



# WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN FOCUS: KUWAIT

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FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH  
KUWAITIS ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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As the Kuwaiti National Assembly considers a law that would grant Kuwaiti women political rights for the first time in Kuwait's history<sup>1</sup>, a series of focus groups conducted with Kuwaitis finds modest support for granting women the right to vote, but less enthusiasm for women running as candidates in elections.

Conducted with a cross section of Kuwaitis<sup>2</sup> from Kuwait City and Al-Jahra in July 2004, the focus group research offers fresh perspectives on public attitudes on key issues related to women's rights. Designed to complement other efforts aimed at identifying the challenges and opportunities for empowering women, this public opinion research project is one component of Freedom House's Survey of Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa.

## **Key Findings from the Research Include:**

- **Modest support for granting women the right to vote.** Kuwaitis, women and men alike, overall express modest support for granting women the right to vote. Young Bedouin men are the strongest opponents, and unmarried urban woman are the strongest supporters. Complacency among supporters of women's political rights is a challenge. Most Kuwaitis, including opponents, agree not much will change in Kuwait if women vote.
- **More controversy over women as candidates than women voting.** Granting women the right to present themselves as candidates in elections is more controversial than giving them the right to vote, with a number of men and some women saying it might be against Islamic precepts to allow women to hold senior public offices. Much of the debate hinges on whether women holding seats in the National Assembly constitutes *wilaya*, roughly translated as "ruling authority." In a related part of the discussion, no Kuwaiti interviewed— male or female – agreed that women could be judges, citing Islamic principles as their justification.
- **Cynicism about Kuwait's political system.** Kuwait has a "selective democracy," in the words of several Kuwaitis interviewed. Despite debates in elections and the National Assembly, a common attitude is that the government ultimately does what it wants to do and true power rests in the hands of elite families. Some note that certain members of the National Assembly can get things done for their constituents, but many cynically brand these members as "service MPs," implying that they are not interested in serving the broader interests of the country.
- **Disconnect between women's rights activists and supporters.** Many Kuwaitis view advocates for women's political rights in Kuwait as elites operating without an organized base.

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<sup>1</sup> Since Kuwait's founding, women have been completely excluded from formal participation in Kuwait's elections, even though Kuwait's constitution provides men and women with equal rights. On May 17, 2004, the cabinet of Kuwait's government approved draft legislation that would give women the right to vote and stand in parliamentary elections. Kuwait's National Assembly rejected a similar measure five years ago by a vote of 32-30. In early March 2005, the National Assembly began discussions about scheduling a debate on this draft legislation.

<sup>2</sup> As noted in the methodology section, respondents in this research were Kuwaitis, who represent a minority in Kuwait's overall population.

Kuwaitis have difficulty naming organizations and individuals lobbying for women's political rights, while opponents of women's political rights are better known.

- **Sense of progress for women.** The dominant view among Kuwaitis interviewed is that women have achieved significant progress over the past decade. Kuwaitis cite increased educational opportunities for women as the main factor that has led to advances. Kuwaitis also say that women's employment rights are generally respected, but some note that a glass ceiling remains intact, preventing women from attaining top positions.
- **Perceptions of strong legal protections.** Numerous Kuwaitis say that women are afforded strong legal rights and protections, particularly against violence. Several men express dismay about how easy it is, in their view, for women to go to police stations and courts to report abuse.
- **Islam's central role.** Islam is a pervasive influence that informs most aspects of Kuwaitis' discussion on women's rights. Kuwaitis make frequent reference to their understanding of Islamic principles, citing Quran verses and the Traditions and Ways of the Prophet Muhammad to explain their opinions and feelings on key questions related to women's rights. On some topics, such as the weight accorded to a woman's testimony in court and women's inheritance rights, Kuwaitis make clear that they believe there are certain "red lines" not to be crossed, due to religious beliefs.
- **Resistance to outside involvement.** Both men and women in the focus groups express reservations about outside organizations providing assistance to advance the cause of women's political rights, with men more strongly opposing this support, calling it "interference." Some Kuwaitis worry that non-Kuwaitis would not understand important values and key aspects of Kuwaiti society.
- **Divided attitudes toward the United States.** Overall, public views on the United States are mixed. On the one hand, Kuwaitis express appreciation for America's liberation of their country from Saddam Hussein in 1991, and they applaud Hussein's removal from power. Some Kuwaitis also admire the achievements of the United States in business and technology. At the same time, Kuwaitis express serious misgivings about aspects of American foreign policy, citing prisoner abuses, the mistakes made during Iraq's reconstruction, and perceptions of an unbalanced policy favoring Israel.

### **Recommendations:**

Recommendations based on views obtained in this research to help Kuwaiti civic groups, the Kuwaiti government, and international women's rights advocates in efforts to expand women's rights include:

1. **Invest in public awareness and advocacy efforts that engage the broader Kuwaiti public.**
2. **Frame arguments and campaigns on women's rights to fit more closely with Kuwait's social context.**

3. Examine arguments of the opponents of women's political rights carefully in order to develop more strategic and effective messages in favor of women's full political rights.
4. Provide specific examples of women serving as effective and capable leaders when creating messages advocating for women's rights to run for office and serve as leaders.
5. Keep in mind other challenges that women face beyond the lack of political rights, including continuing shortcomings in their legal rights.
6. Develop public awareness-raising programs on the problems of domestic violence.

# NATIONAL MOOD: OPTIMISM MIXED WITH WORRIES ABOUT SOCIAL CHANGE

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The starting point for examining Kuwaitis' attitudes on women's rights is a brief examination of the public's outlook and leading concerns. The overall mood in the country is strongly optimistic, with most saying that things are heading in the right direction.

## **Economic Boom Boosts Spirits**

Positive economic news in Kuwait has lifted spirits, with Kuwaitis citing sustained oil price increases, a recent construction boom, and technological advances as positive changes. "We're enjoying an economic boom," says one middle-aged man from Kuwait City.

Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad's tour of several East Asian countries in the summer of 2004 to discuss trade and economic ties, a visit which garnered headlines during the period of the research, generally leaves a positive impression with Kuwaitis. This visit creates expectations about possible economic reforms on the horizon.

Some say that Kuwait's fortunes are tied closely to Iraq's and worry about the instability there. As one middle-aged married woman in Kuwait City says, "If Iraq sees stability, we expect improvement, God willing. For the time being, we can't decide, since the security situation is not stable internationally. The security situation will stabilize within two to five years, and the region will then witness economic prosperity."

## **Mixed Feelings about Globalization's Double-Edged Sword**

Kuwaitis are divided on the implications of globalization and Kuwait's increased interaction and growing interdependence with the rest of the world.

***International Travel, Products, and Media Diversity.*** Kuwaitis mention three main avenues of increased contact with the rest of the world: increased travel to other countries, the increase of imported brands and products, and increased access to information and entertainment through foreign media outlets.

One middle-aged married Bedouin man says, "People travel abroad, and this was not the case in the past. Kuwaitis in the past did not travel as much and were not as exposed to other societies. Nowadays, people travel to the United States and Europe and see things that they do not find in Kuwait." Others cite the prominent presence of Western products and stores in Kuwait, with a few participants mentioning Marina Mall, a well-known shopping mall in the Salmiya district of Kuwait City where numerous Western brands and stores are on prominent display.

Many Kuwaitis demonstrate an air of resignation about the economic and social changes Kuwait is experiencing, saying that it is inevitable. One married Bedouin man says, "Globalization is taking

place, whether we want it or not,” and another man says, “We are riding the train of globalization, and either we go first class or economy class, or we are left behind.”

This sense of inevitability leads some to call for more reforms in Kuwait. Kuwaitis generally express a sense that Kuwait must update the educational system and reform the economy in order to remain competitive. Some worry that Kuwait has fallen behind other Arab Gulf countries such as the United Arab Emirates.

***Conflicted Reactions to New Media.*** The emergence of a broader array of media choices in Kuwait is a cause for debate among the Kuwaiti public.

On the one hand, Kuwaitis are enthusiastic about access to more media, with a number of participants specifically citing Showtime, the Discovery Channel, and The Movie Channel as favorites. The positive comments on new media outlets extend beyond entertainment and include news. An unmarried man from Kuwait City says, “Thank God, today we have a million channels from West to East, coupled with an unprecedented presence of *Al-Jazeera* that unites the Arab street...”

