Islamic Feminism in Kuwait: The Politics and Paradoxes

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Introduction

Many people, particularly since September 11, 2001, seem to think that Islam is inherently oppressive to women. But what do Muslim women in majority Muslim countries think about these issues? Do they consider themselves oppressed by their religion? And why do so many of them still wear the veil? This book tackles and untangles several commonly misunderstood paradoxes current in majority Muslim countries today. A case study of Kuwaiti elites and college students illustrates these paradoxes at the cutting edge of a contemporary women’s suffrage movement. Using data from in-depth interviews with Kuwaiti cultural elites, we begin to unravel the logic that makes Islamic feminism a thriving approach to understanding the sociological importance of community, politics, and religion in majority Muslim countries. This book is a sociological window into Islamic feminism and serves as a model to understand social reform for women’s rights in other majority Muslim contexts. It explores the subject of women’s political participation in Kuwait as a means to understanding larger social reform issues. It is an updated search for examples of a reconciliation between Islam and feminism that comes out of an in-depth look at the evolving political roles for women in Kuwait.

One of the distinctive theoretical contributions of this study is to highlight the idea of a feminism rooted in sources of authority that are legitimate to the actors involved and to the societies with which they interact. In the case of politically active Kuwaiti Muslim women, the dynamics and boundaries for their version of an indigenous women’s rights movement are situated amongst a variety of schools of Islamic thought, particularly those of the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the Shia sources, and a variety of Liberal secular references from women’s political participation in the United States and Europe. Through ethnographic interviews and survey research of Kuwaiti elites and college students, one finds several interesting paradoxes about Islam, women, and politics in Kuwait:

- Muslim women are not jealous of Western feminists.
- Islamists are winning elections—with the help of women.
• Intelligent Muslim women are choosing to wear the veil.
• Veiled women are succeeding in fields of business, education, and politics.
• Men are not opposed to, but in fact enabling, Islamic feminism.
• Arab youth support both modern standards for gender equality and respect their traditional religious culture.
• Islamic feminists are finding ways to negotiate for progressive women’s rights within the conservative constraints of their culture.

Far from being standardized to an antiquated text or interpretation, Kuwaiti elites are reconciling feminism with Islam in a variety of ways. Their ability to negotiate between traditional values and modern realities is a contextual process—and one that illustrates the possibilities for an indigenous resolution to global problems of gender inequality and economic disparity in the Middle East. A key sociological approach presented in this book is to understand the sociological sources of legitimate authority within Islamic contexts, namely, religious texts, the community, and authority figures. Islamic feminists are most successful when they present their arguments for women’s rights as legitimately sanctioned from these indigenous and religious sources. The chapters in this book are divided to address each of these paradoxes in further detail.

**A Sociological Theory of Legitimate Authority**

The sociological theory of legitimate authority put forward in this book acknowledges the influence of authority figures to maintain social control and the logic of optimizing one’s benefit and minimizing negative sanctions. An extensive history of the important sources of legitimate authority in Islamic tradition includes religious texts (including the Sharia and Hadith), the Muslim community (ummah), and authority figures (including imam preachers, Islamic scholars, and the political head of state). However, a historical and juridical focus on legitimate sources of authority in Islam is not the main focus of this book. Instead, a sociological theory of legitimate authority acknowledges the importance of multiple sources and dimensions of authority distilled into these three nodes of authority (texts, community, and religious or political leaders) but focuses on the logic and argument of Islamic feminists working within conservative cultural constraints to fight for progressive women’s social and political
rights. A theory of legitimate authority explains the seeming paradox of Islamic feminism. The theory states that for marginalized agents in traditional, conservative, and sacralized societies, change must be legitimated by an indigenous source of authority if it is to be accepted and effectual in the local community. In the next few chapters, we will see this theory come to life through the experiences of women’s rights activists in Kuwait.

There are two points to this theory: one involves the standard for what or who is an authority and the other the standard for who or what is defined as legitimate. The standard for the two parts of the theory are culturally specific and can be redefined to the particular conditions of the social phenomenon under study. In this book, the social phenomenon of an inherently traditional, conservative, and religion-based progressive feminist movement is encapsulated by Muslim elites in the majority Muslim context of Kuwaiti society. Islamic feminists argue for the expansion of women's rights in the public sphere by appealing to indigenous sources of authority, namely, sacred texts, theological arguments based on the life of the Prophet Mohammed, and the rulings of contemporary religious leaders, as well as the nonreligious Kuwaiti source of political legitimacy—their national Constitution. By equating the Constitution with sacred texts as a source of political authority, Islamic feminists have touch points to work with both secular women's rights activists as well as non-progressive Islamists who limit their sources of authority to religious sources. The sociological theory of legitimate authority is discussed and reengaged throughout the book.

**Unique Findings in This Study**

The findings of this study have much to say not only to the academic literature but also to the broader audience of readers interested in the topic of Islamic feminism. Among some of the more unique findings are:

- Women’s rights activists in Kuwait who are deeply concerned about social inequalities (for example, unequal access to government benefits and discrimination in the judicial system) are divided by their religious and ideological approaches.
- Ideological differences are indeed about secular versus theocratic worldviews, but when it comes to women’s political rights, they are more salient to political process and supporter mobilization.
• Through academic research, personal narratives, interviews, and field observation, this study provides deeper insights and nuances to understand the gendered differences of approach and incorporation of political ideologies with regard to women’s political rights in a majority Muslim context.

Finally, this book is about men and women in a majority Muslim society who operate within communal norms and restrictions and at the same time rise above averages—what I will refer to as Muslim “elites.” One of the purposes of this book is to demonstrate the possibilities for the empowerment of men and women in developing contexts within their respective cultural constraints.

What We Thought We Knew about Islam and Gender

Before considering the present study of Islam and gender in Kuwait, it is important to review what we thought we knew about Islam and gender based on studies by scholars both inside and outside the Middle East. Out of a postmodern pursuit of indigenous women’s voices, some Muslim women of the Middle East had the opportunity to break through feminist paradigms on a global scale—seen in international policy institutions such as the United Nations, the Arab League, and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. At the academic level, several sociologists and anthropologists have used their disciplinary methods to document some of the common agenda items and human concerns, such as the importance of the stability of the family and protection of personal security in times of conflict, shared by both Western and Middle Eastern feminists.

There have also been attempts to group Muslim women’s rights activists with Christian feminists as a way to emphasize interfaith commonalities. These theoretical groupings of Christian and Muslim feminists fit into the “culture wars” paradigm espoused by scholars such as James Davison Hunter and Samuel Huntington. Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” argument furthers the notion that instead of women being unequal simply because of global economic inequality, Muslim women could arguably be at a disadvantage because of their cultural, perhaps particularly Islamic, constraints. Some scholars began to argue against the particularity of Islamic culture as a source of oppression for women and instead distinguished patriarchal constraints within traditional and conservative Muslim societies while pointing out the individual agency of Muslim women within
those cultural constraints. Later, some scholars began to look inside Islamic history and culture to highlight sources of argument for the expansion of women’s rights. Some took a legalistic approach pointing to sources of Shariah and Hadith as the basis for such arguments. Others took a social science approach of distinguishing culture from theological arguments.

Far from being a universal symbol of submission and oppression, the Muslim veil began to take on a modern, empowering meaning of “privacy and resistance” among some Muslim female scholars. Since then, the current literature on Islam and feminism includes feminist reinterpretations of Qur’anic texts and points out the double benefits of literacy and community that women gain by participating in Qur’anic classes. There has also been a recent emphasis on the particularity of cultural context and location in studies of Muslim women, which I continue to follow in this study of elites in Kuwait. By focusing on elites, and not representative data, I am also furthering the point that distinctions in Islamist politics occur by variation in social class. By “cultural elites” I mean those who have access to higher education, may have either studied or traveled outside their country of origin, or have come from a household with economic means that enable them to further outstanding educational and professional pursuits. Such a focus on cultural leaders is merited for the power that these elites hold to influence their societies and complement empirical studies that emphasize aggregate trends and demographics. Additional research of contemporary Islamic feminists includes studies of the effectuality of female pietist movements in Egypt and Lebanon, and a treatment of the convergences and differences of secular and religious feminists.

**What Exactly Do We Mean by “Islamic Feminism”?**

The term “Islamic feminism” has come to include just about anything people want it to mean. Feminists with a Liberal, secular agenda have embraced the term as a sort of annexation of women’s rights activists with traditional dress and residual religious sensibilities. But Liberal and secular feminists may not completely incorporate the essentially pious arguments of women’s rights activists that argue for their rights within Islam. However, many Islamists, such as Shiite Islamist activists in Iran and Sunni Islamists in Egypt, may tout a slogan of “Islam is the Solution” to their society’s problems, including the grievances of inequality of many women, but are not very clear on the details of what a comprehensive Islamist solution would look like.
In this book, I define Islamic feminism as a movement that seeks to further a progressive agenda for women’s rights within an Islamic framework. Islamic feminists are characterized by the use of Islamic arguments to justify and promote progressive women’s rights. Note that this term can include both men and women, elites and nonelites. In the introduction to her book *Feminism in Islam*, Badran writes:

Islamic feminists have built upon and extended the Islamic modernist thinking that has been an integral component of Muslims’ secular feminism and moved it into a whole new space. Islamic feminists are providing the new intellectual fuel necessary to push forward feminist goals in Muslim societies in Africa and Asia and in Muslim communities in the West, in an effort to move closer to achieving a transformed *umma*.¹⁸

The present study makes both a theoretical contribution to the sociology of religion and goes further in-depth into the Islamic feminist paradigm. Interviews with male and female Kuwaiti women’s rights activists highlight both the intellectual fuel behind Islamic feminist arguments as well as the particularities of the feminist goals that previous scholars have only theorized for contemporary Muslim women’s rights activists. And yet I am also expanding the paradigm to include various viewpoints in and around an Islamic feminist paradigm. That is, I interviewed men as well as women, young people as well as seasoned activists, conservative Salafists as well as secular Liberal Muslims on the future of Islamic feminism in Kuwait. By “Liberal” Muslims, I take the definition from the context as it is used among the elites in Kuwait, who would associate a politically “Liberal” ideology with one that is secular (one who believes religion and politics should remain separate) and is more interested in defending individual liberties than conserving cultural traditions. By “Conservative” I mean also what is largely interpreted in Kuwait as politically Islamist (that is, one who considers Islamic beliefs and traditions should direct politics, including at times a belief that the Shariah should be equal to if not above the Constitution as a legal authority), and that conservative Islamic traditions of the community should be respected above “aberrant” individual preferences. As one Kuwaiti Islamist activist describes the differences with regard to the debate about granting women the right to vote and run for political office in 2005:

Though I encouraged Islamist politicians to speak and accept publicly women’s political rights, they responded by saying that: “We know we are the most to benefit (from women’s political rights). But we will continue to speak publicly about what we feel is the position that benefits the whole society (that of opposing women’s political rights).”
The Liberals responded by saying: “We know we won’t benefit (from the conservative votes of women who have gained their political rights), but on principle, we will continue to fight for women’s political rights.”

Understanding what being “pro-women” means in this multiplicity of perspectives is essential to gaining a comprehensive understanding of Islamic feminism in one of the conservative and traditional societies of the Arabian Peninsula, as well as recognizing the importance of establishing legitimate sources of authority on which activists ground their pro-women arguments and agendas.

**A Brief History of Women in Kuwait**

For those who might be less familiar with the events leading up to a contemporary situation for women’s political participation in Kuwait, I offer a brief survey here. There are many more sources of historical depth that would serve for additional reference, but to contextualize the remainder of the topics in the current study, I outline a brief series of historical events that affected Kuwaiti society and have bearing on the current social and political roles for women. There are many excellent resources that recount the history of pre-oil Arabia that cover this period in much more detail than I aim to here. My aim is to emphasize the roots of modern social networks and divisions among Kuwaitis that impact women’s rights.

