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**Women's Rights and Intersectionality in the Gulf-Identity
Politics, the Question of Inclusion and Representation.
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Introduction

In the past few years, women's rights have become one of the most urgent issues in Gulf societies and received much attention worldwide. Women's rights is a global issue, as currently there is no country in the world that has fully succeeded in gender equality and women's rights amongst all groups of women. Yet, there has been an "internationalization" of women rights issues in GCC by international institutions for various reasons including the politicization of "human rights" and neo-oriental approach to women's issues as indicators of modernity/progress by Western standards. This resulted in numerous reports such as the recent report from [Human Rights Watch](#) and another by [International World Bank](#) two years ago that rated Qatar quite low on the gender equality scale. These reports come with their own political and social agendas and visions. It is, therefore, crucial to problematize these reports and question their objectives in the context of politics of knowledge of construction. The main question here is do these reports really help women in the Gulf or do they further perpetuate a shallow narrative on women's right as a monolithic category in the region?

Locally, women's rights have often been discussed through the debate on feminism without a clear conceptualization of what it really

means in the Gulf context. The advocates of feminism claim to use this ideology/concept to emphasize political, economic and social rights. While those against it see it as an ideology borrowed from the West without the contextual underpinnings of the Gulf society. In this article, I would like to deconstruct some of the concepts around women's rights in the GCC in order to show the complexity of the issue and bring into the discussion intersectionality, identity and inclusion. The aim is to pose questions and to problematize some of the existing notions and debates on the issue.

One of the main problems surrounding the discussions on feminism in the Gulf is that some view it as a homogenous category and blanket term. However, feminism is not a uniform concept, it is not just a theory, ideology or a belief system; it is many different things for different people. Feminism may mean any or all of the following:

1. An idea as explained by Marie Shear — "the radical notion that women are people"¹
2. A political project
3. An academic and intellectual framework, as Deborah Cameron states, "a mode of analysis... a way of asking questions and searching for answers"²

The notion that feminism is only about "gender equality"- treating this as a uniform/universal category without

¹ Cameron, D. *Feminism: ideas in profile*. Profile Books, 2018.

² Hartsock N. 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically

Feminist Historical Materialism.' In: Harding S., Hintikka M. (eds) *Discovering Reality*. Springer, Dordrecht, 1983; Hooks, B. *Feminist theory: From margin to center*. Pluto Press, 2000.

any consideration to women's multiple identities is inherently flawed. If feminism is really only about promoting women's rights on basis of their gender identity, then in order for this concept to manifest as an organised movement, women would have to unite on the basis of being "women". This is exactly part of the problem; women are an inherently diverse group, so it is almost impossible or reductionist to expect them to unite on the virtue of being "women". This is simply because being a woman means different things in different contexts; gender identity and related discrimination is intertwined with contextual and structural realities.

The question of solidarity and multiple layers of identity is central to the debates on feminism worldwide. The question is, are we having these debates in the GCC?

Contextualization of Intersectionality and Women Rights in the GCC

The very notion of diversity and the idea that "women" does not imply a homogenous group is the core principle of "intersectional feminism"³. Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term in 1989 as part of black women's rights movement. The essence of "intersectionality" is the acknowledgement that women's experiences are shaped by context in which they exist not only on the basis of gender. Other aspects of their identity such as social class, race and ethnicity impact women's sufferings. Therefore, not all women suffer equally; the level of women's discrimination is dependent on the intersectionality of their multiple identities. In short, a woman is more than just a gender.

There are two main strands in Intersectional Feminism- one focused on identity and the other focused on structures. The focus on structures allows us to look at a range of social and institutional practices that further perpetuate gender-based discrimination.

It is important that we treat intersectionality as a framework of understanding domination and oppression and how they overlap in individual social identities. Therefore, a conversation on women's rights is not complete without the lens of intersectionality.