Access to these channels leads people to compare Kuwait’s media with media based in other countries. A young unmarried woman from Kuwait City says, “When we see foreign television stations, they are very different—there is advancement. We see no development in our own television stations.”

Young women—especially unmarried women living in Kuwait City—are impacted by female presenters on television news programs and television shows involving talent contests, with a number saying that women singing in these programs serve as an ideal to emulate or as a standard against which to measure their own lives. These programs spark aspirations. Kuwaiti women are comparing themselves to foreign women, several participants say. One young woman in Kuwait City says, “If we look at television, we now have access to satellite programs, and this is a major influence. We see women presenting, directing, and preparing programs.” Other young women say that seeing prominent women on television inspire them to improve themselves in all aspects of life and make an important contribution in their careers.

Yet at the same time, several Kuwaitis, particularly middle-aged men, worry that new entertainment available in the media, increased contact with the West, and new technologies are contributing to unpredictable societal change and a loss of religious values. Some say this increased contact is the reason why an increasing number of Kuwaiti women are clamoring for more rights. Several Kuwaiti men accuse women of imitating the West. One young man in Kuwait City blames globalization and technology for causing “trials and problems” all around the world, saying that satellite television has led Kuwaiti women to push for more rights.

*Kuwaiti women are now agitating for their political rights unlike before. This is a result of watching their foreign counterparts on satellites, in contrast to when they used to watch local programs only. (Urban man, 20-29, unmarried)*

*Our society’s nature should change, but what is happening in our Arab Gulf societies today is material change but not [positive] social change. For example, girls in our societies aspire to imitate girls in the West and men have similar aspirations as well. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

A few men single out Star Academy, a popular television program centered on a talent competition, as a particularly “dangerous” program that affects women’s behavior. One middle-aged Bedouin man in Al-Jahra says, “Let’s take the Star Academy program. The way young men and women interact together during this program is very dangerous. The age between 18 and 21 is very dangerous. We all went through this phase. It is a very daring program that affects the way girls behave. I have heard that girls [who watch this program] become more flexible and might even approach guys and talk to them.”

Some Kuwaitis connect the new media and technology with a fracturing of the family and a decline in parents’ authority.

*Parents have more or less resigned, and their role is being replaced by TV, Internet and chatting online... Parental guidance is no longer there. Children dress as they please. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*The mentality of the family has changed as a result of greater awareness through the media and travel. Everyone watches television and reads newspapers. This gives them ideas, like people saying to their daughter, we can go and sue your husband. Marriage is no longer an eternal bond. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

Middle-aged men from Kuwait City express strong worries that family values are being lost, as exemplified by people not keeping family visits outside of weddings, funerals, and holidays a priority, parents not maintaining close watch over their children, and everyone working longer hours. “We’re going in the same way” as Western societies, one middle-aged man in Kuwait City says in dismay.

***The Irresistible Allure.*** Despite numerous misgivings expressed about new media and technology, some Kuwaitis admit to having mixed feelings about it all; some who object to new entertainment programs, for instance, admit that they watch programs they themselves deem “offensive.” As one middle-aged man in Al-Jahra points out, “There is a difference between what we watch in the *diwaniya*<sup>3</sup> room and what we watch at home.” Another man from Kuwait City acknowledges that although he was “totally against Star Academy,” when the time came for the audience to vote for their favorite performer, “it was between a Kuwaiti and a non-Kuwaiti, and I told my wife to call and vote for the Kuwaiti.”

### **Indications of a Religious Reawakening**

Societal change connected to the emergence of new media and technology, the increased presence of Western brands in Kuwait, and greater contact with other countries leads some Kuwaitis to turn back to religion, and several note a religious reawakening impacting Kuwaiti society. “Religious societies are everywhere,” says one middle-aged Bedouin woman, and another says, “Anywhere you go now, whether it is shops or public markets, there are always copies of the Quran, unlike in the past, when this was not done.” According to some Kuwaitis, Iraq’s invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990 may have contributed to this Islamic revival among Kuwaitis.

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<sup>3</sup> A diwaniya is a gathering that is an important and regular feature of social and professional life in Kuwait.

*After the Iraqi invasion, and after liberation, the religious awakening reemerged as an expression of gratitude and thankfulness to Allah for liberation. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

*Women have conservative dress code as part of tribal rules. Women became more conservative after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*We now dress better than the period before [Iraq's] aggression, because before the invasion we were not using hijab<sup>4</sup> as much as now... because we went to Saudi Arabia during the aggression, and we were compelled to wear the niqab<sup>5</sup>. (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)*

## **Women's Status and Appearance Important in Debates about Societal Change and Control**

Many Kuwaitis focus on the social status of women when discussing the dramatic changes Kuwaiti society is undergoing, with some Kuwaitis using women's appearance and their changing status as a barometer to evaluate whether societal change is positive or negative for the country. Comments about women veiling are common, with Kuwaitis pointing to veiling as one of the most tangible and outward signs of women's status. Most Kuwaitis note that the number of women wearing the veil has increased.

The need to "control" women and their sexuality is a frequent part of Kuwaiti men's discussions about societal change. One young unmarried man from Kuwait City says, "A woman is similar to an electric cable, which should be insulated to avoid a shock to whoever touches it. So if a woman exposes her body, it affects others." A young Bedouin man from Al-Jahra quotes the Prophet Muhammad in explaining the guiding role men should play in the lives of women: "The Prophet Muhammad, Peace Be Upon Him, said, 'The woman is from a bent rib. If you straighten it, it becomes better, but if you leave it alone, it becomes more bent.'" Another young Bedouin man argues that social control and religious regulation has prevented Kuwait from suffering from the spread of AIDS, sexual problems, family problems, and high crime rates. Finally, one middle-aged Bedouin man from Al-Jahra says, "Two factors are usually behind the destruction of nations—women and money. Ever since the time of the Romans, either women or money were the real causes of downfall."

It is at this complex nexus of societal change, with all of the pushes of modernity and globalization and the tugs of religion and tribe, where much of the debate in Kuwait on women's rights takes place.

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<sup>4</sup> A head covering worn by some Muslim women.

<sup>5</sup> A face veil worn by some Muslim women.

## PUBLIC SEES ADVANCES FOR WOMEN OVER LAST DECADE

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Nearly all Kuwaitis interviewed say that the situation for Kuwaiti women has advanced in the past decade. Most describe these changes as slow and gradual, and the majority expects further advances for women, with an emphasis on incremental change. Men have a markedly different and more negative perspective on these changes' implications for women and society in general.

Kuwaitis point to women's increased access to education, with women outnumbering men in some universities, as one of the leading forces contributing to women's advancement. Married urban women uniformly say that women have seen a change for the better, saying that children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men are treated better and can receive an identity card more easily.

Some focus on the most concrete signs of progress for women, like more Kuwaiti women appearing on television and driving cars in the streets. Others say that women are more assertive at home.

*[Women have advanced] in all aspects... whether it is her work or her opinion, she claims what is hers when she has a problem with the husband. (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)*

*Thank God, I sometimes go out shopping alone, and go out shopping and to restaurants at the same time. (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)*

*Tradition and norms used to forbid women from appearing on television. But now the situation changed in the event of development, technology and globalization. A woman now appears on television and everything is normal. However, women still have no right to participate in elections. (Urban woman, 20-29, unmarried)*

A number of Kuwaitis point to the 1990-1991 Iraqi invasion and occupation as a pivotal moment for women's advancement. A few point to specific Kuwaiti women such as Asrar Al-Qabandi and Wafa Al-Amer, who were active in the Kuwaiti resistance movements.

*Immediately after the invasion something abnormal happened. Women started to work because the invasion taught us resistance and taught us that a person has to work more and prove himself whether a man or a woman. There is no difference between men and women. (Urban woman, 20-29, unmarried)*

*There were women martyrs who laid down their lives for their country during the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein. (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)*

## A Gender Divide: Hints of Backlash against Women's Advancement

Several Kuwaiti men have strong reservations about women's changing status in Kuwait. Some view increased freedom as corruption, and others frame women's rights as an idea promoted by the West.

