



Gender Politics and Women's Leadership in Kuwait

by Alanoud Alsharekh

Local authorities have fallen behind other Gulf states in launching gender equality initiatives

Kuwait was one of the first Gulf states to introduce public schooling for women, and by the mid-1960s Kuwaiti women were actively engaged in the labor market. Yet when the first parliamentary elections were held in 1963, Kuwaiti women were not included in the democratic process. The consequences of this exclusion still persist today, with Kuwait ranked 129th globally for women's political empowerment. With a lone female MP and just two cabinet ministers, it's not surprising that Kuwait ranks so low. According to UNDP figures, only 12 percent of women occupy leadership positions in Kuwait's public sector, with the private sector doing only marginally better at 15 percent. Thirteen years

on from gaining their full political rights in 2005, Kuwaiti women are still struggling to be included in government and secure leadership positions based on their qualifications and merit.

Since 2005, there have only been eight female ministers and seven women appointed to the Municipality Council (and none since 2013). Although Kuwaiti women have been able to run for office since the 2006 elections, with 28 running at that time, harsh media treatment has deterred more from seeking office. Fear of failure has also played a factor—only eight women have won seats since 2006, with just six managing to assume office. Of the small number of women who have reached leadership roles, many are recycled across posts—including Minister of Housing Jinan Bu Shihri, who was one of those appointed to the Municipal Council. The real number of women in leadership positions is therefore smaller than even what these modest numbers at first suggest.

Structural obstacles for women

Barriers to women's leadership in Kuwait are entrenched and therefore difficult to overcome. Kuwaitis are not used to seeing women in leadership positions in the religious, economic, or industrial spheres. The government has tried to bolster women's political participation—for example, in 2012 it promised to ensure women were employed in the justice sector. But the government has not yet honored its pledge—there hasn't been a single appointment despite graduating over 20 female district attorneys in 2015 for that very purpose.

Kuwait's laws are also impediments to having more female leaders. Guardianship over women in tribal- and kinship-based patriarchal societies like Kuwait's translates into legislation and policies that limit women's autonomy. Unfortunately, the wording of many laws in Kuwait and other Gulf states renders women as the legal property of their male guardians. That means they require consent for something as personal and basic as getting married.

Closed male circles also make it difficult for women to break through. The "diwaniyya" culture, a network of alliances and pressure groups that influence leadership ascent, is often a prohibitive

barrier for women in Kuwait. Dr. Faiza al Khoraifi, the first woman to become chancellor of Kuwait University, may have been as qualified as anyone else to fill the position, but having influential male family members may also have been a helpful factor in her hiring. Her late brother Jasim al Khoraifi was parliamentary speaker, and her husband Ali al Ghanim is chairman of Kuwait's Chamber of Commerce—they could contribute to her ascent through political deal-making. Without intervention by powerful males, it is very difficult for women to access leadership positions. That's especially true when there are also economic, educational, or political obstacles to overcome.

Countries like Sweden and Finland, which have a proportional electoral system, have more women in leadership positions because they make it easier for women to be included in the political process. Where women are forced to go it alone as independent candidates, like in Kuwait, it is exceedingly difficult for them to break into leadership roles in politics but also trade unions, corporate boards, and sports clubs.

A country's political maturity and experience with participatory democracy are thus indicators of high rates of female leadership. In Kuwait, the inclusion process is still fairly new and so there needs to be strong political will to guarantee that women make it to decision-making positions. Kuwait would do well to look at the 2013 example of Saudi Arabia's King Abdallah enforcing a 20 percent quota for women on the Shura Council despite societal resistance. A more recent example to emulate is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashed's announcement that the UAE will commit itself to gender parity in government posts. Kuwait's leadership has yet to publicly endorse similarly empowering measures in such a forceful and top-down manner.

Gender stereotypes are also barriers

Gender discrimination permeates Kuwait's public and private institutions in ways that make women less likely to end up in leadership positions. The media often focuses on women as sexual playthings and is no friend to female leaders. Reporters tend to be more critical of women and ridicule their performance and physical appearance in ways that most male leaders don't have

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to deal with. Women are also portrayed negatively in educational curricula, making it difficult to challenge the indoctrinated view that women are inherently domestic creatures who belong in the kitchen. These views reinforce stereotypes that women are not leadership material and thus make it harder for them to be taken seriously in senior roles.

Policies that encourage segregation, like those that were implemented in Kuwait University and by extension all higher learning facilities post-1998, are a real impediment to women's leadership because this division shrinks and constricts the space available for them. It socially isolates women from men and from taking on "male" roles—including leadership positions—returning them to a tightly controlled domestic space.

A lack of awareness among Kuwaiti women about their legal rights and how they're denied leadership roles on a systematic basis doesn't help either. Collective frustration with female underrepresentation remains the only road to genuine change. However, the Supreme Council of Development and Planning's recent program to train women for leadership positions as part of Kuwait's Vision 2035 goals, as well as private sector initiatives such as Ibtakar's Empowering Kuwaiti Women in Politics program, are modest steps in the right direction.

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