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Bahraini Women and their Position in the Reform Process

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It seems that being educated and engaged in the professional labour force are not considered sufficient preconditions for entitling women to civic and political equality, and for playing an active role in decisions that affect their societies.

Indeed, the marginalization of women's role coexists with a definite increase in their level of education and professional involvement. There is a need to depart from the "spontaneous" belief that there is a positive correlation between education and involvement in the work force on one hand, and political participation on the other. Or, at the very least, one should admit to the absence of an automatic link between them.

A second conundrum is related to the question of who makes change possible. On one hand, there is no doubt that social elites could contribute to the pace at which change takes place, and that there can also be top-down intervention by the authorities to achieve certain gains for women in the domain of political participation. On the other hand, granting women more responsibilities clearly represents a move that goes one step ahead of the societies in which they live. In most cases, progress in this area occurs after it becomes evident that steps in this direction would fail to muster the necessary support through the more formal channels: a majority vote in the parliament, or some form of support by the public opinion in that society at large.

A case in point is the failure of repeated attempts to grant women in Kuwait the right to run for parliament, something that was only granted after royal intervention. Similarly, in many Gulf countries, women were only appointed to "sensitive" positions, with the help of a royal decree.

However, aside from the symbolic significance of these events for women, the question that remains unanswered is the extent to which such developments have really impacted the daily lives of women, and drives them towards taking charge of their own lives. No doubt, answers to those questions are directly linked to the strategies of reform in this very vital sector, and Bahrain is a typical case in point.

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Many would agree that the beginning of Bahraini women's involvement in the Public sphere can be traced back to the period that witnessed the spread of Literacy amongst them. At the beginning of the 21st century, discourses such as the need to empower women gained increasing momentum, thereby forcing the position of women in a given reform process under the spotlight. Simultaneously, the international political system underwent profound changes, with states and nongovernmental organisations focusing their efforts on implementing the provisions of the Beijing Conference and many political regimes opting for the adoption of reform and some democratic measures.

Following a period of political and security-related instability, an agenda for Reform was initiated in Bahrain in 2000. Like most democratic reform projects in the Arab region, the Bahraini project relied at its core on notions of democratic practice and on concepts of citizenship and equality, including full political rights for women. Implementation of this agenda began soon thereafter, with proposals to a National Action Charter, a move which resulted in the amendment of the constitution in 2002.² The amended constitution was submitted for referendums in 2002 and 2006 respectively, as a result of which Bahraini women obtained their political rights and were for the very first time able to participate in elections.

No doubt, various Bahraini political and civic organisations and groups were inspired to various degrees by this reform project – and were positively impacted by its values on the level of their internal regulations, managerial

structures and political, social and cultural programmes. The reform scheme also impacted the behaviour, interests and position of individuals towards reforming and modernizing society more generally, and towards empowering women in particular.

Others still held on to a limited understanding of those concepts and values, especially those related to issues of social reform, and in particular those related to the empowerment of women, and to integrating them into the process of sustainable development and change.

However, analysts agree that the pace of reform remains extremely slow. It remains pertinent therefore to look at the position of Bahraini women in the reform process by examining the main characteristics, nature and particular features of women's position in the reform process, as well as the main hindrances to their effective participation.

Historical Background

Historically speaking, women's activism was always affected by internal factors, such as access to education, academic and literary activities in regular and religious schools, religious preaching, and the spread of cultural and social clubs that had ties with the reform movement underway in the Arab Mashreq.

Although the 1920s³ witnessed a gradual growth in the strength of the national and civil movement for reform amongst the educated class and various other sectors of society, calls

² The National Action Charter was submitted in 2000 and approved by 98.4% of the Bahraini public. It was followed by the submission of the first Bahraini constitution, on December 6, 1973, giving political rights only to men before it was amended, on February 14, 2002, to grant women equal rights in this domain.

³ Among calls for rights in 1923 were the establishment of a legislative council, Arabising administrative departments, applying social justice, halting speculation and commercial opportunism, enacting fair laws, spreading a spirit of freedom, instituting a measure of democracy and limiting the powers of the executive. See, Abdel-Rahman al-Baker, *From Bahrain to Exile* (Arabic).

for women's liberation, their equality with men and their increased participation in public life had not yet become part of the reform agenda.

