



Women in the Gulf

An EGIC Investigative Series

Interview with Dr. Wafaa Alaradi

Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Kuwait University.

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.

In this work of the series we sat with Dr. Wafaa Alaradi Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science at Kuwait University to discover more about the challenges and opportunities for women in Kuwait and in the academia context.

Dr. Wafaa, let us thank you deeply for taking the time to engage with us and let our audience know about your experience, your profession and your sector, with specific reference to the Arab Gulf.

EGIC: First of all, given your position, I would like to ask you: how would you describe women's status in Kuwait in general?

Dr. Wafaa: With all due caveats, I would assess the status of women in Kuwait as, overall, positive. Women are generally supported in their quest for opportunities, which are abundant, and they are given a chance to compete with men equally. Generally speaking, in comparison with the condition of other women in the rest of the region, in Kuwait women have a certain degree of equality.

EGIC: In your opinion, were there key progresses or significant setbacks in the past few years? If yes, which ones would you highlight?

Dr. Wafaa: The path towards progress in women's rights has always been characterised, in the past as well as today, by setbacks and obstacles. One could summarize such obstacles in three main points. One, culture and traditions, that are predominant in our society: while this is very much changing, many people retain old-school-thinking and believe that women should be restricted from work and opportunity of disenfranchisement. Two, the dominance of religious groups, both in the mainstream and in the Parliament, where they served among the major blocs in the past few years. In its parliamentary experience, this bloc has consistently been using religion to deprive women from many rights and opportunities. Third, there is an issue in the level of political and societal awareness, especially among women. Women tend to lower their own expectations on themselves and on other women, if given the opportunity. Women can become their own worst enemy.

EGIC: What about, specifically, in the academic context? In your opinion, are Kuwaiti women offered equal opportunities as Kuwaiti men to make a career in academia, education or culture in general? Do all faculty members receive equal appreciation, encouragement and support?

Dr. Wafaa: Generally speaking, in the field of academia, I believe that in Kuwait women are given equal opportunities as to their men peers. In some contexts perhaps the art of networking is overvalued, but that doesn't affect access to an opportunity for female candidates. For example, the Department of Political Science at Kuwait University has had, for the past few years, almost equal numbers of male and female faculty members. This has changed quite a lot with respect to, for example, the situation 20 years ago whereby only 2-3 faculty members were women. Today we see increasingly an equal ratio of the two genders. Still, in other contexts, away from academia, men do still have privileged access to jobs and career opportunities. For instance, jobs in energy companies or in the field of mechanics, are still considered to be more appropriate for men.

EGIC: How about your students, in particular female students? Do they see your figure as a source of inspiration for their own future?

Dr. Wafaa: It is blissful for me to know that I inspired many students in the past 6 years and our time together has influenced their way of thinking and their plans for the future. Some of my students have moved on to become part of the diplomatic corp, others are continuing with their graduate and post-graduate studies, including in the Department of Political Science, and I am very proud of them all.

EGIC: Is the academic career a popular professional choice for Kuwaiti women? And is this career generally encouraged by families and society?

Dr. Wafaa: The academic career is highly valued as an opportunity by many people in Kuwait, both men and women. This is due to its competitive wages, highly-regarded reputation, access to further opportunities, and so on. In the past, this career choice wasn't encouraged by most families for their daughters, due to the fact that it was likely to involve much traveling. Nowadays, instead, it is families and society that support such opportunity for women. For example, more benefits are given to those who hold scholarships and their spouses and kids to help them continue their academic endeavours.

EGIC: Did you experience any challenge to your research or teaching activities that could be partly attributable to your femininity?

Dr. Wafaa: I guess I faced difficulties in reconciling being a mother and a Professor. In that particular moment more specifically, the burden and social demands imposed on a woman is different and much heavier than that a man usually experiences. Plus, some of the more sensitive topics that I have picked as research themes have sometimes been rejected because they would be addressed by a woman.

EGIC: How would you compare the challenges and opportunities encountered by Kuwaiti women in academia with the context of the wider Arab Gulf?

Dr. Wafaa: Comparing Kuwaiti women to others in the region is not an easy task. Kuwait was the first country in the Gulf to start funding scholarships for women for example. The benefits and scholarships are more generous than elsewhere. However, one cannot underestimate others, their current scholarships and funding opportunities, and their capabilities for the future.

EGIC: During your career you collected a number of international experiences. What do you think is the most common misconception that your international colleagues have about Kuwaiti female scholars?

Dr. Wafaa: I believe traveling all the way from Kuwait to the United States was perhaps one of the biggest societal shock for me. The cultural and linguistic gap is wide and I have even faced religious discrimination once. Other than that, the American community has been welcoming and indeed most Kuwaitis who travel to the United States and live there for a long while always wish to go back.

EGIC: What best practices, in general, do you think Kuwaiti academia could import or export?

Dr. Wafaa: Broadly speaking, Kuwait's education system needs much improvement. Speaking about the Department of Political Science specifically, positive changes could include: adding courses focusing on regional studies, teaching courses in English, strengthening the teaching method should to encourage reading and research and minimize frontal lectures.

EGIC: Would you like to tell us more about some of your main research projects?

Dr. Wafaa: My current research agenda includes work on women in Kuwait's Parliament, quota law, the foreign policy of the United States, and revolutionary movements.

Thank you very much for your precious time!

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Date: 21 December 2017*