International Women’s Day Lectures

On Tuesday, March 5 and Wednesday, March 6, on the occasion of International Women’s Day, the Center for Gulf Studies hosted a series of lectures presenting original research on Kuwaiti women and a panel discussion on Kuwaiti women’s activism and the various forms of gender discrimination Kuwaiti women face.

Tuesday’s events started off with a lecture given by Dr. Nada Al-Mutawa, Head of Research Division at the Center for Gulf and Arabian Peninsula Studies at KU, on the role of networks in women’s empowerment. She spoke about the exclusion of women from male networks in Kuwait, most obviously in the form of the Kuwaiti diwaniya. Networks are beneficial to entrepreneurs as they give them direct access to knowledge, business know-how and valuable connections, but Dr. Al-Mutawa commented that they can also lead to a loss of knowledge which led to women were exiting networks at a young age.

Emanuela Buscemi, an independent researcher and consultant on women’s issues, discussed the use of narratives by Kuwaiti female authors resist patriarchy. She presented Tayyiba al-Ibrahim’s ‘A Servant’s Diary’ and Fouziya al-Salim’s ‘Muzun’ as novels which employed a feminist point of view, explored independent choices in marriage and love and offered a matriarchal reform of local customs.

AUK’s own Dr. Luciano Pellegrino spoke about Kuwaiti women with foreign spouses; the marginalization they face and the regulation of their intimacies by the state. He commented on the country’s linkage between citizenship and blood and its tendency to show women who marry non-national as less loyal to the state. Dr. Pelligrino had found that children of such marriages are often the prime sufferers of these marriages as they encountered bullying in school.

Wednesday’s discussion on Kuwaiti women’s activism included Ms. Shamael Al-Sharikh, a member of the Women’s Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) who is currently working on the National Youth Association, Ms. Suha Al-Oudah a lawyer and member of the Defending Committee of Women’s Issues in Kuwait (DCWIK), and Dr. Ebthial Al-Khatib, a former board member of the WCSS and a founding member of Group 29. The discussion was moderated by the CGS’s director Dr. Farah Al-Nakib.

The participants shared their personal history and relationship with activism in the country; most of them started at a young age and were encouraged by family members and member-organizations. Dr. Al-Khatib and Al-Sharikh spoke of the diverse representation of women in the WCSS and its openness to all women so long as they subscribe to the concept of equality between men and women.

The lack of volunteerism in Kuwait was discussed in length as well as its importance to cultivating a strong civil society. Al-Sharikh commented that the lack of will to volunteer stemmed from a “flawed educational system” and an environment wherein the youth’s needs are over-met without asking them to give back. She also discussed the difficulty many young women face when they are taught empowerment at school but find themselves stifled at home; she believed this to be a manifestation of local kinship mentality and offered that women must find a way to break social rules whilst maintaining
a facade of respecting tradition and culture.

Al-Oudah, who often speaks at workshops and lectures about violence against women, spoke of the pervasiveness of patriarchy; regardless of their class, many women are subjected to physical abuse. On the topic of migrant domestic workers, Al-Oudah believed it was the country’s responsibility to issue laws and educate migrants upon arrival on their rights and protections from such acts of violence. She also listed the DCWIK’s many goals to eliminate discrimination against women and included the system of guardianship.

Group 29’s focus on the marginalization of the Bidoon community and the Bidoon women’s severe loss of identity, to the point of “invisibility” was discussed by Dr. Al-Khatib. She stated that often in humanitarian crises “women were the main sufferers” and what is needed to change the situation for women are bold moves. She also talked about the need for the Arab Spring revolutions to change people’s minds to be successful, and commented on the danger of religious fundamentalism to women’s freedoms and rights.

The Center for Gulf Studies (CGS) at the American University of Kuwait aims to promote greater cultural understanding of and increased intellectual interest in the Gulf, by facilitating free and open academic discourse on a range of issues that both shape and challenge this critical region of the world. The goal of CGS is to enable scholars as well as political and civil society actors both within and outside the region to contribute and add value to the burgeoning field of Gulf Studies, while at the same time informing and engaging the general public. To this end, the CGS encourages, supports, and cultivates interesting and original research on the Gulf, while regularly organizing a variety of public academic events such as lectures, roundtable discussions, and conferences.