Women in Kuwait have been affected to a large extent by the economic and topographic realities of the Arabian Peninsula. Many Kuwaitis in particular had indigenous roots in the Peninsula as bedouins, nomads who had to deal with the dry and harsh climate of the desert. Many other Arabs were merchants and tradesmen and lived along the coastal towns of the Peninsula, either to the western side and traded across the Red Sea or along the eastern coast where the present Gulf States are located, strategically across from what is modern-day Iran. This twofold distinction of rural bedouin background and urban coastal background (badar) comprises one of the main ethnic markers of Kuwaitis today.

*Seventh Century: Rise and Spread of Islam*

Tribal and ethnic divisions among Muslims grew from years of trading and invading in an attempt to gain control of the major trade ports with the East. After the rise of Islam in the seventh century and since its spread to the present day, religious divisions gave birth
to further sectarian divisions, most notably across the Gulf with Shia Iran and in the West with the Maliki schools of Islam predominant in North Africa.  

Religious sectarianism also played an important role in the divisions among Gulf Arabs, as followers of Shia Islam concentrated their political aspirations along the Persian side of the Gulf. On the Arabian Peninsula, Sunni Islam was largely dominated by a form of strict fundamentalism, known as Wahhabi Islam. Wahhabism, or *Salafism*, arose in the eighteenth century when ‘Abd al-Wahhab spread this version of Islam through a political alliance with the al-Saud tribes in taking leadership for what is modern Saudi Arabia.  

Wahhabi Islam was well suited for the inherently conservative mores of life in the desert. The segregation of women from unrelated males, the deference to ruling tribes as political and spiritual leaders for the entire group, and a literal interpretation of the Qur’an and Hadith, were all guidelines for an Islam that would provide for and protect the pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj) that Muslim believers all over the world were required to make. Even today, one can perceive the influence that Saudi Arabia has over the Arabian Peninsula both politically and culturally precisely because it is the protector of many holy sites in Islam, particularly of Mecca and Medina, and the guardian of the *Kabbah*, toward which Muslims pray five times a day.

The complex fabric of sectarian, tribal, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences among Kuwaitis offers both a strength and a challenge for women’s rights activists in the region. With such a plurality of backgrounds, a patriotic appeal to fight for women’s rights as a nation of Kuwaitis is a very effective strategy—one that is often espoused by youth and women’s rights activists of all political and religious persuasions. And yet social divisions are apparent in practical ways, such as when it is time to vote. Despite popular pro-women and patriotic sentiments, many times old tribal, ethnic, sectarian, and class divisions are reproduced at the ballot box. In the first few elections where women could participate (2006 and 2008), conservative voting patterns resulted in few votes for women candidates.

Twentieth Century: Discovery of Oil

Another turning point in Kuwait’s social and economic development that ushered in a new era for the region and affected women’s lives was the discovery of oil in the 1930s and the subsequent deluge of foreign investment. Assiri and Crystal both provide a more detailed account of this transition and its subsequent effects on Kuwait’s
foreign policy. Al-Mughni also provides a historical trajectory for Kuwaiti women, beginning with the nomadic tribes of the northern part of the Arabian Peninsula to the specific tribes that settled in Kuwait, and the social organization around the emerging pearl diving industry that separated Kuwaitis into merchants, divers, and bedouin nomads. Subsequent pacts with the British changed the organic evolution of the emerging Kuwaiti society by cementing the power of certain families as the gatekeepers for foreign investment in the country. From the 1960s, substantive social changes began to take place as oil revenues provided the funds to quickly develop Kuwait’s economy and, notably, education, which included granting university access to women.

1961 Independence

Independence from Britain in 1961 gave Kuwaitis a new narrative for public activism. Women who wanted to become informed and active in politics could appeal to a nationalist narrative—which is still a theme in the politics of today. With an emerging independent national identity, men and women of all backgrounds—bedouin, merchant, Sunni, or Shia—could come together as Kuwaitis. González and Al-Kazi further lay out the sociological reasons as to why life for Kuwaiti women continued to expand out of private spaces into public places. Increasing opportunities for women in education and at the workplace influenced the way they renegotiated boundaries in public spaces, including whether or not they wore the Islamic veil.

1990 Iraqi Invasion and Aftereffects

During the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, women began to show their strength as they contributed to the war effort. With women working to keep their families together—and using their knowledge to bravely supply artillery, reconnaissance, and moral support—the possibilities for women opened up in the public eye. One former female parliamentary candidate speaks of how this turbulent time in her country’s history opened the doors for women to become involved in the nation’s politics:

Throughout the invasion of Kuwait, there were big changes for women, both inside and outside of Kuwait. A lot of women started to get involved in politics. Before the invasion, Kuwaiti women were very relaxed, shopping . . . and even in business, or any kind of work, Kuwaiti
women were always considered as weak figures. And she was not very serious in work or in business. But after the second of August 1990, women in Kuwait, threw every…Christian Dior or Saint Laurent or every [designer dress]… and they just wore military jackets.

After the invasion (and of course, the liberation of Kuwait), all the world started to push Kuwait for real democracy, and to start to have women be involved in the political [scene].

At that time [there were] no groups for women in Kuwait, and… 17 years after the invasion, men (and even MPs29) [did] not allow us to enter the [campaign tents] in the election time.

And if they said “come” [the women] came very shyly, and they put two or three chairs for women outside of the campaign [tent] and they know they can do this because we didn’t have the right to vote. That’s why they didn’t need us. And they didn’t want us to see what [they were doing]. And they did not allow us to go deep and share with them their meetings or any kind of discussion. Because until 2005, when we didn’t have any right to vote [it was] not necessary.29

This former female Kuwaiti parliamentary candidate recounts a history of conflict that ironically brought women together in vision and politics for a time. She also highlights the radical shift in politics caused by the government act in 2005 to give women their political rights. While women had shown their bravery during wartime, they were still not considered political actors until 2005 when their political rights were granted.

September 11, 2001, and the Global War on Terror

The jihadist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent “Global War on Terror” led by the United States, created significant shifts in how governments and individual Muslims in majority Muslim countries viewed themselves and their place in global politics.

September 11 [was a] big time for the Americans, tragic too…

Now, Kuwait has a dilemma. (Problems come with each side.) They want on one side, to be very pro-American…. They [the Kuwaiti government] want American…interest in the area, they want to have America in Iraq and the rest of the area, yet at the same time, they [face] an internal problem—all political Islamists [have] very strong parties. (The Kuwaiti National Assembly also has strong Islamist parties), and they are anti-American. [We] don’t know how [to] solve this problem.30

The fact that jihadist Islamists awakened Islam to global consciousness in a very politicized lens put many political Islamists on the
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defensive. Added to that was the discontent caused by the physical presence of the American military in Kuwait, which served as a base of operations for the war against Saddam Hussein in Iraq and against the Taliban in Afghanistan. Kuwaiti society became very affected by the aftereffects of September 11 and the “War on Terror.” Subsequent geopolitical interventions designed to weaken terrorist bases of operation affected the countries of the Arabian Peninsula in a very real way.

2005 Election Law and 2006 Elections—The First Female Candidates

Women were granted the right to vote and run for political office in 2005. Political rights for women were first brought up for a vote in the Kuwaiti parliament in 1998 but were actually voted down—by both Islamists and Liberal (all male) politicians. Subsequently, the Kuwaiti government decided to use their authority to issue a decree in 2005 granting women their political rights. The first elections where women were able to vote and run for office were held in 2006 after an emergency election was announced following dissolution of the parliament. The dissolution and subsequent calls for elections left women candidates with about one month to prepare for their first nationwide election ever in Kuwaiti history. Many of the first set of female candidates felt that there was very little time to prepare viable campaigns and blamed dearth of preparedness and resources, not religious or ideological objections, for their lack of success. Though women did not win seats in their first elections, they did make a big mark on the political and social scene, forcing Islamist politicians as well as Liberal ones to acknowledge them on the campaign trail.31

Contemporary Women’s Rights in Kuwait

Throughout this modern period of fast social change and development, including the discovery of oil and the aftereffects of the Iraqi invasion, Kuwaiti society established a pattern and a rhythm for women’s rights. With each historical change and political development, major political players were able to reconsider their interpretation of Islam to meet the current challenge. This is the pragmatic and progressive framework that underlies modern women’s rights activism in Kuwait and enables many of the paradoxes associated with Islamic feminism in Kuwait.
In addition, it is important to recognize the intellectual roots of various contemporary feminist movements within Islamic contexts that have influenced the women’s political and social movements in Kuwait. These include the Muslim Brotherhood, the Salafis, the Shia, and the politically Liberal or secular Muslims. First of all, Kuwaiti Muslim society comprises about 70 percent Sunni Muslims and about 30 percent Shia Muslims. Among the Sunni Muslim schools of thought, the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) school of thought has its roots in Egypt, with all the complexities of engagement with a secular government that was until recently led by Hosni Mubarak. The Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, whose intellectual and political foundation sprung from the writings of Hassan al-Banna and later Sayyid Qutb, provided an outlet for a disgruntled middle class whose economic and political frustrations did not benefit from the elite Liberals in charge. Liberal Egyptian feminist forerunners such as Hoda Sharaawi also may have put off moderate and conservative women activists by disavowing traditional customs, such as throwing Muslim veils off into the sea. A Liberal and largely secular brand of feminist activism may never have taken a solid hold on the hearts and minds of most of Egyptian society. Nonetheless these Muslim women reformers provided pioneering models for women’s activism in conservative Islamic societies such as Kuwait’s.

Islamic Feminists of the Muslim Brotherhood

Contemporary women activists out of an Islamist mold, such as the Muslim Brotherhood’s Muslim Women’s Association founder Zaynab al Ghazali, and writer and scholar Dr. Heba Raouf Ezzat, are among those leading the discussions within the masses of Islamic activists and politicians who most recently marched to depose the long-standing secular regime of Hosni Mubarak. In Egypt, this particular brand of Islamic feminism is marked by oppositionist tendencies and is comprised of women from the working, upwardly mobile, and educated middle class. Saba Mahmood depicts the grassroots organization of these women in Qur’anic study circles and highlights their ability to fortify the modern Egyptian woman with an education and a reference to her faith. Islamist women from within the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought have been determined activists in recent political campaigns outside of Egypt as well. In Kuwait, as we will see in later chapters, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the Kuwaiti version of the Muslim Brotherhood, also referred to by its Arabic acronym as “HADAS,” is comprised
of many young people, who see themselves not only as religious conservatives but also as political pragmatists. Some of the young women of HADAS I met with were from working middle-class backgrounds and were mothers and college students with jobs outside the home. And yet they believed that politics was a means to an end for women’s social rights, not an end in itself. Now, the question for women activists within the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought is largely the same for the Muslim Brotherhood in general. With a slogan so vague and broad as “Islam is the Solution,” what will it mean in actuality as Islamists move forward to compete for legitimacy within a new Egyptian government? What are the implications of continued women’s participation in a future government with Islamic political affiliation? For Kuwaiti society, the question might be, to what end will women continue to participate and will they themselves ever put forward a female Islamist political candidate? Some of these questions about the future of Islamist women in politics can be better contextualized by observing and hearing from some of the women of HADAS themselves, as we do in this book. We see that as progressive actors within a conservative cultural context, they deliberate the importance of religion in politics and yet selectively push the traditional boundaries they work within.

