

# the talk

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Dr Al Anoud Al Sharekh  
A Voice of Reason



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## The Emergence of Rights

### Dr AlAnoud AlSharekh

Dr. AlAnoud Al Sharekh is a pioneer in her own right. An activist, a researcher, an academic, an advocate for rightful change, for the growth of a balanced society through increasing involvement of Kuwaiti women in the political decision-making process, for continuing the fight towards promoting women's rights, human rights, Dr AlAnoud is a voice to be reckoned with. She is boldly outspoken and a facilitator of public discussion highlighting pivotal issues not only in Kuwait but also in the Arab society as a whole. Dr AlAnoud serves as an advisor to numerous government bodies and NGOs, she is also a founder of Abolish 153; and has received many notable awards; her work aimed at promoting, impeding and raising awareness revolving around a set of issues has received much recognition.

We had the privilege to interview Dr AlAnoud and to be inspired and encouraged by her cause and her determination.

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**Tell us a little about yourself, your educational background, your current professional positions and associations, NGO's that you are affiliated to, lifestyle etc.**

I head my own consultancy firm called "Ibtakar Strategic Consultancy". As a political researcher, an academic and an activist my main focus is on youth, gender equality and cross-cultural trends; I am better equipped and able through my own establishment to help both public and private sector institutions improve their inclusion of these often marginalized groups. Since I am keenly interested and focused on Arab Feminist Theory, I have made gender diversity and female leadership training a main focus at our firm. I have always championed women and minority rights in Kuwait and beyond, and assisted in the set-up of civil society groups and NGOs that help facilitate public discussion around pivotal issues facing Arab society today. This is what I now work on professionally and my research academically, and I am fortunate enough to be a Research Associate at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London University, and able to work with the top academics concentrating on these topics.

After I received my Bachelor's Degree in English from King's College, London, I completed my post-graduate education at SOAS, earning a Master's Degree in Applied Linguistics and English-Arabic Language and Translation, and a PhD Near and Middle Eastern Studies - Comparative Literature and Feminism. I fell in love with the energy of the school and have stayed on as a Member of the Advisory Board at the LMEI Institute for the past 13 years. I am happy to say that a course I helped found, fund, and occasionally teach part of - "Islam in Britain", is in its 8th year at SOAS now, open to both under and post-graduate students.

I am heavily involved with a number of non-profit organizations, including AIWF, Eithar and Abolish 153 – the campaign to fight honor killing legislation which I co-founded, as well as being the acting director of the Friends Who Care Campaign that seeks to help at-risk young women (under the age of 21) within Kuwait's social care system. I think that each of us is capable of making an impact in our own way and this is the way that feels most natural to me.

**Talk to us about the books you published and the gender issues that were talked about.**

Over my career I have published numerous books and articles focusing on political identity, cultural politics, and gender and kinship policies in the Arabian Gulf.

Angry Words Softly Spoken: A Comparative Study of English and Arabic Women Writers was translated into Arabic and published by the Higher Council of Culture in Egypt and introduces a cyclical tripartite structure of looking at feminist consciousness. I worked on a series of edited volumes for SOAS and these were Challenging Limitations: The Redefinition of Roles for Women in the GCC, The Gulf Family: Kinship Policies and Modernity, and Popular Culture and Political Identity in the Arab Gulf States. The last two became very popular references for those teaching about the GCC region or wishing to learn more about it.





**Since you are a founding member of the Abolish 153 campaign, describe what the campaign does and its purpose.**

Abolish 153 is the campaign to end honor killing legislation in Kuwait and the GCC. This campaign aims to abolish article 153 from Kuwait's penal code – which gives men regulatory, judicial and executive power over their female kin in blatant disregard of the constitution, international agreements on human and women's rights and even Islamic Sharia. In the absence of shelters and survivor resources Abolish 153 has become integral in highlighting issues of gender-based violence, and providing moral and financial aid for victims of abuse. I think the prime concern of this campaign is to raise awareness about the continued existence of such legislations and to introduce a cooperative, non-confrontational approach to resolving this issue. In our three years we have achieved many milestones but our proudest moment was receiving the Chaillot Prize for Human Rights last year.