Historians attribute this to the low education levels amongst women, their complete segregation from men in the public sphere, and the confinement of their public activities to the eradication of illiteracy, nursing, and raising of social awareness. One researcher recounts that it was difficult for women to go to school, since this was a time when both social customs and religious leaders did not look favourably upon it. Not to mention the authorities displayed a lukewarm interest in the education of women compared to men, which delayed women's learning curve, and which inevitably reflected itself on the level and quality of the education that they received.

Having said that, the education of women witnessed a quantitative increase over time, even though its impact remained limited, and subject to the type of activities that Bahraini women were allowed to engage in: activities whose nature depended in the first place, on the prevailing intellectual, ideological, religious and sectarian reference tools.⁴ Nevertheless, it remains important to note that during the 1950s and 1960s, this state of affairs did not prevent women from the elite --influenced mainly by foreign notions of modernity and eager to highlight their role and status in society- from taking part in various public activities.

The establishment of women's organizations and associations was intrinsically linked to the increase in education, the formation of social, cultural and political associations, and was encouraged by the prevailing political discourse of the national movement and its calls for liberation, democracy and equality, and the

impact that the above has had on the views of pioneering women activists.

As a result, the year 1955 witnessed the formation of the *Nahdet Fatat El Bahrain* (the Rise of the Bahraini Young Woman) in 1955,⁵ the first women's organisation in the Gulf region to represent the views of women from influential political and economic classes. In 1960, another society, *Ri'ayat Al Tifl Wa Al Omooma* (Care of the Child and Motherhood) became active in the same domain, and called for a gradual granting of political and legal rights to women. Due to the affiliation of its members to the elite and the ruling family, it became a soundboard for the government.

In 1970, a third society, the *Awa'el Women's Society*, was formed, whose membership body represented middle-class women with university degrees, and who were also receptive to various political streams of thinking. Together with al-Nahda Society, their activities increased. Meanwhile, important political and intellectual changes were taking place, all of which consolidated their commitment and focus on issues related to women's education, work, civil status and political rights, etc. to name just a few. Soon afterwards, *al-Rifa' Cultural and Charitable Society*, the *International Women's Society*, in 1975, and *Fatat al-Reef*, in 1972, were established, the latter by women from rural backgrounds, yet who enjoyed some

⁴ Baqer al-Najjar, *Women in the Arabian Gulf and the Difficult Transitions to Modernity*, (Arabic), p. 75

⁵ The Women's Club was the first to be established in 1953 and was set up by a number of well to do women from families close to the centre of power, in order to undertake charitable work, help the poor, and educate women in the arts of cookery and sewing. However, it came under attack from conservative elements in the country, who demanded its closure. Abdel-Rahman al-Baker, one of the main leaders of the National Movement, from 1954 to 1956, did not like the club due to its association with the wife of British Embassy Councillor Belgrave, and therefore called for the establishment of an alternative women's charitable society, which ended in the closing down of the club. See, *A Beginning without End*, a book written by a number of women researchers, pp. 15-86.

levels of education and culture. However it was not officially allowed to operate until 2001.⁶

With the period of political openness that began in 2000, numerous women's organisations became active alongside those that already preceded them on the scene, and adopted similar objectives.⁷ For example, on 2 August, 2006, the Bahrain Women's Union was established, which drew its members from the majority of women's organisations that existed in the country, including the *al-Mustaqbal* Islamic Women Society, which represented the only Islamic society in the Union. The Union's objectives reflected the goals of its different member societies.

Bahraini women achieved considerable social progress, especially in the domains of education, workforce and participation in the activities of civic and governmental institutions. However, by then, they were not given a chance to assume leadership positions, or participate at the political level, for reasons which will be elaborated in the next section.

⁶ Requests to be allowed to operate publicly multiplied in 1980 and 1990s. However, the main reason why the government was opposed to those societies was largely related to how it viewed those societies: considering them to represent outright the views of the political left, embodied by the National Liberation Front. See, Mona 'Abbas Fadel, *The Political Education of Bahraini Women: Impact and Vision*, p. 126.

