

# REFORMS AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE KINGDOM OF BAHRAIN

*Over the past four decades, Bahrain has achieved considerable progress in socioeconomic development. With its diverse dimensions, this progress has positively influenced the role of women in society and their ability to effectively contribute to economic and social development in the country. However, women's participation in public and political sphere is still limited due to various obstacles and cultural stereotypes. In order to cope with these, Bahraini women have to make full use of their influence in civil society and the media, as well as making alliances with the political parties to guarantee successful nomination in the elections.*

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**O**ver the past four decades, Bahrain has achieved considerable progress in socioeconomic development. With its diverse dimensions, this progress has positively influenced the role of women in society and their ability to effectively contribute to economic and social development in the country. Bahrain, a tiny island nation in the middle of the Arabian Gulf region, and its populace cannot be fully appreciated without a thorough understanding of the history, culture, and political tendencies of the region. Accordingly, this article is not only about the political journey of women



in Bahrain, –an Islamic country with an open and multiethnic society– but also about the drive towards 21st century modernism and the struggle to find a balance between traditional and cultural values and the needs of today.

Concerning the participation of women in the development process as one of the principal pillars of democratic transformation, an important breakthrough in the history of Bahraini women occurred in 2001 as a culmination of their long struggle for a political voice.<sup>1</sup> However, no evaluation of the experience of women in Bahrain can be complete without due consideration to the framework of the gradual social, cultural, economic, and political changes that the country has undergone.

The interest in women's issues did not emerge from a vacuum in Bahrain, but developed in harmony with society's long march in the fields of education and employment since the early decades of the 20th century. Although female participation was relative and never matched local ambitions, it nevertheless remains unique, and distinguished within the geopolitical sphere and, at the same time, proves that any development has to be based upon advanced social principles that would help in the transformation of educational and practical achievements into political gains.<sup>2</sup>

1 The King's National Action Charter, which reintroduced constitutional law to Bahrain, was approved by national referendum.

2 Whereas Bahraini women were voting in the 1940s at the municipal level and exercised influence throughout the democratic experience of the 1970s before enshrining their role in the National Action Charter, women across the surrounding Gulf states fared very differently. Only in 2005 were women granted complete voting rights in Kuwait, while they obtained the right to vote and stand for parliamentary elections in Qatar in 2003. Neighboring Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, has not granted women this right as yet.

Needless to say, the participation of women in decision making is one of the fundamental factors in the development of the abilities of women and elevating their self-confidence. In turn, this enhances their experiences and skills, thereby preparing them for entering the political sphere in a well-equipped manner. However, obtaining decision making positions is not an objective *per se*, but rather a means through which women can participate in planning policies and making decisions that lead to ameliorating their status, hence placing the issue of women's participation amongst the priorities in national development.

Thus, the quintessence of democracy can be achieved by considering women as principal and indispensable partners. Indubitably, Bahrain has witnessed considerable measures designed to improve the status of women, particularly in the legislative field. It goes without saying that political rights cannot be isolated from other rights, as democracy requires legislating laws that solidify the concept of citizenship, and full partnership between all citizens. Thus, providing a comprehensive legislative system

pertaining to women consolidates the concept of citizenship, while safeguarding women's integrity as well as their psychological, social, and economic security.

Despite the fact that the Gulf Region has only recently moved towards democracy, Bahrain took the lead in the 1940s when women voted in the first municipal elections, albeit without standing for nomination. That was a brave and advanced step by the standards of the time, and can be regarded as the first practical political participation for women in Bahrain that went unopposed.

When His Majesty King Hamad ascended to the throne in 1999, he proclaimed his comprehensive reform project which formed the beginning of an overall roadmap for development across all levels of society and polity. This was initiated by the proclamation of the National Action Charter in 2001, which represents a contract between the King and his people, ushering the beginning of democratic reforms. The most important reform measure adopted was the transformation of the country into a constitutional monarchy and the establishment of a bicameral parliamentary system with a fully elected lower chamber, and an appointed upper chamber.

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The reform program in Bahrain aimed at building a unique paradigm suited to the special needs of the society. As such, the Bahraini reform experiment is distinctive in its geographical surroundings due to the dynamic atmosphere of diverse political activities, making it difficult to compare the Bahraini experiment with developments in neighboring countries.