**Islamic Feminists and Salafi Islamists**

Also among the Sunni Islamists in Kuwait are the Salafi Islamists, whose intellectual and social roots stem from the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia. The Salafis are known to be the most strict of the politically engaged Islamists, particularly with regard to women’s public participation in society. For the Salafis, politics is subservient to religion and only exists to serve religious ends. For them, there is no separate space between mosque and state. They do not distinguish between public and private roles for women; they abide by norms that keep men the functioning stewards of God’s creation outside of the home and women as the stewards of the private sphere of life, in the home. For Salafis, women are integral to religious revival, but women’s active participation in politics is to be marginal, at best. Carine Lahoud-Tatar’s work on Salafism in Kuwait offers a more detailed look into this particular school of thought. For the present study, I asked Salafi Islamist politicians of their goals for incorporating women’s votes after they were forced to accept the Kuwaiti Government’s decision to allow women the right to vote and run for public office in 2005, and what steps they were prepared to take to continue to fight for their vision of women’s rights.
Consistent with their conservative Islamic ideology, they expressed their concern that with so much social breakdown of the traditional family, they see their group as a last bulwark to keep Kuwaiti society from the decay of a liberalizing, secular, and in their view, “Western” model of society. The question for the women who support such Salafi candidates and work to expand this vision is—how will Kuwaiti society remain economically and politically competitive when the rest of the world is working to incorporate and provide equal opportunities for its women (half of its labor force) in the public sphere?

**Shia Islamic Feminists**

About 30 percent of Kuwaitis identify with a Shia Muslim school of thought, whose intellectual roots go back centuries to the early developments of the Muslim community after the death of the Prophet Mohammad but whose cultivation is most recently anchored by religious scholars in Shia Iran. In Kuwaiti society, there are two branches of Shia Islam that draw most significant adherents, particularly those with references to scholars in Qom, Iran, and Najaf in present-day Iraq. Both were traditional places of Shia study and scholarship, and continue to serve as places of reference for slightly differing interpretations of Muslim texts and traditions, particularly with regard to women’s political and social rights. The Shia of the Qoms school of thought are thought to be more lenient and liberal on some women’s rights issues, such as women’s political rights, whereas the Najaf school is perceived to be more strict or conservative on some women’s rights issues. A large number of Shia in Kuwait have integrated themselves through business and trade to be among the merchant upper class of Kuwaiti society. A legacy of wealth and intellectual development have allowed Shia in Kuwait to be a relatively successful minority group in society and equal participants in the government. Thus, the Shia representation in the parliament often splits between the Liberal secular politicians (such as female parliamentarians Dr. Rola Dashti and Dr. Massouma Al-Mubarak), who have religious roots in Shia Islam but who do not bring their religious views into their political agenda, and the Shia conservative parliamentarians, such as those of the National Islamic Alliance.

**Islamic Feminists and Political Liberals**

Among the intellectual schools of thought that most influence the women’s rights movement in Kuwait are politically Liberal women’s rights activists. We can say that the roots of the Liberal political activists
are situated in a Western-style secular democratic process, where there is a separation of private religious preferences and political activism. This is the usual branch of thought most closely identified with the popular use of the term “feminism.” However, this book explores the trajectory of women’s rights activism among elites in Kuwait as a way to shift the paradigm for an Islamic feminism described in opposition to Western-style secular feminism. What I discovered through my fieldwork, quantitative survey work, and qualitative in-depth interviews was that even Liberal women’s rights activists in Kuwait negotiate for their political and social goals within a traditional and conservative Islamic space. Margot Badran even argues that Islamic feminists are more “radical” in some ways than Islam’s secular feminists. This could be the case because an alliance with political Islamists appears to be the only way to further a more progressive women’s rights agenda in traditional Muslim societies. The popularity and political success of Islamist parties in Kuwaiti politics is something that has given traditional Liberal elites in Kuwait a cause to redefine their political strategies as well. The success of Liberal candidates such as Dr. Rola Dashti who won a seat in the parliament in 2009 is a case among the other three women to observe and analyze for her ability to reach across the aisle and draw voters from more traditional and conservative parts of Kuwaiti society. By her own admission, Dashti followed local conservative Muslim traditions when campaigning in tribal or conservative Islamist parts of the country, such as wearing a veil or speaking to gender-segregated audiences. One Islamist women’s rights activist put it this way:

No one in Kuwait would dare to say Islam is not a positive force, but there are different levels of how it’s applied into politics. For example, Islamist parties will try to relate Islam more directly to their politics. But even non-Islamic parties will consider themselves Muslims and will use Islam to their advantage. Any problem in the application of Islam is with the people, not with Islam.

The question for politically Liberal women’s rights activists in Kuwait is, how will they continue to be relevant to a society that is attempting to redefine its Islamic identity in light of a global backlash against Islam since the attacks of September 11, 2001? And what does the backlash against authoritarian secular regimes in the Middle East (as in Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, Hosni Mubarak’s Egypt, Mohammed Ghannouchi’s Tunisia, Moammar Qaddafi’s Libya, and Bashar Al-Assad’s Syria) mean for the viability of a political secularism among Liberal Muslims in Kuwait?
A Theory of Legitimate Authority

Max Weber set up the theoretical framework to understand the nature of power in modern societies. Characteristic of modern societies is a surrender of individual liberties to the state by granting the state authority over those individual rights. In a theory of legitimate authority, I build on Weber’s ideas and extend them to a majority Muslim context, where state, religion, and community are politically, theologically, culturally, and historically intertwined. A theory of legitimate authority is a sociological theory for understanding the role of progressive actors within conservative contexts, such as Islamic feminists in Kuwait.

Due to the history of Islam in Kuwait, it becomes clear that to affect change individual actors in Islamic contexts must have the support of their sources of religious and community authority, which at times include political authority. In this way, their activism is considered “legitimate” and, perhaps more importantly, righteous, and is recommended. Sources of legitimating religious authority include religious texts and religious leaders who issue legal opinions that affect the mindset of their communities. The community provides additional sources of legitimate authority to whom Islamic feminists also appeal to. The emphasis on change with the approval of the community is an essential component for understanding Islam and gender in majority Muslim contexts where family and kinship affiliation is central to personal identity that may differ from more individualized notions of social activism and religiosity in Western contexts. In a Muslim country that values its secular Constitution, like Kuwait, political sources of authority become important components to advancing a women’s rights agenda within a nationalist framework. In Kuwait’s modern women’s suffrage movement, the political government also played a decisive role in giving women the authority to pursue their political rights. The theory of legitimate authority provides a new framework for understanding the relationship of Islam and gender in majority Muslim societies.

Sources of Legitimate Authority

There are three main sources of legitimate authority in majority Muslim contexts: religious, community, and political authority. Under “religious” sources, the main references are to sacred texts (Qur’an and Hadith), religious scholars, and their leadership and opinions (fatwa). Under “community” sources, I include the family,
ethnic group affiliation including regional variations such as tribal group or clan, and sectarian affiliation which in Kuwait may be integrated into ethnic identity. Under “political” authority, which is often prioritized by political Liberals over the religious sources, I include the Constitution and the ruling government.

Sources of legitimate authority in Islamic tradition come from Muslim scholars from a variety of schools of thought. Most pertinent to the case study of Islamic feminism in Kuwait are the Muslim Brotherhood and the Salafi Movement in the Sunni Tradition, Qom and Najaf schools among Shias, and of course Liberal Muslims who take more contemporary and progressive interpretations on these various schools of thought. The five Madhabs (schools of Islamic jurisprudence) also condition the interpretive traditions from which legal opinions on women’s personal status laws are drawn.

Within Islam, there are several important principles, such as shura, the role of consultation in bringing about wise leadership, that give progressive voices within traditional contexts the edge they need to address injustices within an Islamically appropriate framework. Another Islamic principle used to advance women’s rights in these societies is the concept of wilayat, or leadership, which both men and women have in carrying out their God-given responsibilities in the world. In an Islamic framework, both men and women will answer to God on Judgment Day about how they had used the life they had been given. Islamic feminists argue: wouldn’t God approve of a woman doing all it took to fight against public injustices?

In an earlier work, I tested whether religious sect, religious school of thought, political identity, religious experience, religious salience, and religious practice have direct effects on women’s rights attitudes, while controlling for gender. I found that gender, sect, religious school of thought, and political identity, but not religious practice, have persistent effects on attitudes about women’s rights. The fact that sect came up as consistently significant for this study while measures of religious practice had no effect on women’s rights attitudes runs counter to the finding of Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali, who found attitudinal orthopraxy to have a negative impact on women’s rights attitudes despite sect. In addition, I found no relationship between certain behavioral religious practices and women’s rights attitudes, specifically, mosque attendance, Qur’anic reading and pilgrimage to Mecca, religious socialization (being raised religiously), and Qur’anic literalism have no consistent or persistent effect on women’s rights attitudes. This finding is significant not only because many scholars and popular writers hypothesize a significant relationship between
outward appearance of religiosity and a conservative attitude toward women’s rights, which was not found in this data, but also because it dispels stereotypes and assumptions that many Western scholars have about the influence of religion in Muslim countries. While many scholars see religion as an oppressive and conservative force regarding issues of women’s rights, I have found that quite the opposite is true. There had to be other sources of legitimate authority from within the religion to promote women’s rights. As shown by this sample of Kuwaiti college students in the ISAS (the Islamic Social Attitudes Survey) data, many young Muslim women consider Islam to be a source for them to fight for women’s rights. Thus, in the present work I had to disregard previous assumptions about the nature of Islam and feminism and leave room to find a pro-women message even among Islamist conservatives who voted against women’s political rights in Kuwait. Though there are arguably countless influences on the political opinions of women’s rights among Kuwaiti Muslims, I have reduced the sources of legitimate authority to the three main sources presented here and will expand them further through the chapters and diversity of interviews that follow.

Oddly enough, despite apparent differences in men and women, Conservatives and Liberals, I also found many commonalities among my interview subjects. I realized later that that in itself was a story worth sharing.

The Sociological Advantage: Mixed Methods

This in-depth look at the lives of Kuwaiti elites furthers the study of Islam and gender from the sociological perspective, not least because of the mix of quantitative survey and qualitative interview methods of analysis. Several academic examples of this approach include Inglehart and Norris’s work using the World Values Survey (WVS) data, a data set that aggregates data from over 90 countries on various questions of social, cultural, and religious values. Some sociologists have taken a look at the Islamic countries in the WVS to highlight particular findings and trends from majority Muslim contexts. Islamic studies specialists have also made such mixed methods accessible to more popular audiences outside of academia with Gallup Poll survey data on what Muslims in majority Muslim contexts think about democracy, radicalism, women’s rights, and clashes with the West.

Recent works on Islam and gender incorporate fieldwork among Muslim elites to illustrate the experiences of women in traditionally
Muslim contexts, while others focus more on aggregate statistics. And yet the picture of Islam and gender is even more complex than simple numbers or narrative. A study into the lives of Muslim women’s rights activists in Kuwait requires a mixed method approach to situate interview data within larger statistical trends at the macro and community levels so that it can speak effectively to current events and public policy questions.

There is one final note about what a sociological approach contributes to discussions of Islam and gender in majority Muslim contexts. Social scientists, unlike politicians or religious leaders, are incentivized to incorporate as many perspectives as possible into the analysis, and particularly those perspectives that are closer to the subjects under study. Some, such as the Salafi Islamists, disagreed with allowing women the right to run for political office. But since the 2005 government decree granting women their political right to vote and run for public office, even Salafi Islamists had to address the issue of women’s rights and argue for the support of women voters and I thought it would be important to include their voices in this study. What I found as a sociologist is the immense individual complexity of both the subjects of Islam and gender, even before analyzing the ways that they intersect. Not only is it important to recognize the influence of culture and history on contemporary social movements, but it is rather important to chip away at the often convenient but grossly inappropriate term “Muslim world.” Scientifically speaking, there is no such thing. By the same token, there is neither such thing as a “Christian world” or a “Hindu world” or any other world other than the present slice of human reality under study and specified by the particular voice that interprets the results of their observations. In this book, the world under study is that of Muslim elites of the traditional and conservative Arab Gulf society of the State of Kuwait. And, as you will see, there is plenty of variation in this slice of “world” we have come to here.

