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WOMEN'S ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION IN KUWAIT

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Abstract

Since the introduction of women's suffrage in 2005, the number of women elected to parliament in Kuwait has been very small. Only ten women have served as members of parliament and no women were elected in the 2020 election leading to an all-male parliament in Kuwait today. It is important to understand the reasons why it has been difficult for women to get elected in Kuwait in greater numbers. This paper argues that deeply gendered structural inequalities and sexism play a significant role in preventing women's election to parliament. They create impediments to women carrying out election campaigns, including inhibiting securing funding and building networks. Women running for office are also exposed to sexist prejudices, criticism and public defamation. The paper also draws attention to some of the features of women's political participation in Kuwait. First, women's political participation is understood in broader terms by women's rights activists, going beyond electoral participation to include informal political participation such as activism for women's legal, political and socio-economic rights and membership of unions and associations. Second, the hierarchies and privileges that derive from citizenship status, and the socio-economic structures built around it, shape women's experience of participation in elections. As a result, only women from a particular socio-economic background run in elections and enter parliament.

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Introduction

Since the introduction of women's suffrage in 2005, the number of women elected to parliament in Kuwait has been very small – only ten women have been members of parliament (MPs) since then.¹ No women were elected in the 2020 election leading to an all-male parliament in Kuwait today. This is puzzling because there is a long history of women's rights activism and a strong push by women's organisations for women's political participation in Kuwait. Moreover, Kuwaiti women are actively involved in economic and public life, including education and the labour force.

It is important to understand the reasons why it has been difficult for women to get elected in Kuwait in greater numbers. This report argues that deeply gendered inequalities and sexism play a significant role in preventing women's election to parliament because they create impediments to women carrying out election campaigns and building networks, among others. Furthermore, the issue is not only that a very small number of women have been elected in Kuwait, it is also that only women from a particular socio-economic background run in elections and enter parliament. The hierarchies and privileges that derive from citizenship status and the socio-economic system built around it shape women's experience of participation in elections.

On the other hand, the fact that only a small number of women have been elected in Kuwait since 2005 does not mean that women do not participate in politics. Women hold unelected positions in the government and activism for women's legal, political and socio-economic rights and women's participation in unions and political associations should also be considered as political participation in its informal form. In addition, the fact that not many women have been elected to parliament does not mean that women's suffrage and the small number of female MPs have not made an impact on women's political participation. On the contrary, these developments have changed the discourse around women's political and public roles in Kuwait.

The report relies on 27 semi-structured interviews with women politicians, public servants, academics and activists and the academic literature on women's political participation in Kuwait. Rather than offering generalisable explanations, it seeks to capture the state of discussions on women's electoral participation in 2019 and to provide an account of what issues were emphasised in these discussions. The interviews offered important insights on the dynamics that influence women's electoral participation in Kuwait. These included issues such as the obstacles to women's electoral participation, social gender norms and the

¹ No women were elected in the 2006 and 2008 elections, four women joined parliament in 2009, three in 2012, two in 2013 and there has been only one female parliamentarian since 2016.

2009: Maasouma Al-Mubarak, Aseel Al-Awadhi, Salwa Al-Jassar, Rola Dashti

2012 (Feb): No women elected

2012 (Dec): Safaa Al-Hashem, Al-Mubarak and Thekra Al-Rasheed

2013: Al-Mubarak and Al-Hashem

2016: Al-Hashem

2020: No women elected.

electoral system among others experienced by women politicians that ran for elections in the past and those who are planning to run in the future. Interviews also provide information on some of the strategies used by women candidates to get elected and observations on the work of women MPs in office. What follows is, first, a historical overview of women's political participation and the introduction of suffrage. This overview helps historically situate and contextualise women's electoral participation in Kuwait. Then an account of the obstacles faced by women politicians and the strategies they use is provided. Finally, the paper offers some lessons building on the research findings.

The Struggle for Women's Political Rights

The introduction of women's suffrage in 2005 was a key turning point for women's rights in Kuwait. But this does not mean that women began to participate in politics only after suffrage. Political participation cannot be limited to formal participation such as voting, running for parliamentary elections and taking up governmental positions. Women from different walks of life make strategic and political choices every day, they set up women's rights organisations, join political associations and actively engage in politics, even though these activities do not conform to the modalities of formal political participation.² Indeed, Kuwaiti women have been engaging in formal and informal forms of political participation throughout the history of Kuwait.

Women in Kuwait have been actively involved in socio-economic life, especially in education and in the private and public labour market since the 1960s. This was the result of the growth of the oil economy, institutionalisation of the state and the government's desire to avoid foreign labour.³ Today 57 percent of women (aged 15+) and 87 percent of men (aged 15+) are in the labour force.⁴ Seventy-six percent of women have completed higher education compared to 35.8 percent of men⁵ and Kuwait ranks fourth in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region in gender equality according to the Global Gender Gap Index, calculated based on economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment.⁶ There is a long history of demand for women's political rights and several attempts led by women's organisations have been made to reform the electoral law to introduce women's suffrage and allow women to run in elections. However, the introduction of suffrage was delayed in Kuwait compared to other MENA countries. Two other Gulf countries, Qatar and Oman, introduced suffrage before Kuwait.⁷

² Ann Marshall, 'Organizing Across the Divide: Local Feminist Activism, Everyday Life, and the Election of Women to Public Office', *Social Science Quarterly* 83/3 (2002), pp. 707–25.

³ Haya Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', *Middle East Report* 32 (1996), p. 33.

⁴ These statistics include the non-citizen population. 'Labor Force Participation Rate', *World Bank* (ILO estimates) (2019). Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=KW> (accessed 1 April 2021)

⁵ These statistics is based on gross enrolment ratio which includes non-citizens. See 'Education and Literacy', *UNESCO* (2018). Available at <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/kw> (accessed 1 April 2021).

⁶ Kuwait ranks 122nd in the world, 'Global Gender Gap Report 2020', *World Economic Forum* (2020). Available at http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf (accessed 1 April 2021).

⁷ Qatar in 1999 and Oman in 1994 (became universal in 2003).

Women's organisations in Kuwait have been active since the 1960s. While some of these organisations focused mainly on social development, others worked to promote women's political rights.⁸ The two leading women's organisations until the 1990s, the Cultural and Social Society (CSS, later WCSS) and the Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS) were established in 1963. CSS mainly represented the women in the merchant class⁹ and focused on charity work and social entertainment. AWDS consisted mainly of middle class women.¹⁰ In the 1960s and 1970s, CSS and AWDS carried out their work with little collaboration and this was detrimental to generating society-level awareness of women's issues.¹¹ A new women's society emerged, the Girls Club, in 1976.¹² In general, most of these organisations tended to follow the government position, emphasising women's role as mothers and wives and focusing on traditional practices to reform society.

The topic of women's enfranchisement has been openly discussed by members of these organisations and activists since the 1970s. AWDS played a crucial role in pushing for women's political participation.¹³ It focused on gender equality in all fields of employment, citizenship rights, family law and political participation – issues that CSS tended to avoid. AWDS's pressure resulted in the first bill in the Kuwaiti Parliament to support women's suffrage and amend the electoral law in 1973. The bill was rejected on the basis of social values to maintain the allocation of different gendered roles and responsibilities. The government also formed a moral police force to combat 'moral crimes' and protect the 'unity of the family'.¹⁴ The government closed AWDS in 1978, based on unproven claims of financial fraud, and put pressure on associations led by secularists and nationalists by removing their board members and appointing new members in their place.¹⁵ The government, ruling family and most of the MPs explicitly challenged and suppressed the demands for women's rights and promoted family values based on obedience to the male head of household during the 1970s.¹⁶

In the 1980s, the opposition to women's civil rights and political participation began to be more religiously grounded as a result of the resurgence of Islamism in Kuwait and in the wider Middle East. The government gave license to the formation of two Islamist women's

⁸ According to Kuwaiti law, all voluntary organisations, including women's ones, can be established with the permission of the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which also controls their funding.

