



 REPORT WORLD

Kuwaiti Women Leaders Aim to Bring More Gender Parity to Politics

JUNE 13, 2018 — LILY HINDY

Only about a dozen years have passed since women in the Arab Gulf nation of Kuwait were granted the right to vote and run for elected office in 2005, a hard-won victory that followed a large demonstration in front of parliament. But since then, instead of picking up momentum, the movement for women's political participation has faltered: The number of women running in general elections decreased over time, as did the number elected. Twenty-eight women ran for seats in 2006, though none won, then four were elected in 2009. But in 2012 only two gained seats, and the most recent round of voting brought only one. Today, Safa AlHashem is the only elected woman in Kuwait's fifty-member parliament (around 15 cabinet appointees also vote in parliament). According to UN Women, as of January 1, 2017 the country ranked 184th out of 193 total for its percentage of women in parliament.

Alanoud Alsharekh and her partners at Ibtkar Consultancy are bent on reversing that downward trend. Last month, fifteen high-powered Kuwaiti women swept through Washington, D.C., visiting congressional offices, embassies, universities, and think tanks. Referring to the group as "our future leaders," Ibtkar selected them to participate in a year-long pilot training program called EKWIP (Empower Kuwaiti Women in Politics) to prepare them to run for elected office, assist in other women's political campaigns, or advance professionally in other sectors. Ibtkar, a boutique consultancy firm that specializes in political and public relations strategy building and aspirational leadership for women, selected the women from a pool of about seventy applicants based on their goal to increase gender parity in leadership roles across their nation in politics, law, culture, and business.

"I am very excited and privileged to be part of this experiment," said Alsharekh, a researcher at the London Middle East Institute and an outspoken advocate for women's rights who has explored the possibility of running herself. In addition to teaching them the skills needed to enter the political arena successfully, the purpose of the tour, which also stopped in Dearborn, Michigan, was to introduce them to successful women leaders in the United States, many from the Arab-American community.

"At the end of the day the obstacles against women in leadership positions are frustratingly similar wherever you are in the world," said Alsharekh, though she pointed out that here in the United States, Arab-American women "face another layer of othering because they're Arab, and the way that Arabs are politically positioned right now specifically within this administration, that's not an easy thing."

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The women range in age from twenty-three to fifty-six, with backgrounds in business, law, teaching, journalism and even

sports—the captain of the national women’s basketball team was getting geared up to run for president of one of the country’s sports clubs. I caught up with the group on April 20th while they were in Washington D.C. on their study tour. In what follows, you’ll get to meet six of them, and hear them in their own words.

Athra Al Rafae

WOMEN’S RIGHTS LAWYER ATHRA AL RAFAE, PICTURED LEFT WITH CONGRESSWOMAN DEBBIE DINGELL (D-MI) DURING THE EKWIP STUDY TOUR IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ANNOUNCED HER INTENTION TO RUN FOR KUWAITI PARLIAMENT IN 2020 DURING THE EKWIP STUDY TOUR IN THE UNITED STATES.



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Athra Al Rafae, forty-one, announced her intention to run for parliament in 2020 in Kuwait’s *Al Qabass* newspaper during the trip to D.C. Al Rafae is a lawyer who has worked for two decades on cases involving women’s rights in Kuwait. She has repeatedly challenged the government on its policies around housing for divorced and single women, who face discrimination in housing loans (she won a significant case for divorced women, who are now entitled to a sum of money from the government instead of being left homeless after divorce without any compensation). She has represented women who are abused by their male family members and call Al Rafae for help only after escaping surreptitiously from their homes.

She has long seen the need for more women in Kuwaiti government because of her experience fighting these cases with the Ministry of Housing, parliament, and other government entities. “When I meet with members of parliament, they are all men,” she said. “We don’t have any women inside the parliament to talk with about these cases. So nobody listens to us.”

In 2006, when women had their first chance to run for parliament, Al Rafae started thinking about her future in politics: “I said, I should be a candidate.” But she explained that the four women who won in that first race were not strategically prepared to be in office. Women had never had any training or mentorship, formal or informal, and so Al Rafae was thrilled to hear about the EKWIP program last year. “When I made my announcement, people said, ‘We’ve needed you for a long time!’”

Al Rafae plans to focus on three main issues during her campaign: gender equality; housing rights for single women and for Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis, who also can’t buy homes; and fighting corruption. She faces a lot of critics from traditional backgrounds, she says—both men and women. When asked her about her motivation, she responded quite simply that she is a lawyer and knows the law.

“These people are fighting me because I’m working for women’s rights, but I don’t listen to them. This is my principle. I know the law. I know the rights. I know equality and I know my Islam, what my Islam says. This is my responsibility.”

