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Kuwaiti Women and a Note Regarding Their Short Lived Political Journey

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A recent Harvard Business Review article reviewed research that showed that women are more likely to exhibit more leadership skills than men (Zenger and Folkman, 2019). However, many women established in their careers do not realize the need for consistent self-promotion and how deeply the odds are stacked against them. It is unfair to keep asking women to prove themselves in a playing field that is not level so they must think and act and look for opportunities outside of the box, and even that is not enough if we were to examine closely the eight major obstacles for women's political leadership in Kuwait today.

Obstacle 1: Lack of Quotas

Until this day, only six women have made it to parliament since we received our political rights in 2005, and of those only 5 practiced as MPs (AlBader, 2021). After 17 years of attempting organic change, it is clear that stronger intervention is needed to create gender balance in the national assembly, through temporary or permanent quotas like many Arab and International countries have done.
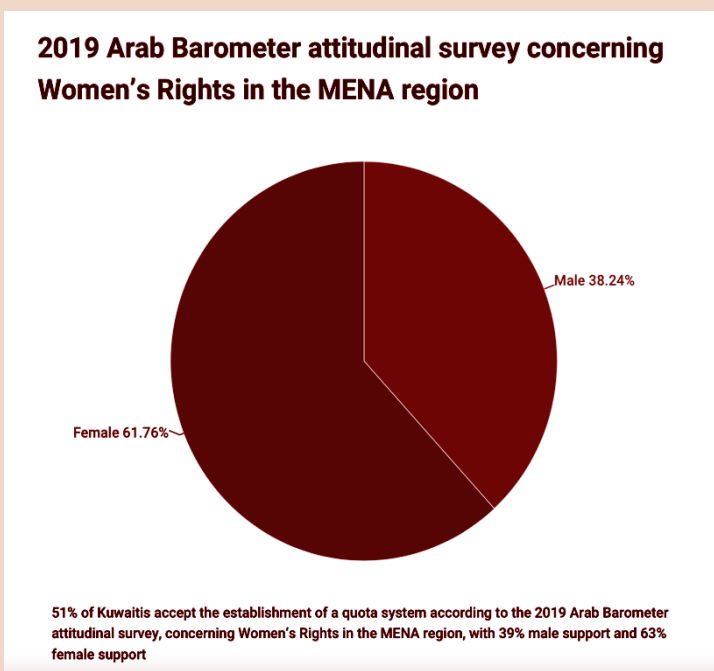
We are in need of government intervention to ensure gender balance within appointed positions such as the recent appointment of 4 females to Kuwait Municipal Council in May 2022, as we have only had 11 female ministers since 2005 and only 10 women were appointed to the municipal council. Dr. Massouma AlMubarak's appointment as Kuwait's first female cabinet member in 2005 paved the way for women's participation in the 2006 elections, despite the numerous obstacles that Kuwaiti women continued to face in exercising an active role on the legislative level (Shalaby, 2015).

Regardless of this breakthrough, female representation in government remains low. From 2006 to 2019, ministerial cabinets only granted one to two seats to women, and in Jaber

Al-Mubarak's second ministerial cabinet, which had no female representation at all in 2012 (AlSaidi, 2021).

This tendency was echoed in the governments formed between 2020 and 2021, with Dr. Rana AlFaris serving as the only female minister in each of the three governments formed during that time (Kuwait Council of Ministers, 2022).

In 2009, four women were elected to the Thirteenth National Assembly for the first time in Kuwait's history: Dr. Massouma AlMubarak (1st district), Dr. Salwa AlJassar (2nd district), Dr. Aseel AlAwadhi (3rd district), and Dr. Rola Dashti (3rd district). The four women who won seats in the Thirteenth National Assembly were unable to further secure their seats, and women were unable to win any seats in the February 2012 elections even though 23 female candidates ran for office. Later in the December 2012 elections, women won three seats: Dr. Massouma AlMubarak (whose seat was contested), Safa AlHashem, and Thikra AlRashidi, who was appointed as minister of social affairs and labor. When the Emir called for a new round of elections in July 2013, six women ran for office, but only Safa AlHashem retained her seat (Olimat, 2011). As a signatory of the International Covenant on Political and Civil Rights (ICCPR), Kuwait has an international obligation under international law to ensure members of the society have an equal opportunity in the political process as per general comment No.25; States are required under the Covenant to take whatever legislative and other measures are necessary to guarantee that citizens have an effective opportunity to exercise the rights it safeguards

2019 Arab Barometer attitudinal survey concerning Women's Rights in the MENA region

Male 38.24%

Female 61.76%

51% of Kuwaitis accept the establishment of a quota system according to the 2019 Arab Barometer attitudinal survey, concerning Women's Rights in the MENA region, with 39% male support and 63% female support

(UNHCR, 1996). Article 25 is at the heart of democratic governance founded on popular consent and guided by the Covenant's values (OHCHR, 2020). Therefore, a quota system, permanent or temporary, is necessary to establish gender balance in the political arena. Finally, it is important to highlight that 51% of Kuwaitis accept the establishment of a quota system according to the 2019 Arab Barometer attitudinal survey, concerning Women's Rights in the MENA region, with 39% male support and 63% female support (Thomas, 2019). In Kuwait, a suggestion recently put forward by former Minister of Justice and MP Mishari al Anjari that would ensure 20% representation for women may be a good start (Al Jarida, 2020).