⁹ It is important to note the social polarisation between the merchant and tribal populations in Kuwait, which has major consequences on elections due to the fact that most Kuwaitis from tribal sections of the society live in the outlying electoral districts 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Muhammad S. Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', *Journal of International Women's Studies* 12/3 (2011), p. 79.

¹¹ Mart Ann Tétreault, Katherine Meyer and Helen Rizzo, 'Women's Rights in the Middle East: A Longitudinal Study of Kuwait', *International Political Sociology* 3/2 (2009), pp. 218–37.

¹² The government tried to unite these organisations by creating the Kuwaiti Women Union in 1974, which was dissolved in 1977. Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', p. 80.

¹³ Lubna Al-Kazi, 'Women and Non-Governmental Organizations in Kuwait: A Platform for Human Resource Development and Social Change', *Human Resource Development International* 14/2 (2011), pp. 167–81.

¹⁴ Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', p. 34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

organisations, Bayader Al-Salam and the Islamic Care Society (ICS). Some of the members of these organisations were connected to the Muslim Brotherhood.¹⁷ They emphasised traditional female morality and virtues and promoted women's roles as strengthening family, raising good children and protecting societal customs. ICS, established by Sheikha Latifa, the wife of the then Crown Prince and Prime Minister of Kuwait at that time (Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Salim a-Sabah), promoted ideals related to morality and virtues, such as a religious woman working for the benefit of the family and society. Bayader Al-Salam also promoted the idea of a woman who is pious and focused on purification and good deeds.¹⁸ Rather than challenging these, WCSS and Girls' Club chose to emphasise their own religiosity and supported the Islamist vision of modesty and chastity of women.¹⁹

However, other women's organisations continued to lobby and push the political agenda for women's enfranchisement, as a result of which, an MP proposed a bill to grant women the right to vote but not to hold office in 1981. This bill was rejected, largely due to objections by Islamist MPs.²⁰ In 1982, a push by women's organisations led to the introduction of another bill by some of the nationalist and Islamist (particularly Muslim Brotherhood parliamentarians but was rejected on the basis that electoral politics befits men and it is not religiously permissible for women to nominate or recommend other women or men.²¹ Women activists criticised the ultimate rejection of these bills and protested. As a result, a Family Law was codified in 1984.²²

In the 1990s, awareness of women's rights in society increased because of the role women played during Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Women became even more politically engaged and, after this, their participation in public life expanded to campaigns and rallies. However, this was not a positive period for women's rights in general. Women's demands for suffrage were repeatedly rejected both by the Parliament and the ruling Al-Sabah family although there was some support for this among members of the ruling family. The Parliament ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women in 1992 (CEDAW), mainly due to external pressure and with significant reservations, most notably on women's right to vote and their right to pass citizenship to their children. The Muslim Brotherhood and some Salafi blocs opposed women's suffrage and proposed laws for gender segregation and early retirement with full benefits to mothers in 1995 which essentially encouraged women not to work.²³

¹⁷ Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', p. 80.

¹⁸ ICS ran classes in embroidery, sewing, cooking and the Qur'an according to Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', p. 34.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Interviewee 2. 1981 was the first year that Salafis participated in Kuwaiti parliamentary elections (and the first year that the Muslim Brotherhood participated as a bloc), Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', pp. 80-1.

²¹ Ibid., p. 81.

²² Dania Maktabi, 'Female Citizenship and Family Law in Kuwait and Qatar: Globalization and Pressures for Reform in Two Rentier States', *Nidaba: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Middle East Studies* 1/1 (2016), p. 25.

²³ Mary Ann Tetreault, 'A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women, and Politics in Kuwait', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 33/2 (2001), pp. 203-20, p. 213.

In 1994, the Federation of the Kuwaiti Women's Association (FKWA) was established as the representative of all women's organisations and the chair of ICS, Sheikha Latifa, was elected as its president (WCSS did not to join). FKWA did not pay much attention to issues women face in their everyday lives, for instance, the higher number of impoverished female heads of household after the Gulf War. It followed religious and social traditions and blamed women for social issues (divorce, poverty, limited civil rights of Kuwaiti women married to stateless men, etc.) rather than interrogating the role played by societal norms, institutions and laws in perpetuating such ills.²⁴ An ex-public servant who used to be involved in the movement for women's political participation reported that at the 1995 Beijing Conference, Sheikha Latifa said, 'The situation of Kuwaiti women is perfect and they do not need their political rights.'²⁵ Anti-feminist groups, FKWA and some WCSS members joined protests against abortion, gay rights and sexual liberties drawing praise from Islamist men who complimented them on their 'headstrong attitude'.²⁶

Despite these circumstances, women's struggle for their rights and suffrage continued. One year after Kuwait's liberation, a large forum was established by women's organisations, lawyers, academics and other groups to demand gender equality and justice. Forum members began to protest in the streets in 1992 and rallied for the implementation of the Kuwaiti Constitution, which explicitly states that men and women are equal. Some of the MPs were already supporting these women and they made an offer to propose a law that gives women voting rights but not the right to get elected. This offer was rejected by women activists. In this period, women activists began to approach candidates during elections to inform them they would attend their campaigns. Some candidates refused but others set up women-only tents.²⁷ Women began to participate in the 'Monday diwanias', which demanded the return of parliamentary life after the Iraqi invasion and occupation. Diwanias have a long history of being spaces for political discussion and for voicing the demand for return to democracy in Kuwait during times when the Parliament was disbanded. Interviewee 16 said some women sought to register their names as voters in the presence of the media and then appealed to courts to complain about not being allowed to register.

Some of the Islamist women's movements also played a role in women's rights advocacy. Although they advocated domestication of women, they also managed to create a separate platform for women to articulate their interests in different ways in forums beyond their families.²⁸ In fact, several Islamist women lobbied for women's political rights after 1999 until the Election Law was passed in 2005.²⁹ For instance, Kawakib al-Mulham and Shii activist Khadijah al-Mahmeed are outspoken and they oppose the

²⁴ Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', p. 35.

²⁵ Interviewee 6.

²⁶ Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', p. 35.

²⁷ Previously, in the 1980s, women used to stay in their cars and listen to the discussions through speakers set up by campaigners. Interviewee 2 and 16.

²⁸ Haya Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi, 2000).

²⁹ Emily R. Wills, 'Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait', *Middle East Journal* 67/2 (2013), pp. 173–84, p. 182.

exclusion of women from public life.³⁰ It is also important to note that there are new Islamisms that challenge the patriarchal structures and emphasise that faith and religious behaviour are an individual's responsibility.³¹

Overall, until the late 1990s, although it would be fair to say that women's organisations have not consistently supported the women's movement for equality in history and also did not collaborate to unite their forces in supporting women's civil and political rights,³² they were the key actors that put pressure for reform from below. They found ways into the Parliament to articulate women's interests in the form of discussions and engaging parliamentarians in their advocacy work that led to bill proposals.³³

The year 1999 marked an apparent change in the Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah's position on women's enfranchisement. He dissolved the Parliament and called for elections and issued several decrees on the economy as well as a surprise one granting women the right to vote and run for parliamentary and municipal offices. Sunni Islamist MPs predictably rejected this decree but some liberal MPs also opposed it because it was issued during a parliamentary recess and they saw this as a constitutional violation. One week later, liberal MPs proposed an identical bill to the Parliament but that was rejected, too.³⁴ It has been argued that the regime strategically used women's suffrage to divert the opposition from economic decrees, to give itself a better international image by appearing pro-women's rights and to divide the opposition to the government in the Parliament which had different views about women's political rights.³⁵ The Emir issued another decree in 2005 to grant women the right to vote and run for political office (but with the condition to follow Sharia); this time it was successful.³⁶

The adoption of women's suffrage could be considered as a delayed decision, given the long struggle and efforts for women's suffrage in Kuwait.³⁷ Most of the interviewees indicated the lack of regime support and particular religious interpretations relating to women's position in society as key reasons for the delay. The strong religious wave in the 1980s and the regime's closeness with religious groups during this period were mentioned as important factors. The Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs issued *fatwas* and disseminated *hadiths*

³⁰ Tetreault, 'A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women, and Politics in Kuwait', pp. 211–2.