⁷ Among these societies are the Bahrain Women Society, Bahrain Society for Women, Bahrain Society for the Development of Women, Hamad's City for Women, al-Hour Women's Society, and *al-Mustaqbal* Women's Society, all of which started working publically on September 15, 2001, the last two being Shiite Islamic women's organizations. There are also religious women's committees like the committee of the Islamic Awareness Centre, and other such women's committees some members of the Islamist *al-Shura*, *al-Asala*, and *al-Manbar* societies, the latter three being political societies with ties to the Islamist Salafi and Muslim Brotherhood Organisations, and which enjoy a large support base in the country. See Mona Fadel, *ibid*, p. 12-127

The Legislative and Legal Variables

The first Bahraini constitution was adopted in 1973 and remained in force till 1975. On 14 February, 2002 an amended version was adopted as stipulated by the National Action Charter. Although the amended version of the constitution⁸ spells out the equality of all citizens, men and women, in the political social, cultural and economic domains, it failed to include any provisions that clearly outlaw discrimination against women.

Despite the modernisation of legislation that accompanied the political reform process, there remained an overlap between the functions and authorities of the Executive and Legislative branches, which undermined the separation of powers, and independence of the judiciary. In this regard, it is worth noting that there are 3 branches of government in Bahrain: the Legislative Branch, the powers of which are assumed by the King and the two-chambered National Assembly (with its appointed Shura (Consultative) Council and elected Representatives' Chambers); the Executive branch, whose powers are assumed by the King and the Council of Ministers, and the Judiciary, embodied in the body of judges who issue judgements in the name of the King.

It is also important to point out that although Bahrain is a signatory to several international agreements relevant to women's rights, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) that it ratified on March 2, 2002, it

⁸ An opposition movement developed against the amendment of the constitution, in 2002, which expanded the King's prerogatives and led to the establishment of an upper house whose members were appointed by the King, and who were empowered to enact legislation alongside the existing lower house.

entered reservations on some of its provisions.⁹ Moreover it has not signed any other international human rights covenants or treaties.¹⁰

As far as local laws are concerned, Bahrain has no civil status law, or any specific legal provisions that explicitly criminalise violence and discrimination against women. In addition, there is no law that grants Bahraini citizenship to the children of Bahraini women married to foreigners. Since 1982, women's organisations and different political groups have been unsuccessful at forcing the government to enact of a Personal Status Law.

Furthermore, the country's courts are guided by Islamic *Shari'a* Law in their rulings, and continue to suffer from a stifling bureaucracy that delays proceedings for several years. This leaves the plaintiff in limbo, unable to get a divorce, or only being granted one after agreeing to give up custody of their children or their alimony rights. There are also instances in which disadvantaged women risk losing all of their rights, such as if she ends the marriage through *Kul'a*.

⁹ Bahrain entered reservations to Article 2, the very core provision of the Convention, on the ground that it contradicts *Shari'a* law; to Article 9 paragraph 2, related to nationality, and to Article 16 related to the civil status. See *CEDAW Shadow Report*, Civic Committee-Monitoring and Preparation Committee, 2008.

¹⁰ Among the conventions that Bahrain did not sign are: Convention on the Political Rights of Women of 1955, UNESCO's Convention against Discrimination in Education 1960, Convention concerning the revision of the Maternity Protection Convention, 1952, Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981, the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951, and the 1949 Convention on the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. See *CEDAW Shadow Report*, Civic Committee-Monitoring and Preparation committee, 2008.

No doubt, opposition by conservative religious clergy plays a major role in delaying the enactment of these laws. This is more so because of the absence of a firm position on behalf of the government, a position that is subject instead to the calculations and power politics of the conservative social and religious circles, all of which politicized the issue in their relationship with the state. Surely, this is not to say that there are no achievements to be listed,¹¹ (such as the establishment of an Alimony Fund)¹² however, they do not replace the need for a proper law.

In relation to this, it is worth mentioning that Decree No. 15 of 1976, of the Penal Code, falls short of providing adequate protection for women, because it fails to criminalise discrimination and undermines the principle of equal opportunity for men and women. It also fails to criminalise acts of violence against women, such as honour crimes, rape and sexual harassment, whether within the family or in the public domain. This means that the current text itself discriminates against the female victim and does not consider her equal to man before the Law, not to mention cases where the law allows offenders to escape punishment altogether, only to re-commit the same crime.

Moreover, there is no law criminalising trafficking in women for sexual purposes, meaning that expatriate females are not

¹¹ Among achievements made is terminating the police's ability to enforce a woman's return to her husband's home (*Ta'a*), a policy that was not grounded in any legal or religious provision, enactment of a law of appeals to *Shari'a* Courts, in 1987, and a Law of Custodianship over Money in 1986, and the right of women to benefit equally to men, from housing benefits provided by the Ministry of Housing. See the *Family Law*, Jam'iyat El Amal Al Demokrati, March 2008, p. 82.