Abeer Omar

ABEER OMAR, RIGHT, WITH CONGRESSWOMAN DEBBIE DINGELL (D-MI) DURING THE EKWIP STUDY TOUR IN WASHINGTON, D.C.



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Abeer Omar, fifty-six, is the senior executive for Corporate Communications and Government Affairs at EQUATE Petrochemical Company, which employs over 1,200 people and has complexes in Kuwait, North America, and Europe. Omar started as a human resources employee and worked her way up. “All my life, most of my meetings, I’m the only woman at the table. I’m the only woman.... When I joined this company, I started thinking, what could make me shine among all those males? ... I don’t let myself enter any meeting—any forum—without equipping myself with knowledge. I’m sure my colleagues, the men, can just come in the morning, enjoy the meeting, while I was staying [up] all night trying to prepare myself to not miss any opportunity.”

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Omar is not convinced that she will run for a political office, but she said the training program was helping her to explore her opportunities and identify the skills she needs to take advantage of them, should she choose to do so. When I asked her about the state of women’s political participation in Kuwait, she said, “the story is sad, the number of women is decreasing.... I believe that we need to encourage more women not just in the parliament but in every leadership position. Even in my industry for example, the petrochemical industry—the percentage of women is very minimal.”

Like many of the women I spoke with, Omar is optimistic about change in Kuwait in large part because of recent changes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait’s large and influential neighbor. The new Saudi crown prince Mohamed bin Salman has begun to relax the kingdom’s male guardianship laws, which require women to seek permission from their male guardian (father, brother, husband, or even son) to do any number of things. These include applying for a passport, traveling outside the country, studying abroad, getting married, or even exiting prison. As of last year, Saudi women are for the first time allowed to drive, attend sporting events, and go to the movies. Women in Kuwait have long enjoyed more legal rights than their counterparts in Saudi Arabia; with conservative countries like Saudi Arabia opening up, many women across the region are wondering what might be in store for them.

“I think everywhere women still did not reach what they want,” Omar said of women’s rights movements. “It’s not a surprise, because in every region, the men were there before the women.... Women were always inside the home and men were outside, whether in the political or non-political arena. Just imagine how many years it took the States—now it’s 100 years since you got the possibility to vote—so for Kuwait it is the same thing. We need more and more, but I think

now I'm more optimistic because of Saudi Arabia's transformation. I think it will make a change, and it will push every single GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] country to have more speed in women's rights and giving more political freedom to the women."

Leanah Al Awadhi

LEANAH AL AWADHI, RIGHT, WITH FORMER KUWAITI MP ASEEL AL AWADI, NOW THE FIRST WOMAN TO BE KUWAITI'S CULTURAL ATTACHÉ TO THE UNITED STATES.



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Leanah Al Awadhi, twenty-three, is still too young to run for parliament, but she has already held elected student government positions and wants to be ready to run for national government when she turns thirty. Al Awadhi sees Kuwaiti society as rapidly changing. After spending two years in London working toward a master's degree in countering organized crime and terrorism, she came home to find that young men and women in the capital city were able to interact at coffee shops without any hassle.

"Before it was kind of like taboo to be sitting in a coffee shop with your guy friend, your male friend. And now we just network... so for example, I'd be sitting in a coffee shop with a friend and then her guy friend would come and say "Hi, what do you do?", and then by the end of the conversation we'd be exchanging business cards or emails or we'd already be planning a project together."

Al Awadhi co-founded an organization that hosted the first cross-cultural “diwaniyah,” or gathering, in Kuwait. Diwaniyahs have traditionally been a male domain—they’re “where all the networking happens,” explains Al Awadhi—though mixed-gender diwaniyahs have become increasingly common in recent years. Al Awadhi’s diwaniyahs include men and women as well as foreigners, who far outnumber Kuwaitis in the country and are subjected to racism and excluded from society. “We’ve [discussed many] topics: on whether or not we should offer sexual education in Kuwait, we’ve discussed women’s rights, we’ve discussed the economy, the quality of air in Kuwait and how to improve it.... In the end of the day, the message we really want to convey to people is that we want them to interact, we want them to engage with people from different nationalities, different social circles, in order for them to learn how to interact with people in order to build the values of respect.”

Social integration would be an important part of Al Awadhi’s platform. “My agenda would be [perceived by many as] very crazy... I think many families would not like me, many would not vote for me. I may seem a little radical to them.”

Asrar Hayat

ASRAR HAYAT, RIGHT, WITH KUWAITI MINISTER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY KHALED AL RAWDAN, AFTER THE EKWIP GROUP MET WITH HIM IN WASHINGTON, D.C.



