

Opinion – Why Women's Rights in the Gulf Matter for Afghanistan

Written by Rachel A. George

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RACHEL A. GEORGE, NOV 21 2021

Qatar's foreign minister recently called the Taliban's actions to deny girls' education in Afghanistan "very disappointing." Applauding his country's own progress on women's rights, he added, "[We] have also been trying to demonstrate for the Taliban how Muslim countries can conduct their laws, how they can deal with the women's issues." The Gulf has never been seen as a bastion for women's rights. And yet, these comments prompted by the turmoil in Afghanistan are perhaps unsurprising. They illuminate subtle changes taking place in the region which could offer a unique lens into an understanding of women's rights challenges in Afghanistan, the Arab world and beyond.

For the Gulf states, there is a delicate balance between the region's evolving geostrategic interests and a desire to appear as leaders of Muslim modernity. The crisis in Afghanistan and its implications for women only highlights these tensions further. The Gulf region has also long played a complicated role in Afghanistan's trajectory. In the 1990s, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, along with Pakistan, were the only countries to officially recognize Taliban rule. Since then, the Gulf states have positioned themselves variously playing critical roles with respect to Afghanistan.

Qatar hosted talks between Washington and the Taliban, and provided critical assistance to refugees in transit, while the UAE provided troops to support the US in its withdrawal, and Gulf states have served as a landing space and host for recent swaths of refugees, to some controversy. As the violence in Kabul escalated this summer, prominent Muslim clerics from Saudi Arabia and elsewhere met in Mecca, condemning Taliban violence as "unjustified," the Secretary of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation even accusing the Taliban of perpetrating "genocide against Muslims."

Despite an unwavering commitment among the Gulf States to enshrining strict interpretations of religious conservatism and pursuing claims of cultural distinctiveness, perhaps nowhere is a quiet evolution in the Gulf more visible than on the issue of women. The Taliban takeover, though not directly linked to the Gulf's own policies on women, is bringing this to the fore in a timely way.

The rhetoric of gender equality is gaining traction in the Arab Gulf, where reforms over the last decade alongside the delayed ratification of the CEDAW convention in the 1990s and 2000s have begun to crack otherwise persisting rigid legal and social systems which not long ago allowed for little movement on gender equality. While still falling to the bottom of the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index, the region has seen swift gains in maternal mortality, education, with rates improving across Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, today mirroring many OECD countries. Saudi Arabia recently lifted restrictions allowing women to obtain passports and travel without permission from a male guardian, and enshrined new standards against gender discrimination and harassment in the workplace. My research on local press reporting in Kuwait found a swift expansion of the coverage using the language of gender discrimination in Kuwaiti media in the past five years, a topic around which the local press was previously relatively silent, and the country recently established a new domestic violence law. And the UAE now boasts a world-leading rate of 50% female representation in its Federal National Council.

Despite shiny reforms and sometimes surprisingly progressive rhetoric from the country's overwhelmingly male

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political elite, the region remains a hotbed for violations on human rights and women's rights. Kuwait's new law on domestic violence was the result of hard-won gains prompted by a thriving women's movement, which has long been calling to 'Abolish 153' by repealing the penal code which provides lesser sentences to male perpetrators of violence in circumstances of male 'honor killing'. In spite of years of attention and advocacy, the code remains unreformed. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's move to grant women the right to drive in 2018 was met with the arbitrary jailing and mistreatment of many of the country's female #Women2Drive activists, exposing the dark reality behind glossy headlines around women's emancipation in the region.

Though setbacks persist, it clear that the gender issue is not going away, and, importantly, women's issues are different today than they were in the 1990s. This is the case globally, and the Taliban and the Gulf are not immune from 30 years of women's rights progress. In the Gulf, women's rights issues and a wider array of rights concerns bubble under the surface, with top-down reforms subtly growing and responding to economic pressures as local activists continue their struggle. The Qatari Minister's statement on girls' education is just one indication that the Gulf is an important context for contestation and positioning on women's issues in the region, which is different but not isolated from the situation in Afghanistan.

These issues are highly political – as has been noted, the Taliban's repression of women is in many ways 'more tactical than ideological.' This is also true of the Arab Gulf. Historical grievances, contestation over cultural identity, and economic shifts have meant that the 'women question' remains a breeding ground for political division in both contexts despite their vast differences. But they are also areas of potential transformative upheaval.

Growing Muslim feminist movements are reaching beyond borders which once seemed impenetrable and offer some threads of hope that change is possible. Even the Taliban has had to bow and bend to the sway of global women's rights discourse, offering some vague promises on gender equality, however empty. There is clearly a fear even among the Taliban of stepping too far out of line on women's issues to become a global pariah. In the 1990s, this pressure was present but muted, with clamp downs rampant and even unapologetic. Today, Taliban leaders gave vague promises on women's rights, brazenly pulling the rug as they are caught between competing pressures to play to international discourse while also exerting their strict interpretations of social order. These tensions are not going unnoticed by Taliban supporters and critics alike, and are clearly seen by domestic and global audiences.

Overall, there is a sense that, if those aiming to support women in Afghanistan can exploit this desire for good image on gender equality, then there is hope for change. But it is also clear that these pressures can only go so far. Both hope and despair can be felt among women's rights advocates in the Gulf, while despair heightens in Afghanistan. The two contexts, despite overwhelming differences, are not developing in isolation from one another, or from the global agendas within which they assert claims, and taken together can offer a deeper understanding of women's rights around the world today.

About the author:

Rachel A. George is a Research Fellow at the Overseas Development Institute, a global affairs think tank in London and a Lecturing Fellow at Duke University Center for International Development. She holds a PhD in International Relations from the London School of Economics and Political Science and an MA in Middle East Studies from Harvard University. Her work has been published in *Human Rights Review*, in the book 'The Arab Gulf States and the West: Perceptions and Misperceptions, Opportunities and Perils,' *The National Interest*, among other outlets. Her personal website is <https://www.rachelangeorge.com/>.