*Yes, women have more rights than they should.* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

*What is the origin of this issue of women's rights? Where did it start? In the West, and it is derived from Western culture. What is the similarity between Western culture and our culture, if any? They are far apart from each other. We can apply that if we are Westerners.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, unmarried)

*The social restrictions imposed on women in the past are now less—maybe some call it freedom, but I call it social corruption.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, unmarried)

A few Kuwaiti men express the sentiment that men and women can never be equal because they are not the same, that men and women in essence are so fundamentally different that it is unwise to consider them equal in rights. This opinion, particularly dominant among younger Bedouin men, leaves little room for discussion about the issue of women's rights.

*There is a complete biological difference between man and woman. Therefore, it is insane to call for equality [between men and women] because they are both different creatures. The difference between an ape and a man is 0.1 percent, that's what I saw in a film. With this low percentage, the monkey is an animal that does not understand, while man thinks, understands and builds this earth. How about the differences that exist between man and woman in biological structure and in mental ability as well?* (Bedouin man, 20-29, unmarried)

*When I say women are incomplete in mind, I mean a woman always thinks emotionally, and—regarding religion—her period makes her incomplete in religion because she can't do all the prayers during the time of her monthly period... That's God's judgment...* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

*Can a woman do what a man does?! Can she build buildings?! If woman wants her rights, then ask her to do what men do. She can't even bear one hour working!* (Bedouin man, 20-29, unmarried)

# MODEST PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR WOMEN'S POLITICAL RIGHTS

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Kuwaiti men and women alike express modest support for granting women the right to vote.<sup>6</sup> Giving women the right to run for public office is more controversial, with a number of men and women questioning whether allowing women to hold leadership positions in public office would contradict Islamic principles.

Unmarried Bedouin men are the strongest opponents to granting women full political rights, with several saying women should focus on their primary role—raising children and thus raising the future male political leaders of Kuwait. Young single women from Kuwait City are the strongest supporters, but their support is not channeled or organized.

Opposition to women's voting rights is not the only impediment to advancing women's political rights. Complacency and lack of organization among supporters of women's political rights are also important obstacles to advancing women's political rights.

## **Arguments in Favor of Women Voting**

Overall, most Kuwaitis moderately support granting women voting rights. The few Kuwaitis who are against giving women voting rights are often strongly emotional in expressing their opposition.

A number of women note that Kuwaiti women have fallen behind their counterparts in several neighboring Gulf countries when it comes to political rights, indicating a possible argument that could be made to support the cause. One married urban woman says that Kuwaiti women are “pioneers” when it comes to entering the workforce, but they are now falling behind on voting and political participation.

An air of inevitability and complacency hangs over the discussions on women's voting rights. Most Kuwaitis seem to think that giving women the right to vote will eventually happen and that there is little they can do as individuals to advance the cause.

Among the men and women who support women's voting rights, the two common arguments cited are based in religion and existing practices in Kuwait. Some participants note that the Prophet Muhammad used to consult his wives when taking a decision, mentioning this as a justification for including women in Kuwait's political process. Others mention that Kuwaiti women already participate in elections that take place in cooperatives and other organizations in Kuwait; such concrete examples make it seem more natural that women would participate in national elections.

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<sup>6</sup> Currently, male citizens over 21 years old are entitled to vote. Fewer than 140,000 men cast ballots in the 2003 elections for the National Assembly, the most recent national elections in Kuwait.

## Arguments against Women Voting

The handful of Kuwaitis who voice opposition to women voting in elections—generally male voices—usually structure their opposition in the most strident terms, using the language of Islam and “traditions.” A few men even question the phrase “women’s political rights” and refuse to engage in the question on those terms, saying women have no such rights. Others say that other rights—education, employment, and security—are more important than political rights.

*Islam will be all lost [if women receive political rights].* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*... If you see the pure Islamic societies abiding by customs and Islamic traditions, you'll see that woman has no rights, except her husband's rights and her obligations towards her family; they (women) have no voice or political role.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*When you say rights, you mean rights that are taken away from them and that should be regained. There is nothing called rights. When we say rights, we mean things that cannot be negotiated, that cannot be argued or discussed. It is better to say women's participation.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*When we talk about women's rights, we always refer to political rights. Women find this very important. But there are other rights better than political rights. They did not think of such rights as education, employment and security.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

## Kuwaitis Anticipate Few Changes If Women Vote

Most Kuwaitis, including opponents to granting women political rights, agree that if women are given the right to vote, not much will change. No one predicts upheaval or major changes if women receive the right to vote. A few say that perhaps issues like family law, personal status, and housing issues would receive more attention, but most do not expect major policy shifts should women receive the right to vote.

Some Kuwaitis believe giving women the right to vote would increase the representation of tribal and religious elements in the National Assembly. Those who say that tribal representation would increase do so based on the notion that women would vote for candidates recommended to them by their family and tribal members. More independent-minded and assertive women, like younger single women living in Kuwait City, reject this notion, with one saying that, “It is not a husband’s right to tell his wife how to vote. If that would happen to me, I would report him [to the authorities].”

Some say that Islamist political forces would fare better at the polls if women voted. One middle-aged Bedouin man says, “Islamists usually call for the best things to happen, and women see Islamists as better than those who lack values and traditions.” But overall, most Kuwaitis do not foresee any seismic shifts if women are granted the right to vote, in part because of a widespread belief that a few elites control Kuwait’s political system.

## Perceptions that Kuwaiti Government Exploits the Issue of Women's Political Rights

Several Kuwaitis believe that the government is not seriously interested in advancing women's political rights and instead aims to use it as a negotiating card against conservative elements in the National Assembly. Others express the view that the government is just using women's political rights as a negotiating tool to advance higher priorities and causes it is truly interested in, such as economic reform, privatization, and "Kuwaitization" of the labor force.<sup>7</sup>

*Sometimes, I feel it [the push for women's full political rights] is a form of pressure against the Islamic members [of the National Assembly] because there was a crisis between the government and the National Assembly. The government uses women's rights, then they retreat. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

*The government is working on the issue of women's rights. If the government really wants to implement women's political rights, it can do so and collect all the votes on this issue in one meeting. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*Women will not be given their full rights, I am sure. The government is using the issue of women's right to vote and run for elections as a way to put pressure on Islamic deputies and others... Giving women the right to vote serves the interest of Islamic deputies because most women back Islamists... I was part of the students' union at university. When we held elections, we were only concerned about the ballot boxes allocated for women, because if a university has 10,000 students, 70 percent of them would be females and 30 percent males. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

## Popular Complacency about Women's Voting Rights

Although support for granting women the right to vote is fairly broad, advocates for women's voting rights face considerable challenges in motivating the public to get involved in efforts to pass new legislation. None of the Kuwaitis interviewed say that they have been active and involved in efforts to give women the right to vote. "Even women themselves don't support their fellow women who are interested in getting involved in elections," says one middle-aged woman from Kuwait City. Another woman in Kuwait City says, "I am personally one of those women whose priorities are my house, kids, and job." Kuwait's oil wealth and welfare state may serve to make Kuwaitis quiescent and inactive.

Most supporters of women's voting rights express little desire to get involved in advocacy and lobbying efforts. Younger women in Kuwait City are more interested than all other supporters of women's voting rights in getting involved in efforts to support the cause, but they say that they have little information about the groups leading lobbying activities.

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<sup>7</sup> Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Sabah, Kuwait's emir, sought to dispel the notion that his government was not serious about passing the legislation in a speech read by Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Sabah before Kuwait's National Assembly on October 26, 2004. In the speech, the emir declared, "Kuwaiti women should be able to vote and stand in elections as candidates. They have been equal partners to Kuwaiti men and have shouldered their responsibility...and it is the wish of the Emir."

## Advocates for Women's Rights: Viewed as Disconnected Elites

Kuwaiti organizations currently lobbying for women's political rights are seen as disconnected from many of those women and men who support their cause.

Many Kuwaitis find it difficult to name organizations and individuals who have been lobbying to grant women the right to participate in elections. Even the strongest supporters of women's political rights—single women living in Kuwait City—are unable to name a single individual involved in these efforts. When asked who leads the initiatives to obtain political rights for women, most Kuwaitis respond with a vague answer such as “the women's association” or “the women's committee.”

