

Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain

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On January 30th 2021, the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) [reported](#) that it is going to participate in the *Generation Equality Forum* in Paris in June 2021. ADHRB [CODEPINK, Women's March Global, MENA Rights Group, EPAPI-Paris, Gender in Geopolitics Institute, Gulf Center for Human Rights, Women in War and La Minutieuse] object to the participation of the Council, as it does not abide by the principles of the forum. The SCW acts as a representative for the Bahraini government, which has repeatedly engaged in systematic human rights violations, including women's rights, through legislation and actions.

Although the [Bahraini](#) government often publicly underlines its support for women's rights – and sometimes refers to the SCW to do so – it has refused to implement gender equality recommendations and continues its discrimination towards women. Since the Arab Spring, the status of women's rights has plateaued or even regressed in key areas, with the government taking new measures to target [women](#) human rights activists. Women also continue to face discrimination in the legal system, underrepresentation in government, and marginalization in the economy.

The government of Bahrain has acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), but has [retained](#) substantial reservations to it by, for example, refusing to ratify the Optional Protocol. Although the SCW has organized awareness training programmes and workshops aimed at empowering Bahraini women, and lobbied to change the Nationality Law to be gender inclusive, the government has proven unable or unwilling to translate these initiatives into reforms. As such, Bahrain remains in violation of the CEDAW.

Despite this, the SCW claimed that the CEDAW had been "[put into effect](#)" in July 2016. Only a few months earlier, Secretary-General of the SCW, Hala al-Ansari [stated](#) that "*Bahrain will not lift any of its reservations to CEDAW but will redraft them in a positive manner in order to ensure that the text of the convention does not prejudice Islamic law nor does it trespass Bahrain's sovereignty.*" However, limited efforts have been made to implement them in practice. The statements of the SCW provide legitimacy to the government's restrictions on women's rights and the reservations put on the CEDAW. In fact, the SCW can even be regarded as a tool for the government to hide human rights violations. The SCW provides legitimacy to the government on issues of gender, and in many cases is referred to as evidence of Bahraini women's empowerment.

The SCW aims to bring awareness to the development in Bahrain under the vision of the King. On the SCW's official [website](#) it is stated that the Council is established by, and directly affiliated,

with the King and operates on a national strategy [approved](#) by him. Furthermore, the president of the Council is Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, wife of King Hamad bin Khalifa. It is therefore clear that the SCW and the government are tightly linked, and that the Council should in fact be seen as an extension of the Bahraini regime.

In fact, the domestic structure of the SCW is entirely reliant upon royal endorsement. The heads of the SCW are the President, the Deputy President and the Secretary General, and their nominations are dependent on the approval of the monarchy. As [stated](#) on the official website of the SCW : “*A Royal Order shall be issued appointing the secretary general of the council, after being nominated by the President of the Council.*” The King also issued a Royal Order to re-appoint Hala Mohammed Al Ansari as Secretary General for three years. Hence, the Secretary General has been appointed by the monarchy, as she was nominated by Princess Sabeeka and endorsed by the King himself. Furthermore, she had [already worked](#) for the royal family in the past. Lastly, the Deputy President is also a member of the Al-Khalifa family.

This is not the first time issues of the Council’s nepotism have been raised. Front Line Defenders [reported](#) in 2018 that prominent women human rights defender Ghada Jamsheer was banned from performing in the media after criticizing the SCW’s nepotism, bogus “empowerment” projects, and “state-sponsored propaganda in the name of women’s rights.”

This is problematic for many reasons, mainly because it means that the SCW has strong motives to not criticize the government, despite clear violations of international human rights laws, including those of the rights of women. For example, the report [Breaking the Silence](#) exposes a concerning increase in the political targeting of female human rights defenders in Bahrain since 2017. In the report, Ebtisam al-Saegh and Najah Yusuf testify that they were subjected to severe torture and physical and sexual abuse at the hands of National Security Agency officers. Many others reported that they were threatened with rape during the interrogation and received death threats directed towards themselves and their families.

The most recent Human Rights Watch [World Report](#) on Bahrain, as well as a [resolution](#) from the European Parliament adopted in March 2021, emphasizes the deteriorating human rights situation in Bahrain. It highlights how the Bahraini government still discriminates against women’s right to inherit, divorce, and transmit nationality, and continues to maintain reservations on articles in the CEDAW.

This discrimination, and even in some cases *regression* on the rights of women, goes against the reports of both the government and the SCW. The Council [reports](#) on the progress of women and the commitment of the Bahraini government to advancing Bahraini women in society. Even more concerning is the legitimacy international actors provide the Council in the international arena by giving it a platform to publicize the words of the government.

Given the GEF's focus on engaging civil society in the fight for gender equality, it would be inappropriate for the SCW to participate in the forum, as the Bahraini government has consistently restricted and persecuted civil society. Officials routinely [deny](#) permits to civil society organizations advocating for women's rights and human rights while arresting their leaders. Moreover, the [forum](#) is intended to serve as an occasion for governments to announce ambitious and credible commitments to gender equality. Given Bahrain's poor record in promoting human rights and gender equality, the GEF would provide the Bahraini government with a platform to further whitewash its human rights violations and promote a false narrative of genuine progress while offering no meaningful reforms in women's rights.

Furthermore, the forum is described as a [major](#) cause supported by the current presidential mandate in line with France's feminist diplomacy which is based on the International Strategy for Gender Equality. The [strategy](#), among other things, calls for an end to sexual discrimination, coercion and violence. As mentioned above, women human rights defenders in Bahrain have testified to being sexually abused by the authorities, a subject on which the SCW has remained notoriously quiet and refused to investigate despite repeated attempts by victims to seek assistance. Moreover, the strategy calls on France to advocate for women's rights in international forums and to support women's development, but the nepotism in the Council and its continued silence on important women's rights issues do not contribute to women's progress in the country. Additionally, the strategy establishes that France wants to take an active role in supporting women's rights and improving the situation for women around the world. Considering this, France should indeed reject the Council's efforts to whitewash human rights issues and instead call upon the Bahraini government to respect international agreements and end discrimination against women.

For these reasons, several NGOs have come together in this letter to object to the participation of the Supreme Council for Women and urge France to uninvite them to the *Generation Equality Forum*.

Signed,

Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain ; CODEPINK ; EPAPI-Paris ; Gender in Geopolitics Institute ; Gulf Center for Human Rights ; La Minutieuse ; MENA Rights Group ; Women's March Global and Women in War.