³¹ Wills, 'Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait', p. 176.

³² Al-Mughni, 'Women's Organizations in Kuwait', p. 35.

³³ There were about 11 proposals to amend Kuwait's electoral laws but they were all rejected. Interviewee 9.

³⁴ Tetreault, 'A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women, and Politics in Kuwait', p. 213; Wills, 'Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait', p. 173.

³⁵ Liberals and Islamists had incompatible views about women's political rights and most of the Shiia MPs supported the decree. Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly'; Tetreault, 'A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women, and Politics in Kuwait', p. 214; Wills, 'Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait', pp. 177–9.

³⁶ 23 votes against, 1 abstention and 5 absences. This shows the sizeable opposition in parliament against women's suffrage. The decree amended Article 1 of the Election Law No. 35/1962 by deleting the word 'male'. Maktabi, 'Female Citizenship and Family Law in Kuwait and Qatar: Globalization and Pressures for Reform in two Rentier States', p. 28.

³⁷ Meriem Aissa, 'Kuwait: Why Did Women's Suffrage Take So Long?', in S. Franceschet, M. L. Krook and N. Tan (eds), *The Palgrave Handbook of Women's Political Rights* (London: Macmillan, 2018), pp. 201–12.

claiming that women's political rights were *haram* to raise questions about the legitimacy of women's electoral participation.³⁸ Therefore, as indicated by interviewees, examining the dynamics that shape the regime's relationship with society and interest groups is necessary to understand why women's suffrage was introduced late in Kuwait.³⁹

Some of the interviewees indicated that international pressure was another important factor in the change in the regime's attitude on the issue of women's political participation.⁴⁰ With the further deepening of Kuwait's political engagement with the Western world after the 1991 intervention, the US had begun to push the Kuwaiti regime to give women their voting rights. Interviewee 7 stated that Sheikh Al-Sabah, who was the Minister of Foreign Affairs during and after the invasion, wanted to improve Kuwait's image internationally. This international pressure reinforced the increasingly robust, consistent and publicly visible women's movement demanding political rights.⁴¹

Women's Challenges and Strategies in Electoral Participation

Gender Norms and Inequalities

The Kuwaiti constitution rules against discrimination on the basis of race, origin, language or religion. However, in practice, gender discrimination in socio-economic and political life has been systematic and equal rights on paper have not transformed into equal opportunities.⁴² Family rather than the individual is constitutionally defined as the key unit of society and gender hierarchy is a key characteristic of most Kuwaiti families. The paternalistic legal guardianship system, the laws and social practices that govern marriage, divorce, housing and inheritance place men in a higher position than women in this gender hierarchy.⁴³

Interviewees illustrated this gendered hierarchy through some examples: the laws concerning honour killing still exist (some progress has been made through the Abolish 153 campaign as a result of which new legislation for victims of domestic abuse was introduced in 2020);⁴⁴ there is a large number of women working but there are still many women with no access to their bank accounts because husbands or fathers hold the accounts; a mother cannot approve surgery for her child because a male relative is expected to sign

³⁸ Wills, 'Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait', p. 176.

³⁹ Interviewees 15, 16 and 20.

⁴⁰ Interviewees 6, 7, 15, 18 and 20.

⁴¹ After the invasion, US and UK think tanks and organisations in Kuwait collaborated on the issue of women's suffrage. A group of Kuwaiti women attended a women's political rights programme in the US including Rola Dashti, Nadia Al-Sharrah and others. Interviewees 6 and 7.

⁴² Tetreault, 'A State of Two Minds: State Cultures, Women, and Politics in Kuwait'.

⁴³ Haya Al-Mughni and Mary Ann Tetreault, 'Gender, Citizenship and Nationalism in Kuwait', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 22/1-2 (1995), pp. 64-80; Interviewee 17.

⁴⁴ Yasmena Al-Mulla, 'Kuwait National Assembly Approves Domestic Violence Draft Law', *Gulf News*, 19 August 2020. Available at <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-national-assembly-approves-domestic-violence-draft-law-1.73290715> (accessed 6 April 2021).

the papers (this is a custom, not a law, and puts women in a difficult position, especially those who are divorced or are single with dependants); for a divorced woman to remove her ex-husband's name from her passport is a very complicated and frustrating process whereas divorced men have no such issues; every father in Kuwait receives 50 Dinars for every son or daughter born but mothers do not; in May 2019 the Parliament discussed whether women should be banned from smoking shisha (hookah); there were no female judges in Kuwait until recently when eight female judges were sworn in in 2020;⁴⁵ women are not in senior positions on boards of directors of state companies, such as the Central Bank of Kuwait or in high positions in bureaucratic structures despite the fact that they constitute the majority of the workforce in public offices; women do not have access to equal housing and women cannot pass their citizenship on to their children.⁴⁶

Almost all interviewees pointed to the work that needs to be done for women to be granted full constitutional and legal rights. Interviewee 10 explained the ongoing tension between women and the government: 'They [male politicians and the government] say, "What more do you want now? We already gave you the rights".' Interviewee 7 said this reflects the reductionist view on women's political rights and civil rights in general and overlooks women's need and wish for equal treatment. It also puts women in a position of demanding rights and men as the 'giver' of rights. Interviewee 10 added: 'So voting is only one step but there are 100 steps coming.' Operating in a male public culture creates difficulties for women MPs in Kuwait. It is not easy to overturn or change the impact of decades of male dominance in politics which generated a political culture that has marginalised women. Interviewees, especially those who ran in previous elections or were planning to run in the 2020 elections, stated that social gender norms and structural and physical violence against women create significant obstacles for women to engage in formal politics.⁴⁷

Double Standards and Sexism

Almost all the female activists and politicians interviewed for this research indicated that some sections of Kuwaiti society believe that women are not as qualified as men in politics. Interviewee 11 said that the political field is perceived as an aggressive and tough place for women who are not seen to have the right skills and relevant experience or 'what it takes' to survive. As a result, scrutiny of women is harsher and they are expected to prove they are worth the position they have or aspire to have. These double standards

⁴⁵ 'Kuwait Swears in First Female Judges in Country's History', *Al Arabiya*, 3 September 2020. Available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2020/09/03/Kuwait-swears-in-first-female-judges-in-country-s-history> (accessed 6 April 2020). The judiciary in Kuwait has a religious character and most people who work there are graduates of Islamic Sharia. The law to allow women to be judges has passed now but it has not been applied yet as those women who will be qualified for the position have not graduated yet.

⁴⁶ Interviewees 4, 16 and 12; Interviewees 6, 7, 17, 19 and 20.