*I don't know its name exactly, but there is a women's rights committee. (Urban woman, 20-29, single)*

*Their activities are limited, and even their names are unknown. (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)*

*I don't know the name of a particular person working with these women's organizations, but they are operating legally. (Urban man, 20-29, single)*

*Look at the names of those who advocate for political rights for women—all of them belong to big influential families in Kuwait; their sole concern is achieving their own personal interests. By doing so, these women are leading this movement to achieve personal glories. (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)*

*None of these organizations defend women's rights. They only use women. There are many rights that need to be defended. Women's organizations and associations mostly care about political rights, but ignore other important rights. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

When asked why they had not taken part in any activities promoting women's rights, younger urban women say that they were not given a chance and that no one had encouraged them. On further probing about who should encourage them, one woman suggests their parents, but also notes that their parents are not encouraging them.

A handful of Kuwaitis are capable of naming prominent Kuwaiti women, such as Rasha Al-Sabah, a member of the ruling family who serves as an undersecretary of higher education and a top advisor to Kuwait's emir.

Public figures critical of women's political rights are more easily recognizable, with several Kuwaitis mentioning Waleed al-Tabtabae, an Islamist member of the National Assembly who has opposed measures to grant women full political rights.

## More Debate and Controversy over Women Running for Office and Serving as Leaders

Though granting women the right to vote in elections enjoys moderate support, the issue of whether women should have the right to stand for election and hold seats in parliament and top positions in government is more controversial.

Young, urban, single women are the strongest proponents of a woman's right to run for office and serve in leadership positions, and women are more supportive than men. Some supporters of women running in elections cite examples from Islamic history, saying that the Prophet Muhammad used to take into account women's opinions.

Several others say that it would be acceptable for a woman to stand in elections as long as she is qualified. As one middle-aged Bedouin man says, "We don't mind if women become members of the National Assembly. We believe we have some powerful women with very refined social status, and they can fulfill the responsibilities of this position."

When Kuwaitis can point to a specific example of a woman currently serving in some sort of leadership position, or when they can name a woman who has the qualities that one sees in current leaders, they are more capable of envisioning women running in elections.

*A woman like Masouma Al-Mubarak<sup>8</sup> [would make a good member of the National Assembly]... She is veiled, dressed properly, a good speaker, and honest. She could make it to the National Assembly... (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

*I'm a member in the Shamiyaa cooperative, and the women involved there are worth more than men. One of the first vice presidents elected there was a woman named Fayza Al-Khorafi... I don't want to change anyone's opinions, and I'm not a liberal, but I'm thinking in a way that makes sense... there is a big group of women who have better judgment than men, and those women can reach high positions. (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

*We have some people in the National Assembly whose presence is not felt. They are only there for themselves alone. But if somebody like Dr. Masouma Al-Mubarak were there, she would perform better than some of them. (Urban man, 20-29, single)*

In addition, existing cynicism about the current batch of male members of the National Assembly leads some to conclude that women might do a better job.

*A female member of the National Assembly is better than a male member who doesn't do his job. (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

*I want you to know that I am very surprised about some of the people who are in the parliament—they don't achieve anything. A woman may be better suited to do the job. (Urban man, 20-29, single)*

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<sup>8</sup> She is a prominent political scientist at Kuwait University and women's rights activist who has published articles on women's rights in Kuwaiti newspapers.

**Arguments against Women Running for Office and Holding Leadership Positions.** Kuwaitis are more sharply divided on whether women should be allowed to run in elections and hold top leadership positions than they are on women voting. The main arguments against women running for office and serving as leaders can be grouped into four categories:

**1. Impracticality.** Some Kuwaitis—mostly men—maintain that it is simply not practical for a woman to become a member of the National Assembly or a top government leader because, according to this view, women are not capable of traveling freely or interacting with all of the people they would have to serve and represent. For some, it is almost inconceivable that a woman might be available in the late hours of the day to solve a problem.

*A deputy usually works for the people who voted for him. It would be tough for a woman to be a deputy because this way she will have to meet people and mingle with men all the time. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*A woman [leader] would have to receive men at her house or meet them somewhere to listen to what they have to say and discuss certain issues. This conflicts with our norms and traditions. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*...we're living in a community where it is hard for a woman to go out at night. If a problem arises after midnight and we need to talk with our representative in the National Assembly in the middle of the night, and the representative is a woman, how are we going to talk to her after midnight? Of course, as a representative, she has to do her job for the community, but not being able to reach her in the evening is a problem... (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

**2. Damaging to Families.** A number of men, as well as a few women, worry that women running for office and serving in leadership positions would harm Kuwaiti families. One middle-aged Bedouin man articulates this argument, saying, “It is difficult for a woman to hold such a post. It would be difficult for her to hold an ordinary job, let alone serve as a member of the National Assembly. She has more responsibilities at home, raising the children and meeting other obligations.”

**3. Too Emotional.** Some who oppose women running for office base their arguments on the notion that women are too emotional and weak to serve in a position of responsibility.

*Women are emotional by nature... It is better for a woman to stay away from politics. (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)*

*In fact, a man is controlled by his brain but a woman is controlled by her emotions. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

**4. Absolute Rejection.** There are several men and a few women who reject outright any notion that women might be able to stand in elections and hold leadership positions. Some of these arguments are framed in emotionally resonant language and based on certain individuals' understanding of Islam.

*Why should Kuwaiti women go to parliament? Why should we women spoil our image? Let us be as we are. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

*Women entering the National Assembly could destroy Islamic law and increase disorder in society.*  
(Urban man, 30-44, married)

*In Bangladesh, the prime minister is a woman, and Bangladesh is the poorest country in the world; there are floods, and they die in the thousands annually, without any solution.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*Female leaders are a sign of the coming of the end of the world. The Holy Prophet had rightly predicted that towards the end of the world women will be taking men's positions, which is one of the minor signs...* (Urban man, 20-29, single)

***The Issue of Ruling Authority.*** Much of the debate hinges on whether women holding seats in the National Assembly constitutes *wilaya*, which roughly translates as ruling or political authority. When some undecided Kuwaitis waver on the issue of whether women should be granted the right to stand in elections and hold a seat in the National Assembly, the debate often centers on whether or not serving as a representative constitutes a form of *wilaya*. Some say that serving as one member in a body made up of several members, like the National Assembly, does not constitute ruling authority. As one man from Kuwait City says, “A member of the National Assembly represents a community, but does not rule it.”

No participant—male or female—agreed to the notion that women could serve as judges, saying that according to their understanding of Islamic principles, women are not permitted to serve as judges.

## **Public Skepticism about Kuwait's Political System**

In addition to obtaining a sampling of Kuwaitis' views on the full range of women's rights, the research affords the opportunity to gain some new insights on how Kuwaitis see democracy and evaluate their political system.

***Views on Democracy: A Need for Limits and Structure.*** When asked in an open-ended question about democracy, the leading associations are largely positive, including “freedom of expression,” “freedom of thought,” “justice,” “equality,” “openness,” “participation,” and “freedom” in general.

Only a small minority completely rejects democracy. These voices are found among younger men under the age of thirty, and they base their rationale on their understanding of Islam. “Islam does not give me the right to vote,” says one young unmarried man from Al-Jahra. Another young unmarried man from Kuwait City denigrates democracy as “pre-Islamic.”

Several Kuwaitis are quick to point out the need for limits in a democracy and express worries about unrestricted freedom. Some women say that some Kuwaiti men take advantage of the country's limited democracy to, as one Bedouin woman says, “lord it over us... and curtail women's freedom.” Others say that unstructured freedom could lead to disorder.

*Democracy, from my point of view, gives freedom with limits, and you should not exceed these limits in a way that would harm others. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

*As long as religious limits are there, there is no problem. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*Broad freedoms would cause disorder in the community... For example, if one of the imams at the mosques made a public call for a holy war against America in Iraq, that would cause disturbances, and he should stop preaching, because it is dangerous. (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

**Mixed Views on Kuwait's Democratic Progress.** Kuwaitis are mixed in their opinions of their current government. Some maintain, as one middle aged Bedouin woman does, that “Kuwait is the only democratic Gulf country.”

Most, however, express a cynical attitude about how the system operates in Kuwait, saying that ruling elites, certain families, and special interests have dominant control over policy in Kuwait. Several use the term “partial” or “selective” democracy to describe how they view Kuwait’s government. For these people, whether or not women obtain political rights seems beside the point, since in their view Kuwait’s entire political system remains controlled from above.