**How the Research for This Book Came about**

With support from the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion, I was able to travel to Kuwait, Qatar, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates to conduct research on the relationship of religion and women’s political rights. Over 35 men and women were interviewed, from various political perspectives, ages, and backgrounds, but who were all connected by their view of the importance of women’s rights. They
included men and women; Shia and Sunnis; Islamists, Independents, and Liberals; people from rural (bedouin tribal) backgrounds and some of more urban backgrounds; female parliamentary candidates; male current or former parliamentarians; academic women’s rights activists; journalists; university professors; social activists; and even a Western convert to Islam. I was also able to conduct field research and informal interviews with elite men and women elsewhere in the Gulf, including Qatar and Yemen during the summer of 2008. These outside interviews serve as complements to the thesis of Islamic feminism as seen in Kuwait, but only 30 of my Kuwaiti interviews are included in the statistical analysis of the interview data presented here.

In addition to the qualitative, semi-structured in-depth interviews of 30 Kuwaiti elites, a pilot survey of over 1,000 Kuwaiti college students (the ISAS) was also conducted. The survey explored various models to measure individual religiosity and women’s rights attitudes. The methodology for the ISAS data of Kuwaiti college students is further detailed in the Appendix. Analyzing the data from the ISAS survey in the context of over 300 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts, fieldwork, and participant observation at women’s rights conferences and lectures in Kuwait served to gain a deeper understanding of the wide space that Kuwait allows for a mature discussion of women’s rights in a majority Muslim context. The interviews, pilot study, fieldwork, and participant observation were the research methods that allowed me to come to the conclusions present here in this book. It is my intention and hope that this book will lay the groundwork (theoretically and operationally) for further studies to be conducted on Islamic religiosity, political affiliation, gender, and the future for women’s rights in majority Muslim contexts.

Though almost all of my interviews of Kuwaiti elites were conducted in an official capacity as cultural leaders, and all of my interviewees participated willingly, I chose to obscure names and personal details as much as possible to bring clarity to their ideas while maintaining confidentiality. I chose to diminish the individual identities of my interview subjects not to diminish their individual contributions but rather to highlight the universality of their insights and perspectives. Where direct quotes from interviews are used, I refer to the Interview number listed in the Appendix. Because many of the interview subjects who chose to conduct their interview in English were not native speakers, I have edited the quotes for clarity and where making significant edits have noted a break in the dialogue with a break in the paragraph or a three-point ellipsis (“…”). Where substituting a word for clarity, I have included it in brackets ([ ]). I hope the
presentation of this interview data is helpful to future social scholars and encourages further discussion with the high level of respect with which I was treated as a research scholar and with which I regard all those who were kind enough to participate in this study.

Outline of the Book

The following chapters are illustrations of the paradoxes inherent in a sociological perspective on Islamic feminism as it works out in the conservative majority Muslim context of Kuwait. In chapter 1, we look at how Western models of feminism, largely secular and individualistic, have not taken root in Muslim hearts and minds. In chapter 2, we look at the phenomenon of political Islamists’ resurgence as a force in politics, not unrelated to the issues underlying the discontent with Western approaches to women’s rights in the region. In chapter 3, we explore the myth of the Muslim veil as a symbol of oppression, and instead look at sociological data that supports the fact that most Muslim women in Kuwait who wear the veil freely choose it, and examine the reasons underlying the resurgence of the veil in contemporary Muslim societies like Kuwait. Chapter 3 also looks at the myth that Muslim women are monolithically oppressed in their conservative societies, and, instead, focuses on the fact that Muslim women are pursuing higher education and becoming leaders in fields of business, education, and now politics. In chapter 4, we will look at the paradox that instead of systematically oppressing women, men in Kuwait are in fact enabling Islamic feminism by opening doors for women in both the public and private spheres. In chapter 5, we look at the youth of Kuwait and their paradoxical personalities and lives, which are both modern and traditional. The Conclusion outlines the outstanding demands and defining agenda of Islamic feminists in Kuwait and explores the methods of their success as progressive actors within a society of constraint. Through the case of Kuwait, we see how Islamic feminists demonstrate that progressive actors within culturally conservative societies who have the support of their sources of religious, community, and political authorities legitimate their actions to the larger society.
Western Feminism Has Not Taken Root in Muslim Hearts and Minds

One observation that may surprise many readers is that not all Arab Muslim women are jealous of Western freedoms. With depictions of physical abuse, acid throwing, and forced child marriages, these extreme cases portrayed by the media may seem like the norm for Arab Muslim women. But particularly in the oil-rich State of Kuwait, those cases of abuse are far from the norm. And among educated elites, particularly politically Islamist women, there is a disavowal of the belief that they are oppressed by their religion.

According to Islamic history, women of the Arabian Peninsula before Islam were subjected to many kinds of abuses, treated mostly as property, and had few, if any, rights. What Islam purportedly brought to women in terms of rights and duties were codified standards regarding inheritance and standing within the Muslim community. Where women were routinely the victims of infanticides, Islam prohibited such practices. Where women had few avenues for obtaining independent wealth save through the death of a spouse, or the will of a generous father upon his deathbed, Islam codified rights of women to alimony in the event of a divorce, set the amount of...
a daughter’s inheritance, and set provisions for exceptional cases such as participation in a polygynous marriage. Although these Islamic provisions may not seem generous by today’s standards, Islamic feminists are quick to highlight the fact that these codifications gave women many rights at the time that other groups did not, including Christians and Jews. Principally, Islam emphasized the political and social rights and responsibilities of women as integral to their participation as equal partners in the ummah.

There is no shortage of Islamically legitimate examples of women who were economically independent of men and thus were able to have a greater voice in their communities, including the Prophet Mohammed’s first wife and his first convert to Islam, Khadeeja. According to Islamic tradition, when Mohammed met Khadeeja, she was actually his employer. Later after their marriage, she became an important source of income for the budding leader to begin his small community of believers. Mohammed himself encouraged economic independence of women and demonstrated this by establishing that among Muslim believers women would gain some portion of their father’s inheritance.

And yet there are many discrepancies between the legacy of honor and value of women in the Islamic religion and the way that women’s rights have been codified by individual majority Muslim societies. There are many Muslim women who lift legitimate grievances of systematic injustice and inequality of women in their societies. However, many women inside traditional, conservative Muslim societies such as Kuwait have rejected outside help. The reality is that after millions of US dollars in aid and years of violent conflict, Western feminism has simply not taken root in Middle Eastern Muslim hearts and minds. There are many reasons for this that are explored here. What my research of elites in Kuwait’s contemporary women’s suffrage movement uncovers is that of a new path for women’s rights. An indigenous feminism not solely based in opposition to a Western feminism, but one that fills a niche that Western, individualistic, and secular-based feminism could not reach in traditional, majority Muslim societies.

Feminist scholars have scratched their heads for decades wondering why most women around the world still choose to remain in traditional, patriarchally structured models for the home and society. At the same time, religious and conservative women have expressed dissatisfaction at the public activism of self-proclaimed feminist activists. Bra- and veil-burning demonstrations emblematized the sacrilegious undertones of a Western-based women’s rights agenda that offended instead of liberated some. To reconcile the long standstill that women
from traditional Islamic societies have had when confronting secular and Liberal models of feminism, I build on previous social theory to construct a theory of agency grounded in legitimate authority. By deferring to religious, community, and political authorities in their campaigns for more women’s rights, individual actors in Islamic contexts who have the support of these authorities are valued, accepted, recognized—legitimated. With the approval of a legitimate authority, the individual is emboldened to push over new horizons with a sense of community behind him or her. Throughout the chapters, we will look at how an Islamic feminism based on a sociological theory of legitimate authority differs from more individualized notions of social activism and religiosity in Western contexts.

A NEW SEARCH FOR ISLAMIC FEMINISM

This study is also an updated search of Islamic feminism that began with a “third-world” consciousness of the 1970s. Since the success of the Iranian revolution in 1979 and a rise of Islamic fundamentalism in the 1980s, academic interests promoted efforts to highlight marginalized women’s stories. Gender studies specialists can agree to disagree on what to call the current wave of feminism. But an updated study of gender and Islam in a majority Muslim context is particularly important and relevant to contemporary gender studies because the global context for both Islam and feminism has shifted dramatically in the last few decades. Though there has been a history of political Liberalism and individual rights that accompanied the feminist movements of the 1960s, historian Margot Badran recognizes the new interactive space for traditional women created by Islamic feminists.

The appearance of the new Islamic feminist paradigm did not spell the disappearance of secular feminisms. The “two feminisms” continue to exist side by side, and are increasingly mutually interactive. Secular feminists have a long historical memory of women’s gender struggles and a repertoire of organizational practices and skills highly honed over time.

Whereas secular feminists in Muslim societies have a history as pioneers, they may also have marginalized the upwardly mobile middle-class masses of women from rural, tribal, or more religiously conservative backgrounds. The fact that Islamic women’s rights activists have become bolder in the last few years, particularly in times of social revolutions, has attracted more attention to their cause. Islamic
feminists have responded to global, political, economic, and social shifts and inspire scholars, policy makers, and women’s rights activists to rethink previously held assumptions about the empowering agency of religion. As we read the experiences of Kuwaiti elites witnessing the dawn of women in Kuwaiti politics, it becomes clear that legitimating religious, community, and political authorities hold particular power for women in highly religious and traditional majority Muslim contexts.

**Islamic Feminist Distinctions**

A critical stance toward Western feminism has spurred an indigenous, Islamic feminist approach to women’s rights that holds its own distinctive characteristics. First, Islamic feminists seek to establish an agenda that is *part of a comprehensive Islamic worldview*. It is more than a spin-off of Western feminism. Second, Islamic feminists seek an agenda that is *legitimated in their societies by a religious source*—whether by sacred text or tradition—that could be by a religious scholar, *ulama* (as in Iran and Afghanistan), or by personal study of the scriptures (the Qur’an) and tradition of the Prophet Mohammed (the Sunna). Third, Islamic feminists seek *cultural compatibility*, that is, a framework for social activism that complements a patriarchal cultural and historical legacy. For much of the Arabian Peninsula, this includes deference to a legacy of tribalism present since before the founding of Islam as a religious and cultural force.¹¹ Many Muslim women have sharpened their arguments by not resisting their patriarchal cultures, but in fact embracing them.¹² This is not necessarily particular to Islamic women’s activism. A similar approach was documented in studies of evangelical women in the United States¹³ and of evangelical women in Colombia who reshaped their communities by their pious example.¹⁴

**Islamic Feminism, a Means to an End**

One of the most important findings in this exploration of the relationship of Islam, at the macro-sociological and micro-sociological levels as well as the evolving role for women’s political rights in Kuwait, is that regardless of gender and political affiliation, Islamic feminists view women’s political participation as a *means* to larger social reform issues, particularly reform of Personal Status Laws, and not an end in itself. In particular, some issues addressed by personal status legislation in Kuwait (and also in several other Arab countries) include: rights of
citizenship, options in the event of divorce, and rights of inheritance and property ownership. Currently, Kuwaiti women are not able to pass on their citizenship to their children if they marry a non-Kuwaiti. Not being a citizen would exclude their children from receiving government subsidized education, healthcare, and other benefits. Matters of child custody, ability to find housing, and even the ability to enter into marriage or to break their marriage contract in divorce, are all procedures that, under the current interpretation of Islamic law in Kuwait, must be mediated by a male guardian or in some way present complications for women with requirements not demanded of men. In addition, male guardianship requirements for marriage or travel further complicate already emotionally difficult situations for many Kuwaiti women.  