**Gender equality is always something we're constantly striving for in the Middle East, especially in Kuwait. How do you think this issue has progressed over the years?**

I think gender equality is just one form of equality that we need to look at. We need to look at finding equal opportunities for women and young people in general, especially those from certain socio-economic backgrounds, and to make sure there are no discriminatory ceilings placed on their social and economic mobility. I strongly believe in gender equality in terms of legal rights and in terms of opportunities, but I also believe in the need to investigate ways to make it a level-playing field for people from different socio-economic backgrounds and especially those who are exploited, ignored or marginalized because of cognitive biases which many in the workplace are not even aware of. That is why we have come up with tailor-made diversity trainings for GCC public and private sector organizations at Ibtakar, and this is why I dedicate a big part of my time promoting youth initiatives and pushing for more women involvement in leadership positions.

**You have had numerous achievements throughout your career. Which was the dearest to you and why?**

Raising awareness around the existence of violent legislations and attempting to end them is my life's mission so I cannot consider it an achievement though I am very proud of that body of work. I would say that one of my dearest moments was being recognized for my academic and activist contributions to the cause of women's rights by being awarded a knighthood by the French Government (National Order of Merit), and being able to present that honor to both HRH the Emir and the Crown Prince. Seeing myself as the background to young men and women dancing at our 2017 Annual National Operetta as a result of that honour was a highlight of my career. If I had to choose just one achievement it would be being the Keynote Speaker at my daughter's graduation at AlBayan School. I was the first alumni invited to speak and it was a great moment for me because my convictions meant that I have had to make alternative and at times insecure career choices, but those ultimately led me to being a role model for my daughter and her generation.









**How would you define the term “feminist,” and what kind of value do you think this term might hold?**

I think in its most basic sense, a feminist is anyone who loves women and wishes them to be treated with the love and respect that they deserve. Every humanist must therefore be a feminist because it’s about social justice and recognizing the fact that when women are only half-citizens or half-colleagues or are undervalued in anyway simply because of their biological difference, it is demeaning to all of us, and fiscally unsound.

**Would you consider yourself a feminist?**

I love to recount a conversation I had with a Saudi friend who is involved in women’s issue but from a “removed” academic distance. She called me a “self-declared feminist” and I corrected her that I was a “self-evident feminist, for what else would I be?” I consider myself, and most sane people, feminists. I have no patience for people, especially women, who think it’s a pejorative term.

**How do you find yourself embracing this label and who has influenced it?**

I know that people have misconceptions about feminism, and it even had something of a backlash within Western academics because some feel that it’s a white woman’s term, but I think we need to embrace it because for me it means that you believe in the empowerment of women and you are aware that there is a systematic disempowerment of women. I began my activism which influenced my PhD when we were dealing with the rejection of the passing of the bill in 1999 to get women their full political rights. If you look at the situation of women in the Arab world today, including Kuwait, you’d find a lot of regression because women are afraid to stand up and say that we are feminists and that this discrimination will not stand. I was influenced greatly by all the brave women and men who came before me, the iconoclasts and the innovators who refuse the status quo, Arabs and foreigners alike.

**Do you think that men in our region are being aware of the gender equality changes? And is the topic being socially acceptable nowadays?**

I see more and more demand in my line of work for female empowerment, leadership grooming and inclusion policies, but in terms of implementation much of that is hindered by unconscious biases and social norms that need to be challenged so that real progress can be made. In this part of the world there is this “benign” patriarchy that is promoted as a protector of women, but limits them instead, like guardianship practices and disciplinary violence. These are still socially awkward topics in most circles but if we don’t counter the mainstream narrative we will find ourselves slipping back even further. Look at the resurrection of female war trophies within ISIS, an extreme example but one that should remind us that any concessions where rights are concerned are a slippery slope.

**From a feminist perspective, what are the topics you would like to see addressed more and how?**

I would like to see the safety of young girls and women become a priority. That does not mean excluding boys and young men but there is no denying that we



are the more vulnerable group especially during times of conflict so I am a great believer in legal protection. I think the only way to address gender equality is through education and our curriculums in Kuwait are offensive and misogynistic beyond belief among many other issues, so I would say we would have to start there.

**What are the issues that you consider should be a priority to be worked on as a country here in Kuwait.**

We have to tackle all the laws that lead to women being treated as incomplete citizens: personal status laws, housing loans, nationality rights for their children and an end to violent legislation. We need a domestic violence law, shelters and hotlines for abuse survivors. We need political and entrepreneurial incubators that are catered to promoting women and a commitment to leadership roles for them like the UAE has done. In short, we need the political will to put in policies and measures, even quotas, to ensure fair representation and a dignified existence for all women.