*Whether a woman gets the right to vote or not, we are suffering a fake democracy. (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)*

*There is freedom in anything related to the private sector, but there is no freedom in anything related to the government. (Urban woman, 20-29, single)*

*I call it selective democracy. If the rulers want something, it will pass, whether or not it plays by the rules of democracy. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*We do not have democracy in Kuwait. Only a few members of the National Assembly were elected from among ordinary people and the rest have their own political and financial interests. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

**National Assembly Lacks Credibility, Seen as Accomplishing Little.** Most Kuwaitis interviewed hold Kuwait’s National Assembly in low esteem. In the eyes of many Kuwaitis, the National Assembly is all talk and not enough action.

*If democracy means that a member of the National Assembly says that a government minister has stolen millions, and nothing happens, and the people never take their rights—if this is democracy, Kuwait has a democracy 100 percent. (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)*

*It is just some kind of four-year-long theatrical play. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*It is all just words with no accomplishments. (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)*

*The members of the National Assembly have been promising us for forty years that there’s going to be freedom in the country. I’m not talking about women here; I’m talking about men. People trust their representatives to do the right thing and they vote for them, and these representatives promise there’ll be freedom but they’re only pretending... 70-80 percent or even 90 percent of the representatives just look out for their own interests.... (Urban man, 30-44, married)*

Several Kuwaitis have the perception that the National Assembly spends too much time studying, debating, and deliberating, and a number of people criticize the frequent investigations and interrogations of ministers in the National Assembly. As one middle-aged woman in Kuwait City says, “After just five or six months in a ministry, a minister is subject to interrogations. Because of the frequent questioning, a minister has no contact with the ministry. He doesn’t know anything about the ministry.”

The impression that members of the National Assembly are just looking out for their own interests, or the special interests and groups that support them, is strong. Several Kuwaitis have a term to describe members who focus almost exclusively on the particular interests of certain people, as opposed to the national interests: they call them “service members,” meaning that they are solely operating to provide services to certain people, and not to all of their constituents.

Kuwaitis interviewed indicate a need for stronger constituency outreach efforts by members of the National Assembly. Some Kuwaitis have the impression that their representatives in the National Assembly forget about those who vote for them. As one Bedouin man describes, “When you ask this one member of the National Assembly for something, he kicks you out of the office. I want to say, ‘Why are you kicking me out? You reached your position through my vote, and maybe my vote was decisive. Why don’t you want to help me now?’”

# PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON WOMEN'S RIGHT TO EDUCATION AND WORK

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## Views on Women's Right to Education

Kuwaitis see increased educational opportunities for women as the key factor that has led to progress for women. When asked to select most important rights for women, choosing from a list of eight<sup>9</sup>, the leading response among women and men is education. Most Kuwaitis see education as the ticket to better job prospects, a better life, and stronger families, because educated women are seen as better at raising children.

*Women were illiterates before, but praise God, the society is different now.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*I don't know, but I believe that the most important thing is education, and that through education, I can achieve all my rights.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*In the past, parents never let their daughters go to school. These days, they are more concerned that their daughters should complete their education.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*Women are being more and more educated. Women also entered the job market and assumed more family responsibilities. Women have a bigger role to play in their families these days.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*Having a degree is now important. Nobody can find work without having a university degree.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

Women now significantly outnumber men in university enrollment, and some participants express reservations about a recent policy to lower entrance standards for men in order to achieve more gender balance in student bodies.

## Measured Support for Gender Segregation in the Classroom

Measured support for gender segregation in the classroom exists among many women and men. Bedouins are somewhat more supportive of segregating men from women than their urban counterparts.

*I support segregation—of course! I don't support co-education of women and men.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

*Islam doesn't allow that men mix with women.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

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<sup>9</sup> The eight rights included in the list were property, education, employment, legal rights in court, political participation and voting, protection against violence, and the right to serve as leaders in government.

*I attended a mixed class [in the university]. Women used to sit on the right side of the room and men on the left. But men and women mingle outside of the classroom, so it is of no use to forbid mixed education only in classes. Segregation should also happen on the whole campus. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*Recent surveys have shown that mixed education has served to reduce the level of scientific achievement of both male and female students—students reach a higher level of achievement when separated. (Bedouin men, 30-44, married)*

But many Kuwaitis express concerns about feasibility and financial costs of creating facilities and systems that provide separate but equal education. Several Kuwaitis point out that restricting entrance to classes to certain genders has made it hard for certain students—both male and female—to complete their degrees. Some women say that it does not make sense to impose gender segregation in schools and universities if women and men end up working together in the workplace later on in life.

*Women have to get used to mingling with men. This way, they can deal with them in a better way later during their careers. (Urban woman, 20-29, single)*

*The current situation—they are separated from elementary to secondary, and in the university they are mixed. If we separate them in the university, when will they communicate with each other? After graduation, they will work together. We cannot separate them in this situation. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

## **Views on Women's Right to Work**

Kuwaitis say that women have increasingly become an accepted part of the workforce. In addition, women and men alike say that women's rights to own property, obtain inheritance, and operate businesses independently receive strong respect in Kuwait.

From the perspective of most Kuwaitis interviewed, women's entrance into the workforce has elevated their status and increased their value and worth in society. A small minority of Kuwaitis object to women having jobs, saying that their primary responsibility is staying home and taking care of the children. But most say that a working woman receives more respect.

*It is definitely a good thing that women are working... We have female teachers to teach women and female doctors to treat women patients. (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)*

*We can now see more respect for women...in that she can lift herself up and become financially independent without expecting anybody to pay for her or provide her with anything. (Urban woman, 20-29, single)*

*Women have become more independent, and husbands have become dependent and lazy. (Urban woman, 30-44, married)*

Nevertheless, several Kuwaitis note that a glass ceiling exists for women in the workplace preventing them from advancing to the most senior positions. Some believe that more impediments to women's advancement exist in public sector jobs than in private sector jobs.

***Debate about Inequality of Benefits.*** Most Kuwaitis note that even though men and women in Kuwait generally receive equal pay for equal work, men receive additional benefits, including “social allowances” when they have a wife or children. A few women complain about this difference, but most Kuwaitis see it as justified, because men are viewed as the ones primarily responsible for providing for their families. As one young unmarried woman in Kuwait City says, “It is mentioned in our religion that a man should take care of the woman financially. If a woman would like to help her husband, that is fine, but it is more of grant from her side. The husband does not have the right to ask her to help him with money.”

## SENSE OF PROGRESS ON WOMEN'S LEGAL RIGHTS

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Most Kuwaitis interviewed say that women are afforded strong legal rights and protections in Kuwait, with several noting that women are increasingly assertive about demanding their legal rights. A handful of men express dismay over how easy it is, in their view, for women to go to the police and initiate court cases.

*The law favors Kuwaiti women.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

*The laws are far better [for women] here in Kuwait than other Gulf countries like Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

*The law stands by all women's civil rights... The problem is not in the law but in norms and traditions.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

Some men say that people are using the law in such a way that it is causing discord in families. One middle-aged man from Kuwait City says, "These days the law interferes with how we raise our daughters." Another man in the same group recounts a story from the newspaper in which a Kuwaiti woman who reported her father to the police after her father told her mother that he would kill his daughter for breaking curfew and staying out after midnight. According to the man, the police made the father in this story sign a document promising not to harm his daughter.

**Domestic violence.** Several Kuwaitis interviewed note a decline in the level of domestic violence and abuse against women; some say that women's increased access to the courts and police are an important factor, but most point to a change in social mores.

*Domestic violence was more common in the past [than it is now]. In the past, when a woman got married to her cousin, she would keep silent if he beat her to maintain good relationships within the family.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*Women don't accept husbands that hit them these days. Today, women are dominant over men.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*Cases of domestic violence are being reduced... In the past, wives were subject to beatings, but today it is all different. When a husband becomes angry and beats her, the wife no longer endures this—she just leaves him and everything else behind.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

Despite this perception of advances in legal rights for women and a decline in domestic violence, comments by some Kuwaiti men indicate that much work remains on changing social attitudes about family violence. A few men believe that it is permissible to use physical violence against women, with some basing their rationale on their understanding and interpretation of Islam.