An insightful reading of the democratic experience in Bahrain indicates that widespread political awareness is the prime mover of this experience, and shall continue to be the driving force in the right direction towards building political and national institutions.

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Accordingly, analysts and observers should analyze present events in Bahrain as a successive accumulation from the announcement of the National Action Charter in 2001 to the enactment of the Political Societies Law in 2005.<sup>3</sup> This progression has created a political reality that implies recognition of the social changes which had taken place in previous decades, and resulted in the development of a new political era.

was the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in 2002 under the leadership of Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, the wife of the King. The Council is as an official consultancy body on women’s issues and reports directly to the King.

The highlight of the most effective accomplishments for women

One of the Council’s primary aims is to develop women’s participation in all aspects of political life, including the policy-making process and their appointment to leading and decision-making positions. In addition, the Council aims to make widely available services for providing women with assistance in political participation, employment, investment, and legal counseling.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that “political society” is the term applied in Bahrain to what can otherwise be described as a political party. In order to avoid confusion, where a Bahraini political society is discussed, it is referred to as a party.

Close attention to the cause of women in developed countries confirms the idea that no society can carry out reforms based on principles of equal opportunities and justice, without acknowledging the rights of women in human development.

Although Bahraini women have enjoyed full political rights since the proclamation of the 1973 Constitution, they remained deprived of these rights in application as the Elections Law of 1973 was interpreted to apply exclusively to males although the non-gender specific term, “citizen” was used. The conservative and religious groups in the assembly managed to capture the scene and impose their vision. Meanwhile, the male proponents of liberal thought in the assembly did not take a stance against this manifest violation of the Constitution, whether because of the strength of the religious current in the prevailing political discourse or due to the lack of credibility of the liberals.

Notably, six women were appointed by the King as members of the High Committee for Drafting the National Action Charter between 2000 and 2001 – in stark contrast to the decades-long domination of men in the political arena. Having women as partners in shaping the reform process implies that at that juncture, the country’s leadership was far ahead of its society in recognizing women’s rights. The presence of women in the Committee led to women being granted their political rights, which was explicitly stated in the Charter, and then enforced by the amendments to the Constitution. In fact, the National Charter included an unequivocal clause on the political rights of every citizen (male and female) that put an end to any textual interpretation which could have led to women being deprived of their political rights.

*“While rights can be granted by a political decision, they can only be permanently established by struggle, self-determination, and a sound faith in the capabilities of women.”*

The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain provides equal opportunities before the law for all citizens.<sup>4</sup> Therefore any legislation enacted by the Legislative

4 Article 18 of the Constitution is particularly noteworthy in this regard: “People are equal in human dignity, and citizens are equal before the law, in public rights and duties. There shall be no discrimination among them on the basis of sex, origin, language, religion or creed.” *The Constitution of the Kingdom of Bahrain*, 14 February 2002, <http://www.bahrain.bh/pubportal/wps/wcm/connect/66637e004b96f314ba75bf13d8048f0c/CA9SS7XP.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CACHEID=66637e004b96f314ba75bf13d8048f0c>

Council that violates or limits the substance of a right is considered unconstitutional. A woman, and indeed anyone, may appeal to the Constitutional Court to repeal any legislative provision that impairs the principles of equality.

Although most constitutions of the world stipulate equality between citizens and non-discrimination between them in rights and duties, even in the most advanced societies and political systems, gender disparity in assuming leadership positions exists in practice. This is due to the hegemony of masculine thought and the traditional division of roles between men and women, in addition to the indifference of women, and their cautiousness about joining political movements for their cause.

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The interpretations that governed the old Election Law affirm the fact that social heritage cannot easily be eradicated by means of legislation. While rights can be granted by a political decision, they can only be permanently established by struggle, self-determination, and a sound faith in the capabilities of women.

Although there was no single voice opposing women gaining their political rights in the buildup towards the National Charter and promulgation of the amendments to the Constitution, the ballot boxes would present the actual outcome.