⁴⁷ There are cases of femicides in Kuwait and this form of violence is part of the structural and gender-based and sexual violence women experience in Kuwait. This is a big issue women's organisations and activists are targeting in Kuwait. For instance, a recent murder of a woman by a man who was stalking her led to protest and public discussion on this issue. See 'Woman's Murder by Alleged Harasser in Kuwait Sparks Protest', *Reuters*, 24 April 2021. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/womans-murder-by-alleged-harasser-kuwait-sparks-protest-outrage-2021-04-22/> (accessed 21 May 2021).

force women to work harder to prove themselves as capable politicians.⁴⁸ Moreover, tribal or familial associations influence voting behaviour in Kuwait, both for women and men, but the idea that women should not be politicians is still prevalent in more conservative districts, particularly districts 4 and 5.⁴⁹

Such views exist despite Kuwaiti women's extensive experience in socio-economic life, high rates of employment and education (including tertiary), their membership in management boards and the high positions they hold in the bureaucracy. Many women have been actively engaged in politics through leading civil activism, carrying out campaigns and working in women's organisations, religious organisations and unions. Interviewee 17 described the doubt about female political competency as part of a male biased discourse. Interviewee 7 stated that even though in reality many of the male candidates' and MPs' ability to do the job is highly questionable, they are not scrutinised in the same way as women. She said, 'Men have been given multiple chances and have proven themselves not worth it and yet they get elected again.' Interviewee 11 said, 'I think they want superwomen and if you are not at the level people want you to be, then you are not seen as worthy.'

The interviewees also referred to a view in Kuwaiti public opinion that has criticised the first four women elected to parliament in 2009 for not having done enough. Interviewees who talked about this issue were highly critical of this perception. Some of them stated that there was an unrealistically high expectation of what these four women MPs could have achieved and they were cast as failures even though male MPs who achieved as much or less than them were not criticised as harshly.⁵⁰ In fact, they had significant achievements. They introduced several bills to improve women's status and rights and managed to get eleven of these bills passed through parliament.⁵¹ They prevented some of the proposals by conservative and Islamist MPs. For instance, they opposed the proposal to allocate monthly direct financial transfers to unemployed Kuwaiti women because they believed this would encourage unemployment. Instead, a monthly payment was agreed for women aged over 55 to alleviate poverty at old age.⁵² These MPs also formed the Parliamentary Committee on Family and Women.⁵³ Interviewees 10 and 11 stated that these were achieved despite significant obstacles such as a lack of support from other MPs for the laws they proposed, the difficulty in changing existing policies and the fact that they were in parliament for less than two years.

⁴⁸ Omaymah E. Al-Suwaihel, 'Kuwaiti Female Leaders' Perspectives: The Influence of Culture on Their Leadership', *Contemporary Issues in Education Research* 3/3 (2010), p. 30.

⁴⁹ Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', p. 92.

⁵⁰ Interviewees 15, 17, 19 and 21. Massouma Mubarak is seen as a success, Aseel Al-Awadhi as an MP who has had some achievements but Rola Dashti and Salwa Aljassar are criticised more harshly.

⁵¹ Including laws such as the right to travel without male guardians, to apply for a passport, public education and health provision for the children of Kuwaiti women married to a non-citizen and rights to housing for divorced Kuwaiti mothers. Many of their propositions, for example, on social insurance for widows and public nurseries for children aged 1–5 were rejected. Maktabi, 'Female Citizenship and Family Law in Kuwait and Qatar: Globalization and Pressures for Reform in Two Rentier States', p. 29.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ The Family and Women's Committee has not been very active for a while and was dissolved in early 2019 and now women's issues will be handled by the Human Rights Committee. Interviewee 4.

Finally, according to the interviewees, sexism towards women politicians is prevalent in Kuwait and can be commonly observed in the media and social media. Described as misogyny and patriarchy by interviewee 21, sexism in this context reveals itself as harassment of women through dissemination of judgement and views about women politicians' private lives, personality, family, 'honour' and bodies to delegitimise them. Interviewees 4, 7 and 18 gave examples of how women are judged for not fulfilling their primal maternal and family duties and face smear campaigns about their 'honour' and family.⁵⁴ Male MPs do not face such misogynistic and sexist attacks. Interviewee 1 talked about how Aseel Al-Awadhi, an academic and MP for District 3 (elected in 2009), was attacked by Islamists for her 'moral decadence' and was charged with apostasy because of a lecture she gave in which she talked about critical thinking. Al-Awadhi fought the charges in the courts and in public and defeated her challengers. The first female ministers were also under considerable pressure from Islamist MPs to wear the hijab and some MPs threatened to interpellate them over that issue.⁵⁵

Interviewee 20 stated that sexism also reveals itself in the form of belittling women politicians by posting comments such as 'you don't have what it takes', 'you are not qualified', 'you don't know how to talk', 'you can't compete' and 'you're emotional'. She also mentioned how women politicians are body shamed and made fun of based on their looks, weight or clothes. Ex-MP Safaa Al-Hashem is often criticised for her behaviour such as being too vocal or too loud for a woman. However, as stated by interviewee 20, if a male MP behaves in the same manner (there have been incidents of male MPs physically fighting in the Parliament), he will not receive such a reaction. During her interview, Al-Hashem (Interviewee 3) stated that she has been criticised for her communication style. She was ridiculed, mocked and scrutinised but she did not change her style. Al-Hashem added, 'It was a rough ride and I had to punch a lot of faces along the ride, especially the "severely bearded" AKA my MP colleagues. I wanted to become a chronic headache. I am known for being sharp-tongued.' Some of the interviewees stated that Al-Hashem is also criticised for being a negative role model of a female politician due to her racist comments.⁵⁶

Diwaniyas

Interviewees involved in formal politics as candidates or former MPs described the electoral process in Kuwait as an extremely social one, partly due to the lack of a political party structure. This social activity mainly takes place in traditionally and historically male-dominated spaces named *diwaniyas*, defined as the 'political kitchens of Kuwait' by Interviewee 10.⁵⁷ *Diwaniyas* are places where people get together, meet each other, present

⁵⁴ Ex-Minister Jenan Boshehri, ex-MP Aseel Awadi and ex-MP Safaa Al-Hashem have been exposed to such smear campaigns.

⁵⁵ 'Freedom in the World 2009 – Kuwait', *Freedom House*, 16 July 2009. Available at <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a6452a732.html> (accessed 21 April 2021).

⁵⁶ Interviewees 7, 13, 20 and 21.

⁵⁷ *Diwaniyas* are conduits for maintaining opportunities such as networking or status and serve as social capital and indicators of social status for families holding them. They are valuable because public spaces are strictly controlled by the government and can face closure. As a private domain, *diwaniya* is exempt

views, broker deals, promote candidates and discuss politics. For those people who are politically oriented, attending *diwanis* regularly is key for facilitating their political career.⁵⁸ During election seasons, regularly visiting various *diwanis* is almost obligatory for parliamentarians who wish to keep their seats and for those in the process of announcing their candidacy and rallying support. Outside of elections, *diwanis* can function as a forum in which policies are presented and discussed, serving as consultative platforms and places through which public opinion can be gauged.⁵⁹

It is very challenging to break through the system of *diwaniya* to enter politics as a newcomer. Interviewee 21 stated that some MPs actually obtain their seats thanks to being members of specific *diwanis*, whether they are tribal, urban, Shiite or Sunni. Interviewees 12 and 16 said most male candidates have social, financial and political support thanks to sectarian, tribal, Islamist, political or familial connections and networks and added that it is hard for women, as well as young men with no tribal or family support, to promote themselves in these spaces. This hinders women's access to public opportunities and networks.⁶⁰ According to two interviewees, it is especially harder in districts where tribes and pro-Islamist views are more dominant and the use of political money is more prevalent.⁶¹ This lack of access to knowledge through *diwanis* (on what goes on in the Parliament, in the committees, about positions of individuals or groups on different issues, about regulations such as setting up campaign tents, carrying out advertisements) makes it harder for women to respond to queries during the election process and to develop strategies for post-election.⁶² There is ongoing valuable work to empower women in politics through training and seminars funded by the government or the UN. However, these efforts are not able to reach the wider sections of society.⁶³

from the 1979 Law of Gathering's restrictions which require a permit for a gathering of more than twenty people. According to Tetreault, this private institution is vital for the viability of the constitutional government in Kuwait because it serves as a buffer from state intervention. The *diwaniya* has persisted despite socio-economic transformations in the post-oil discovery and it has continuously reasserted its political significance. Clemence Chay, 'The Diwaniya Tradition in Modern Kuwait: An Interlinked Space and Practice', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6/1 (2016), pp. 1–2 and p. 5. Lindsey Stephenson, 'Women and the Malleability of the Kuwaiti Diwaniyya', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1/2 (2011), p. 185.