¹² Law No. 34 for 2005 foresaw the establishment of alimony rights for the divorced women who have custody over their children, in the amount to be specified by the court.

protected against sexual abuse. Furthermore, and according to the Nationality Law of 1963, a woman has no right to pass her nationality on to her children, a provision that prompted Bahrain to enter a reservation on Article 9, paragraph 2 of CEDAW.

The law on the exercise of political rights of women magnifies existing challenges in the face of women's efforts to win seats in the parliament. Electoral districts are not distributed in a way that adequately reflects their constituency population, and is based on the principle of 1 vote per district, which undermines the chances of female candidates, especially in the absence of a quota for women.¹³

Similarly, the Social Security Law does not equate between men and women as far as retirement packages are concerned, nor does it set the same retirement age for both sexes.¹⁴ The social allowance that married men receive from the state is also double that of a married or single female employee. Finally, unlike their male counterparts, women do not benefit from a housing allowance

The Education Variable

Access to education for women, which started officially in 1928, is compulsory and free, but the lack of proper mechanisms to enforce the compulsory aspect and limit dropouts, is one of the main causes for high illiteracy rates among

women. Dropping out of school results is to a large extent related to the existence of family problems, poverty, need, death of one of the parents, divorce, break-down of family relations, and early marriages among young women. In terms of Illiteracy among females, it is worth noting that the rate dropped from 28.75% in 1991, to 17% in 2001, and from 13.3% to 7.5%¹⁵ in the same period for males.

As for the school curriculum, it is one and the same for boys and girls at the primary school level, which has an almost equal number of male and female enrolment rates. University education is open to female students who usually account for the majority of excelling secondary school graduates.¹⁶

In response to the requirements of the reform process, growing social demand, development oriented programming; changes have taken place in the official education system, and which crystallized as a result of the passing of a number of relevant legislations and laws.

However facts on the ground show that there is a gap between the declared official direction and position of the government, and actual plans and practices on the ground. For the education system does not help prepare women to play a more effective role in society, despite their considerable presence and academic over-achievement. This is due to the ongoing use of rigid methods of education that over-emphasize

¹³ As an official body, the Higher Council for Women opposes a quota for women on the pretext that it contradicts the constitution, despite the fact that the state never expressed reservations on Article 4 of CEDAW, regarding its commitment to the implementation of all necessary measures to empower women through a quota system. Nor did the state adopt any political or administrative measures to honour this commitments.

¹⁴ The reference here is to Social Security Law No. 24, for 1976. As for the retirement age, it is 60 years for men, and 55 years for women.

¹⁵ The ratio of female students in higher education is estimated at 58.4% compared to 41.6% for males, based on 2004-2005 data from the Ministry of Education.

¹⁶ There is a gap between males and females, and Bahrain's rank amongst the world's nations has dropped to the 115th out of 128 countries, despite the large financial investment in increasing women's enrolment in schools. To reap positive results in this domain, women must be more integrated in the economy. See the Report of the World Economic Forum in Davos, *Al Wasat* (Newspaper), November 2007.

lecturing resulting in limited levels of knowledge acquired.

In addition it stresses the need to obey and accept the status quo, and provides students with a incomplete information, not to mention that this information is affected by contradictory ongoing sectarian, religious and political conflicts and debates, and lacks elements that encourage dialogue, exchanges of views, and respect for diversity and disagreement.

The economic variable

Bahrain is a Gulf oil exporting country with a market economy that depends on the free flow of capital, intermediation of funds, and the development of an environment that seeks to attract investors through the enactment of legislation and adoption of relevant strategic and economic measures. This means that its economic activities revolve round the provision of services in the banking, commercial and tourism sectors, in addition to healthcare and education, to name just a few.

Given the above, the Bahraini Labour Law of 1976 is geared towards this service economy. It was promulgated based on principles of the 1973 constitution. The law makes reference to 'male and female' employees, implicitly recognizing gender equality in employment, and that the relevant provisions apply to them both.

