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 Jihan 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 Khora- 
fi, 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 fac-
tor in her hiring. Her late brother Jasim al Khora- 
fi was parliamentary speaker, and her husband 
Ali al Ghanim is chairman of Kuwait’s Chamber 
of Commerce—they could contribute to her as-
cent through political deal-making. Without in-
tervention by powerful males, it is very difficult 
for women to access leadership positions. That’s 
especially true when there are also economic, ed-
ucational, or political obstacles to overcome.

Countries like Sweden and Finland, which have 
a proportional electoral system, have more wom-
en 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 lead-
ership roles in politics but also trade unions, cor-
porate 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. Ku-
wait would do well to look at the 2013 example of 
Saudi Arabia’s King Abdallah enforcing a 20 per-
cent quota for women on the Shura Council de-
spite societal resistance. A more recent example 
to emulate is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid’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 pub-
lic and private institutions in ways that make 
women less likely to end up in leadership posi-
tions. The media often focuses on women as sex-
ual playthings and is no friend to female leaders. 
Reporters tend to be more critical of women and 
ridicule their performance and physical appear-
ance in ways that most male leaders don’t have 
to deal with. Women are also portrayed negativ-
ely in educational curricula, making it difficult to 
challenge the indoctrinated view that women are 
inhernently 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 
semin 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 con-
stricts the space available for them. It socially iso-
lates 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 un-
derrepresentation 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 Ibtkar’s Empowering 
Kuwaiti Women in Politics program, are modest 
steps in the right direction.

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