



Empowering Muslim Women in Scientific Research

Webinar Series

Seventh Webinar

Female Empowerment in the Gulf Arab Region: Saudi Arabia during (2005–2015) and Oman from 2004 to the present day

Date & Time: Wednesday, April 29, 2026 | 5:00 – 6:30 PM (UAE) | 2:00 – 3:30 PM (UK)

Location: Online | **Language:** English

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Abstract

This talk examines female empowerment in Gulf Arab states, focusing on Saudi Arabia during King Abdullah's reign (2005–2015) and Oman from 2004 to the present. It explores how the appointment of the first female Deputy Ministers and Ministers (2003–2009) served as a mechanism for gender reform amid rising female education, mobility, and economic participation.

Drawing on feminist state theory and the concept of state feminism, it analyzes how government-led policies advanced women's rights. The Saudi case is examined through fieldwork by an Italian scholar, while the Omani case is analyzed from an internal perspective. Both show that, although top-down reforms are often selective, they have produced tangible legal and policy gains that expand women's autonomy and participation.

The talk argues that institutionalizing state feminism enables targeted reforms even without strong grassroots movements, improving women's status and policy influence. Focusing on Oman, it highlights the 2004 appointment of a female Minister of Social Development and subsequent reforms affecting women, children, and civil society. Despite constraints such as limited budgets and conservative norms, state feminism has achieved meaningful but uneven progress while aligning reforms with national development priorities.



Dr. Rafiah Al Talei is a distinguished scholar and researcher specializing in women's rights and gender dynamics in the Gulf and broader Middle East. With a Ph.D. in Gulf Studies from Qatar University, her academic work centers on women's political participation, gender representation in literature and media, and civil society engagement. She has authored and contributed to numerous publications, including reports for Freedom House and IREX, as well as chapters in edited volumes on women in media, politics, and Gulf literature. Dr. Al Talei's scholarship is informed by both thorough research and decades of professional experience, making her a leading voice in advancing understanding of women's roles in the region's social and political development.

Elena Maestri is Professor of History and Institutions of the Muslim World at the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore (UCSC) of Milan (Italy). She received her PhD in "Institutions and Organisations" from UCSC, specializing in history and institutions of Arabia. She has carried out extensive research on the Gulf Arab countries, gender issues and Islam, development and cooperation in the GCC, the old and the new media in the Arab-Muslim world. She is author of many articles, book-chapters, and books in Italian and English. In the most recent years she has been co-author and co-editor of *Arab Women and the Media in Changing Landscapes*, and of *Migration and Integration Challenges of Muslim Immigrants in Europe*, published by Palgrave Macmillan respectively in 2017 and 2021. Her book, *The Arabian City and its Territory. Historical Identity and Heritage Issues* was published in 2019 by EDUCatt, Milano.