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Asrar Hayat, fifty-three, participated in the first demonstration for women’s suffrage in Kuwait in 1996. An MBA and former general manager at a telecommunications corporation, Hayat has held board membership at a number of

companies, including the national airline, Kuwait Airways. “All my life I’ve been working hard, a career woman, a single mom for two amazing boys. Humdillah [praise God], I accomplished a lot.”

Hayat wants to run for political office on a platform of reforming the education system in Kuwait. “I have to educate people so they can work and they can develop our country. I think this is the most important factor. Of course there are many factors, but, to start with, education.”

Men have to get used to [the fact] that we are with them. Together. All the time.

She believes that more women should be involved in politics because “we work hard, we are punctual, we are passionate, we are disciplined. We are picky. Women are known to be picky. And this is good! When you work, you want everything to be correct, done properly. And men have to get used to [the fact] that we are with them. Together. All the time. So they will always remember that we are together in it and we are all citizens, we are all equals. You know, if they just leave us to the side, maybe they will forget that we are equals. That we are intelligent.”

Nour al-Hawaidi

NOUR AL-HAWAIDI, RIGHT, IN WASHINGTON, D.C. WITH EKWIP TOUR ORGANIZER AND IBTKAR CONSULTING PARTNER ALANOUD ALSHAREKH.



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Nour al-Hawaidi, thirty-four, holds a master's in political science and is now working towards a PhD in the same field. She organizes activities to show women what their constitutional rights are, and she is very active on social media. With this training, she is preparing herself for a parliament run in six years, in 2024.

“We are half of the [society] in Kuwait,” she said. “When I ask for more rights for the woman, I don’t look for the decline of the man—no. I have to work with the man. But not behind him: with him....We have to change the minds for the girls and for the women.”

Hanan Alzayed

HANAN ALZAYED, RIGHT, WITH FAYROUZ SAAD, DEMOCRATIC CANDIDATE FOR U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.



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Hanan Alzayed, forty-seven, is head captain of Kuwait's national basketball team and a freelance journalist. She also works in the tourism department of the Ministry of Information. Alzayed sees great opportunity for women's empowerment through sports. Unfortunately, she said, the government is little invested in women's sports. She intends to use the training from her EKWIP experience to prepare her to run for president of one of the country's handful of women's sports clubs, she said. In Kuwait, sports clubs are funded by the government and their boards are elected by

members. Alsharekh noted that the first female board member was appointed to a national sports federation in May, but that was only through the insistence of FIFA, professional soccer's international governing body.

"I think women in sports, it's about leadership and it's about empowerment, and it's about also equality. Behind sports there are so many skills. And I think it's important that we tell the government, we tell society, we tell the whole world that we have ladies who are capable to do something for their country. And it is one of the main issues I want to [focus on] when I run for office."

Alzayed says she has always been supported by the men in her family, but she thinks most men are not ready for women's advancement. "Some of the men, they really fight for the women. Because women cannot reach this point without a man by their sides. I'm here because I'm supported by my family. My father, my brother, they are part of me. They are men. But in general, when it comes to politics on this issue I think the man, he wants to lead everything."

The women of EKWIP returned to Kuwait after their whirlwind tour in the United States, where they will continue their year-long training with Ibtkar. You can follow their activities on Twitter (most posts are in both Arabic and English). May 16 was Kuwaiti Women's Day, marking the day in 2005 of the landmark ruling by the country's parliament to grant women full suffrage. In a post on Twitter, Alsharekh shared a few photos of the protests outside of parliament leading up to the ruling that year, along with a caption noting: "there is still so much left to do."

We remember when we were denied voting rights and most leadership positions.

We remember not having a say in who represented us.

We remember those who stood against us and now court our votes.

We remember because there is still so much left to do.

Happy Kuwaiti women's day! pic.twitter.com/wRplmZCz2I

— Alanoud Alsharekh (@AAlsharekh) May 16, 2018

COVER PHOTO: PARTICIPANTS IN THE EKWIP (EMPOWER KUWAITI WOMEN IN POLITICS) TRAINING PROGRAM IN WASHINGTON, D.C. WITH FORMER KUWAITI MP ASEEL AL AWADI, WHO IS NOW THE FIRST WOMAN TO BE KUWAIT'S CULTURAL ATTACHÉ TO THE UNITED STATES. CREDIT: IBTKAR CONSULTING.



Lily Hindy, Contributor

Lily Hindy is a doctoral student in History at UCLA. Previously she served as senior foreign policy associate at The Century Foundation, focusing on the Middle East. Lily has a Master's in International Affairs from Columbia University's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and a Bachelor's in Government from Smith College.
