

## Role of Networks in Establishing a Constructive Dialogue on Women's Citizenship Rights in the Arab Gulf

### Theme(s):

- Governance and Decision Making

### Type of Program:

- Networking to Raise Awareness (research analysis)

### Country/Region:

- Arab Gulf Countries

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**Initiative overview:** Using the United Arab Emirates as an example, the study investigates the interactive relations between women's international networks and local non-governmental organisations. It also studies the scope of harmonisation between universal and local discourses on social justice and gender equity.

**Social discriminatory practices targeted:** As is the case in many Gulf countries, political parties in the United Arab Emirates are prohibited. Women's associations have to be part of the women's union authorised by the State and which is chaired by the spouse of the late president and the founding father of UAE. To date, there is no human rights organisation.

**Socio-cultural context:** In the last two decades, a significant development took place in the number of international social movements mobilised for the achievement of social justice throughout the world. The parallel development of the civil society locally increased in a number of developing countries. Although most non-governmental organisations are working to achieve justice and equity, one of their most important activities deals with women's empowerment and gender equality. In fact, the international movements supporting human rights and women's rights can be considered a driving force for gradual social development.

Since the 1990s, ITC development, which is linked to opportunities for change and international meetings, has increased the number of international networks and examples of inter-organisational cooperation. These increases were achieved with the emergence of international women's organisations which use women's rights as a collective platform to influence social and legal frameworks.

Pressing for the professional nature of activist work emanating from the need for funding, financial support and working in wide geographic areas – led to an increase in the number of non-governmental organisations whose work is based on social justice and equality. Women’s organisations play an important role in reformulating the discourse on legally granted rights, especially in the area of citizenship. Internationally, women’s networks and non-governmental organisations contributed to redefining social justice, human rights and equity-related issues. Domestically, women’s organisations were inspired by international standards and adapted them to their own agendas.

## Objectives and Goals

The study investigates the dynamics of relations between international women’s networks and local non-governmental organisations in terms of discourse, harmony between international discourse and local discourse, and practices in the area of social justice and gender equality. The aim is to evaluate the capacity of such networks for creating a common culture and adapting its strategies to different local contexts. Therefore, it is important to identify the alternative strategies agreed upon by women’s international organisations and local non-governmental organisations to design work plans and formulate a discourse and messages on women’s empowerment and rights. As a case study, the United Arab Emirates, like other transitional societies, is a clear example of the interaction between forces of change and the opposing attempts to maintain traditional ideas of women’s citizenship rights.

## Good Practices

**Note:** The summary does not provide lessons for replication to develop the activities of local non-governmental organisations.

## Innovative Approach

The study highlights a number of ideas to mobilise forces in relation to women’s issues in the Gulf such as:

- Studying and documenting social issues through investment in higher education and academic research, which is still in its first phases, and orienting this investment to become a space for thinking about women’s issues and rights in the Arab Gulf.
- Understanding context and obtaining changes. The preliminary analyses of the written media and the internet highlight that, since 2002, the public sphere in countries such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman and Bahrain has become more responsive to the international discourse on equality and women’s empowerment. There is still a need for more efforts to understand the scope of attitudinal change and the manner of supporting the working forces to sustain women’s rights.

- Exploiting the new political policies for change so that voluntary work becomes a wide social movement, in light of the fact that the social and political changes witnessed by transitional societies provide opportunities for political change. There are social activists who do not belong to grassroots non-governmental organisations and therefore do not benefit from resources that could help them overcome political obstacles in their societies. It is advantageous to take advantage of these new political opportunities and get organised inside the usual 'deconstruction reference'.
- Instead of bringing in or preparing new frames of reference, social activists are inspired by existing references and prepare agendas according to existing values and ideas. Snow, Rochford, Worden, and Benford (1986) suggest that social movements should bear their political interpretation of events or use the existing frames of collective awareness. When social movements link their visions to recognised values, they provide themselves with a better chance for success. In the Middle East for example, women movements' renunciation of the secular discourse on human rights and adoption of a developed Islamic discourse are considered a strategy that reconciles the general vision with pre-existing national frames.
- Building a climate of trust and legitimacy, especially with conservative opponents and existing social networks such as charity organisations, voluntary organisations and social groups is important in order to obtain social support. What matters in the process of legitimising effective social parties is the interaction with the local context in a manner that includes the language and the symbols rooted in the national cultural frame. Such an approach enables social activists to rise above their marginalised status and establish a sustained dialogue with opponents. Thus, they become recognised as legitimate activists in the public domain (Tarro, 1992).
- Using state authorised institutions as change tools is a proven effective strategy. Because of the commitment of Gulf States to education and investment in this sector, it seems that introducing gender studies into the research and pedagogy of academic institutions in the United Arab Emirates may be a real means to supporting women's position. Given the absence of balance between the local population and foreigners, the reason for the state support of women's education is really based on economic development. Statistics show that spending on women's education by Gulf governments exceed that of Middle Eastern countries, and is likely to achieve social change.