Obstacle 2: Media Backlash Against Women and Cyberbullying

Media backlash against women in politics increased dramatically after the 2009 parliamentary breakthrough. The lack of channels that promote positive narratives of women in political leadership, online bullying of female political figures, and hate speech against women has become increasingly normalized and migrated from traditional channels to online platforms.
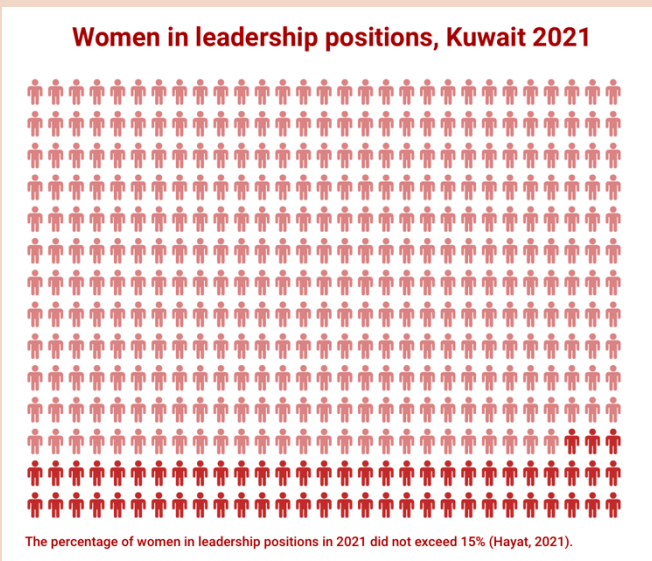
Cyberbullying against women with the intent of discrediting them and/or inciting other violations and abuses against them is a serious concern and can indicate systemic gender-based discrimination, according to the United Nations (2020). The normalization of such practices can be "used as a tool to control women, to maintain men's dominance over women, and to reinforce patriarchal norms, roles, and structures" (OSCEPA, 2021). As a result, the lack of a positive narrative and the consequences of political cyberbullying fosters a culture of limitation and discouragement of female political participation. Former Kuwaiti parliament member, Dr. Salwa Al Jassar, spoke publicly about her experience with political cyberbullying as she was a victim of rumors, insults, and abuses that tended to inflict harm and mock not only her but her family as well (Middle East Eye, 2020).

Obstacle 3: Numbers and Indexes

We know Kuwait ranks low on the Global Gender Gap Index, and we need more gender-positive KPIs that are supported by published numbers and statistics to continually monitor the status of women's leadership opportunities and ensure their equal access. Worldwide, women hold approximately 21% of ministerial positions, with only three countries having 50% or more women in their legislatures, and 22 countries being led by a woman in the presidency. Kuwait had a global gender gap index of 0.62 in 2020 (UN Women, 2021).

Obstacle 4: Education & Outdated Curriculums

Education and Curriculums should promote equality and respect for women at an early age, and the images used must reflect women as CEOs, police, ministers etc., and in jobs that reflect female contribution to the labor market outside the domestic space. The 2019 Arab Barometer attitudinal survey, concerning Women's Rights in the MENA region, shows that 7 in 10 Kuwaitis believe in men's political leadership over women, composing 76% of the society (Thomas, 2019), which is also linked to these ideas formed in childhood about the limitations of "women's work". This was vividly reflected in the 2020 parliament election as women obtained approximately 2.1% of the votes (AlAnjari, 2020); despite the majority of the voters being women who accounted for 293,754 votes out of the 567,694 voters (Attiya, 2020). Educational measures should start

Women in leadership positions, Kuwait 2021

The percentage of women in leadership positions in 2021 did not exceed 15% (Hayat, 2021).

with empowering women and cultivating a culture of equality between the two genders. For instance, Kuwait Investment Authority has the highest percentage of female employees among sovereign wealth funds globally with 53% (AlQabas, 2020), though the fund only appointed a female executive director in 2017 (SWF, 2022). Women in Kuwait are not only marginalized politically but economically as well. According to the World Bank's Women, Business and law report of 2022, Kuwait scored 35 out of 100, making Kuwait's overall score lower than the regional average. The female labor force in Kuwait (age: 25+) was estimated to be 55.8% in 2022 (ILO, 2022) and the percentage of women in leadership positions in 2021 did not exceed 15% (Hayat, 2021). The figures above highlight the importance of developing curriculums and educational systems that support women's empowerment and the notion of equality. It is vital to have a narrative that fosters intersectional development and grants equal opportunities. Both genders should be equally enabled in the public sphere, and this is something that should be taught from a young age in order to have better political and economic representation.

