

Who is worthy of ‘Women’s Rights’?

Intersectionality in perspective in the Gulf

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“If you don't have a lens that has been trained to look at how various forms of discrimination come together, you're unlikely to develop a set of policies that will be as inclusive as they need to be” (Kimberlé Crenshaw).

The aim of the ‘Women in Gulf Series’ was to highlight and further accentuate the voices and agencies of various groups of women in the Gulf region as they narrate their own stories and write about their own experiences, insights and intersectionalities.

Women’s agency is not always complete or separate from the structures within which they exist. The idea behind this series was that women narrate their own stories, highlight their agency (even within limitations) and ultimately speak to the socio-political structures pushing, highlighting and even questioning their representation in these structures.

The [opening article](#) set intersectionality as a framework for researching, studying and working towards women’s rights in the region. Intersectional feminism simply put tells us that not all women suffer equally, and that gender is not the only factor in women’s discrimination. It is the notion that women are not a uniform category. It is the “view that women experience oppression in varying configurations and in varying degrees of intensity. Cultural patterns of oppression are not only interrelated but are bound together and influenced by the intersectional systems of society. Examples of this include race, gender, class, ability, and ethnicity.” [said Kimberlé Crenshaw]. While intersectionality transcends an exclusive focus on identity or mere categorization, the lived experiences of racially marginalized women and girls are shaped by a range of social and institutional practices that reproduce and sustain social categories and infuse them with social meanings.

There are two main strands in Intersectional Feminism – one focuses on identity and the other focuses on structures. The focus on structures allows us to focus on a range of social and institutional practices that further perpetuates 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.

Overview of the Women in Gulf Series

In this series, while some researchers spoke directly to the theme of intersectionality highlighting the need for a more inclusive approach to women’s rights in the region, other researchers highlighted their own experiences whether in form of projects, research or shedding light on the hidden or more marginalized voices of women. [Shaikha Al Hashem](#) spoke about ‘Border Checkpoints at the Nodes of Intersection’ highlighting issues with intersectional feminism in the Gulf, the need to break the borders of categorization and create a more united movement and dialogue against oppressive structures. [Batul Sadiwala](#) raised important questions about the invisibility of the intersectionality of disabled resident/non-citizen/Bidoon women in Kuwait. She further calls attention to the pressing need to move beyond the dominant categorization of identities and investigate the construction of labels in local context and how they shape women’s experiences and opportunities in the society.

Other researchers and students like [Jawaher Al Shammari](#) and [Al Jawhara Al Thani](#) wrote about their own initiatives relating to women in their contexts. Jawaher spoke about the ‘Future is Female’ project at Georgetown that aims to increase women’s visibility in the public. Al Jawhara spoke about the ‘Women in Qatar’ website which she started as an aim to record Qatari women’s contributions and experiences and share them with the larger audience. [Noora Al Kuwari](#) spoke about the legal pitfalls in personal status laws that leave women vulnerable, with a second-class citizen status. [Mira Al Hussein](#) narrated her

personal experience with a powerful voice, claiming her own agency as a citizen woman married to non-citizen, and struggles with legal institutions, raising critical questions about citizenship and the status of women in the Gulf.

[Hasnaa Mokthar](#) engaged critically with the discourse and laws surrounding femicide and so called 'honor killings', emphasizing the need to change the language related to the issue. She deconstructed the concept of 'honor killings' as a monolithic category and blanket term, explaining how different women in Gulf countries are exposed to gender violence at various degrees and how some women are invisible to the legal system. Finally, [Shaimaa Al Essai](#) offered an analysis on how the conservative religious establishment in the majority of the Gulf States is trying to extend its societal guardianship on women to the digital space amidst resistance from the feminist activists.

Representation, Exclusion and Reality Checks

Overall, all women spoke about intersectionality either from their personal experiences or addressing the larger questions of representation and visibility in overlapping structures of oppression in various contexts. However, in the broader sense, the conversations and dominant discourse about women's rights in the Gulf remains a rigid, narrow, and exclusive one. One that refers to only a particular group of women - mostly a particular group within the citizen women. The present discussions and narratives claim to speak on behalf of all citizen women - constructing them as homogenous category. Diversity is at best a token concept in this context. Many women's rights initiatives in Gulf operate within this limited and exclusive framework, either ignoring or making invisible the oppression of other groups of women in the society who may also be subject to discrimination and oppression by the same women who claim to be agents of feminist agendas.

Nevertheless, a limited representation of certain groups of women such as 'domestic workers' may have picked up- through international human rights pressures but with little agency and voices from these women themselves- who if spoke will have no legal protection from the consequences. The larger question remains unasked or only partially answered, who is Gulf woman?

How do we move forward?

Through this series of reports and essays, it becomes apparent and rather urgent that moving forward, intersectionality is the only framework through which any meaningful changes, progress and reforms for women's rights can be achieved in the Gulf. The emerging discussions and narratives on inclusion/exclusion, othering/belonging on the broader topics of identity means that there is an on-going awareness about othering, exclusion, and identity politics in the Gulf. This discussion should also adopt a gendered lens, to understand which groups of women structurally and systematically are marginalized and invisible to the institutions. This is the time to move beyond the rigid, exclusive-membership club discussions of women's rights that privilege struggles of certain groups of women while systematically ignoring other and even further perpetuating women's oppression and suffering. This is systematic and structural violence against those women who are seen as unworthy of being considered for the chosen women's rights discourse.

A more inclusive approach does not just mean superficial or token discussions with a few chosen representatives of certain groups of women - as this may further the tokenism of diversity of women that is already prevalent in the region. Instead, this is an invitation for an honest enquiry into what kind of social categories exist in the Gulf societies and how women's multiple identities are constructed, privileged, and ignored. What processes make certain women invisible to the socio-political institutions and marginalize their experiences and oppression as separate from or irrelevant to the larger narrative of women's rights in the region?

As long as women in Gulf are either treated as an exclusive and homogenous category or majority of the women remain invisible to the system, institutions and women's rights discourse, then any work on progress and women's rights is ineffective and at best superficial. As Rupi Kaur says "I'm not interested in a feminism that thinks simply placing women at the top of oppressive systems is progress."

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