



**Moodhi Mohamed Al-Suqair  
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Women's Cultural and Social Society, Kuwait**

**Gulf Affairs: What role does the Women's Cultural and Social Society play in Kuwait?**

**Moodhi Al-Suqair:** Since it was established in February 1963, the Women's Cultural and Social Society has played an important role in defending the social, cultural, economic, and political rights of Kuwaiti women. We do this through a number of programs that benefit women. These include raising awareness about women's health issues, child and maternal care, assisting women with disabilities and helping them in their daily needs, and cooperating with NGOs that focus on women's issues in the local, regional, and international contexts.

**Gulf Affairs: Does the Society collaborate with institutions outside of Kuwait? If so, what have been your primary areas of focus for such collaboration?**

**Al-Suqair:** The Society collaborates with institutions both inside and outside of Kuwait. It collaborates with several bodies of the United Nations such as UN Women and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and it has a special consultative status with the UN's Economic and Social Council. In

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terms of non-UN bodies, we also work with Freedom House, the General Arab Women Federation, Kafa Organization and the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), among others.

The Society's focus when it comes to collaborative projects is on empowering women and enhancing their capacities in society. We've formed a Gulf-wide committee to demand that women can pass their nationality onto their children, conducted a study with UNIFEM on women in the field of politics, published a report on Kuwait's personal status law and other women's rights issues, launched a legal empowerment initiative for women with the UNDP called the Waraqati Project, and worked with Freedom House to establish the Norok Qanunok campaign aimed at raising awareness on the personal status law.

### **Gulf Affairs: How do you describe the status of women in Kuwait? How has their role in society evolved over the past few decades?**

**Al-Suqair:** Women are half of Kuwait's society. Since the early 1960s, Kuwaiti women have played an active role in building the society and families alongside men in many fields.

One notable thing women have done is to empower themselves through higher education. As such, women have been able to demonstrate their ability to participate in leading their community and making important and successful decisions in various areas of work.

As for how women's status has changed in recent years, one of the most important developments relates to voting rights. In May 1999, His Highness the Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad approved an election decree that granted women the right to vote and run for the national assembly. However, the decree was obstructed by some parliamentarians and women in turn took up the issue with the highest court in Kuwait—filing a lawsuit on May 4, 2000. On May 16, 2005, women were finally granted their full political rights.

Another milestone happened on December 4, 2013, when Kuwait signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) with the UN's Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), which was aimed at enhancing efforts in the social, developmental, and political empowerment of women and giving them their equality with men in various fields. The MoU focused on protecting women's rights and combating all manifestations of discrimination against them and eliminating all forms of violence.

Also, the Committee for Women's Affairs was formed in Kuwait's National Assembly to study and take care of all civil and social rights related to women. The committee was also tasked with looking into amending laws that are not in the interest of women and enforcing the laws that already are in their favor. The committee also raised awareness among women about how to exercise all their rights.

### **Gulf Affairs: Since being granted the right to vote in 2005, very few women have succeeded in winning elections. In your opinion, what are the main barriers facing female politicians? How can these be overcome?**

**Al-Suqair:** There are many obstacles. Kuwaiti society, like any other Arab society, is still dominated by patriarchy, customs, and traditions. Many in the country unfortunately believe that women are deficient and unable to compete with men.

Women also lack a political basis as men have dominated the political arena for 40 years through sports

clubs, cooperatives, and “diwanias.” Women only began building their political base and asserting themselves as leadership competitors during the last ten years—they have not yet achieved what they are aspiring for. Political Islam, which has dominated the political arena for years, has also reinforced the idea that women are not eligible to take up political positions in parliament and elsewhere.

### **Gulf Affairs: What government policies would you like to see enacted that can support gender equality in Kuwait?**

**Al-Suqair:** There are many policies that the government could pursue to support gender equality in Kuwait. The percentage of women in the public and private sectors is small compared to men. In the national assembly, there is just one woman member and the cabinet has only two female ministers. The government could use top-down measures to increase the number and percentage of females in leadership posts across Kuwait.

In terms of housing, granting women the same rights would go a long way to improving their status. Kuwaiti women married to non-nationals are not currently granted the same right to government housing that is suitable for them and their family, or government loans that would guarantee their purchase of homes with adequate living conditions. The Society has succeeded in convincing the housing agencies to approve the increase of housing loans for widowed and divorced women who have children to 45,000 Kuwaiti Dinars (\$150,000), and we are still asking the agencies to raise it further to 75,000—this would be more in line with the loans Kuwaiti men currently receive.

There is also a need to pass legislation to criminalize violence against women. There is no law in Kuwait on the issue of domestic violence within the family. It is currently possible to use some articles of the Personal Status Law and the Penal Criminal Code in the event of a serious crime inside the home. But these articles are limited in their ability to cover all forms of domestic or family violence. It’s also still difficult to quantify the extent of violence against women in Kuwait because conservative norms mean things often go unreported. One encouraging development is that civil society organizations are working to draft legislation criminalizing violence in all its forms.

Equally important, the state needs to spread awareness and challenge the culture of violence against women through school curricula, the media, and training programs. Broadcasting simple awareness programs on television would help reach the largest possible audience in both urban and rural areas. Also, increasing the number of seminars, lectures, and workshops in remote regions and sending telephone messages would contribute to realizing this goal.

### **Gulf Affairs: What would you say is the main barrier facing Kuwaiti women today?**

**Al-Suqair:** One of the main barriers facing women is their ability to secure decision-making positions. Men are often preferred even when there are women who are more competent and qualified. Although Kuwaiti women constitute a high percentage of the labor force, they tend to be concentrated in lower-level positions than men.