

CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Mapping Gender and Women's Studies in the Arab Gulf: How to Move It from the Margins?

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Over the past few decades, the Arab Gulf has witnessed tremendous socio-economic and structural transformation coupled with major reforms to modernize the higher education sector. These reforms have focused on establishing partnerships with foreign universities and/or hosting international branch campuses to promote diverse, liberal, and high-quality educational programs. While these far-reaching reforms have undeniably led to a dramatic increase in the number of academic institutions (Baghdady 2017), these institutions have mostly reproduced traditional educational structures and paradigms, with little contribution to the advancement of more liberal and progressive ideas and/or areas of study, namely, gender and women's studies (GWS).

GWS is a creative, critical, and innovative field of inquiry and pedagogy. The field's conceptual and methodological contributions allow us to understand the sociopolitical dynamics that produce gender inequality in society and to unpack the socially constructed norms that legitimize unequal gendered relations and power hierarchies. While women's rights and gender equality are among the main pillars of sustainable development and modernization, educational reforms in the Arab Gulf region have not paid much attention to advancing GWS as an institutionally independent field. As a result, the establishment and institutionalization of GWS programs in the Arab Gulf remain fragmented even compared with other parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, and they continue to face a myriad of pedagogical, sociocultural, and institutional challenges.

The main aim of this essay is to survey the challenges of institutionalizing GWS in the Arab Gulf and their effects on teaching courses on women and gender. Moreover, it sheds light on the complex and—in some cases—problematic task of introducing and embedding GWS within the ongoing transformation processes of higher education in the region. It highlights long-standing as well as emerging

challenges surrounding the consolidation and institutionalization of the field and proposes a number of strategies to mitigate them.

The Status of the Institutionalization of Gender and Women's Studies in the Mena Region

Despite decades of activism and feminist scholarship, GWS programs and teaching remain relatively nascent, and progress is rather slow in the MENA region (Asfari Institute 2019). The 1990s witnessed the development of numerous GWS programs that were created in response to calls by international developmental organizations to expand gender education as a means of gender empowerment. Several university-affiliated research centers were established, including the Institute for Women's Studies at Bir Zeit University in Palestine, the Women Studies Unit at Ahfad University in Sudan, and the Gender Development Research and Studies Center at the University of San'aa in Yemen (Elsadda 2021). Currently, there are a few GWS programs and courses, mainly in Egypt, Morocco, Lebanon, Palestine, and Sudan, that are mostly part of the English and language departments (Rached and Smail-Salhi 2016; see the introduction to this Critical Perspectives section for more on this point).

Focusing on the Arab Gulf, the region has experienced rapid expansion of higher education in recent years, mainly through privatization and internationalization (Buckner 2011). While education has been largely the responsibility of the state, with public universities falling under the direction of national governments, the educational landscape in the Gulf transitioned to a hybrid model in the 1990s that facilitated the existence of public, semipublic, and private colleges and international universities (Willoughby and Badry 2017). The internationalization of higher education led to the creation of new programs across different disciplines and within the social sciences and humanities that aimed to promote social advancement and build a knowledge-based society. Notwithstanding these reforms, GWS continued to lag, and to date there is not a single university in the Gulf that offers a stand-alone degree in GWS (Almazidi 2019; Alsahi 2018).

In the United Arab Emirates, the American University of Sharjah is the only private institution in the Gulf that offers an undergraduate minor in women's studies. Moreover, United Arab Emirates University, the oldest public university in the country, recently created a women and culture minor in the Arabic Language and Literature Department. Within the international branch campuses, New York University Abu Dhabi only offers two courses, Women and Work in the Gulf and Making Women Matter.

As for the other countries in the Gulf, the private Hamad Bin Khalifa University in Qatar offers a two-year graduate degree in women, society, and development. Furthermore, Kuwait University hosts the Women's Research and Studies Center, which was established in 2012 in coordination with the Ministry of Planning and the United Nations Development Programme. In 2021, the History Department at Kuwait University launched the Women's and Gender Studies Research Unit, which faced intense backlash from some conservative legislators

(*Al-Akhbar* 2022). Besides these Gulf countries, no GWS programs exist in Bahrain, Oman, or Saudi Arabia.

Thus, most institutions in the Gulf lack dedicated gender studies departments and programs with sustainable funding and a degree of institutional support. Furthermore, the few academic programs on women's studies that do exist tend to focus on women and family-oriented courses and programs. Clearly, more programs—especially those specializing in gender, not just women's studies—are much needed in the Gulf region, especially at the undergraduate level. However, these objectives are fraught with numerous challenges, as demonstrated in the next section.

Challenges Facing Gender and Women's Studies in the Gulf Region

The institutionalization of GWS in the Arab Gulf faces diverse challenges, including the existing conservative sociopolitical context that resists the knowledge produced by gender and feminist critique, the rigid institutional framework within the higher education sector, and skepticism about how a GWS degree would translate into immediate job placement.