Regarding rights of inheritance and property ownership, while receiving one half of the amount of inheritance as a male heir was revolutionary and progressive during the Prophet Mohammed’s time, in contemporary times it brings to light gender-based discrepancies that may have outgrown their original usage. To address such women’s rights concerns, secular and Islamist Kuwaiti women have taken different paths to political activism. For example, although only a handful of women (mostly secular) ran as candidates in the first 2006 elections, many Islamist women chose to vote for male candidates whose agenda they agreed with. They believed that their political rights were meant to improve more important social rights such as maternity leave and flexible working hours. By incorporating more women into the politics of legislating women’s rights, practical issues that many Kuwaiti, Arab, and Muslim women face provide politicians, voters, and outsiders opportunities to observe and analyze which interpretations of Islamic law, and indeed which sources of authority, will prevail when it comes to negotiating new boundaries or new “horizons” for women’s rights in Islamic societies. In the short term, it appears that Islamic approaches to politics may serve feminists as a means to their long-term goals of appealing for more social rights for women.

**In Opposition to Western Feminism**

Some Western audiences have asked whether I sensed certain jealousy from the women I interviewed for my project; whether they were jealous of the freedoms I enjoyed—to travel wherever I wanted (unaccompanied), to wear whatever clothing I wanted to, to choose whom I wanted to marry or not get married at all. And my answer may surprise some. Not only were most of the women I interviewed
not jealous of my respective freedoms, but they also seemed largely content with their own availability of choices and the cultural constraints that shaped them. Clearly, many of these cultural elites are actively engaged in a struggle to give Kuwaiti women more rights and choices—the choice to work outside the home and still balance family obligations; the freedom to recover emotionally, physically, and financially from abusive relationships; the right to retain custody of their children in the event of a divorce; the right to have their voices heard at all levels of government (including voting and running for parliament); increased access to healthcare and education; and many more. Still, I sensed an awareness among Kuwaiti activists of such issues as global problems that are present in all societies—not necessarily unique to their own culturally Muslim society. There was also an awareness of the fact that the solutions to these problems take time to resolve. As one Qatari interviewee put it:

[There is] the difference between the real religion and the practices. You must differentiate. Talk about the practices. Don’t focus on Islam. In the West, everything is focused on Islam. “Islam is bad!” “Islam is violent!” But this is not the case, you’ve seen it.

As for the women, like in all the Arab countries, there are injustices for women, it’s just you know, “growing up” societies… So again, there are problems to be solved—slowly, slowly.¹⁶

Instead of resentment over Western freedoms, I found an overwhelming acceptance of a cultural orientation that was more appropriate to their liking than the radically individualistic, somewhat chaotic vacuum of choices they viewed as the “Western” option. There is a real sense of ownership that comes through from the men and women who see themselves as individual agents of change for a generation caught up between the rapid economic growth and demographic shifts of a rural bedouin and tribal culture to a more globalized and cosmopolitan society. The most central difference I discovered between Islamic feminism and the more Western, Liberal, or secular feminist approaches is an acceptance of cultural constraints on individual freedoms and willingness to work for change from within those constraints.

Far from jealousy, what I repeatedly observed from my interview subjects was a criticism of Western feminism and its failure to speak to traditional Muslim culture. One way to read this criticism is to see that Western feminist arguments were dulled by a lack of understanding of deeply rooted Islamic and Eastern communal values and
religious sensibilities. These criticisms include a view of Western feminism that emphasizes individual rights at the expense of communal values and focuses on liberal values to the disregard of theological and religious distinctions in Islam, such as the emphasis on gender segregation.

Again, with many different social backgrounds come many different ideological approaches to politics and public life. I found that in contrast to secular or more liberal women’s rights activists, Islamic feminists distinguished themselves by incorporating their religion and femininity holistically to all other parts of their lives and would reject some of the idea that they as women might have to conform to a male mentality to succeed. One marker of an Islamic feminist is their use of the Arabic phrase *deen wa dunya*, or as one of my interview subjects put it: “Life is religion, religion is life.”

Islam’s version of a Protestant Reformation has never fully come to pass, so Muslims, particularly in traditionally Muslim countries, live in a reality where no aspect of worldly life is too far from religion’s reach. Thus it makes sense that effective negotiators would frame their comments and justifications to push forward with more rights for women within an Islamic framework. As another interviewee pointed out, even the Arabic language is restricted by its spiritual roots—to say hello means to “wish God’s peace upon you.” The advantageous marriage of personal piety and public activism is of particular benefit to politically Islamist women, whose outward appearance speaks for their political inclinations in what we will later explore as the “cultural capital” of the veil.

There may have also been a backlash against the second wave of feminism popular among Kuwaiti secular elites of the 1960s and 1970s. At a time when wealthy elites were tossing in their *abayas* for short skirts, it appears that tribal traditions and kinship structures were not buried as far underneath as pictures from that era portray.

Well, about the pictures in the ’60s. Not everybody in the ’60s wore the mini-skirts. It’s just that those who wore them liked to get their pictures taken. They had…much more media exposure because they were willing to be in the photographs. Others were…conservative and they didn’t go for these media channels. So in Kuwait, you always have those trends. But even those who were wearing mini-skirts and wearing no *hijab*…you have to also know that a lot of them were upper-middle class, and despite their very Westernized appearance, their families had very conservative values about who you marry, how you conduct yourself, what you study, where you work, what you do. I mean, these women in mini-skirts they were not allowed by their
family under any circumstances to work as nurses. Period. And they were not allowed to be TV announcers. And they were not allowed to be journalists. Because these three professions kind of have a negative stigma from the society. So she might be wearing a Christian Dior mini-skirt, but her father would not [have] allowed her to be . . . a journalist. Or a TV announcer or even a radio announcer or an actress.19

And yet this same Kuwaiti professor points out how conservative appearances can also be deceiving:

So conservatism runs deep in Kuwaiti culture. And forget about the appearance. Because I had . . . the other day, I had one girl, she not only had the hijab, she had the niqab, I could only see her eyes. And she had excellent English. And she was wearing the black gloves, the black socks. And she was here doing a research [paper] on the sculptures of a prominent Kuwaiti artist . . . and he . . . you know, his sculptures are figurative. You see the male body denuded and you know, in different positions doing this, doing that. And it’s very strange that with her appearance you would assume, you would think that the majority of the common Islamic groups would think that sculpture is a taboo, it’s wrong, it is idols, and art is the last thing you want to do or appreciate, or think of as an aesthetic achievement of any sort. But I did not ask her because I did not want to embarrass her [by asking] “how do you reconcile?,” okay. But for some of the girls . . . they have no qualms about dress in a very conservative, I would say ultra-conservative way, and have very progressive ideas.

Fighting “Social Diseases”

One of the reasons for the current success of Islamic feminists is the success of political Islamists all together. A political Islamist resurgence has gained momentum in the Middle East long before the current wave of populist uprisings. One possible reason for the success of political Islamists in societies with a culturally Islamic tradition is the convenience of having a common enemy in the libertine, decant cultural values of “the West.” A homogenous designation such as “the West” encourages the kind of stereotyping that so many Westerners make when they lump such diversity of cultures and ideas into a phrase such as “the Muslim World.” But regardless of the accuracy, both terms are used to rally popular support for socially conservative politicians. The conservative Salafists in Kuwait are some of the public relations champions of Islamic values against the threat of an undermining secularism and Western influence into Kuwaiti culture.
And yet a closer look at Salafist politicians demonstrates the sophistication with which they come to office and how outsiders would do well to listen to their insights for an understanding of their current success. One Salafi parliamentarian I spoke with had received a doctoral degree outside of Kuwait and felt perfectly comfortable speaking in English. I was surprised by some of his personal credentials, such as the fact that he was very well-read and mentioned works from Western authors often to support his own traditional Islamist positions. Also, I found it interesting that his wife and daughters, instead of being locked in the kitchen at home, were allowed to drive and have jobs outside the home.

I felt that interviews with Salafi Islamists would provide invaluable insight into the paradoxical nature of the fight for women’s rights in Kuwait. For one particular Salafist I interviewed, I felt that much of the discussion had the tone of an anti-Western lecture, but I couldn’t help feeling pleasantly surprised not only by the courtesy with which I was treated, giving me over an hour of time to answer my questions about women’s rights, but also by the readiness with which he shared his political opinions with one who should have been the “enemy”—a non-Muslim, Western woman. The fact that the Salafi interviewee could express himself in perfect English was already an indication about the misunderstandings many Westerners have about Islamists in Kuwait. The assumption might be that Islamist conservatives might retreat from secular education and exposure to the world outside of their idealized Islamic context. But I found that not to be the case of Salafi cultural elites. In fact, I was surprised at the awareness that these conservative Islamists had about the reality of their complex modern world. It appeared that they were teetering on a precipice of the unknown, while glimpsing longingly for an idealized, traditional past. It was clear from their comments and their voting records that they feel passionately about keeping their society away from the cliff’s edge and intend to do so by keeping the tip of the political balance in their favor.

First of all, let me say that in Kuwait we follow the Islamic religion. And it is not only a religion, Islam is a religion and Sharia as well. And we, me and my movement and a lot of Kuwaitis, try always to perform and fast and... coincide with the Sharia. And we want to be close as much as possible to the Sharia.

This is our religion. This is our values. So, unfortunately, there are a lot of differences between the Western culture and the Islamic culture. We cannot just hide our heads in the sand and say that [there is] “no difference, and women in Islam can work every job and do
everything that the Western woman can do,” this is wrong. Maybe [we have] different views and very different values and that’s why the West will not understand what we believe.

We believe this is for the own good of the woman and for the families. And that’s why we believe that our families in the Arab and Islamic world are more constant and more cohesive and as we move toward the Western culture, we inherit the Western social diseases. There [are] no families as good as our families in the Islamic culture. A lot of divorce cases (in the West) a lot of single parents, a lot of crimes in the West, a lot of women rape, a lot of narcotic addition in the West, a lot of venereal diseases, AIDS, and so many diseases in the West. So we don’t want to be like the West. We are different.

In Islam, women are equal to men, but they are different. We are created different and this is not a [cause for] shame. I as a man cannot work or do some of the women things or jobs or roles in life. Also, women can’t also play the same role as men in life. We are equal, but have different jobs. We complete one another. And this balance is very important. [Breaking] of this balance will create a lot of social diseases.  

What a Kuwaiti Salafist calls “social diseases,” a rise in divorce rates, a breakdown of the traditional family, and health problems caused by relationships outside of marriage, are concerns that many social conservatives around the world champion as proponents of “family values.” In the Kuwaiti Islamist case, the fears of a future without traditionalists in politics is enough to get people voting for them at the polls. Feminists who align themselves with Islamist family values and yet work for additional social rights and acceptance are addressing the fears that accompany rapid social changes.

**A “Just” Equality**

Another Salafi Islamist parliamentarian also referenced the Sharia as the main source of authority on his views about women’s rights and roles in the society:

The Islamist’s reference is Islam and the Islamic Sharia, which is the complete, final religion which was revealed by God to humanity as a whole and we express our attitudes towards women based on this *Sharia* of Equality and Justice.

We have to point out that the conditions of women pre-Islamic *Sharia* were very, very bad, women were inherited as property and they were humiliated and Islam came to equalize women. They were equal with some differences.
Islam calls for the honoring of women to give her her status. And Liberals here have references other than the Islamic reference. They have this confusion between their reference and our reference. They call for absolute equality while we call for just equality rather than absolute, complete equality.  

An additional distinction of Islamists in politics is that women are incorporated into a movement as equal partners with different roles and responsibilities. This language of references to the religious textual tradition in the Sharia is precisely what the theory of legitimate authority addresses in terms of creating a framework, with built-in limitations, that frames the discussions and options for women’s rights within Islam. When Islamic feminists wish to address the most conservative political players in Kuwait, they can do so most effectively when they base their arguments in Islamic culture, heritage, and tradition. The fact that women were granted political rights by the emir of Kuwait gave the strictest Salafists an incentive to speak to women as potential voters.

