

A rising tide of empowerment for women in the Gulf Arab states

By The Daily Star

Friday, January 25, 2008

The fact that the Gulf region still lags behind other parts of the world in terms of women's enfranchisement makes stories like those of Kuwaiti Education Minister Nouria al-Subeih all the more inspiring. On Tuesday Subeih, known as the "Iron Lady" by many of her compatriots, survived an attempt by conservative members of Parliament to oust her from her position on the basis of absurd charges that she had endangered religious values, among other things. Her triumph in the no-confidence vote was hailed by many as a victory for Kuwaiti women, and indeed all Arab women of the Gulf region. And although major victories such as these are still in relatively short supply, there is an overall trend toward the greater enfranchisement of women that bodes well for the future of Arab countries in the Gulf region.

The past decade has seen significant gains for Arab women in the Gulf, not least of which their having voted and run for office in elections in Yemen, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. Considering that the battle for women's rights such as suffrage has taken decades in other parts of the world, Arab women are in many respects advancing with far greater speed than their counterparts in other countries. By assuming leadership positions, they are also setting an example for women around the world. In 2006, for example, Haya bint Rashid al-Khalifa became the third woman in history to hold the post of president of the United Nations General Assembly. In the UAE, women already hold eight of the 40 posts in the country's Federal National Council, an advisory body that lacks legislative powers but is expected to see its authority expanded in the coming years. That ratio of women's participation in governance - 22.5 percent - puts the UAE ahead of countries like the United States, France, Ireland, Japan, Canada and Greece in terms of female representation and gives good reason to believe that women will play a very powerful role in the country's future.

Many of the victories that have been achieved have been the direct result of the toils of women's associations and rights activists. But reform-minded Gulf leaders have also played a central role in women's advancement - often against the wishes of their more conservative citizenries. These leaders are well aware that economic and human development cannot be achieved without the full participation of the forgotten half of their societies.

Admittedly, much more work remains to be done to advance gender equality in the Gulf region, just as much more remains to be done to achieve greater parity in the West. But the cause of empowering women has gained so much traction that some women's rights activists and rights groups have declared the year 2008 the "Year of Gulf Women." And women like Subeih are certainly getting the year off to a good start.