The field of GWS faces significant sociocultural challenges that influence the integration of women's studies programs into mainstream curricula in the Gulf region (Ibrahim 2012). Traditionally, the overall educational policies of the Arab Gulf have emphasized the need to reinforce the political status quo, promote religious values in society, and preserve traditional gender roles in the family. They have favored methods of rote learning rather than encouraging critical debate. Contrary to this traditional approach to teaching and learning, the field of gender and women's studies is rooted in critical thinking that challenges the status quo and questions societal norms and power hierarchies. The institutionalization of the field thus inevitably provokes resistance from conservative political and social groups invested in maintaining the social hierarchy and status quo.

Related to the aforementioned sociocultural challenges is an inherent view of the field of GWS as alien to Arab culture and a tool of Western hegemony that acts in service of foreign agendas. Feminism is widely viewed in mainstream culture as a Western import that is incompatible with the region and its tradition (Golley 2004). The stereotypical understanding that feminism threatens to destroy family values and local cultures and encourages women to fight against men further fuels opposition to it in the region (see Shereen Abou El-Naga's contribution to this symposium). Such prejudices hinder both the creation and institutionalization of GWS programs and shift the institutional focus and funding to creating more "feminine" and "family-oriented" courses/programs that reproduce the social and political status quo in society.

Notwithstanding advancements in the higher education sector across Gulf societies, its institutional framework continues to inhibit the institutionalization of GWS. The trend of privatization and internationalization of higher education has resulted in the rise of international branch campuses—international institutions with a local connection, and local institutions with international

connections—such as local institutions with Western names or affiliations. Regardless of their public, private, or semiprivate status, the institutions depend on various degrees of subsidies and financial incentives provided by the incumbent regimes (Willoughby and Badry 2017, 57). This means that, in reality, they are constrained by the structures and processes that organize political life and have to adhere to state regulations. For example, when the provost of Hamad Bin Khalifa University, David Prior, was asked about academic freedom, he responded by emphasizing that “academic freedom is in the eye of the beholder,” adding that “there are different political contexts in which universities have to work” (Willoughby and Badry 2017, 61). Thus, the transition toward the internationalization and privatization of the higher education sector has mostly reproduced existing educational structures, norms, and constraints, with marginal contributions to the advancement of more liberal ideas and areas of study, such as GWS.

Developments in the higher education sector have also focused on offering training and creating new programs that directly respond to the job market needs. In particular, these new programs have prioritized the funneling of national citizens into highly desired public sector jobs and expatriates into the private sector labor market. Under this market-driven model, a degree in GWS is deemed “unmarketable,” thus universities tend to overlook its value. The contributions of GWS to the study of international affairs, economic policies, and national politics have been largely overlooked in policy debates (Almazidi 2019). The undervalued status of the field of GWS in the new knowledge-based society and economy in the Gulf poses key challenges to the consolidation of this field and further leads to its marginalization.

Strategies for Institutionalizing Gender and Women’s Studies in the Gulf Region

As maintained in the introduction to this Critical Perspectives section, the degree of university’s autonomy and ability to develop new programs, the availability of funding, student demand, and the political context are important factors that may also impact the institutionalization of GWS programs and departments (Stromquist 2001). Furthermore, acknowledging the fact that women’s rights and gender equality is a prerequisite for sustainable development, universities in the Arab Gulf region should pay closer attention to advancing GWS as an institutionally independent multidisciplinary field. Institutional support is crucial not only for safeguarding faculty’s autonomy and freedom of expression, but also for shielding them from being the targets of conservative forces in society that may oppose the widespread teaching of feminist education and “taboo” ideas, such as postmodern feminism, secularism, and queer theories.

Universities should also consider integrating introductory courses in gender studies into the core curriculum, as well as introducing a gendered lens in undergraduate programs across disciplines to spread a minimum degree of gender knowledge and understanding of critical gender theories among all

students. This approach would ensure that younger generations, of both sexes, become fully aware of and engaged with women's and gender issues—even if its definitions remain contested among the majority of students and teachers.

Finally, securing funding to establish and support GWS programs and research locally is extremely important. Providing resources to create independent programs that reflect the region's priorities and capture local needs will further encourage public debates on gender equality and social justice. It will also contribute to raising questions about gender hierarchies and to challenging its foundations in culture and society.

Conclusion

Institutionalizing GWS in the Gulf region is important for local societies, for the field of gender politics broadly, and for MENA studies more specifically. It will promote social advancement in Gulf societies by producing competent students who are well versed in critical thinking and rigorous creative investigation. Strong regional programs in GWS also promise to produce qualified scholars with rigorous theoretical training and nuanced local knowledge. These scholars will be well prepared to introduce important insights to the field of gender politics and to critically engage with its theories by bringing in new empirical cases, diverse voices, and nuanced analysis. Institutionalizing the study of gender politics will also contribute to disseminating the knowledge produced from the region and encouraging collaboration among scholars based in the MENA region and their colleagues at Western universities. It will thus open up new important research venues for the field of gender politics and ensure that our scholarship is distinctly more authentic, nuanced, and relevant to the population we are studying.

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