We are with women’s right to vote, but not to run for elections and we work on giving her full civil rights and some other privileges, administrative privileges in other aspects of life. But we do not think that it is fair for women to be part of the election process or reach the National Assembly because this work is beyond her abilities and capabilities. So it is part of honoring women to excuse her from such tedious tasks. It is also part of our knowledge of her biological, human, and natural abilities as a female.

There was a point of difference for more conservative Salafists who insisted that women should not even have the right to vote. This may be one of many touch points where some Salafists broke off from politically involved Salafists. Salafists have historically been somewhat apolitical and served in Muslim societies more as religious advisory roles. However, the political alliance of Wahhabism and the royal family in Saudi Arabia encouraged Salafists to engage in politics to promote their social agendas. In Kuwait, there are various groups among the Salafi Islamists, and the ones that are most politically involved insist that they remain committed to legislating toward the benefit of women but are opposed to women serving as legislators. Again, though the arguments for excluding women from politics makes the Salafi Islamists appear opposed to progressive rights for women, what is essential to grasp is the fact that now that Kuwaiti women have voting power, even the most conservative
Islamists are in a dialogue with women about their rights and how they can address their concerns as constituents. The willingness of Salafist politicians to engage women as part of the legislative process, now that they have the right to vote, is telling of the macro-level effects of women’s suffrage.

Because we [Islamists] work on, depend on women’s rights, we work for the service of women, we want to serve women and want to work for the protection of society and women as a part of society and we work also on finding laws that would better the situation and condition as regards all aspects of life, though [we] do depend on women’s votes though [we] weren’t voting for the motion [to give women the right to vote and run for office].

We have societies, administrations that help prevent these social problems and our role is through spreading awareness, religious awareness, in mosques to prevent this problem from reaching a point where there’s no coming back. There’s an essential case where we tried to find a solution for and we tried to find a solution to other social problems here in Kuwait. The problem, I think, is not with the men. The problem is [with the] women. They…want the Islamists to win. They voted for Islamists. It’s convenient! If I’m a woman, I have to…settle for the same salary [for] doing nothing. A lot of people, they don’t want to work. Why? If you can work until you are paid retirement at 55 or 60? Why? [Instead] Retire and…go shopping, and…This is the challenge between liberalism and

Later, when I asked if giving women their political rights opened up room to talk about other marginalized groups and issues, the Islamist simply laughed. He narrowed his gaze and spoke rather clearly:

Our problem is with women in general who climb on women’s issues. Every time we offer something or present a solution, we find confusion coming from the clowns of candidates who would rather shout when addressing women’s issues, when we are with giving women their rights, and we have laws that already give women their rights, but there are some candidates who would like to make a fuss about it.

While some of this perspective was shared by politically engaged female Islamists, the political Liberals argue against Islamist policies, which in their view work to further marginalize women from public life. And Liberals fault women who vote with Islamists for furthering an Islamist agenda.
a government with the Islamist forces. What they’re doing, it’s a crime against the country.25

And yet despite opposition from Liberal politicians, in a short time Islamists have managed to open up networks of communication so that Islamist supporters—many female—can feel included in the Islamist political agenda and continue their support.

Naturally these laws are complements to women, we complement women. It’s in our nature to want to serve women and help them lovingly. So it all goes for the benefit of women.

We work on laws that give privileges to women, administrational, job-related privileges that men do not get. Maternity break, early retirement, and we do not as males feel that we are oppressed because our main aim is to make women happy, please women, that is why I do not know why some women if they find any partial law that would favor men or would give certain privileges to men they would get so upset about it and make a big fuss about it. While we only work for the benefit and to please women.

Is there any special way your movement looks at issues differently than the Muslim Brotherhood or the Scientific Salafis? In what ways do you cooperate with them?

There is cooperation…there’s the law of civil and social rights that gives privileges to a lot of women and this is now discussed.

There are eight propositions for women in the monetary, economic committee, and they are all for the benefit of women, they are housing, and are also proposing to give wages for those who do not work.

And this was proposed by the Islamists. And the people that were against this were Liberals and the female candidates. And now we conclude and say who really stands with women, is it the Islamists or the Liberals?

Through election seminars, articles, statements, we try our best to convince women and we do have the capability to convince women that we are for women.26

So another paradox of Islamic feminism in Kuwait, explored in the next chapter, is that Islamists are winning elections. And yet the reasons why Islamist politicians are winning is starting to make more sense as we analyze the actors within the plethora of Islamist activists. Instead of a monolithic or homogeneous group of religious fanatics, we see that they are educated, informed, and ideological but pragmatic. We can understand the diversity of Islamist conservatives in Kuwait by analyzing their sociological roots and how they have moved in to become successful in contemporary Kuwaiti politics.
Islamist Family Values

Islamists project themselves as the party of family values. This is not unlike social conservatives in other cultures—in a world of uncertainties about the future, the anchor of the family can prioritize any number of other government concerns, and Islamists portray themselves as the champions of family values. Western feminism may not have taken root in conservative Muslim societies such as Kuwait because of its association with a destabilization of the traditional family. One Islamist women’s rights activist recognizes that Islamists may be more politically effective precisely because they are addressing all levels of fear and insecurities that their citizens are feeling and offer a holistic solution grounded in their religious and cultural heritage.

It’s not so much about women, but the family issue that is important to address. Many working women are finding it more convenient to stay at work rather than at home, to face crying children. Women fear their daughter’s attitude that they will delay marriage and having kids. [Female political] candidates need to have a strategy to address these attitudes, and prepare speeches to address these concerns from mothers about the future for their children.

Islamists and conservatives read the news and point out the disadvantages that the modern woman faces in other countries and they use it to their advantage. So the candidate who supports women’s political rights should tell the voters that they should feel no fear.

But this is a legitimate fear because people are disappointed in their children. Nowadays you doubt if your children are a worthy investment for your future. All the religions say God loves those who respect their parents. But before there was insurance, there was the expectation that after your children turned thirty that they would support you and you could retire. In Kuwait, now it is expected that the government will support you in your old age. Secondly, children consume a lot of money and effort and you’re not sure that you will benefit after all.27

One Liberal male journalist speculates that it was not so much the divided opinions among men that were hurting women’s chances at future progress but, in fact, the conservative reservations that many women had about supporting their own increasing rights and roles in the public sphere. That kind of fear of the unknown social consequences of pursuing women’s political rights may be what’s behind much of the support they gave to the Islamists.

I don’t know how to describe it, but… not so many women are supportive of these [political] rights.
Because of their traditional education, the pressure of religious groups and religious conservative understanding...there are so many factors! Because I would even say that say, 50 or 60 years ago, the West was such a model for people in the Islamic world and the East in general. It’s not that model anymore. Especially...here the religious, conservative people talk about the...problems with the institutions that...families are facing in the West, for example, “do you want those couples [fighting] for homosexuality?”

So these are...things that keep people from...being a full supporter of changing the status of women along the Western lines. So if it’s not along the Western lines and it’s not a modernizing of these relationships, then the Islamists will come [in] with their solution.²⁸

Later he goes on to say that some conservative men and women oppose social changes in gender roles because of adverse effects on the continuation of their own civilizations, encapsulated in the propitiation of the traditional family.

And they say another thing. That...women’s liberalization will play a negative role in growing the population in the Islamic world. Because in all these societies where women are free...eventually they decrease...having children...and the family institution suffers badly and...the man-woman relationship is not normal...and many things like that. And again, there aren’t good answers for all these questions.

Islamic feminists can address local concerns without having to align themselves with a Western-style feminist movement. Instead, there are many reasons for arguing for women’s rights within an indigenous, Islamic worldview. Among these are its mass appeal and the empowering stance of having the right to do things their own way.

**Indigenous Arguments for An Islamic Feminism**

Women’s rights activists in Kuwait may feel the need to create an indigenous feminist movement as an alternative to a Western feminism. Indigenous arguments for an Islamic feminism are that it is a movement that incorporates the masses, not a feminism limited to wealthy elites. The male Kuwaiti journalist offered that most Kuwaiti women may stay away from women’s rights conferences and issues precisely because they may feel they don’t belong.

Some say that women’s rights issues have been taken over by elitist groups or, so these are societies who only represent the elite and the
majority of women they don’t find their place there, but I don’t know. They might be interested in women’s rights, but they might not be interested in the venue. You don’t just say throw it like this, and then you will see several groups involved with women’s rights issues, you just get one or two who are really serious, many of them are not serious. And then you will see the in-fightings between them so these are those who [stand by] . . . their people and so it is not really [about] women’s rights issues. 29

Another male interviewee makes the point that not all politically Liberal women represent the majority of Kuwaiti women and their concerns. He suggests that in fact personal political agendas may inhibit coordination among Kuwaiti women’s rights activists. He offers that the exploration of political rights is a promising cooperative exercise for them.

I think [political] elections will be a test and the participation of women in the past election [of 2006], even though it was less than two months of announcement, was overwhelming. Women went to vote and they were there in full force. They participated with a very short time [to prepare]. So this is the answer. 30

Another indigenous argument for Islamic feminism is that with legitimate religious, community, and political support, Islamic feminists can pave their own road to feminism—without the help of outsiders. Interestingly, many Muslim female leaders in majority Muslim cultures do not uphold Western women as their models. In fact some make it a point to distinguish their leadership style as organic from their own conservative, gender-segregated cultures. One example is Princess Haila bint Abdulrahman Al Saud, director for the Women’s Section of the Riyadh Chamber of Commerce and Industry. She says:

In the West, women in business are constantly struggling to make themselves heard in a men’s world. My heart goes out to them . . . But in our culture, women can start their business in an environment surrounded by supportive women who understand the value of the female perspective and support each other. 31

Islamic feminists are establishing their own brand of progressive activism, with or without the tenets of secular, Liberal, individualized Western feminism. Much of this is reflected in the way that women’s rights activists talk about their goals and form alliances to meet those goals.
Liberal Feminists Share the Arena with Islamic Feminists

Dr. Lulwah Al-Mulla, a champion of women’s rights as head of the Women’s Cultural and Social Society of Kuwait, is a woman who appears Liberal and Western in appearance and does not wear the hijab in public but addresses her feminism while respecting her religion:

I think that the Islamic Sharia law is very fair to women and we don’t really have any complaints there. But there are other laws, made by ordinary men that are unfair to the social circumstance in which we live today and we are working to correct this. 32

Despite differing political strategies, Liberal feminists are recognizing the importance of sharing the political arena with fellow women’s rights activists of the Islamist persuasion. Not only do many Liberal Kuwaiti women feel content with the restrictions on their individual freedoms for the sake of the society, but many are also adamant along with Islamists that they are not at all jealous of Western freedoms. One Islamist women’s rights activist in Kuwait shares her opinion regarding the difference between a Liberal approach to women’s rights and a politically Islamist approach in Kuwait:

If they are Liberals, or belonging to the Liberal parties or Islamic parties, they are all Muslims. They practice Islam. But maybe these Liberals wanted us to be like the West. No boundaries. No limits for whatever you do. We, who think we represent the Islamic movement, wanted a society [that is] balanced, [where]…Islam can be practiced…and we don’t want to live the West’s life. 33

This is a variation of the theory of legitimate authority in that one of the three variables (in this case, the community) becomes the predominant source of authority in achieving women’s rights and goals in the society. In a society where political Liberals and Islamists can all agree to be Muslims, it is possible that both sides can come together for a women’s rights agenda founded on religious principles, shaped by the community. This cooperation may even cross borders with its message of empowerment for Muslim women. One Qatari women’s rights activist put it this way:

To satisfy the Western world, I don’t have to rethink all my faith. I don’t believe in this…So I don’t think we need to change everything.
We need to understand our religion because we’ve been away from it and back[ed away from] it for some time.\textsuperscript{34}

Through these varied examples we can see how an Islamic feminist framework is most effective in a traditional majority Muslim society like Kuwait. Not only does Islamic feminism address the fear of spreading social diseases, promote Islamic family values, and fight for a “just” equality in opposition to Western secular models, but Islamic feminists are also empowered by arguing from within their Islamic worldview. Through an appeal to religious, community, and, finally, political authorities, women are achieving their goals toward social rights in Kuwait.