*According to the Prophet's sayings, if you must beat a woman, do not use your hands—use a type of stick.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*When beating a woman, it must be very light and not to hurt her, but it should be a precautionary beating.* (Urban man, 20-29, single)

***Views on Women's Testimony in Court and Female Judges.*** Two areas in which Kuwaitis—both men and women—say that women do not have the same legal rights as men are in testifying in courts and serving as judges. In the understanding of virtually all Kuwaitis interviewed, the court testimony of two women is needed to equal one man's testimony. There is no debate on this matter, and most Kuwaitis base this on their understanding of Islam. In addition, several men and women justify this provision by saying that women are too emotional and also prone to forgetfulness.

*[Two women are required to testify] because it is in our Sharia (Islamic law).* (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)

*A man is controlled by his brain, but a woman is controlled by her emotions.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*Women tend to forget. They always get two women to testify, so that one would remember if the other forgets.* (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)

*This was given to us by Allah, from whom all perfection and majesty comes, and it cannot be changed.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*Well it wasn't me who said that two women are needed to testify in the first place, it was Allah...* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

Similarly, nearly all Kuwaitis interviewed say that women cannot serve as judges. Their understanding of Islam, as well as a perception that women are ruled by their emotions, informs this perspective.

*A woman's emotions would have effects on her decisions [if she were a judge].* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*Our Prophet once said that women lack mental powers and faith. Her faith is not complete because she gets her regular period, when she cannot fast or pray. Regarding the power of her mind, a woman's emotional side always wins over her mental powers when she has to make decisions.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*Sharia does not allow women to hold the position of judge... because women are emotional in nature and men are more patient. Men can put up with things. Men are not compassionate; they use their minds, which is not the case with women.* (Urban woman, ages 20-29, single)

*There is a difference [between men and women] in physical and structural abilities, even in mental abilities; women have smaller minds... Their minds are not complete like men's minds.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

## More Debate over Women's Rights in Family Law

***Perceptions that Divorce is More Common Today.*** Many Kuwaitis say that divorce is on the rise. As with the perceived decline in domestic violence, the main factor behind the perceived increase in divorce is not tied to changes in legal rights; instead, more Kuwaitis point to shifts in societal attitudes. Only a few people mention the issue of women's legal rights in divorce cases as a factor, like one middle-aged Bedouin man who says, "One of the main reasons behind the rising number of divorces in Kuwait is the high [financial] allowances for divorced women."

But several Kuwaitis point to a shift in how Kuwait's social structures deal with family relationships and treat divorced women.

*[Divorce has increased] because the wife's family intervenes in personal matters between the husband and the wife. These days, the wife tells her family everything.* (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)

*How did people look at a divorced woman in the past? As an outcast. However, the way people look at a divorced woman today has changed considerably. She is now working and goes about her life normally. There is no difference between her and anyone else.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

Nevertheless, a few Kuwaitis point out that women face problems obtaining divorces and more impediments in divorce court proceedings. One middle-aged man says, "Women are treated unfairly in Kuwait's personal status laws," explaining that women sometimes unnecessarily suffer from prolonged divorces and do not receive the same respect in legal proceedings.

***Concerns about Housing Rights for Divorcees and Widows.*** A number of Kuwaitis interviewed raise concerns about the rights of divorced women and widows and argue that they require further legal protections and social support. A number of middle-aged women in Kuwait City claim that widows and divorcees face discrimination in housing, that they were placed in isolated and insecure housing. "The area where widows and divorced women live is known as the area without protection," says one married woman from Kuwait City. However, some mention that the Minister of Housing recently created new housing facilities so that widows and divorced women are more easily integrated into Kuwaiti society.

***Divided Opinions on Polygamy.*** Sharply divergent opinions on polygamy exist among Kuwaitis. Nearly all agree with the view that Islam allows a man to take up to four wives at once; the debate centers on how practical and advisable polygamy is in this day and age. Some Kuwaitis, particularly men, assert that a man having up to four wives is his God-given right and that polygamy is on the rise.

*Religion allows man to marry four [women]. This comes from Allah.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*I believe that a man can marry four women at one time, meaning that he can be in love with more than one woman at the same time and with the same intensity.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*Taking more than one wife has increased in the last ten years, especially in the southern part of Al-Jabra, where they are building new houses. There's a saying: 'In every new house there is a second new wife.'* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

Others hold an opposite opinion that polygamy is on the decline, saying that fewer women accept their husbands taking a second wife.

*In the past, if a man wanted to marry four women, the woman [first wife] would accept this situation. But now, it is impossible that the woman would accept such a thing.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*Nobody accepts it [polygamy]... How can a woman accept another woman sharing her husband?* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*No matter what happens, the wife wants her husband only to herself.* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

***Legal Rights of Kuwaiti Women Married to Foreigners.*** One issue of concern for some Kuwaitis, particularly women, is the rights of Kuwaiti women married to foreigners. One middle-aged woman from Kuwait City describes the main issue, saying, “Kuwaiti women who are married to foreigners do not have the same rights as men—she is not treated like a man who is married to a foreigner.”

The main concerns for those who raise the issue are the benefits provided by the government to families in which a Kuwaiti woman marries a foreigner, saying that in such cases families receive fewer benefits, like housing allowances. In addition, some worry that the children of Kuwaiti women married to foreigners cannot receive citizenship and all of its benefits.

There are a few voices that accept this unequal treatment, including a number of middle-aged Bedouin women. As one of these women explains, it is fine “because Kuwait is a tiny country, and children of Kuwaiti men are also Kuwaitis. But the children of Kuwaiti women married to foreigners benefit from citizenship of other countries.”

However, for most Kuwaitis interviewed, the government should address this inequality and provide Kuwaiti women married to foreigners with the same rights, benefits, and support. One young man from Kuwait City questions whether it is “Islamic” to treat women differently because of the issue of nationality.

# ISLAM'S CENTRAL ROLE IN DEBATES ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS

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Islam is a pervasive influence that informs most aspects of Kuwaitis' discussion on women's rights. Kuwaitis make frequent reference to their understanding of Islamic principles, citing Quran verses and the Traditions and Ways of the Prophet Muhammad to explain their opinions and feelings on key questions related to women's rights. According to most Kuwaitis, Islam is all-encompassing, "not just a religion, as believed by some people, but a total way of life," in the words of one unmarried young man from Kuwait City.

On some topics, Kuwaitis make clear that they believe there are certain red lines not to be crossed when discussing women's rights. For example, in the view of most Kuwaitis, Islam's precepts on inheritance and testimony in court are clear and there is no room for debate on those matters. According to this perspective, certain basics cannot be touched—God makes no mistakes.

On matters where some might see an inherent inequality, others see the difference in inheritance rights as an accurate expression of Islamic principles.. When asked whether it is acceptable that women receive a smaller share of inheritance, middle-aged married Bedouin women in the focus groups say "yes," with one woman explaining, "According to the religion of Islam, a man has more responsibility, and so it should be."

But most Kuwaitis express the view that Islam has had an "equalizing" impact for women, giving them rights they did not have previously under tribal customs, but not making women equal to men in all respects. One young Bedouin man in Al-Jahra says, "Islam is fairer and easier to women. In the tribal tradition, the man is the complete master and is given more than he deserves." One middle-aged woman in Kuwait City maintains, "In our religion, there is justice. Islam makes women equal, but it is not implemented properly."

## Questions on Implementation

Kuwaitis interviewed raise numerous questions about how Islam's principles are being implemented in Kuwait. Some see tribalism as preventing Islam's principles from being implemented properly. "Sometimes tribalism contradicts religion on certain issues, especially justice," says one middle-aged woman from Kuwait city. A young Bedouin man from Al-Jahra says, "Tribal traditions do not permit women to go to school and learn," something he sees that runs contrary to Islam's teachings.

Others blame the fact that portions of Kuwait's legal system were derived from French and Egyptian legal systems, resulting in only a partial implementation of Islam's principles. A few of the men interviewed focus on this point, with a middle-aged man from Kuwait City pointing out that although personal status laws are derived from Islamic law, it is not properly applied in his view. A young Bedouin man from Al-Jahra says that in many parts of criminal law, Kuwait does not follow what he believes Islamic law dictates, including cutting off the hands of thieves and stoning adulterous women to death.