In the context of Gulf, the conversation on intersectional feminism has been started by some countries such as in Kuwait, where there is more space to discuss such issues publicly but is entirely absent in other countries like Qatar, for example. The governments in some countries in the region (Saudi Arabia, Qatar) have responded to women's rights issues and introduced some reforms such as those relating to women driving, dress code and changing minimum legal marriage age. Many international and local agencies refer to these reforms as success stories on the surface without deeply understanding structural issues different women face. Although these reforms may benefit some groups of women, other groups of women still remain marginalized, and their issues remain undiscussed or hidden. Some of these issues include issues of domestic violence, discrimination and abuse in workplace, unequal pay, lack of access to resources or to legal systems amongst groups of women who belong to the category of "bidoon" (stateless),

³ Crenshaw, K. *On intersectionality: Essential writings*. The New Press, 2017.

residents and migrant workers women are invisible discourse of “women’s rights”. Currently, the discussions surrounding women’s rights focus only on one category: the citizen. The conversation here is about class, identity, systematic and structural discrimination, and privilege. For example, a citizen woman of privilege class may now be able to drive without the permission of her guardian (a success story for Western media) but the same woman within in her professional workspace continues to facilitate gender-based discrimination against other women due to their ethnic/legal status by denying them equal access to opportunities as other women and men. The point here is that privilege allows one woman to gain certain rights while still discriminating against other groups of women.

Hence, before we talk about reforms from the state, we have to look at the ideology and vision that informs these reforms and the structures and systems that perpetuate different levels of discrimination. We have to reconsider the feminist discourses in the region to see how exclusive or inclusive they are. Is the conversation really about intersectionality or is it about perpetuating certain existing categories such as “migrant”; “bidoon”; “citizen”, “resident”, “tribal” , and “domestic worker.” ? In many Gulf countries, the term “women’s rights” speaks exclusively to only one category of women: the citizen. It perpetuates further the notion of privilege and identity as a fixed static term, overlooking other groups of women who suffer in the process of “giving” rights to a certain group of women.

Although intersectional feminism is relevant in the Gulf, class, ethnicity

and social status are defined differently in the region compared with the West. In order to contextualize intersectional feminism in the Gulf, I propose we start by asking the following serious questions before we conceptualize feminism and women’s rights discourse in the region:

- 1- What identities (which are constructed) are prevalent in the Gulf and which ones are more privileged than others?
- 2- What does race, economic/social class, and national and religious identity mean in the Gulf?
- 3- What groups of women are structurally and systematically privileged than others and how certain structures discriminate certain groups of women over others?
- 4- Which groups are invisible to the discussion?

Currently, we are not having these discussions and if we are, these are not always with equal representation and protection for vulnerable groups of women such as the bidoon and migrant workers. Most discussions are exclusive rather than inclusive, overlooking the systematic and structural discrimination that benefits some women through privileging others.

It is, therefore, not just a question of who you are as a woman but who you are in relation to the structures and system. The focus has to be on structures of oppression and to problematize those structures.

Conclusion

It is key, therefore, to not just treat “intersectional feminism” merely as an identity politics as it can reduce

the whole discussion to “us” vs “them”. Identity is a fluid concept and is shaped by one’s position in structures and systems. As women, we are situated in structures differently yet similarly; same forms of oppression are reproduced but to different extents. This is where solidarities can be built.

If we do not understand the systems and structures and understand the law and how it impacts various women, then discrimination will be replicated in other laws for other groups of women. In the case of the Gulf, this means women who are marginalized or hidden in the system such as Bidoon, migrant, and expatriate/residents. Though these groups may be viewed as non-citizens, they are still part of the large fabric of the society. Women’s rights discourse that does not take a holistic and inclusive approach to solving women’s issues is only perpetuating oppression further, and any reforms on “women rights” is just reinforcement of privilege in disguise.

About the author

Zarqa Parvez is a PhD student at Durham University and her research focus includes: Nationalism, National Identity, Women, State and Society in the Gulf Region. She is a lecturer in the Middle Eastern Studies department at College of Humanities and Sciences at Hamad Bin Khalifa University.

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