⁵⁸ Interviewee 18.

⁵⁹ Stephenson, 'Women and the Malleability of the Kuwaiti Diwaniyya', p. 188.

⁶⁰ Al-Suwaihel, 'Kuwaiti Female Leaders' Perspectives: The Influence of Culture on Their Leadership', p. 30

⁶¹ Interviewees 11 and 15.

⁶² Interviewees 7 and 20.

⁶³ Examples are trainings organised and led by Lubna Al-Kazi, the Director of the Women's Research and Studies Centre at Kuwait University and Alanoud Al-Sharekh, the Director of Ibtakar Consultancy. Lubna Al-Kazi is currently running a women's leadership training programme funded by the government. The programme identifies women interested in politics through an application process and provides them with training on public speaking, leadership skills, campaign management, lobbying and networking. Al-Kazi's Centre works in partnership with UN Women and with the Supreme Council of Planning and Development, who is implementing the Kuwait Vision 2035. The Centre is responsible for Vision 35's goal number five, gender empowerment. The programme undertook a training in 2018 and was working with another group of women in April 2019. However, Interviewee 14 criticised this programme for targeting only a particular group of women and excluding women from different strands.

Tribal primaries are another significant impediment for women's ability to get elected in elections, especially in Districts 4 and 5 but also in other districts. In these districts, tribes carry out primary elections and choose their candidates before the official polls. Despite being illegal, they continue to be carried out. Tribal primaries create hierarchies and additional hurdles that are difficult for women to navigate.⁶⁴ The government enforces the ban on primaries selectively and does not consistently try to prevent them.⁶⁵ Interviewee 12 said she refused to participate in primary elections as they are illegal and she also believed that they are unfair because a prospective candidate's success is based on numbers rather than the capabilities of the candidate. She said her 20 years of experience in her district in public service and her extensive relationships worked to her advantage during her campaign.

Elections in Kuwait are preceded by intense periods of meetings in houses, *diwanis*, schools and large campaign tents. In these gatherings, discussions take place, candidates give talks and answer questions. Interviewees 4 and 15 said that during election seasons women candidates have access to most *diwanis* either through invitation, familial connections or through setting up their own *diwanis*, but this is not the case outside of election times. Interviewee 12 confirmed this point by stating that male candidates usually have a family, *diwaniya* or tribe supporting them but women usually rely on their individual efforts. Interviewee 10, who ran in the last elections, reflected on her experience of entering *diwanis*:

‘It was harder for me because this is their place but, in the end, no one was against me entering the diwaniya during the election. But after the elections, I tried to continue to attend and found the same people who were welcoming me had changed their attitude. It was like, “Why are you coming now? There is no election, so...”’

Women's attendance in *diwanis* during election seasons seems to have slightly normalised them as no longer strictly male institutions and places. New female *diwanis* with the same function as men's social/friends *diwaniya* organised by affluent women have also emerged; these are usually open one day a week including outside of the election periods.⁶⁶ Such women's gatherings used to be called majlis but now some women are deliberately calling theirs *diwaniya* as well. There are also political *diwanis* as forums for political discussion organised by well-known women such as Rola Dashti and Rasha Al-Sabah.⁶⁷ Chay writes that women's enfranchisement has challenged the highly gendered public-private distinction. He considers *diwanis* as fluid spaces between public and private and as the most apt places for the blurring of gendered segregation based on public-private distinction. Interviewee 21 added that the emergence of mixed and female *diwanis* show the different strategy adopted by women politicians as they are seeking to reshape a masculine space. However, Interviewees 4, 16, 20 and 21 added that the number of *diwanis* led by women for political purposes is still very small and women are still excluded from the traditional and influential *diwanis*.

⁶⁴ Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', p. 92.

⁶⁵ Interviewee 16 said during primaries police cars wait outside to ensure their 'smooth running'.

⁶⁶ Interviewees 4 and 18.

⁶⁷ Deputy Minister of Higher Education and a member of the royal family. Stephenson, 'Women and the Malleability of the Kuwaiti Diwaniyya', p. 192.

Networking

The change in the electoral system in 2012, which reduced the number of votes a voter can cast to only one,⁶⁸ has made it even more difficult for those with no support or funding from a tribe or family or no money to campaign in the elections, to build networks and to win. In the new one-vote system, tribes and families identify and support the candidate who is most likely to win the election rather than give other candidates, including women candidates, a chance.⁶⁹ Interviewee 2 said,

‘Previously, a voter had four votes and at least one of those votes would go to women. So, your first choice is the guy you know, your second choice is the guy you want, your third choice is “we need to give women a chance”, and the fourth vote, you give to whomever. But now ... it is only one vote and that’s not good.’

Women candidates have to work harder to network and access the relevant spaces and platforms when running their campaigns. Interviewees who ran in elections said they usually start their campaigns within the family, then reach out to friends and then to the *diwaniyas*. Interviewee 6 said that the campaigners first approach those with a more open mind about women’s participation in politics and then move to conservative members of society and approach the latter through their wives and daughters. Interviewee 10 decided to establish her own *diwaniya* a couple of years ago: ‘In the beginning it was me and my campaign team attending and after a while I started advertising it on social media and numbers increased over time including mixed-gender visitors and lots of young people.’ She said she wanted to ‘have our place for people to come and talk politics’. In her *diwaniyas*, she trains women who are planning to run in the future about the electoral process and campaigning. She said that she is criticised for calling her meetings ‘*diwaniya*’. She has received comments such as: ‘This is not for women, change the name please, don’t call it *diwaniya*. Call it a meeting/gathering but not *diwaniya*, it’s almost like you’re wearing a *dishdasha*.’⁷⁰

Interviewees talked about social media (mainly Twitter, Instagram) as another tool used by women candidates to overcome the limitations in networking and reaching out to wider audiences.⁷¹ They added that male candidates also use social media but not as actively as women and that some women are also visible on traditional media such as television. Interviewee 15 stated that social media has the risk of creating a big bubble that is limited to like-minded people with similar background and socio-economic status. Women activists also create networks and online platforms to support female candidates in elections. For example, the recently formed Mudhawi’s List is an excellent example of such a platform.⁷²

⁶⁸ It used to be four votes.

⁶⁹ Interviewees 4, 15, 17 and 19.

⁷⁰ A traditional robe worn by men in Kuwait and in the Arabian Peninsula.

⁷¹ Interviewees 18 and 20.

