



The people's champion

For Bahrain's underprivileged and disadvantaged, Dr. Fatima Al-Balooshi is the go-to woman. The only female minister (of social development) in the country is working tirelessly to help the causes of the poor, elderly and children in the kingdom. BY CHRISTINA FERNANDES

“I have been in this position for three years now, but sometimes it feels more like 300 years,” Dr. Fatima jokes. Since Dr. Nada Haffadh left her post as health minister last year, Dr. Fatima has been the only female minister in the country, but she is not concerned about this.

“In Bahrain, we women have always been working with men, especially as nurses and teacher, but also in other professions,” she says. “We have no problems working with them. I have personally never had any problems. In fact I have experienced a lot of kindness and respect from my male colleagues and they welcomed me and my former colleague Nada as women in the government.”

Dr. Fatima says there is not as much discrimination in Bahrain as there is in some of its neighbouring countries. “I am the daughter of an employee at the Alba plant,” she says. “I received a Bahraini scholarship to study in Canada and I was

not from an influential family. It didn’t make a difference that I was a girl. The year I went, most of us were girls; there were only two or three boys. This is what Bahrain is like.”

After receiving a Bachelor’s degree in science from Concordia University in Montreal, Dr. Fatima returned to Bahrain and worked as a high school teacher for a year. “I was supposed to go into medicine,” she recalls. “I started my graduate degree in human anatomy at Columbia University in New York, but then I switched to computing and education. Eventually I got my doctorate in education, focusing on instructional technology and media.”

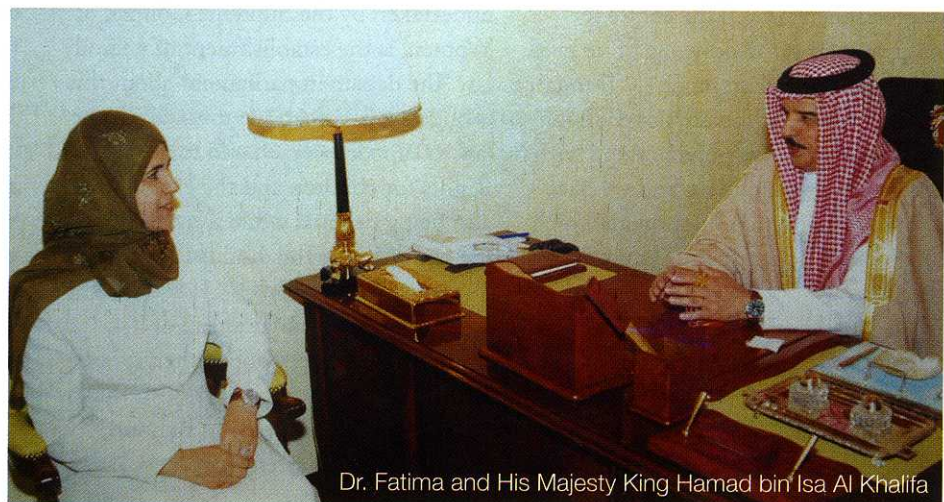
Upon her return to the kingdom, Dr. Fatima began working at the Ministry of Education, where she was responsible for introducing computers into Bahraini schools. She then moved on to the University of Bahrain where she eventually became the dean of the College of Education, before being appointed by His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa to her current position as minister of social development.

“At the ministry, we work for all citizens, for families as a whole, for parents, for

With the new of era of democracy in Bahrain, many rights have been established.



Dr. Fatima Al-Balooshi



Dr. Fatima and His Majesty King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa

children, for the disabled and the elderly," she explains. "We also register and work with social NGOs, which is a big job — there are currently more than 500 such NGOs in Bahrain."

Through her work, Dr. Fatima has made a difference in many people's lives, Bahrain as well as expatriate. "Our ministry is based on two main pillars in terms of service — social service and social investment," she explains. "So we work for the protection of women by providing shelters for those who have been abused and

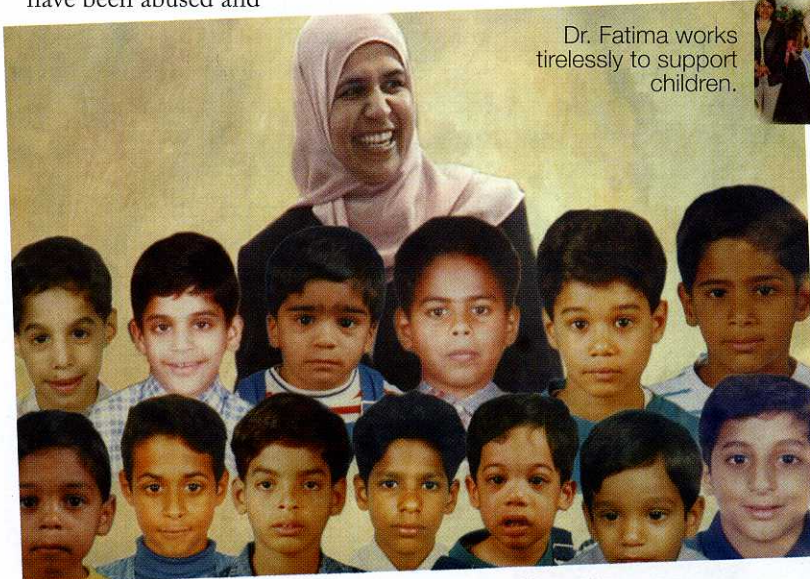
airport. "We will soon open another centre in Muharraq; the official opening ceremony is on March 5," Dr. Fatima adds.

The establishment of new laws is a big step towards helping underprivileged and weaker members of society, she says. "I think the most important movement currently, being

Dr. Fatima is a busy woman, so she takes little breaks whenever she can. "I receive hundreds of emails a day, but



Dr. Fatima works tirelessly to support children.



Dr. Fatima greets a child.

those who are poor and homeless. We also work to prevent human trafficking, which helps not only Bahraini women but also expats."

Bahrain is pioneering these kinds of services in the region. "The centre for abused women is the only one of its kind in the region," Dr. Fatima says. "Through it, we help women who are not economically empowered. We provide them with programmes to train them and we have a microfinance programme through which we help people open their own small businesses."

These small businesses are oftentimes engaged in handicrafts and they are getting a chance to sell their wares at Capital Mall near Seef as well as a shop in the duty free shopping area at the

As a woman, a mother and a wife I want to achieve the right balance between my work and my personal life.

undertaken by the Supreme Council of Women, is the establishment of a family law. The debate in parliament about this is ongoing and we hope to establish the law to support women and their families. Rights for children and the elderly are also being debated while a law establishing the rights of the disabled has been implemented already.

"Bahrain is again far ahead of its neighbours in the establishment of an anti-human trafficking law. With the new of era of democracy in Bahrain, many rights have been introduced."

sometimes I take a break from reading them and surf the internet for sites dealing with ideas for home decor and other such ideas," she says. "When I have time, I like to relax by going to the movies with my kids and shopping — it's relief from the stress with a huge bill at the end," she says with a laugh.

In the future she hopes to improve her ability of managing her busy lifestyle. "As a woman, a mother and a wife I want to achieve the right balance between my work and my personal life, which is not an easy task, but I will try my best.

"Professionally, I really want to make a difference in people's lives; in the lives of the disabled, of children, of the elderly and the poor. That's the most important thing for me." **wtm**