**Women are Supporting Islamist Conservatives in Droves**

Whatever demographic and ideological reasons for the political success of Islamists in Kuwait, the fact that women are supporting Islamist conservatives in droves may be their most effective weapon in the battle for the future of women’s rights. One Liberal female Kuwaiti activist recognized the political shrewdness of the Islamists with this personal anecdote:

Well, the Islamists have the major advantage. The first one is funding. They are very well funded. The second one is the organization... They are extremely organized. I remember...[right before the first 2006] election, twenty-ninth of June. I was working with a Liberal candidate... My candidate was actually pretty close, he was like the third person, he would have made it. And it was on a hot summer day in Kuwait. I mean, it was scorching heat! And we were all wearing t-shirts and capri-pants and our hairs were in buns...And we were wearing sunglasses, and we’re trying to fan ourselves—and sometimes we just couldn’t, we had to take a break from trying to get voters to our side.

Meanwhile, the Islamists were wearing veils, and abayas, and they were covered head to toe, and they stayed much, much longer in the sun than we did. It’s a small little anecdote, but it shows you how dedicated and organized these people are to their cause. I just couldn’t understand how that woman was standing there [like that]. I mean, I was wearing [just] a t-shirt and couldn’t handle the heat. And she just stood there. And it wasn’t just one person, it was droves of them! They were organized, they actually had shifts! You could see them switching shifts. We just took breaks randomly. You know, we just took a random break. [If] someone went to take a break, [then] someone came and...
they took our spot. They were doing it in a very organized and well-planned way. Their candidate won, by the way.\cite{135}

Of course, a political Liberal in Kuwait would view the women’s support of the Islamists similarly to skeptical political Liberals in the West—that they are simply enslaved into a patriarchal and oppressive mindset handed down by past traditions. One Liberal male professor referenced a quote from Saudi Arabia’s former king Abdul-Aziz where he likened religion to the falcon: “You train a falcon in order to hunt with it. So religion is like a falcon. You train and you hunt with it. It’s a simple idea, think about it.”\cite{136}

But the paradoxical nature of an Islamic feminism is that it is at the crossroads between an intellectually rooted secular feminism and the Salafi version, which comes across as less intellectual, more conservative, and literal in its interpretation of the Qur’an. What is true now that women have the right to vote in Kuwait is that their votes will count for a lot in determining the political leadership of the country and the future trajectory for women’s rights in Kuwait. Liberal Kuwaitis were perplexed at the support that women gave Islamist conservatives, although we have already begun to analyze several reasons why that may be the case. Still, there is consternation among Liberals for supporting women’s political rights at all costs when women turned around and voted for Islamists, who were against their right to vote.

Women have to realize that they have to do something for themselves first. I mean, it’s women now [who are] so confused, so lost. Liberal people, men, who worked for women all those years to get women involved, when the women got the opportunity to vote, they voted against them. How can you help [that]? It’s a real dilemma. Not only in Kuwait, in the [entire] Gulf.\cite{137}

We can see how one paradox of Islamic feminism, that Western feminism has failed to take root in Muslim hearts and minds, is due to several factors being addressed by a contemporary, indigenous Islamic feminism. Islamic feminists are addressing fears of the future, including the breakdown of the traditional family and secular individual liberalism, by arguing for political rights as a means to address important social rights and inequalities. The diversity of Islamists in majority Muslim contexts also sheds light on the reasons for the success of indigenous social movements based in, argued from, and legitimated by religious, community, and political authorities.
Enumerating Legitimate Horizons

As stated in the theory of legitimate authority, Islamic feminists seek a balance in terms of legitimate religious, political, and community authorities. One former female parliamentary candidate speaks of her belief in how religion promotes women’s rights and her disappointment that Islamists who benefitted from women’s votes are slow to incorporate them as political actors:

It’s not concerning haram and halal. I’m not specified in this field, but this is what we know. One plus one equals two, there’s no one plus one equals three. Nothing [in Islam] forbid[s] woman to participate in parliament. This is nothing concerning religion. It is only beliefs, that’s it. And they [political Islamists] just want to hold back, they don’t want to agree, because it’s just a belief. And when the time is coming, they just . . .

Now that women can vote, have you seen an organized effort from Islamic groups to get women’s votes?

I think they play with the women. And unfortunately, women, they have small minds to accept this dirty play. I say dirty play because I don’t believe in it and I don’t satisfy [easily]...Because when [the] time [came], and women [could] vote, and they just change[d their minds], and they agree[d]. And they [were] just touching their papers and praising so many [women’s] votes.

Even from my point of view, since we finished [the elections]...they [the Islamists] did nothing so far to prepare women to [run as candidates]...

Because they [Muslim women] have open-minds and they are well-educated. So they have to think about you know, programs, to involve more women on their side. So I always ask them, “why [are you] not preparing well-qualified women to participate in your [campaigns] to be elected”? They don’t have [an answer] to this question...So I feel sometimes shame about the Islami[sts] in that regard.38

While political Independents, and even Islamic feminists who do not affiliate with political Islamist parties in Kuwait, recoil at the political use of Islam, political Islamists do not shy away from letting their religion explicitly dictate their politics. Islamic feminists may or may not affiliate with either political Islamists or political Liberals. Oftentimes, they will belong to neither, but are willing to work with both.

Political Islamists distinguish themselves by emphasizing the religious sources of authority, in this case the Islamic religious texts and traditions. For political Islamists who work for women’s rights, their
Islamist roots are clarified when they focus more on the ways that Islam does or does not allow women to be empowered, such as one political Islamist responded:

Islam urges man, society and the state to protect woman and offer her all assistance she needs to participate in any aspect of leadership. The problem is not with Islam but with Muslim clerics who sometimes do not understand what Islam points or want.  

Again, the defense of an Islamic worldview is essential to understanding the Islamist point of view regarding women’s rights. Whereas politically Liberal Muslims may argue that private religiosity should not interfere with politics, political Islamists boost their women’s rights arguments by using Islamic-based arguments. The legitimacy of their causes include:

1. that Islam does not prevent women from being involved in politics and
2. that Islam in fact supports women and works in their best interest. Man’s (and woman’s) job is to interpret Islam appropriately in modern life.

One of the Salafi parliamentarians gives flesh and bone to this concept when he concludes our discussion with one last important point:

Islam does not forbid woman from any work, like medicine, or engineering...except what we call the wilayat al cobra, which [regards governing of constituencies].

In the past, in the early days of Islam, there was one man, who was the caliph, or sultan. Now, it is three jobs. Because the job of sultan in modern constitutions becomes three jobs: judiciary, legislative, executive. Except for those, any work is suitable for women, bearing in mind that it must not affect the family. She must have balance, ok?

In the eyes of God, men and women are equal. There is no superior and inferior basis, we are all equal. The Qur’an tells us that virgin Mary, she is not a prophet, but the mother of a prophet...one to be admired, a saint, with holy status. Like Aisha in Islam, like Khadeeja in Islam, like Asia, the wife of Pharaoh. She believed in Moses. In Islam, they are all saints. There is no female prophet in Islam, but there are saints.

For political Islamists in Kuwait, religion and politics equally inform their opinions and actions regarding women’s rights. While Liberals
worry about staying relevant to a population that is redefining what their Islamism means to them, Islamists are beginning to temper the refrain that Islam is the solution with real conversations about the systematic injustices for women who fall through the cracks.

Political Islamists are addressing their learning curve by falling back on their religious and political authorities to provide the parameters for their engagement of women in politics. In applying a theory of legitimate authority for political Liberals in a majority Muslim context, the Constitution becomes the ultimate source of legitimate authority, because it serves as an anchor in the midst of social turmoil that, in their view, creates a vacuum for political Islamists to manipulate the influence of Islam on women’s rights. For political Liberals in Kuwait, the main sources of legitimate authority are politics and the community. In the later chapters, we will look through and analyze qualitative and quantitative data of Kuwaiti elites to continue to diagram a legitimate authority framework for a sociological understanding of Islamic feminism. We begin to see that within a theory of legitimate authority, Islamic feminists hold community, political, and religious authorities as equally important gatekeepers and sources of legitimating authorities.
Islamists Are Winning Elections

Islamist parties did not ignite the revolutions that have brought down four authoritarian Arab regimes since the “Arab Spring” first erupted in Tunisia in December 2010—but they reaped their political benefits. The Muslim Brotherhood Movement and other Islamist parties have won all parliamentary elections that took place in the post-revolutions Arab world. In Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco and Kuwait, Islamists won the vote. They are expected to come out on top in Libyan elections and are emerging as a formidable force in Yemen and Syria...

—Ayman Safadi, former deputy prime minister of Jordan

Pious, Popular, Pragmatic Islamists

It was a sweltering 130 degrees Fahrenheit, and I was standing in the middle of the desert. I was looking around for a remote building in the suburbs of Kuwait City for my next set of interviews with a group of young Islamist women, and I was a little late and a little lost. I decided to pick up my cell phone and try my contact again. “I’m sorry I think I’m lost...the taxi has just left me and I’m not really sure where I am!” My contact answered, “Hmm, okay! Don’t worry, Alessandra! I will send one of my friends out to get you! She is coming straight away!” And a few minutes later, to my surprise, a rather young girl, barely 20 years old from what I can make out behind her black veil and abaya, with two small toddlers and a nanny in the backseat, pulls up to where I’m standing in the middle of the dusty road and calls out the window: “You must be Alessandra! Come on in!”

Compared to many of the sleek sports cars I had seen in front of the Marina Mall in Kuwait City, it was not a fancy car—but the young, veiled woman was driving it. I jump in, wondering where I am and giving up any hope to guess what is going to happen next. Later I find out this woman (whom I will call Ms. C.) is a working mom and
still enrolled as a student at the university. And somehow she made 
time for political meetings and picking up stray foreign visitors who 
were interested in interviewing her.

And thus began my meeting of surprises with a group of the 
HADAS Islamist women’s group, which is a political action group of 
sorts (since political parties are not legal in Kuwait, it serves as more 
of a political interest group) and is a subgroup of the ICM in Kuwait. 
The ICM is a modern politically Islamist group, philosophically 
like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. It is a relatively progressive 
group, especially when compared with the Kuwaiti Salafis, and this 
is reflected in the youth and vibrancy of its members. This particular 
group I am meeting with includes members with ages ranging from 
late-teens to one lady over 50 years old. I was primarily interested in 
interviewing the leader of the group, whom I will call Ms. A., a young 
Kuwaiti lawyer—very attractive with a sweet demeanor, very sure of 
herself, and influential enough to convince her friends to join her on 
what later became a group interview of about six women around a 
table, dressed mostly in black, but with varying degrees of makeup 
on their face. And in hospitable Kuwaiti fashion, a generous helping 
of sweets and tea were served.

Throughout the interview, the young women arranged for child-
care, continual replenishment of the sweets and tea for hosting their 
orated guest (that was me), slipped out in groups of two or three 
for evening prayers, and arranged for enough members with excellent 
English to be able to translate for the other members who were not as 
confident in their English. The group included stay-at-home moth-
ers, university students, working mothers, engineers, and lawyers. 
I think this spread of talents and interests says a lot about the group 
that outsiders might completely underestimate, particularly if seen in 
the streets, dressed in black from head to toe. As it turned out, one 
of the girls had made copies of the interview questionnaire I had sent 
them in advance and translated them to Arabic, so they all came pre-
pared and wanted to share about their group and themselves openly 
with me.