Chapter 9 of the law, in effect till today, includes a number of provisions relevant to the employment of women, which remain in need for amendments. For example, it contains provisions that ban women from working at night, prohibit their employment in dangerous industries, and grants them a maternity leave of up to 45 days, before and after giving birth. The new law of 2006, added time allowance for breastfeeding, over a period of 2 years.

Among the main criticisms of the Law is its use of elastic terms that could run against the female employee's best interest. It fails to grant women and working couples the right to take a leave without pay, or a leave of absence to accompany their husband in the event of a posting abroad.

Women in the labour force are concentrated in the services sector, where they account for 25.6% of the total Bahraini labour force, or 21.7% of the country's total labour force, in 2001. According to researchers, the ratio of working women can be explained by the fact that Bahraini women are aware of the value of good education, and of the need to adopt modern values, given the increasing number of economic projects in the country. Other factors include the constant effort by women to improve their families' standards of living, carve for themselves a respectable social status, and achieve financial independence, not to mention the overarching consumer mentality that predominates. It is also obvious that there is a concentration of women employees in middle and lower level positions, and very few in high administrative and leadership posts, adding up to only 6%, which means that they play no decision-making roles in large economic institutions, like commercial and industrial enterprises.

Some discriminatory rules in key areas remain. For example, females who work in the clothing industry and in children's nurseries are subject to arbitrary firings and receive low wages, not to mention the fact that they are not included in any social security plan that grants them access to retirement and benefits in the case of work related accidents. Also noteworthy, is the high level of unemployment among women, constituting 74% of the total number of unemployed citizens looking for work. There are very few women in the diplomatic corps, in the position of Muslim marriage official or governor, while their role in the army and the

defence sectors is largely confined to administrative duties and medical support services. At the same time, there are a number of businesswomen who run their own business and investment companies in the services and commercial sectors.

Clearly, the ratio of women in the labour market does not match their education level and reflects neither the country's social needs, nor the market's requirements. However, although the text of the Law does not differentiate between men and women in the labour force or as far as employment, promotion and leadership position are concerned, the influence of religion and traditional culture and impacts important decisions, and plays a role that is as powerful as any legal text in steering public attitudes. There are increasing and direct calls for women to stay home, for their employment period be shortened, that they be allowed to retire at an earlier age, and work only in certain specific sectors.

The political sphere

The first political organisation to be formed in Bahrain was the National Union Commission in 1954-1956, which called for the election of a legislative council and the establishment of unions. Although women were active in countrywide demonstrations during the tripartite attack on Egypt, in the 1950s, and the labour *intifadas* (rebellions) of 1965 and 1972, and again in 1980s and 1990s, and were actively involved in a number of secret political movements abroad, the absence of women from political life, at the time, was all too obvious.

These factors, as well as the political instability that Bahrain experienced up until 1999, highlighted the need to implement reforms, and increased the number of voices calling for increasing women's role, for empowering them and representing them in decision-making on the local, regional and international levels.

Obviously, the political activities of Bahraini women were confined mostly to the educated classes, especially the female students belonging to the National Union of Bahraini Students Abroad. Some of them took part in secret opposition political activities and a number became highly active in women's organisations. Due to nationalist positions, and their participation in sit-ins organised by the detainees' families, they were pursued and imprisoned by security services, prevented from travelling abroad, fired from their jobs, and subjected to security investigations.

In the early days after independence, a number of individual Bahraini women and women's organisations called for the participation of women in the 1973 elections, and on April 27, 1995, they sent a petition to this effect, addressed to the Emir. They also called for the reinstatement of the constitution and constitutional institutions, and for ending repressive measures against citizens who call for democracy. Hundreds of women from different walks of life, including professional and student circles, signed the petition calling for the participation of women in the political decision-making of the country.¹⁷ Women activists 'Aziza al-Bassam, Hassa al-Khamiri and Munira Fakhro were dismissed from their jobs on account of this petition, and the others were threatened with arbitrary dismissal from their jobs if they do not withdraw their signatures. The arrest and investigations of women activists from the opposition Islamic religious Shiite current continued throughout 1980s and 1990s, up until the onset of the reform period.