⁷² Yasmena Al Mulla, ‘Mudhawi’s List: Kuwait Creates Platform to Support Women in Politics’, *Gulf News*, 20 September 2020. Available at <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/kuwait/mudhawis-list-kuwait-creates-platform-to-support-women-in-politics-1.73999462> (accessed 6 April 2021).

Some of the interviewees mentioned that an important aspect that distinguishes women candidates from men is their tendency to work with younger people and women. Their campaign managers and teams are usually composed of younger people which is generally not the case with the teams of male candidates. Interviewee 4 indicated that women MPs appear to be more aware of the concerns of the younger generation due to their engagement with different civil organisations focusing on education, women's issues and social initiatives.⁷³ The interviewed women politicians and candidates said they prefer to work with women or women's organisations. During her interview, Interviewee 10 stated that she prefers to work with women because 'society and men try to spread the idea that women are the enemy of women and to put us against one another. I do believe that we have to challenge this idea.' In the last election, a group of candidates including Alia Al-Khaled, Ghadeer Al-Aseeri and Safaa Al-Hashem formed a cross-district panel and discussed women's issues. Interviewee 15 described such cross-district initiatives on specific issues as a refreshing approach in Kuwaiti politics and something that male candidates never do.

Wasta and Corruption

Women's inclusion in politics can challenge the existing status quo but can also perpetuate it. In general, the inclusion of excluded sections of societies and stakeholders, such as women, in the political system is usually believed to create better outcomes in consensus building, present an opportunity to challenge polarising dynamics and embedded issues and increase the levels of congruence between policies and public preferences.⁷⁴ Indeed, women parliamentarians across the world in general tend to be more concerned with public goods, transparency, anti-corruption, grassroots politics, the youth and issues beyond the traditional ideological debates and divisions.⁷⁵

⁷³ Interviewee 4.

⁷⁴ Claire Devlin and Robert Elgie, 'The Effect of Increased Women's Representation in Parliament: The Case of Rwanda', *Parliamentary Affairs* 61/2 (2008), pp. 237–54; Arend Lijphart, *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Leif Lewin, Barbro Lewin, Hanna Back and Lina Westin, 'A Kinder, Gentler Democracy? The Consensus Model and Swedish Disability Politics', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 31/3 (2008), pp. 291–310. These views are based on evidence driven from liberal democratic systems and are contested. Judith Squires and Mark Wickham-Jones, 'Women in Parliament: A Comparative Analysis', *Equal Opportunities Commission* (2001). Moreover, they may not be fully applicable to contexts where the monarchical elite has executive power within a parliamentary system.

⁷⁵ Drude Dahlerup, 'Women's Entry into Politics: The Experience of the Danish Local and General Elections 1908–20', *Scandinavian Political Studies* 1/2-3 (1978), p. 140; For instance, women's enfranchisement in the early twentieth century in the UK contributed to increasing welfare spending and tackling inequality, Mona Morgan-Collins, 'First Women at the Polls: What Impact Did Women's Suffrage Have on Politics?', *LSE Government blog*, 20 July 2016. Available at <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/government/2016/07/20/first-women-at-the-polls-what-impact-did-womens-suffrage-have-on-politics/> (accessed 6 April 2021). In Rwanda, the inclusion of female parliamentarians increased the focus on health, property and women's issues in parliamentary and committee debates. Devlin and Elgie, 'The Effect of Increased Women's Representation in Parliament: The Case of Rwanda'.

In Kuwait, although female candidates focus on issues similar to those of male candidates and politicians, they also choose to integrate and re-emphasise issues that are not often addressed in the dominant political discourse in Kuwait. Maasouma Al-Mubarak called for equality of all people in Kuwait from different ethnic, religious or sectarian backgrounds; Salwa Al-Jassar focused on development, employment, health, educational reform and women's issues; and Al-Awadhi called for dialogue to resolve the issue of the 'stateless or Bedoon' and their lack of access to basic civil rights.⁷⁶ Al-Awadhi was critical of the sectarian and religious divides in Kuwait and called for the creation of a social safety net in Kuwait. She also addressed issues such as employment and privatisation and offered a plan to transform the government's involvement in the economy.⁷⁷

Interviewees described most women politicians as outspoken and active women who want to make a change. Whether people agree with their views or not, they all had an agenda and spoke it rather than 'sitting in parliament like a dead body'.⁷⁸ For instance, opinion is divided about Al-Hashem, about her style, her nationalist/racist approach and her disregard for feminism. However, she has also broken stereotypes about women being quiet and complacent and challenged the misogynistic behaviour of men towards her. Interviewee 4 stated that Al-Awadhi and Al-Mubarak have been more active than male MPs and have tackled issues that male MPs would not have touched such as economic inequality, health and education. She added that women elected to the Municipal Council have also adopted a similar approach; for instance, Maha Al-Baghli does not shy away from speaking against corruption.⁷⁹ Interviewee 4 also stated that women politicians in Kuwait are more engaged with the younger generation than male politicians and as a result of this they might be more aware of the impact of the system of privileges and the lack of transparency on them. According to some of the interviewees, women politicians focus on income distribution and issues that transcend existing political and ideological divisions more than their male counterparts.⁸⁰

Some of the interviewees stated that women politicians have challenged existing structures and tried to reform them. Interviewee 16 said that women are not seen as typical 'service MPs' due to their long-term exclusion from clientelistic political networks. She said the one-vote system made the phenomenon of 'service MPs' even more prevalent and pushed electoral politics further into clientelism or *wasta* by increasing voters' tendency to vote for such MPs rather than those who focus on issues, rights or legislation. She added, 'In the 60s and 70s, those kinds of "service MPs" were known to be bad, to be avoided... but now in recent years, they became the ones who are given legitimacy.'⁸¹

⁷⁶ Oلمات, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', pp. 83–4.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ A reference to male MPs made by Interviewee 7.

⁷⁹ Interviewee 4.

⁸⁰ Interviewees 1, 9, 8, 22, 26 and 27.

⁸¹ Corruption in Kuwait is a pervasive and complicated issue. Many of the practices and values associated with corruption may not be seen as corruption by all. Corruption does not just refer to illicit transfers of money and fraud but also to the prevalent practices called *wasta*, embedded in the socio-economic culture (accessing services, positions and information through connections). This is partly a result of

In relation to tackling corruption and systemic socio-economic issues, Interviewee 7 talked about Hind Al-Subeeh and how she tackled false certifications in the ministries she ran which was a project started by her predecessor against a female ex-minister, Nouriya Al-Subeeh. Those with fake certificates were expelled and this process is still ongoing. Interviewee 6 gave the example of a female ex-Minister of Housing, who was part of the 26 Group formed by individuals (not an NGO), that sit with the ruler to discuss issues related to corruption. Interviewee 15 talked about Jenan Boushehri, ex-Minister for Service Affairs and for Housing until November 2019, who pushed for transparency and created an investigative committee. When she resigned from her position, she delivered a strong speech against the government despite having been in a ministerial position. Interviewee 12 said that when she became minister, she was 'shocked to see how the Ministry had been functioning for more than forty years with no clear strategy or goal and it was based on 'random work'. As a result, she developed a strategy but faced huge challenges in implementing it.

