third force appears—the government role—which is unstable and swings back and forth, one day siding with the modernizers and the next day with religious and tribal elements. The media also can play an important role in this struggle by showing women in leadership roles.

**Bundagji:** The problem lies in raising and reshaping awareness, and here we have to go back to education, the importance of concentrating on the concept of citizenship and the rights and duties inherent in it, and on the cause of women's rights and their role in public life.

As for the media in Saudi Arabia, they are very good and play a positive role regarding women's problems and issues. They publicized, for example, the "Girl of Qatif" case (a rape victim initially sentenced to lashing and later pardoned by King Abdullah), as well as that of the businesswoman who drank a cup of coffee with a colleague at Starbucks and was arrested by the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.

**Fakhro:** First, we must reform education, because men and women learn from the same state-provided curricula. Second, there must be reform on the level of *ijtihad* (interpretation) of the holy Quran; there must be modernization and development to suit the age and time. Morocco achieved

an important accomplishment in this regard, namely the new family law (Moudawana), through a modern interpretation of the Quran. Turkey and Iran also have experiences from which we can benefit. We should not restrict ourselves to only Arab societies.

Our problem is the lack of seriousness of decision makers—who are tribalists and dictators—and their interest in maintaining the status quo. There is also the fact that society links men's honor with women's bodies, and so men are careful to keep women behind the walls of the home.

### **What is the impact of economic factors on women's political participation?**

**Dashti:** Women's participation in the economies of the Gulf is growing; they now comprise 30-40 percent of the workforce. Their jobs have become necessary to support a family, but unfortunately women's economic situation has not propelled them to seek high-ranking political offices. Despite their economic capabilities, women still are not economic decision-makers, even though there is no religious dispute over the right of women to manage their money.

There is also economic violence against women in the Gulf, through men's control over women's money. In some cases men give women an allowance out of the women's own money, which of course weakens their independence. As if it were not enough that the woman is confined to her role at home, and then that the man has abandoned his role at home, now the man is taking control of her money!

**Bundagji:** There is a strong link between women's political participation and economic development. Women's participation in the decision-making process is necessary to ensure proper and balanced strategic planning that takes into account the social and economic needs of Saudi women. A recent report said that some 60 percent of female college graduates in Saudi Arabia do not get jobs, even though the state is investing heavily in educating women. This means that the economy is losing a lot by not benefiting from these female graduates. It is true that working women have a prominent presence in teaching and nursing, but they are absent from most sectors.

**Fakhro:** Since women have been permitted to work in other Gulf Cooperation Council countries, many Saudi women—most of them from the Eastern Province—have traveled to Kuwait and worked for very low salaries to escape from the bad situation in Saudi Arabia. They also went to work in Dubai at the invitation of its ruler, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid.

In Bahrain, although many women have obtained much economic power through inheritance, they do not utilize the situation to their benefit. Many of them make husbands, sons, or older brothers their proxies, though some of them have been freed from this pattern.

**Bundagji:** Women in Saudi Arabia make up only 7 percent of the labor market. Even when women assume leadership positions in Saudi Arabia, they lack real decision-making powers. There are 150 men in the Shura Council and only six part-time female advisors. If I were one of them I would not have accepted the position, because it has no powers. There are 170 municipal councils, without a single woman member. The number of women in Saudi Arabia equals that of men, yet no woman can drive. Setting aside the question of a woman's right to drive, consider the economic implications and how costly it is for a women to hire a foreign driver.

**Fakhro:** Saudi Arabia is holding back the whole region. Because it is a country with weight, and the largest in terms of population and area, it affects the progress of the other Gulf countries. The late King Faisal imposed women's education by force. He was a reformer and powerful, but now the rulers do not want to educate their peoples nor do they want reform.

Women in Bahrain make up about 30 percent of the workforce, but they have not yet reached equality with men. In Bahrain, women head universities, professional associations, and civil organizations—elected by men. The women's rights' cause is very strong in Bahrain. There is a large opening for Bahrainis compared to their neighbors.

### **Do you support quotas for women's political representation?**

**Bundagji:** I support quotas.

**Fakhro:** As do I. It should be political parties, however, who implement quotas, as in France, where women make up 50 percent of the candidate slates. The quota by this means is better and fairer.

**Dashti:** I think that the quota need not be limited to legislative councils but also should apply to the executive bodies and councils, because that is where decision-making happens. Such a quota would be an important tool to abolish laws and other measures that marginalize women. Upon taking decision-making positions, women must work to achieve that.

**Bundagji:** But the quota can be a double-edged sword. What can guarantee us that women chosen by quota represent the majority of women, or reflect the diversity of society? The quota is useful as long as it achieves the goal of true representation of society.

**Fakhro:** The problem is that the decision to implement a quota is a government one, and the government will try to exploit the women representatives who owe their positions to it. Unfortunately there are women, for example female ministers, who carry out government decisions against women. They are placed in leadership positions simply to preserve the state's reputation before the West, not out of a belief in women's participation.

### **What are the most important goals for women in your countries now?**

**Dashti:** Strengthening genuine participation for women in decision-making positions, a media alliance to highlight the role of women and their presence in public life, and supporting and developing young female leaders.

**Fakhro:** I dream that there will be more women in decision-making positions and the integration of women into political life—that future generations will have what we did not have.

**Bundagji:** Saudi women need to guarantee their civil rights first. There must be educational reform, the integration of women into the basic service institutions and the chambers of commerce and municipal councils. If women are able to achieve that, they will be able to be in contact with the different levels of society. Another priority issue is stopping violence against children, a cause adopted by women, but we need specialized courts and understanding judges.

Women are an emerging informal power in Saudi Arabia and are changing the status quo. They are taking on the issue of obesity, for example, a major problem in the country. From a health perspective, defeating obesity requires exercise. Taking good health as a starting point, women are campaigning for walking as exercise, and this gives them a new public presence and freedom of movement. Similarly, women are demanding to drive. Ultimately, we hope that change will come through women themselves.

*This interview was conducted by Michele Dunne and translated from Arabic by Paul Wulfsberg.*