Furthermore, and as a result of the influence of international and legal organisations concerned with women's issues, the early 1980s witnessed

¹⁷ See Hani al-Rayyes, *Role of the Bahraini Woman in the Constitutional Intifada, 1994-1998*, p. 7.

a number of women's organisations beginning to show more interest in the legal issues. They began calling for the amendment of legislation relevant to women, like the section of the Labour Law that concerns private sector employment and the Societies' Law, and appealed for the ratification of CEDAW and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both of which were eventually signed in 2002.¹⁸

With the onset of political reforms, societies representing different political positions publicized their activities, and women joined their ranks. With the increasing influence of various religious and sectarian currents, a large number of Islamic women's societies and committees, belonging to various political religious and sectarian societies, were established. Those in turn focused their efforts on keeping women's status quo unchanged, and were directly aided and abetted in their efforts by religious leaders and their respective institutions. This became especially evident from the type of activities, and statements by the very women who head these societies.

Public activism in Bahrain only became possible in 2001, and was the direct outcome of a series of political reform measures that cleared jails of political detainees, allowed political exiles to return home, restored citizenship to those from whom it had been revoked, and nullified the State of Security and Emergency Law. Political societies that had been underground, adapted their situation to the new open climate, and established their own societies (16 in total) representing all political directions in the country. However, although a small number of women did join these societies, it was quite clear that the majority

refrained from getting involved in their activities. Very few women for example were represented on these organisations' administrative boards, one or two at most, indicating a fundamental contradiction with their declared policy regarding the empowerment of women. It is worth mentioning, however, that some of these societies, including the National Democratic Action Society and the Islamic National Accord Society, did in fact establish a women's quota in their respective associations.

Despite all that, the year 2001 proved to be a significant year as far as women's political activism is concerned. Bahraini women took part in the national referendum concerning the National Action Charter, which laid the ground for their participation in the elections. Their participation reached 51% of the total number of voters in the municipal elections, and 31 women ran for office.

Similarly, in the elections to the Representatives' Council, women's participation amounted to 48% of the total, with 8 women candidates, two of whom reached the second round of elections in the 2002 legislative elections (though none of them won a seat). In the 2006 elections, five women ran in the municipal elections, and 16 in the parliamentary elections, though none succeeded in winning a seat (save for one who ran unopposed).

Generally speaking Bahraini women experience difficulty reaching high office; To date, only one woman has managed to become Minister of Health, a second one was appointed Minister of Social Development and, a third as a Minister without Portfolio (the latter now holds the position of Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Women).¹⁹ Bahrain has also one

¹⁸ A national committee of women's organisations was established in 1981 calling for the enactment of a civil status law, and awareness and education committees were formed to promote participation in the legislative and municipal elections of 2002 and 2003.

¹⁹ The Supreme Council for Women was established by Royal Decree in 2001, to act as a reference point for government departments on matters concerning

woman ambassador, and one other who holds the rank of colonel at the Ministry of the Interior.²⁰ In 2005, three women judges were appointed,²¹ while another woman is Undersecretary of a Ministry. Five females occupy the positions of Deputy Undersecretary at ministries, while thirty-one other women can be found in the positions of director. The ratio of women employees in specialised posts is 2:1 from the total number of employees occupying government posts.

In addition to existing shortcomings in the current legislation and laws, analysts blame the failure of women in the elections and the undermining of their role, on upbringing and prevailing cultural, political and social awareness, all of which shape individual mindsets regarding women's participation in political life. Not to mention the low levels of expertise that these women have in political life in general, given that no municipal or

legislative elections were held in the past three decades.²²

However, the above supports the argument that there is a certain readiness evident on the part of Bahraini society to accept the changes to legislation that aim to integrate women in decision-making processes, and in public life.

This does not negate the fact that there are problems impeding their election to parliament, even though some did make it, by appointment, to the Shura Council and to a number of leadership positions. As for giving them responsibility for specific portfolios, whether or not do so is often subject to official considerations concerning policies and relevant strategic planning. In the last five years, officials have increased the ratio of women in the Shura Council from 14 to 20%.²³ The question that begs itself, however, is what were these appointments based on? Were they based on democratic concepts and partnership with civil society institutions? Were ability,

women. It proposes public policies, steps that can be taken in relation to women's development within constitutional and civil societies and helps women play a role in public life and protects them from discrimination. It also proposes and follows-up on national strategies that aim to raise the standard of Bahraini women, offers suggestions regarding the amendment of laws in effect, and monitors the execution of general policies regarding women's issues. The Council answers directly to the King, and is headed by his wife; a Secretary General holding the rank of Minister heads its administrative body. See: www.scw.gov.bh; www.womwncouncil.gov.bh

²⁰ One female ambassador was appointed in 1999, and in 2007, another Bahraini woman ambassador was appointed alongside 23 male colleagues; a number of female cultural attaches, and 12 local embassy employees were also appointed. See: draft of the first and second official reports on the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Supreme Council for Women, 2008.