Obstacle 5: Protection Against Domestic Violence

On September 20th, 2020, Kuwait passed a new law to protect women from domestic violence. In the past, victims of domestic violence were required to file a complaint at the police station and then return home to their abusers, which was a common occurrence at the time. The law was drafted in such a way that it would guarantee protection while also establishing institutional mechanisms to ensure that domestic violence crimes were constantly monitored. One of the articles calls for the establishment of a national committee composed of representatives from the government and civil society organizations. Even though the "Family Protection Law" was passed 2 years ago, it is not yet being applied and it must, because if women feel unsafe and harassed at home or at work, or on the streets how can we expect them to run for political office and attract more abuse? At Mudhawi, we strongly believe that increasing the number of women in leadership positions and fostering a

civil and respectful workplace culture for everyone can help to alleviate both the problem of domestic violence and harassment.

Obstacle 6: Dedicated Gender Bodies

There are some gender-inclusive plans under the SCDP mandate for vision 2035, and some excellent programs to promote women's leadership that have been conducted with the WRSC at Kuwait University and the UNDP but unlike other GCC countries Kuwait does not have a stand-alone governmental body to follow up on implementation and gender KPIs yet. Kuwait has prioritized women's economic empowerment in other key policy instruments, such as the new national plan for Kuwait, Vision 2035/ New Kuwait, which outlines the country's vision for the future.

Kuwait's "New Kuwait" development strategy aspires to make the country a regional financial, cultural, and institutional leader by 2035, according to the country's constitution. In addition to five strategic axes and seven pillars, it is built on the following themes: public administration; economy; infrastructure; living environment; healthcare; human capital; and global position.

Under the Creative Human Capital pillar, the Kuwaiti government seeks to increase women's participation in the labor market, which is in line with Sustainable Development Goal 5, which calls for gender equality in all aspects of life. Specifically, Vision 2035 aspires to transform the country from an industrial-based economy to a knowledge-based economy by empowering private sector entrepreneurs to serve as the primary engine of growth. In order to achieve this goal, equal opportunity must be provided for both men and women in order for both to be effective contributors to the overall vision.

The Women's Empowerment Program (WEP) initiative in Kuwait was launched as part of the SDG 5 program of the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, in collaboration with Kuwait University Women's Research and Studies Center,

UN Women, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). A set of guidelines for businesses on how to advance gender equality and female empowerment in the workplace, the marketplace, and the community, the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) were released in March 2015. This initiative is geared toward the private sector and is supported by a number of companies in the area. Increasing the representation of women in leadership positions will help to accelerate the implementation of Kuwait's new Vision 2035, according to its mission.

In 2021, 14 new private sector companies committed to the WEPs in order to better diversify their workplaces and promote women's employment, bringing the total number of companies adhering to these principles to 44 companies. The Women's Affairs and Business Committee, which was established by the General Secretariat of the Supreme Council of Planning and Development in May 2021 with the mission of promoting women's economic empowerment, will provide additional support for these efforts. It has been the Committee's mission since its inception to increase the participation of women in the workplace (Dexter & AlMutawa, 2022).

Obstacle 7: Electoral Distribution

With politics becoming increasingly tribalized, and more winning candidates at the national assembly coming from self-designated 'Tribal' representation over the past 20 years (Tavana and AlKhoneini, 2020), many as a result of primaries that don't include women, the seats open to female candidates have shrunk. In actual terms, this has meant that districts 4 and 5 being not open to female candidates alongside many other "tribal" seats in the 3 other districts. When we add this to seats that are won by representatives of religious groups whether Sunni or Shiite and diwaniya politics both of which exclude women as political leaders, which realistically leaves very few seats for women.

Obstacle 8: Closed Gateway Positions

It's a well-known fact that women need a longer runway than men to make it to political office but they are unable to get into Kuwaiti political leadership earlier in practice. Student unions, sports clubs, coops, NGOs etc., and other gateway positions for political leadership are dominated by male leadership and there are no checks and balances in place to ensure equal opportunities for ambitious females who are often openly discouraged from participation. They lack access to funding, networks, alliances, and even basic family support at times, which means many lack practical practice in soft and hard political skills.

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