In October 2002, the first municipal elections took place in Bahrain in which 30 women in various constituencies stood for elections, but none of them were elected. That was the crux of the matter – to discover society’s position on the political participation of women. The results make one pause and contemplate the general public picture. Undoubtedly, the failure of women in municipal elections was a shock and a disappointment. Shortly after, however, parliamentary elections followed in which eight women, among them several social activists, also ran for elections. While some of the candidates pulled out, none of those who contested managed to gain a seat in the fully elected lower house of parliament. This occurred despite the fact that women constitute 50 percent of voters. The novelty of the democratic experience and a limited democratic awareness allowed traditional conservative powers to succeed in acquiring seats in parliament at the expense of women. The female vote had been used to secure seats for men in parliament.

In fact, before the polls, no mechanism or action plans were announced in order to prepare female candidates to enter the election campaigns. This political process requires experience and the ability to confront pressures exerted by a male-dominant society, which interferes in women's voting exercises by either pushing them to not participate or manipulating their decisions. Although most political parties (even the religious ones which constitute the overwhelming majority of popular parties) include female activists in their membership as well as committees for women, the fact remains that these committees take orders from their boards of directors, which are void of women. In fact, women played a monumental role in managing the election campaigns of the political parties' male candidates despite the fact that the parties' candidate lists did not include any women. Furthermore, the votes of women are controlled by the directions and policies of their respective affiliated party. Thus, submission to pressures led to the incomplete participation of women and to a disappointing result in the absence of a free and independent opinion that enables women to rationally read programs and accurately evaluate options that serve their causes, first as citizens and second as women.

Although spontaneous struggle was replaced by organized activity and small groups engaged in political action, this did not translate politically into training programs or strategies designed for the entry of women into politics. This leads one to question whether women are fully aware of the challenges of their political role and whether they are prepared to participate in a competitive political arena.

Involvement in political activity cannot be attained through political decisions alone; it has to stem from the convictions and initiatives of women themselves. If one bears in mind the development of opportunities for women and the improvement of their social and cultural status, it becomes clear that the issue is not one of gender rights, but of development and a matter of partnership on the public and private levels. Nevertheless, there remains the imposed question of how women will participate in the reactivation of legal provisions, and how they will contribute to transforming democracy into a tangible reality, considering the lack of support from society. These are unfeasible without embedding the concept of activation of the political role of women and their participation in public life not as a reward, but because of their being fully eligible and able to express themselves and defend their interests and rights.

The first elections in which women took part, in 2002, revealed a flaw that prompted the SCW and civil societies to study the situation and explore the failing. The SCW introduced and applied a political empowerment program – providing technical

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support for candidates as well as training and awareness programs aimed at providing women with the necessary skills to manage election campaigns. The programs were based on the belief in the importance of empowering women to exercise their own independent and critical thinking. Premised on the objective to raise awareness of their political role and ability to evaluate candidates, the SCW hoped that women standing for

parliamentary elections should be distinguished and enjoy a strong presence in the political and social arenas. In addition to acquiring the skills to communicate effectively and handle the media, women should be able to enter the battle equipped with strength and the ability to maneuver in the game of politics. Although female candidates were unsuccessful in the 2002 election, in 2006, one out of 18 female candidates was elected as the first female member of parliament.

The issue of women’s empowerment in Bahrain is no longer looked at from the narrow angle of the relationship between men and women. Instead, today it is considered as an issue of comprehensive developmental and social dimensions. In other words, the aim is not only to improve conditions for women, but also to do so through an alternative overall vision that looks to the future in a national, regional and international framework, while taking into consideration that stability and social integrity cannot be achieved without protecting women’s rights as an integral part of human rights.

Today, Bahraini women occupy three major seats in the cabinet as ministers of information, culture, and social development. In addition, women have joined the echelons of the foreign service as ambassadors to three major world capitals: Washington D.C., London, and Beijing. Furthermore, women occupy leading positions in the civil service and the judiciary as judges and public attorneys. This confirms the importance of the political will of the leadership.

It is apparent that to a large extent women’s political participation reflects the nature of any country’s political and social system. Discrimination against women is considered a basic indicator of underdevelopment and female political participation is considered one of the important elements of the democratic process, revealing principles of social justice and equality in society. Furthermore, female political

participation is evidence of a healthy political environment, representing the best means to protect individual interests by which participation is considered an expression of actual achievement of the principle of partnership in the development process.