Insights from the interviews indicate that interviewees did not perceive an intrinsic connection between being a woman and an aversion to corruption. They indicated that several female ministers have become loyalists, have not really challenged the existing structures and have been involved in *wasta*. Moreover, there are male politicians who are pro-reform and anti-corruption. Therefore, it is important to move away from gender essentialism and to consider the wider institutional and structural inequalities in the system that lead women to take a different approach. Interviewees 5, 7, 10 and 17 stated that women have not been in the system long enough and they lack connections and that is why they might be pursuing more transparent ways of doing politics. They might be challenging *wasta* to empower themselves and increase their leverage and to disempower those that benefit from the established system. Their outsider position pushes them to use moral principles, rules and arguments around what divides right from wrong as leverage and as a source of power.

the poorly executed and inefficient public services which make it hard for people to rely on the system to receive services properly and in a timely manner. In this regard, *wasta* is seen as the playing field for getting things done (Interviewee 8). Corruption in Kuwait can also be defined as a wider tool for political expediency in the wealth distribution system which has turned into an entitlement programme. People feel they are receiving their portion of the wealth and they make a trade-off between political participation and benefits from the government. Most people do not see this as a form of corruption (Interviewee 8). In politics, corruption can take many forms. People can get appointed to positions or nominated as minister thanks to affiliations or family relations (Interviewee 6). For instance, sometimes a member of parliament may receive a payment from a business or an individual to submit an official question to the government (Interviewee 2). Interviewee 6 stated that, at the moment, MPs are mostly looked at as *wasta*, or as 'service MPs' rather than legislators but women MPs are usually seen as failing to provide services in the way society expects them to deliver.

Lessons

Building on the research conducted for this paper, this section will draw on two separate lessons that are worth considering in relation to women's political participation in Kuwait. The second one is related to the issue of inclusion in the conversations held on women's political participation and the availability of space for intersectional discussion and analysis. Such a conversation has the potential to further strengthen women's rights activism and political activism in general in Kuwait.

Important changes have been achieved and suffrage has made an impact on women's political roles but government support is needed to sustain the changes and to overcome existing challenges.

Even though women's suffrage has not resulted in high levels of women's electoral participation, suffrage and the presence of women as electoral candidates and MPs, even in small numbers, have changed the public perception about women's role in politics. The government should build on this transformation and develop a more explicitly supportive agenda and policies to increase women's political participation in general and electoral participation in particular. The important work and effort of women's civil society organisations, women's rights activists and female candidates need consistent, deliberate and constructive support from the government. This is necessary to sustain and build on the progress that has been made until today and also to overcome numerous existing obstacles that and challenges to women's political participation as explained in this report.

Interviews revealed that there is a generally positive view of the impact of women's suffrage on the public and political discourse and perceptions of women's public role. The new dimensions added to the institution of *diwaniya* and women's candidates' and voters' access to male *diwanis* (at least during election periods) are indicators of this. The notion of a woman parliamentarian is now more accepted but maybe less so in more conservative and tribal sections of Kuwaiti society. Interviewees 11 and 21 said that the younger generation of girls and women are more aware of their rights which could be a result of the internet and social media or the indirect result of fifteen years of political enfranchisement. The younger generation coming into their 20s and 30s have the potential to shift things and young women are present in social life, use social media extensively and follow authors like Bouthayna Al-Essa who challenge censorship, decision-making processes and boundaries.⁸²

As a result of women being elected to parliament, the political discourse has also slightly shifted as women politicians brought up issues that were not discussed extensively before in parliament. The Parliament cannot now talk about the issue of housing without including non-married, divorced and widowed women. On the government side, it is only women ministers who have agreed to be grilled and put to a confidence vote. Interviewee 4 stated that male ministers usually give in or resign before receiving a grilling.

⁸² Interviewee 15.

There are changes in the religious discourse about women as well. According to Interviewee 18, previously political leadership of women was considered *haram* but after suffrage, Islamists changed their attitude on this issue. Women's visibility in politics (for instance now very conservative MPs have to sit and work with female MPs) has contributed to the lessening of taboos such as rules around 'honour' or customs related to gender segregation. Interviewee 4 stated that, 'Even though there are not many female politicians, at least there are now examples whereas there were none 15 years ago.' Interviewee 7 stated, 'Now people talk about specific examples, they talk about when X woman was a Minister, and that on its own is an accomplishment.' Interviewee 21 pointed to the changing academic discourse after suffrage and defined the change as a ripple effect that affected the broader social discourse.⁸³

Finally, women's vote has led to a change in the gendered structure of the whole election process. Male candidates and politicians now not only take women more seriously but also talk about women's issues and what interests them. Of course, their campaign promises do not usually turn into legislation after being elected, largely because of lack of support for such initiatives among all-male MPs.⁸⁴ Still, male politicians now set up election tents for women and establish women's committees. Even religious fundamentalists have incorporated women's issues into their agendas because women are voting for them. Interviewee 2 said, 'In the beginning, the perception was that women are voting for whom-ever their husband and their sons are voting for. This is changing.' Interviewee 6 reiterated this by saying that more women are changing their mind at the polling station and voting based on their own choice, whether it is a man or a woman candidate.

However, women's suffrage and women's participation in electoral politics have revealed the underlying gendered and intersectional inequalities and biases in the Kuwaiti system.⁸⁵ Similarly, Interviewee 21 said, 'Women's voting rights brought out a lot of hateful misogyny to the open'. She added that this process has shown that despite women's political participation for 15 years, gendered inequalities persist. The process showed that suffrage does not easily alter existing inequalities and that it is still very hard for women to get elected to parliament.

Therefore, it is very important that the Kuwaiti government provides direct and stronger support for women's political participation to sustain the achievements and positive changes observed since the introduction of women's suffrage. However, more importantly, the government should increase its awareness of the existing barriers and challenges to women's political participation and exert more effort and allocate more resources to overcome them. This is necessary to change the misogynistic and negatively gendered rhetoric and transform the political space to strengthen women's participation in both formal and informal political processes.

⁸³ She added that when the Kuwaiti suffragettes were protesting in 2004–2006, Kuwait University opened a scholarship position for feminist studies for the first time.

⁸⁴ Interviewees 16, 18, 20 and 21.

⁸⁵ Interviewee 5.

An intersectional discussion and analysis could make a positive contribution to the efforts to increase women's political participation in Kuwait.

Class and economic privileges can be advantageous for some Kuwaiti women in political participation but the existing hierarchies create significant impediments for many women. Overlooking the presence of intersectional inequalities in Kuwait can also weaken the chances of inclusive women rights activism and negatively impact the demand for equal rights in Kuwait. Like any other, Kuwaiti society is a plural segmented society divided along religious and ideological lines that cut across urban and tribal divisions and citizenship rights. In Kuwait, these divisions are quite rigid and continue to be essential foundations in the country's political system. These groups – the Hadhari,⁸⁶ Biduns,⁸⁷ Bedouins,⁸⁸ Islamists, Liberals, Shia, Sunnis, the rich and the not-so-rich – are represented by different political blocs.⁸⁹ Divisions between Biduns and citizens, and between the Bedouins and the Hadhari create different privileges and under-privileges and lead to polarised views about who the real Kuwaitis are. However, it is important to remember here that these categories are not fixed and must not be politically essentialised as they are always in-flux, open to change and do not indicate a specific and continuous political position.

Interviewee 21 pointed to the fact that everyday experiences of privileged upper class women are different from other women who cannot even leave their house or work. They experience different legal, social, institutional, educational and employment opportunities or disadvantages. Two interviewees indicated that they are not interested in political activism for women's rights and said Kuwaiti women have everything they need.⁹⁰ When saying this, they actually referred only to a particular group of women, the Hadhari women with access to good education in Kuwait or abroad, who are wealthy, able set up their own private company or work in any sector they want to, able to outsource childcare and have cooks and drivers. Interviewee 21 stated that a woman from a privileged background might say:

‘My husband takes care of everything for me and if not my husband, then my brother, if not my brother then my son and so forth. So that inconvenience of her not being able to do things, such as renewing her own passport, is not really an inconvenience anymore. It is really solved by the thing, patriarchy, that oppresses her too.’

