

DR. ALANOUD ALSHAREKH

Academic, human rights activist & founder of Ibtakar Consultancy

“I look at those towers some mornings and think about all they’ve witnessed,” says Dr. Alanoud Alsharekh, while seated in her living room with its view of Kuwait Towers, a national monument built between 1971-79. The changes Alanoud is referring to have little to do with Kuwait’s shifting architectural landscape, but instead its continuously evolving and complex role as a barometer for women’s rights in the Arabian Gulf region. An award-winning human rights activist, for the past 15 years Alanoud has served as a boldly outspoken voice on gender equality and an advocate for women’s empowerment through her work as an advisor on numerous government bodies and NGOs, in addition to cofounding Abolish 153, a campaign to remove article 153 from Kuwait’s penal code, which gives men power over their female kin in direct disregard of the constitution. “In the Gulf we still encounter this benign patriarchy that is promoted as a protector of women, but instead limits them though guardianship practices and disciplinary violence,” she says, noting the urgent need for domestic violence laws, shelters and hotlines for abuse survivors.

“As citizens, we can’t afford to be complacent, but must lobby our representatives to make these issues a priority and raise awareness around harmful practices without fearing backlash or social stigma,” says Alanoud, who also serves as the acting director of the Friends Who Care Campaign, which helps at-risk young women under the age of 21 within Kuwait’s social care system. Not surprisingly, Alanoud was raised in a household where culture and politics dominated conversations at the dinner table. Her father, Mohammed Abdul-Rahman Alsharekh, founded Sakhr Software Company, which was responsible for introducing the Arabic language into the world of computers and technology in 1983. “My dad is also a published author with a love of the Arabic language, which he saw as an integral part of our heritage. So he invested in digitising it to ensure its continued existence, as he was determined to bridge the gap between East and West through technology and art,” says Alanoud, who grew up surrounded by her father’s impressive collection of modern Arab art, accumulated over 40 years.

“He began collecting while a student at Cairo University in the early 1960s, where he befriended prominent Egyptian and Arab artists at the beginning of their careers,” observes Alanoud, who also views art as a tool for subversion. “I don’t see a difference between the visual arts and my books on progressive feminist consciousness and theory, because they occupy this very subversive space where marginalised groups can communicate in symbols without fear of persecution,” she says, noting that women artists have long played a role in addressing and breaking taboos through their work. “They’ve influenced my own writing, when it comes to finding alternative ways to communicate an emotionally charged message to a wider audience,” says Alanoud, who completed her A Levels at Choueifat, a Lebanese boarding school near Bath, England, before moving to Massachusetts to attend Wellesley College, where she initially enrolled as a pre-med student.

Founded in 1870, the women’s liberal arts college has a history of nurturing a long line of feminists and leaders such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, Madeleine Albright and Nora Ephron. “Ironically, when I arrived at Wellesley I didn’t think of myself as a feminist. I quickly got a crash course in what that meant while walking through campus, where I encountered posters declaring ‘A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle,’ or ‘I don’t need a man to justify my existence,’” recalls Alanoud, who was initially perplexed by these messages, assuming they represented outmoded radical ways of thinking or relics from the 1970s.

“At first I wondered if these women simply lacked the close family structures that we had in the Gulf, but in hindsight I realised that being there sparked a radical shift within me in terms of critical thinking and questioning,” says the activist, who after one semester at Wellesley, transferred to Kings College in London, where she graduated with

a Bachelor’s Degree in English in 1996. “Attending Kings College was a liberating experience in a different way, because it’s there that I learnt to dissect literary texts to look for arguments and counter arguments, as well as grow from constructive criticism,” says Alanoud, who shortly after graduating was accepted into the scholarship programme at Kuwait University, where she developed an interest in linguistics, eventually returning to the UK to pursue her Master’s Degree in Applied Linguistics and English-Arabic Translation at the School of Oriental and African Studies.

While pregnant with her daughter in 1999, Alanoud found her calling at a pivotal moment of change in Kuwait. “At the time I was teaching at Kuwait University, when a bill was being submitted in parliament to give Kuwaiti women their political rights, which included their right to vote and run for office,” recalls the activist, who wanted her daughter to have the opportunity to live in a world where she could enjoy her full rights as a citizen. “I got swept up in the movement and joined other Kuwaiti women, organising rallies and reaching out to members of parliament, because we were aware of being excluded from the political process and trying to get in,” says Alanoud, who attended Kuwait’s National Assembly the day the bill would be passed. “We were told we had enough votes and were excited to be a part of this historic moment. But when we lost by several votes because some MPs had abstained, I was crushed to see the men start clapping,” says the activist, noting she was even more dismayed when some of them jeered at the women, telling them to go home to take care of their families.

“I was enraged and decided this is what I need to do my PhD on, in order to understand where this misogyny comes from, as well as our struggle with gender politics and the meaning of feminism,” says Alanoud of this defining moment in her life, when she returned to SOAS to pursue her PhD in Comparative Literature and Feminism. While there, she helped found and fund a course called Islam in Britain, in addition to initiating a series of groundbreaking conferences from 2004-08 which offered more nuanced perspectives on the Arabia Gulf. “I was frustrated by the limited ways in which the region was being portrayed within academic spaces, and I wanted to broaden the conversation beyond petrodollars and terrorism,” notes the academic, whose first high-profile conference focused on women’s roles within the Arabian Gulf, an event that included the first time a senior female member of the Saudi royal family took to a public stage. “What’s even more gratifying were the number of papers these conferences generated, that resulted in a series of books I edited, many of which are used in university courses today,” says Alanoud, who in 2005 decided to step away from teaching to focus on her career as a researcher.

That same year women in Kuwait also gained the right to vote; an important moment for Alanoud, who was amongst the 500 Kuwaiti women standing outside the parliament building waiting to hear that the bill had passed. In 2016, she founded Ibtakar Strategic Consultancy, where she works on organising seminars and conferences focused on gender, diversity and cultural sensitivity. “In addition to working with private and public institutions on female leadership training, we also assist in setting up civil society groups and NGOs,” says Alanoud, whose most recent project, Empowering Kuwaiti Women in Politics, aims to level her country’s political playing field by grooming women for leadership positions, in order to drive real change at the policy-making level.

“I’m most proud of the mentorship programmes that I’ve been involved in, which have resulted in a small but effective army of socially conscience young men and women, who have a very different understanding of what social justice is. They’re more inclusive in their thinking and call out injustice when they see it,” says the activist, noting that her alternative, and at times insecure, career choices ultimately allowed her to become a role model for her daughter’s generation. “I feel vindicated that I took a risk to follow my true calling somewhat late in my career, and left my full time government employment to focus on it. For me it’s already paying dividends.” ►

PHOTOGRAPHY: MAHA AL ASAKER



Academic and activist Dr. Alanoud Alsharekh, surrounded by examples of her Middle Eastern contemporary art collection at home in Kuwait