Women played a prominent role during the formation of the National Unity Assembly (NUA), a result of the 2011 political and social upheaval in Bahrain.<sup>5</sup> However, when the NUA transformed itself into a legal entity, women were excluded from its primary and leading positions. This case reveals the critical importance of society being convinced that any democratic experiment that excludes women is bound to be incomplete and abortive.

### *Women and Parliamentary Practice*

The National Council of the Kingdom of Bahrain consists of two chambers: the Shura Council (the upper house) that is directly appointed by the King, and the elected House of Representatives. The first Shura Council was appointed in 1992 and consisted of 40 all-male members. Women entered the Council only in its third term in 2000, to which, four women were appointed.

With the King's reform program underway, in 2002 the Shura Council changed from a consultative chamber to a legislative power as the upper chamber of parliament. Following the failure of women to be elected to the lower chamber in the 2002 elections, the number of women appointed to the Shura Council increased by six. With this appointment the number of female members rose to 11 out of 40 (over 25 percent), placing women in the "heart of democracy" as virtual partners with the capacity for a significant contribution in the political sphere. Female members were keen to be present in all council committees. Today, female members head two committees: the Legal and Legislative Committee, and Committee of Human Rights, in addition to assuming the position of Deputy President of the Council.

The entry of women to the Shura Council and their contribution to its deliberations and discussions have reflected their ability to deal with a range of social questions, not necessarily women's issues. The role and responsibilities of these female members enabled them to gain the confidence and support of their male colleagues.

The political conditions and critical setting of the upheaval of 2011 reflected an important turning point for the political path of women in Bahrain. During this period, the largest opposition bloc's resignation (Al Wefaq National Islamic Society

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5 The NUA was created as a political party representing an alternative voice to the powerful one of the Wefaq National Islamic Society, which had until then dominated the political discourse as an opposition force to the government.

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members) from the House of Representatives and its subsequent withdrawal from the National Dialogue created a political vacuum and window for women. Consequently, women seized the opportunity to partly fill that vacuum by standing for election in the October 2011 polls. As a result, three female candidates were successfully elected to the lower house of parliament, joining the other solitary member and making a new total of four female elected members.

Now, for the first time, alongside the 11 appointed members in the upper house, the proportion of women in the legislature amounted to 19 percent.

However, despite the seemingly favorable outcome, particularly in numerical terms and in comparison to the region, these elections belied the continued strength of the political religious movements’ in preventing the female voice from actively partaking in decision-making. It should be highlighted here that the pressure female candidates went through, both those who won and those who lost, was enormous. There were many deterrents including malicious rumors and campaign ransacking to discourage the candidates and coerce them to pull out of the elections. Although these attempts affected the end results, they had no effect on the candidates’ decision to run for the election.

Still, the recent parliamentary success of these Bahraini women is a triumph that reflects their determination to fully practice their political rights as guaranteed by the Constitution. This move, undoubtedly, reflects a sense of courage, and ability to seize an opportunity that may not be repeated in the presence of competing religious blocs known for their staunch stance against the participation of women. Political parties with a religious Islamic orientation utilized women to a large extent either as voters or campaign managers for their candidates. However, these parties had no female candidates on their lists despite the availability of highly competent women in their ranks. Women were used merely as a vote in the elections while being excluded from the candidate lists.

Constitutional amendments emanating from the National Dialogue in 2011 contributed in providing opportunities for women to prove their merit and ability to practice their parliamentary powers. Notably, more power was attained by the lower

chamber of parliament, namely changing the cabinet and monitoring governmental performance. Women can demonstrate their talents as skillful political players if they manage to utilize these mechanisms in an apt manner.

In fact, a cursory examination of women's performance in the House of Representatives reveals that women have achieved excellent results as legislators, representing citizens' interests and reviewing the country's budget. It is worth noting that two of these female members head two of the major committees in the house: the Finance Committee and the Foreign Affairs Committee. Nevertheless, an objective analysis of the performance of Bahrain's female parliamentarians reveals that some are still dominated by voters' pressures to focus on services and daily problems that may come at the expense of parliament's main powers such as audits and questioning, and most importantly the legislative process.