Finally, influences from other countries, including entertainment programs and products, lead people to “enjoy unlawful things openly against religious teachings in the Quran and the Traditions of the Prophet,” as one young man from Kuwait City says. When asked why so many Kuwaitis enjoy watching television programs with women singing and dancing, programs condemned by some religious scholars, one middle-aged woman from Kuwait City says, “We are not applying the teachings of Islam.”

## Questions of Interpretation

The Kuwaiti public differs in its views on how the teachings of Islam should be interpreted in this day and age. For most Kuwaitis, there is a broad understanding that Islam’s core principles and teachings are eternal, but how to interpret and apply these in light of new dynamics varies substantially. “Islam accepts diversity of opinion and change,” says one middle-aged Bedouin man. The core principles are immutable, but much of everything else is up for debate.

*Islam’s basic foundation exists. But changes are made in its form to cope with modernity. The core principles are the foundation. Like a house, this foundation is unchangeable. In this house, you can change the decorations and the furniture, but you cannot touch the foundation. If you demolish one pillar, then the whole house will collapse.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*We love Islam with new changes that blend with traditions.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

*I teach an Islamic education course. Our curriculum states that religion accepts new things as long as they do not defy the religious pillars. So, we would accept development in a way that does not contradict our religion’s rules and codes.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*How Islamic law is applied and interpreted is changing because every age has its own special features.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

Most Kuwaitis state that religious scholars are the main figures who should practice *ijtihad*, the interpretation of Islam’s principles in light of new developments. Only a few participants can name a specific religious scholar who they trust. Some mention the Ministry of *Awqaf* (Religious Endowments), and others cite a leading *mufti* (a religious leader who has the authority to issue rulings on religion) in Saudi Arabia. Several Shiites<sup>10</sup> interviewed bring up prominent clerics in Iraq and Iran. But on the whole, there is no consensus about who is the main authority for practicing *ijtihad* and issuing *fatwas* (religious rulings). One middle-aged man from Kuwait City says that competing *fatwas* are a “great disaster.”

Several Kuwaitis say that it is vital for individuals to develop answers to the important questions in their lives, using Islam. As one middle-aged man from Kuwait City says, “God gave human beings brains and told them to try to assess how they feel about different issues and opinions. If there are things that you think are harmful or wrong for you, you as a Muslim should try to set your path and avoid those things—avoid the things where you have doubt.”

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<sup>10</sup> As noted in the methodology section, Sunni and Shiite Muslims were mixed in the same focus groups, posing an obstacle in obtaining clear opinions on issues in which differences between Sunni and Shiite doctrine were relevant.

# RESISTANCE TO OUTSIDE INVOLVEMENT ON WOMEN'S RIGHTS ISSUES IN KUWAIT

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Kuwaitis, men and women alike, express strong reservations about foreign organizations getting involved in Kuwait's debates on women's rights, with men more strongly opposing outside assistance, calling any efforts by foreign organizations to assist "interference."

Most Kuwaitis interviewed raise concerns that outsiders would not understand fundamental aspects about Kuwait and respect its key social values. A few women say that they would accept any kind of assistance that would lead to advances for Kuwaiti women, but this is not a dominant attitude. Rather, most Kuwaitis express the view that the debates over women's rights in Kuwait are for Kuwaitis to resolve. "If we have a problem, we will fix it," says one young unmarried woman from Kuwait City.

Some Kuwaitis argue that the gap between Kuwait and other countries is so large that it is inconceivable that any intervention or assistance from the outside might be helpful on women's rights. Most Kuwaiti women say that their lives and situation are better than those of women in Western countries. One married Bedouin woman says that she does not want to be like American women, because "American women sell petrol and are involved in the service industries."

All of the single young Bedouin women agree that Kuwaiti women enjoy a better status than women in the West, with one conceding that although Western women have more freedom, "They do not have respect." A young man from Al-Jahra claims that he saw on *Al-Jazeera* television that American women were demonstrating in the streets for rights that Muslim women currently have. Furthermore, several Kuwaitis express the belief that their country operates with a fundamentally different definition of freedom:

*I want you to know that their kind of freedom is different from ours, and that does not make them better than us.* (Urban man, 20-29, single)

*The problem is in the West they have sexual freedom, and our values are different.* (Bedouin man, 20-29, single)

*[Western women have] freedom with no purpose.* (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)

*Our country's situation is different than theirs... and our thoughts are different than theirs.* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

## Divided Public Views on the United States

Overall, public views on the United States are complex. On the one hand, Kuwaitis express appreciation for America's liberation of their country from Saddam Hussein and Iraq in 1991, and they applaud the American-led removal of Saddam from power in 2003. Participants also admire the achievements of the United States in business and technology.

*America is a friendly country. It helped us solve a problem [ending Iraq's occupation of Kuwait] and we are ever grateful for the American people because I feel they helped me.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*What is important is that they deposed Saddam.* (Bedouin woman, 30-44, married)

*I'm one of the supporters of America bringing justice and giving freedom to Iraq and the Iraqis... Yesterday, for the first time, I was pleased because we and the Iraqis are now able to know everything that's happening there in Iraq... In the days of Saddam, no one was allowed to watch channels or install satellite dishes.* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

*I support America socially, economically, technologically, and with its industry.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

*America governs well compared to Arab and Islamic countries.* (Urban man, 20-29, single)

At the same time, Kuwaitis express serious misgivings about aspects of American foreign policy, citing the fumbles on Iraq's reconstruction, prisoner abuses, and perceptions of an unbalanced policy favoring Israel. Despite the fact that the United States led a coalition to end Iraq's occupation of Kuwait, some Kuwaitis focus instead on their perceptions that the United States is trying to dominate the world, with a few saying the United States is threatening to Islam.

*What happened in Abu Ghraib prison is very dangerous... America wants to occupy the Arab world indirectly.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*They are turning a blind eye to terrorism inflicted by Israelis on the Palestinians, knowing that terrorism is at its height in Israel. They kill whole families and destroy their houses over their heads. Terrorism is more common in Israel than in Iraq.* (Bedouin woman, 20-29, single)

*The United States puts pressure on Iran, which by 2006 might have the ability to manufacture nuclear weapons, while Israel already possesses nuclear weapons. This makes you question American policy and its endless and blind support of Israel.* (Bedouin man, 30-44, married)

*The American government is trying to change Islamic law.* (Urban woman, 20-29, single)

*America is totally fine except for its policy toward Israel.* (Urban man, 30-44, married)

*The United States interferes in other people's affairs. Let the world live as it likes without interfering in internal affairs.* (Urban woman, 30-44, married)

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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Recommendations based on views obtained in this research to help Kuwaiti civic groups, the Kuwaiti government, and international women's rights advocates in efforts to expand women's rights include:

**1. Invest in public awareness and advocacy efforts that engage the broader Kuwaiti public.**

In addition to social conservatism and adherence to specific interpretations of Islam, complacency among the general public serves as a major challenge for women's rights advocates. In order to broaden their impact, women's rights supporters should take steps to engage the broader Kuwaiti public through media campaigns and public events that seek to raise the level of awareness and quality of debate on women's rights.

**2. Frame arguments and campaigns on women's rights to fit more closely with Kuwait's social context.**

Islam is a key reference in debates over the status of women, and women's rights proponents should keep this fact in mind when crafting campaigns and arguments aimed at expanding women's rights. This research demonstrates that differences in perspectives on applying Islam's principles in today's world exist among Kuwaitis, and women's rights advocates might have stronger impact if they frame their arguments in terms that more strongly resonate with Kuwaitis.

**3. Examine arguments of the opponents of women's political rights carefully in order to develop more strategic and effective messages in favor of women's full political rights.**

To navigate public debates more strategically, advocates for Kuwaiti women's political rights should carefully examine the arguments used by their opponents and develop messages that aim to expose the weaknesses in their opponents' arguments. In developing strategies for advancing women's political rights, supporters should keep in mind that the terms of the debate over granting women's voting rights are distinct from the debate over granting women the right to run for office and serve as leaders.

**4. Provide specific examples of women serving as effective and capable leaders when creating messages advocating for women's full rights to run for office and serve as leaders.**

One way to strengthen the arguments for women running as candidates and serving as leaders is to cite specific examples of instances in which women play or have played a key leadership role, including serving as resistance leaders during Iraq's occupation of Kuwait and taking leadership roles in community and business groups.

