



# Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

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## **Education, a mirror of women advancement: the case of Kuwait**

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre, striving to maintain a comprehensive outlook on the region of the Arab Gulf, is quite interested in exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social status of women in the region. The role of women in Arab Gulf society is rapidly changing in all aspects. Women are increasingly seen as active citizens able to give a major contribution to their country's political, economic, social realms. Of course, there are significant differences across each of the GCC countries. This series wants to keep track of these changes as they happen. Building upon direct testimonies of women from the Gulf countries, the EGIC will publish interviews, analyses, commentaries, surveys and on-the-ground research about the ever-changing role of Women in the GCC.

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The history of women's cultural and social status in Kuwait has enduringly been defined by the dichotomy between progressive forces including the business-community and the political circles around policy-making and traditionalist groups inspired by Islamism and traditionalist precepts. Such a struggle has consistently reflected on societal developments issues, including women disenfranchisement through education. For instance, education was placed under state control in 1935, marking the beginning of public education and, in 1936, the first public school for girls was established which, however, offered instruction in Arabic only and focused on home economics and Islamic studies. This mirrored the status of pre-oil Kuwaiti society, where men had a prominent role not only in society, but also in the familiar context, where they acted as "guardians," relegating female activities to merely domestic ones, as household and childcare. As a consequence, girls were still, for a few years, typically not sent to school, which resulted in high illiteracy rates.

Shortly after, in 1938, oil was discovered in Kuwait and a wave of economic growth - and Western influences - swept the country, bringing progressive issues to the forefront. Two years after the country's official independence (1961), Kuwait started adult education programs for women,

following similar programs established for men in 1958. By 1960, Kuwait's education system had enrolled some 45,000 students, 40% of which were girls. Since 1966, education became compulsory for ages 6-14 and is offered to all Kuwaitis free of charge. Today, educational development represents the foundation of the Kuwaiti government's commitment to utilizing the country's human resources for meeting the social developmental challenges of the new millennium. This strategy determined increased opportunities for women - although at a slow pace.

Over the past few decades, the road to women empowerment through education has produced as many contradictions. For instance, the modernization of Kuwait and its effects on women's social and cultural perception were not welcomed in the past by the conservative and Islamist segments of the country. As soon as Islamist parties gained majority in Kuwait's Parliament (1996), an anti-coeducation law was passed, leading to the segregation of female and male students and staff in all education sectors and levels. Through the years, the law has sparked a lively debate in Kuwait and it was challenged by University staff protesting its difficulties and costs, by parliamentarians in 2013, students and finally overturned by Kuwait's constitutional court in 2015. Today, while private schools offer coeducation, most public schools are still gender-segregated. However, this is an issue very much in progress and soon the policy could change in all public schools as well.

The level of illiteracy has dramatically decreased in the last 60 years, passing from more than 50% to 4% at present. According to UNESCO, in 2007, female enrolment at primary and secondary level in Kuwait was 97 % and 91 % respectively and for males, the corresponding figures, were 99 and 90 percent. This shows increasing parity between genders at the early stages of education. As for higher education, in the past few years, women even outnumbered men. In the academic year 2013/2014, Kuwait University enrolled more than 35,000 students, and the ratio between males and females was 1:2 in favour of females.

However, despite that, women still disproportionately focus on Arts and Humanities studies, with a substantial lack of interest in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) or vocational and technical training. This cannot be explained by a structural disparities. Indeed, if female schools' curriculum in the past focused on home economic studies, mirroring the common perception of women's role in society, today male and female curricula are identical. The reluctance to join STEM studies can therefore be representative of a cultural bias - common around the world - caused by traditions, parental pressures and the lack of relevant female role models. For example, a female student that gets married during her study cannot attend normal schedules in school. Instead, she has to attend evening courses and potentially join education centres that require less commitment to complete their study courses. Given that women are encouraged to get married early, this restricts their ability to pursue demanding, high-skilled careers.

Still, an overview of Kuwait's labour market today shows that women represent over 40% of the country's workforce, a noteworthy uniqueness in the region. Subsequently, the deep-seated traditional structure of the Kuwaiti family is also slowly changing in favour of more inclusive ones. So far, women are opting for career paths that are traditionally considered more compatible with house-holding, as, for example, teaching. A large proportion of public school teachers are Kuwaiti females, particularly at the primary level, and over 90% of them are below 45 years of age, indicating that this is a growing, long-term phenomenon. Having many women in teaching position, where they embody authoritative role models, can have key positive consequences on society as a whole. However, an even bigger impact might come with an increased involvement of women in the managerial positions across educational institutions.

All considered, given the high level of female literacy in the country and their growing roles in the labour market, in particular in the formative field of education, there is reason to suggest that women empowerment in Kuwait may be slow, but is progressing. The low number of women involved in traditionally male-dominated professions, as well as the lack of women in leadership positions, do represent substantial challenges for the near future. Additionally, a greater involvement of women in high-salaries positions might be beneficial, as economic empowerment has an important role in the overall empowerment of women. To overcome such challenges, in the context of the complex clash of liberalism and conservatism that underlies the country, we suspect education will remain the key instrument.

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