In the long run though, the achievement of women in the Legislative Council with its two chambers will no doubt reinforce the belief in women's abilities, influence the forthcoming elections in 2014, and pave the way to attain more decision-making positions.

### *The Challenges*

Regardless of a country's standard of development or cultural background, women around the world face the same challenges in political participation. They are exposed to the same high expectations from society and close monitoring of their performance, necessitating women to work harder than men.

Despite the involvement of women in various fields, their real influence is hampered by many obstacles. One of the most dominant challenges is that cultural heritage draws specific roles for men and women, which has an impact on the level of success that women attain in their strive to assume higher positions. This legacy is reflected not only on the views of voters, but also on political parties in Bahrain and the media to the point of considering women as intruders on the political scene, which limits the extent women can offer in the political field. This legacy is also reflected in the self-esteem of women and leads to irresolution in getting involved in political life.

It may be of importance here to heed the liberal call for the separation of religion from politics; as this blend has an effect on the political decisions of the political parties under this banner. For instance, the position of religious political parties (in this instance, Wefaq National Islamic Society during its tenure in parliament)

towards the *Jaafari* Section of the family law ignored its bearing on women.<sup>6</sup> Despite the equality of citizens stipulated by the Constitution, only Sunni women acquired their right for a family law when the Sunni Section was proclaimed whereas women belonging to the *Jaafari*/Shiite sect were denied this right. This mantle of religion, used to extend the cultural heritage and positioning of women as lesser citizens, should be confronted with the exposure of appropriate interpretations of religious texts.

The question remains, how to find the best means to guarantee the full participation of women, and to prevent the segregation of women from the mainstream of society.

The women's movement in Bahrain is faced with many obstacles and challenges, the most important of which is the widespread doubt of the aptitudes of women. Long decades of restrictive upbringing, societal practices based on the seclusion of women and planning traditional roles for them, and depriving them of exhibiting their competencies, have led many women to believe in their own inferiority, and to have low self-esteem, sincerely believing they are only suited for the roles drawn for them. This represents a problem that must be dealt with through education, awareness campaigns, responsible media, and a total change in the methods of upbringing, rather than by simply instigating forward-thinking laws.

This requires a concentrated campaign which is not based on political decisions alone but on constant and effective action by governmental and non-governmental organizations. It is here that educational programs should confront gender stereotypes and focus on the concept of partnership between women and men while training programs should build the skills and performance of women, solidifying their self-confidence, so they are prepared to enter politics. In addition, of course, it is imperative to enlighten society about the effective role of women, portraying successful and competent examples.

The stereotypical manner in which women are depicted represents a real challenge for any woman who wants to stand for nomination. Therefore, one of the most important skills that women should acquire is how to deal with the media and use it in a positive and effective manner.

It is important that women's role in the legislative power be positive and successful, as this is bound to alter the dominant stereotype image on the role and competency of women. Moreover, by building bridges and open channels of communications

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<sup>6</sup> Until today, Shiites in Bahrain suffer due to the absence of a codified family or personal status law as the *Jaafari* Section (pertaining to Shiites) was rejected by Wefaq MPs in parliament, and religious clerics continue to campaign against any such legislation.

with civil societies and maintaining an active role in discussion forums, pioneering women should try to eliminate this stereotype and negative image.

It is of great importance to emphasize the level of planning, political and societal lobbying to prepare efficient and qualified female cadres to enroll in parliamentary action to increase or maintain the present ratio obtained in the recent by-elections. Similarly, the training of female candidates and the preparation of their election programs should reflect a balance between files pertaining to women and those related to general political, economic, and social matters.

It is a known fact that canvassing campaigns require increasing financial resources, which in some cases independent female candidates are unable to provide. As such, they need the support of political parties and NGOs in order to compete with other candidates. Thus, in order to provide them with the support they need on different levels, it is of great importance that female candidates make alliances with political parties rather than running as independent individuals.

It is also important to ascertain that participating in elections and having seats in the legislative council are not sufficient. Women's active role in decision-making in all areas of life is crucial for democracy and meaningful political representation.