**5. Keep in mind other challenges that women face beyond the lack of political rights, including shortcomings in their legal rights.**

Though the focus on debating women's political rights is understandable given the draft legislation proposed by Kuwait's government to grant women the right to vote and stand as candidates, proponents of women's rights should not lose sight of other challenges facing Kuwaiti women. Though they have seen some progress in recent years, particularly on economic, educational, and legal rights, Kuwaiti women continue to face many challenges outside of their lack of political rights. Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis and divorced and widowed women in particular face special challenges that deserve attention.

**6. Develop awareness-raising programs on the problems of domestic violence.** This research indicates that certain segments of the Kuwaiti population, including a number of women, offer arguments that justify violence against women. Advocates should take steps to develop awareness about the problem of domestic violence and seek to change attitudes and views that justify violence.

# RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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This report is based on eight focus groups conducted July 17 – 21, 2004, with a cross section of Kuwaitis in Kuwait City and Al-Jahra.

## Methodology

In order to enhance the comfort level of participants, each of the eight groups was recruited to be relatively homogeneous. In this manner, each participant is more likely to feel that everyone's opinion matters equally, that there is no need to defer to another person, which encourages frankness and participation. The rationale for the constitution of the groups includes:

- **Kuwaitis.** These focus groups were conducted with Kuwaitis, who represent a minority of all of the people living in Kuwait. According to the most recent population statistics, as reported in 2004 by KUNA, Kuwait's official news agency, Kuwaiti citizens constitute 37 percent of the 2.6 million people who live in Kuwait. The remaining 63 percent of the population consist mostly of foreign workers from Asian countries such as Bangladesh and the Philippines and the rest of the Arab world.
- **Gender.** Half of the groups consisted of women and half consisted of men, generally reflecting overall demographics of the adult population.
- **Age.** Like most countries in the Middle East, Kuwait has a relatively young population. Half of the groups were with participants aged 20 to 29, and the other half were conducted with participants aged 30 to 44. This scheme is intentionally biased towards the younger generation when compared to available statistics, in order to get a sense of the emerging attitudes that may impact longer term trends in the country.
- **Marital status.** Groups were also stratified according to marital status, on the assumption that men and women who are married versus those who are unmarried have different life experiences and worldviews.
- **Shi'a and Sunni.** Operating on the advice of Freedom House's research partner, the decision was made to mix Sunni and Shi'a Kuwaitis. In retrospect, it is clear that this was a mistake in judgment. Some confusion resulted within some of the groups because of differences in Sunni and Shi'a practices on inheritance and religious authorities. Anyone conducting opinion research in Kuwait, particularly on issues related to women's rights, the family code, and religion, would be wise to segment these subgroups in order to obtain a clearer reading on the differences of opinion between these two subgroups. Estimates vary on the percentages of Sunnis and Shi'a, with one estimate placing Sunnis at 70 percent and Shi'a at 30 percent of Kuwait's population.

Freedom House's research partner organization in Kuwait took the specifications and used its network of individuals to recruit individuals to participate in the focus groups using snowball sampling, a form of convenience sampling in which a key person in a community helps identify potential participants who meet the desired selection criteria.

Freedom House’s research partner provided a trained focus group moderator for the sessions, and Freedom House’s research consultant observed six of the eight sessions with a simultaneous interpreter—the two sessions he did not observe were with socially conservative Bedouin women.

During the introduction to each session, the moderators received permission from the participants to record the sessions. Freedom House’s research partner produced full transcripts of each session, which were used in combination with notes from observing the sessions to produce this analysis.

### **On Focus Groups**

Focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that proceed according to a careful research design. Focus groups are useful in helping understand the language that people use when they discuss particular ideas or concepts. They are also useful in gaining a deeper appreciation for the motivations, feelings, and values behind participants’ reactions. Because of the small numbers involved, however, focus group participants cannot be expected to be thoroughly and statistically representative of the larger population from which they are drawn, and findings ought not to be generalized beyond the small number of participants. They offer insight into emerging ideas and popular attitudes on key issues, but it would be unsound to extrapolate to firm conclusions about what “all” or “most” Kuwaitis believe based on such a small sample of individuals.

**Table I: Focus Group Specifications**

<b>Group</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Area Type</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Ages</b>	<b>Marital Status</b>
1	17-Jul	Kuwait City	Urban	Female	30-44	Married
2	17-Jul	Al-Jahra	Bedouin	Male	20-29	Single
3	18-Jul	Kuwait City	Urban	Male	30-44	Married
4	18-Jul	Al-Jahra	Bedouin	Male	30-44	Married
5	19-Jul	Kuwait City	Urban	Female	20-29	Single
6	20-Jul	Al-Jahra	Bedouin	Female	30-44	Married
7	20-Jul	Kuwait City	Urban	Male	20-29	Single
8	21-Jul	Al-Jahra	Bedouin	Female	20-29	Single

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This round of focus groups in Kuwait is one of three sponsored by Freedom House's Survey of Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa, which aims to facilitate and support national and international efforts to empower women in the Middle East and North Africa region through a comparative evaluation of women's rights in 17 selected countries and territories.

The *Survey of Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, with a projected publication date of early 2005, will provide an overview of women's rights throughout the Middle East and North Africa and identify critical issues relevant for policymakers, experts, and activists.

Freedom House's Executive Director Jennifer Windsor; Sameena Ford, Senior Research Coordinator for the *Survey of Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*; and several other members of the Freedom House team including Jonathan Haddad, Maureen Magee, and Alex Taurel contributed to organizing the research and editing the report. Thomas O. Melia, Director of Research at the Institute for the Study of Diplomacy at Georgetown University, offered many thoughtful comments on the draft report.

Focus Marketing Consultancy, a market research company based in Kuwait City, conducted the fieldwork for these focus groups. Focus offered advice to Freedom House's research consultant on developing the focus group questionnaire and guidelines, recruited participants, moderated the sessions, and prepared transcripts of the sessions.

This report and focus group project was made possible by funding from the United States Department of State's Middle East Partnership Initiative.

# ABOUT FREEDOM HOUSE

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Freedom House is a clear voice for democracy and freedom around the world. Founded in 1941 by Eleanor Roosevelt, Wendell Willkie, and other Americans concerned with the mounting threats to peace and democracy, Freedom House has been a vigorous proponent of democratic values and a steadfast opponent of dictatorships of the far left and the far right.

Non-partisan and broad-based, Freedom House is led by a Board of Trustees composed of leading Democrats, Republicans, and independents; business and labor leaders; former senior government officials; scholars; writers; and journalists. All are united in the view that American leadership in international affairs is essential to the cause of human rights and freedom.

Over the years, Freedom House has been at the center of the struggle for freedom. It was an outspoken advocate of the Marshall Plan and NATO in the 1940s, of the U.S. civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s, of the Vietnam boat people in the 1970s, of Poland's Solidarity movement and the Filipino democratic opposition in the 1980s, and of the many democracies that have emerged around the world in the 1990s.

Freedom House has vigorously opposed dictatorships in Central America and Chile, apartheid in South Africa, the suppression of the Prague Spring, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, genocide in Bosnia and Rwanda, and the brutal violation of human rights in Cuba, Burma, China, and Iraq. It has championed the rights of democratic activists, religious believers, trade unionists, journalists, and proponents of free markets. In 1997, a consolidation took place whereby the international democratization training programs of the National Forum Foundation were incorporated into Freedom House.

Today, Freedom House is a leading advocate of the world's young democracies, which are coping with the debilitating legacy of statism, dictatorship, and political repression. It conducts an array of U.S. and overseas research, advocacy, education, and training initiatives that promote human rights, democracy, free-market economics, the rule of law, independent media, and U.S. engagement in international affairs.

Freedom House's publications include: *Freedom in the World*, an annual global survey of political rights and civil liberties; *Freedom of the Press*, an annual survey of world press freedom; *Nations in Transit*, an annual survey of political conditions in Central Europe and Eurasia; and *Countries at the Crossroads*, a comparative assessment of governance in 30 countries that are at a crossroads in determining their political future, evaluating their performance in civil liberties, rule of law, anticorruption and transparency, and accountability and public voice.