This, according to her, makes women complacent and overlooks the multitude of ways the law erases women; they do not realise the consequences of the existing system until their situation changes, for instance, when they divorce, or if they want to marry someone their family does not approve of. Three interviewees talked extensively about how the oversaturation of privilege in Kuwait can make people ignorant to some of the other oppressions happening in society and limits the intersectional conversation.⁹¹

⁸⁶ City dwellers.

⁸⁷ The stateless.

⁸⁸ Recently nomadic populations.

⁸⁹ Al-Mughni and Tetreault, ‘Gender, Citizenship and Nationalism in Kuwait’, p. 71. Women with Hadhari, Bedouin or Shiite backgrounds have become MPs since suffrage. However, most of these women are from a particular socio-economic class and have actually been mostly Hadhari.

⁹⁰ Interviewees 22 and 26.

⁹¹ Interviewees 7, 13 and 21.

Interviewees also stated that there is no collective effort at the political level to highlight issues that different women experience across society based on their socio-economic, ethnic, religious, tribal background and citizenship status and the intersection of these individual or multiple factors with their gender. The gendered experiences of LGBTQI community are not even mentioned. A similar process can be observed at the level of civil society activism for women's rights. Some of the interviewees said that one of the characteristics of leading women's organisations and politically active women in Kuwait is that they mostly cater for a particular group of women. These divisions are clearly highlighted in two of the examples given by Interviewee 13 who said:

'People do not always feel comfortable going to the activities or events organised by these organisations. On social media you see comments such as 'the same women on stage talking about this again', 'how does this change anything?', 'I don't feel included', 'I don't feel this is like a safe space for me'.'

The other example she provided related to a particular event that sought to bring civil society representatives together and talk about statelessness in Kuwait. This did not work and some invitees rejected joining the event as they do not want to collaborate on issues non-Kuwaiti women experience.

The lack of an intersectional approach limits civil society organisations' ability to generate inclusive spaces for activism and to highlight issues faced by women from different backgrounds. According to Jacqueline S. Ismael (1981), women's organisations have historically neglected the issues of statelessness and have mostly worked for women from a particular class and ideology.⁹² Interviewees added that the lack of an intersectional conversation also leads to divisions into camps and individuals end up siding with one organisation or the other as if they are political parties. As a result, women from different classes are not able to work together or collaborate in elections.⁹³

Conclusion

Nonetheless, women's suffrage has made a significant impact on Kuwaiti politics by transforming the discourse around women's public role as well as by revealing existing inequalities. Suffrage and the presence of women as electoral candidates and MPs, even if in small numbers, have changed the public perception of women's role in politics.

However, women's suffrage has not resulted in a high degree of women's electoral participation due to structural gendered obstacles embedded in the Kuwaiti political and social system as well as the nature of the electoral system (specifically the one-vote rule) and male-dominated political spaces. Of course, significant challenges remain. The underlying factors that hinder or limit women's political participation are multiple but they are part of the gendered structural inequalities manifested in day-to-day life, electoral mechanisms and political institutions. Existing structures are resilient to

⁹² Jacqueline S. Ismael, *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1981).

⁹³ Olimat, 'Women and the Kuwaiti National Assembly', p. 90.

change leading to a continuation of the structural gender inequalities and deep-running biases. In some ways, suffrage also transformed women voters into tools and instruments in elections and into recruits working to perpetuate the transactional political system within tribal, sectarian or patriarchal structures.

Unfortunately, the government has not been effective in being fully supportive of women in politics and adopting a discourse that encourages women's equal participation in all aspects of life. As a result, achieving women's political representation and their meaningful participation are difficult to overcome only through women's rights advocacy. A significant responsibility falls on the shoulders of the government to overcome these challenges and transform the Kuwaiti political space into a more inclusive one. This, however, depends on whether those in positions of power are willing to do so. Finally, suffrage has also revealed the intersectional inequalities in Kuwaiti socio-economic and political life. Indeed, as also stated by some women activist interviewees, the intersectional conversation is necessary in Kuwait to better support women's rights, to create inclusive spaces and dialogue and to further increase women's social, political and economic participation.

Appendix: Methodology

The findings and analysis in the paper rely on the scholarship on women's political participation and women in Kuwaiti politics but the main source of information is 27 semi-structured interviews conducted in Kuwait in the spring and summer of 2019 with politicians (MPs and ministers – ex, current and candidates), public servants, election campaigners, academics and civil society representatives as well as diplomats and a political consultant. Most of the Kuwaiti participants were women except one male political activist and one male ex-election campaigner. The names of most interviewees are kept anonymous upon their request.

The interviews were conducted through the snowballing technique. We tried to reach interviewees through different channels – direct WhatsApp messages or through contacts among academics and activists. Most interviews were conducted in English, some in Arabic. Both the research lead and project assistant were present in most of the interviews but some of them were conducted by the project assistant alone. Interviews took place in the offices of interviewees or their homes. We asked the same set of questions to all participants, which included topics such as the reasons for the late introduction of suffrage in Kuwait, obstacles for women's political participation, how women navigate these obstacles and the impact of women's political participation on women's issues and on the political system in Kuwait.

The interview data unfortunately does not include certain important groups relevant to the research such as representatives of Islamist women's organisations, Islamist or conservative female candidates, male politicians, representatives from districts dominated by tribes and the Bidun. Our efforts to reach these groups were not successful. The logistics probably played a key role in not being able to reach these groups because establishing new contacts takes time, which we did not have in abundance of among this group. More-

over, the period for data collection was short (three weeks). As a result, the analysis in the paper lacks insights from female Islamist and tribal political actors although references are made to these groups. This is a significant limitation of the paper. We also did not talk to women politicians who were appointed to cabinet roles (although some of the ex-parliamentarians we interviewed were also cabinet members) as the research sought to capture the issues around electoral politics.

Interviewee	Position	Gender
1	Ex-public servant, ex-campaign manager	F
2	Ex-campaign manager, businessman	M
3	Ex-MP (Safaa Al-Hashem)	F
4	Academic, head of a women's research centre	F
5	Public officer	F
6	Public officer	F
7	Representative of a women's civil society organisation, Businesswoman	F
8	Academic	F
9	Head of a women's civil society organisation	F
10	Minister, academic	F
11	Electoral candidate, businesswoman	F
12	Ex-MP, ex-Minister	F
13	Representative of a women's civil society organisation	F
14	Representative of a women's civil society organisation	F
15	Political activist	M
16	Head of a women's civil society organisation	F
17	Sociologist, writer	F
18	Political activist, academic	F
19	Ex-MP, academic	F
20	Electoral candidate, academic	F
21	Academic	F
22	Public officer	F
23	Political consultant (British)	M
24	Diplomat (British)	F
25	Diplomat (British)	M
26	Public officer	M
27	Public officer	F

All interviewees were Kuwaiti, unless otherwise stated.

Interview questions

What is your current position/occupation?

Why do you think suffrage was not introduced sooner in Kuwait?

What are the obstacles today for women's ability to get elected?

How do women navigate through these obstacles or what do they do to overcome them?

After being elected (in parliament) or appointed (in government), what strategies do female politicians adopt? Do they seek to adjust to the system, or do they try to change it?

Has women's electoral participation changed campaigning strategies and methods in Kuwait?

Have attitudes about women's role in politics changed since women began to participate in politics?

Has women's electoral participation had an impact on political debates, perspectives on issues and the political discourse in Kuwait?

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Two former Members of the Kuwaiti Parliament, Rola Dashti and Salwa Al-Jassar, 8 June 2009. © Kuwait-Ra'ed Qutena, Flickr

