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Sea waves of social change

Telling the people's story in the Persian Gulf states

If you were to interview a mother living in Bahrain about education, what might she say? Just ask one Wayne State University researcher, who has extensive experience doing exactly that.

May Seikaly, Ph.D., associate professor of classical and modern languages, literatures and cultures at WSU's College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, recently spent a year interviewing hundreds of women, men and youth from all social strata in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain. Her ultimate goal is to write a book that will provide a holistic account of the region's social history.

Seikaly is working to fill a void in literature by using oral history to investigate the impact of momentous societal changes in the Gulf region, prompted by the discovery of oil. Until 40 years ago, Bahrain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates were occupied and ruled by Western powers, so few records on the social aspect of people's lives are available. "There are so many angles and levels of history that are never written about or properly recorded," Seikaly said.

"It is especially unfortunate that women's history is not written about in a region where women's roles are so rapidly changing," Seikaly said. In 2002, women in Bahrain gained their suffrage; that same year, 42 women ran for parliament. "Within politics, women have become very, very prominent, and that's why my first choice was to study society through its women," she said.

Seikaly's book will explore politics, culture and education by weaving the voices of women – from politicians, like Bahraini Minister of Culture and Information Sheikha Mai Al Khalifa, to stay-at-home mothers. But Seikaly's research is not exclusive to women. She also interviewed youth

through focus groups at universities and men from all backgrounds. "Even though I'm looking at the story through women's eyes, I'm looking at the society as a whole," Seikaly said.

A democratic approach to history

"History is the story of the people, not the story of what is told about the people," said Seikaly, who will connect individual stories gathered through interviews into a quilt of narrated history that delves into the interior lives of Bahrainis, Qataris and Emiratis – a technique that characterizes oral history.

"Oral history is the most democratizing process of writing social history," said Seikaly. "It's the voice of the people." Analyzing the nuances of her interviewees' expressions and subtly picking out what is said – and what isn't – reveals to Seikaly the system's effects on society. "Women would talk about the market but would put it in the context of how they buy food and how they feed their kids – issues that make sense in the social context," she said.

Seikaly explained that social topics often invoked discussion of larger issues. "When talking to a woman about education, we would come across issues such as globalization – how globalization has impacted her perceptions of culture, how globalization has negatively impacted how her life is led," she said.

Seikaly's personal history sparked her interest in this subject in the Gulf states. "I come from a culture where orality is very much a part of my legacy, my thinking and functioning," she said, recalling her childhood years in Jordan and

Lebanon listening to her father recount his life stories.

Seikaly sharpened the tools of oral history while working on her first book, *Haifa: Transformation of an Arab Society*, and has since become a well-known oral historian in the Middle East. Recently, Seikaly, who spent nine years teaching history at the University of Bahrain, was awarded a grant from the Qatar Foundation to train men and women to conduct oral history research, which she will be doing this year.

While completing her new book, Seikaly hopes to continue to develop a database of interviews she conducted with Palestinians over the course of 20 years. Her objective is to make this compilation a public resource.

"I don't want to be the only one working on memory," said Seikaly. "I want the younger generation – whether they're in journalism, theater, law or history – to hear the people, because this is the democratic voice of history. This is important for our future."



About Dr. May Seikaly:

Dr. Seikaly received a B.A. in history/politics with distinction from the Lebanese American University, an M.A. in Middle Eastern history from the University of California, Los Angeles, and a Ph.D. in social history of the

Middle East from Oxford University. She joined Wayne State University in 1995.

To learn more, visit:

<http://www.clas.wayne.edu/faculty/seikaly>