²¹ The third female judge to be appointed, Fatima 'Abbas, was appointed to the High Civil Court by Royal Decree No. 17, of April 24, 2007.

²² One of the studies published in 2004 regarding the 2002 elections found that some 61.5% of the study sample believed that women's participation in politics is a western imported phenomenon. A further 59.7% expressed their opposition to women's participation on the pretext that there was no religious text sanctioning it, while 57.9% believed that women's political participation is out of line with religious values. This in itself is a telling indication that religion, and the religious and sectarian authorities, have a considerable and specific impact on public opinion and trends in matters related to women's public participation, especially since 53.4% of religious societies, included in the sample, neither approved nor supported this participation. See the book by group of researchers', "The Bahraini Women's Experience in the Municipal and Legislative Elections: Social Trends within Bahraini Society," (Arabic), The Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research.

²³ Six members out of 40 were appointed to the Shura Council, by Royal Decree No. 14 for 2002. In 2006, the number of appointees increased to 10 and then to 11 after the Minister of Health's resignation and her subsequent appointment to the Council.

performance and expertise taken in consideration, or was this done merely to ensure the “presence” of women in the Council?

Impediments

The main impediment to an increased role of Bahraini women in the reform process is related to the obstacles that the reform process itself faces, coupled with the influence of religious and cultural traditions, and their interaction with social ways of things, and the pivotal role that these play in delineating women’s awareness, behaviour and understanding of events and developments on the ground. Most religious leaders do not favour women’s participation, a fact ascertained by the absence of any women candidates representing them in the municipal or legislative elections of both 2002 and 2004.

With the spread of individual and consumer values associated with the free market economy and the oil boom, many women have turned towards tending to their private affairs, and have resigned themselves to a life of prosperity, and turned their attention to life’s more superficial aspects at the expense of social and political issues. What exacerbates the situation further is that given the political repression and instability Bahrain has gone through, some fear getting involved in activities of a political nature.

Furthermore, the nature of the Election Law, which spells out that electoral districts are based on the one man, one vote system, improves the chances for conservative and fundamentalist religious and sectarian groups becoming represented in the parliament. Once this has been achieved, they work in turn at diminishing the gains achieved by women, as the nature of the electoral system undermines the ability of women to win parliamentary seats.

As regards women’s organisations, most are weak and incapable of attracting new young female members, either as a result of rising tensions and problems among their members, the overlap and duplication of duties, or the absence of any democratic spirit, constructive dialogue and opportunity to express one’s opinion freely within the organization.

Moreover, the authorities’ intervention to delineate these organisations’ activities in order to better control and contain them, and steer them in the desired direction, exacerbates their weakness. The government has taken measures and promulgated laws that facilitate official interventions,²⁴ which effectively sidelines them and keeps them at bay, and hinders their ability to impact political decision-making levels concerned with women’s affairs in Bahrain.

Conclusion

One can conclude that despite the relative progress made by Bahraini women in the education and labour sectors, the progress achieved failed to translate into an improved status and position within the reform process. This is due to several reasons, including the shortcomings of the political reform process itself, the restrictions placed on the powers of the legislative branch, the spread of corruption, discrimination among citizens, gender discrimination in politics and the sectarian polarisation and regional conflicts that Bahraini society has been subjected to.

Other reasons include the slow pace of reform, the lack of commitment in implementing provisions at all levels related to the empowerment of women, or to taking forward other women-oriented programmes. No doubt

²⁴ This is what happened when Law No. 21, for 1989, relative to the organization of civil society institutions was issued.

that the upbringing of women as well as their personal abilities and skills, are a major impediment to their participation, not to mention society's mindset and the prevailing social and cultural system that are still predominantly religious and sectarian in nature.

In the final analysis, it is clear that the status of women in public life, especially political life, i.e., the most vital stream of them all, does not automatically flow from progress in the education and labour domains. It has a mechanism and a life of its own, and poses a challenge to the fulfilment of women's rightful social status. Therefore, it needs to become an objective and a goal of its own.

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