Ms.C.: This team is like a women’s committee in the Islamic political 
group in Kuwait, it’s called HADAS. Did you meet some of them 
in parliament? 
Is this like a social reform group? Or different? 
Ms.C.: This is different. It’s . . . [the] Islamic . . . Movement. 
How are they different than Social Reform Society, or Muslim Brotherhood, 
or Salaf?
Ms.C.: I think we are the Muslim…Brotherhood. We are like a political wing. Right now we are on the political side.

Perfect! I want to know then how did you all view the last elections? The first election that women could run in…were there things you were disappointed in? And what do you hope to do for the next elections?

Ms.A.: The problem was the time [to prepare for elections]…it was very short. We…weren’t prepared.

Young Woman (Y.W.): We were not surprised, we knew [the time for elections was] gonna come, but not that soon. There wasn’t time to prepare for the campaign.

Older Woman (O.W.): But we were astonished that the Kuwaiti lady was…

Ms.B.: Active, interactive.

So was it a good surprise?

O.W.: A good surprise, yes…

Ms.C.: All our candidates won in the elections. And I think…we had six candidates, Islamic candidates, and they all won in the elections…

O.W.: Because of the women. [Laugh].

Do you think that’s because more women were involved?

Ms.C.: Yes, and I think that we were more socially involved with the community. So that’s why it was easy for us to reach more women.

Like what kinds of social engagement do you usually do? What kinds of activities?

Y.W.: Social activities…

O.W.: Yanni, for women, for girls, in different fields, ages…

Ms.C.: We are, I think, the most popular committee or…in the field, or in Kuwait. Maybe that’s because we are more in-between, you know. We are not very strict.

What is an example of “strict”? 

Ms.C.: I think we represent the majority of Kuwaiti women. That’s why people voted for us.

And could you describe more what that means?

Ms.C.: We value the traditions and our culture, and of course, our Islamic religion.

Ms.B.: [We are] Conservatives.

Ms.A.: Our country, I think…our work is…[to] benefit our country. We think that it’s good for the women of our country, and we go ahead with it.

As moderate political Islamists, these women are empowered to actively participate in politics, and as women, they are moved to fight on behalf of the women in their society. In typical Arab Muslim fashion, the girls begin to recount a story from their religious tradition.
to illustrate how they feel they are empowered by their religion to lead in politics.

*O.W.*: I think our religion was brought from the Prophet Mohammed. Prophet Mohammed asks all Muslims to do something. They were going to *umrah* and he asked them to go back again... So all the men, they refused to obey Prophet Mohammed, then he was so angry, not about them, but you can’t say “No!” to the Prophet... So he asked whom? He asked his wife, “What shall I do? I’m afraid for them...”

*Ms.C.*: ... That they will not follow his path.

*O.W.*: So his wife suggested, “Now, you go and...”

*Ms.A.*: ... “Do what you think is better.”

*O.W.*: ... Then all Muslims did right, exactly what he did. Because of what? Because of the woman. So the woman was... *hakima*, wise. So Prophet Mohammed, although he is a prophet, he wasn’t ashamed to take the appointment, or to obey his wife, to do an important thing for all Muslims. So from that we know the Prophet Mohammed liked to take the other’s opinion.

The power of textual tradition as a legitimating source is a key characteristic of Islamic feminists. By referring to a story of how the Prophet Mohammed consulted a wise woman to make a decision in matters of state shows these women that their religion esteems and values women’s opinions on political matters. The precedence set by this textual tradition gives them the confidence to enter politics in their own Muslim society some 1400 years after those events.

Later in the conversation, I ask the HADAS ladies to clarify for me why they supported a party that was against their political rights to vote and run for political office, particularly when they themselves seemed so interested and informed in politics.

*Ms.C.*: They didn’t know what was coming, you know, or what [would be] the result. And many people said that the Islamists voted against it, but really it was in the Islamists’ benefit because they were more organized in the women’s section than Liberals or even other Independents.

*Ms.A.*: Even us, in our Islamic group, there were like negotiations between us...

*Ms.C.*: Among the women, and some people say that we didn’t handle the situation right. This is one of the voices that said that... that we should have voted with the... women’s political rights. And some said “No”... and it went one way or the other, and we believe in democracy, even also between us.
Ms. A.: Yes, we are voting inside [our group], so even when we discuss, we are voting. So what opinion is more [in] number, he will win.

Now, I had to smile at the irony of what I was hearing. It seemed like the women, being “democratic” as they said, took a vote amongst themselves to decide whether or not they wanted to support a parliamentary candidate who would vote against their political right to vote in parliament. And that is exactly what they did!

Then these politically engaged Islamist women explained to me that unlike the Salafis, their more moderate Islamist group was not against women’s suffrage, but their ability to run as political candidates.

Ms. A.: No, nobody … [has a problem with women’s right to vote] … What about running for office as a candidate? Was this more controversial?

Ms. A.: This was the problem, it was the problem about this. Because some of the Islamists said that it’s better to vote only, and some of them see the two [rights together].

Ms. A.: We are against … running as candidates … not because of the religious results, but because of the social results. Because there [are] not enough women [to] be able to be in this position. So if it’s not equal for everyone, then …

Ms. A.: We think that … the important thing [is] that [they have] …

Ms. C.: Our voice …

[You mean,] It doesn’t matter if the voice is a female?

Ms. A.: Whoever has the best ability must win, not for male or female.

In other words, the most conservative Salafists may have been ideologically opposed to women’s right to vote, but in principle, it appears that some moderate Salafists and the politicians of the Muslim Brotherhood school of thought were not opposed to women’s voting rights but their right to run as candidates for political office. It is important to cite this example to point out that ideological differences do exist among political Islamists and have practical repercussions for the inclusion of Islamist women in politics. Particularly since women have been credited with much of the success of modern Islamist movements for the last few decades, the sooner scholars appreciate the diversity within Islamist movements, the sooner we can begin to understand their power and appeal to women and other previously marginalized political actors.

Though Liberal politicians ran on a platform that supported women’s rights to vote and run for office, in practice, they did not
necessarily help women candidates get political support in the ways the women expected. Liberal male parliamentarians hypothesized that empowering women voters would most likely benefit Islamist candidates and did not go out of their way to help their potential competitors. But it is possible that by not helping fellow Liberal women candidates, the Liberal male politicians helped the Islamists gain seats anyway. In fact, the ladies of HADAS admit that moderate Islamists knew that women’s support would be crucial to their political victory and, once legalized by the Kuwaiti government in 2005, had adapted to incorporate women into their political strategy. The inconsistencies of Islamists in politics have some women’s rights activists wary of cooperating with what they might consider fair-weather friends.

Yes, Salaf, and Harakat Disturia, HADAS, whatever, okay? They were saying women have no right to vote and they have to stay at home, do nothing. Just stay in [the house]…these kind of talks.

But after passing the law of having the rights for the women, they were the first people to have women’s diwaniyas, huh! And women committees! To…you know, let women come and vote for them. You can see the contradiction in their positions and their opinions. 

After meeting the enthusiastic young women of HADAS, I can see why the Islamists would want Islamist women involved in their campaigns. At the very least, they would mobilize the female vote in their favor. This organized group of young Islamist women had families and were college educated and employed, not uninformed or apathetic. And taking the precedent legitimated by their Islamic tradition, they were determined to have their voices and ideas heard by top decision-makers.

Ms.C.: We have a suggested law right now…that gives like…more rights for the women…Like maternity leave, or work…about hours, working hours for women…because we think that women, they have a lot of roles in life. We don’t only run for the political [positions],…we have other roles and priorities in life. Like we have to have like family, or our role in the house as a wife, mother, daughter, you know…my friend was just telling me that her mother is in the hospital, and she doesn’t have sick leave, like they won’t give it for her…(she’s not married, or she doesn’t have children). But what we are suggesting now in the parliament, is like they give them more freedom or less hours to work so they can give in other roles in their life.
So you think the more effective long-term strategy for women in Kuwait is to promote social rights first and then political?
O.W.: Yes.
Ms.B.: Others are looking for the political rights like a goal. We are doing it for a way to reach . . . other goals.

So of course, I asked the obvious next question:

And so what are some of those long-term goals?
Ms.A.: Social rights for women and give ideas for the laws.

So do you think women involved in politics is going to help or hurt bringing women’s issues more to the table?
Ms.A.: Helps. Because we’ve got to discuss what we’re suffering about, you know.

One advantage that women have gained through an Islamist political affiliation is access to top Islamist decision-makers, despite Liberal opposition.

Y.W.: Liberals in parliament are not fair members…Whenever [the Islamists] propose something, usually a big group proposes it and [the Liberals] are one of them, because there are not many in the parliament. So it’s not their idea, it’s a group idea. It’s never happened that [the Liberals] proposed it and we were against it.
Ms.C.: We proposed our vision for the medical field, to the Islamic members in parliament . . . and we had access. Not because we are a[n elected] member of this group . . .

An outsider to this group, a Liberal female university professor who may indeed have taught any number of female Islamist students brought in these observations:

Once the women were granted their political rights, [the Islamists] were the first to jump in and start making their own committees for women and having . . . during the political campaigns, a separate tent for the women to attend and listen to the argument of the to-be MP and listen to his views [compared to] those who are currently in the parliament for the next parliamentary elections.

But I think now that the women have their own rights, they will probably have their [own] participation. In the sense that they will urge women who are part of the Islamic groups also to start learning how to arrange political campaigns, win the votes of other women . . . So, as I said. Although their attitude was very much negative, but—something positive will become out of it now that it has become a reality. Now
what kind of politician these Islamic women groups will vote in...we need to wait for the next elections to see.

But...my expectation is that some of these women with Islamic groups, they do have ideals, they are serious about social reform. The issues that are of great importance to them are like elevating the ordeal of women who are married to non-citizens, or non-Kuwaitis. Doing something good for children who are born out of wedlock. Doing something for the handicapped. Perhaps they will be also keen and active on environmental issues because a lot of these environmental issues touch on women’s health.

So I think in this [way], you know...it will be a channel for other women, or women with Islamic orientation to also enter the [political] field. Not that any of these women will be part of any Islamic party. They can be independent. But...I mean, once the channel is opened (even if it is by fundamentalist or whatever groups), that social stigma about a woman who is politically active and therefore she is shameless, she lacks modesty, she’s...you know, shows her face, her voice is heard by the...and the voice is kind of like a taboo thing, it’s like *haram*...that facade will just crumble and fall. And I think, perhaps without knowing it, they are opening avenues and channels for women with perhaps moderate Islamic views, or progressive Islamic views to also participate. You know, when there’s a dynamic of things and you may not plan the other features of that dynamics. But these other features do come in because things are out of your narrow control now and...there are other things that come in.11

In summary, we can learn several things about why Islamists are winning elections in Kuwait and perhaps in other parts of the Middle East from my conversations with the ladies of HADAS in Kuwait. First, we must recognize that *Islamists are not a monolithic group*. Not all political Islamist were against women’s suffrage but most were against women running for political office. Second, *Islamist women are educated, articulate, and driven*. Many stereotypes about Muslim women abound and especially about politically Islamist women who support candidates who deny them a political voice. But what I discovered is that a number of elite politically engaged Islamist women are sophisticated in their approach to achieving social rights for women and view politics as a means to those social rights instead of an end in themselves. In short, these young ladies are indeed pious, but they are also popular with their peers, and pragmatic in politics. Lastly, *Islamists are in it to win it*. Rules of engagement with women changed after women were granted their political rights in 2005. Islamists incorporated women into their campaigns by allowing them to organize women voters and by giving them access to Islamists
already in power. Ironically, Islamists arguably incorporated women more effectively than the Liberals in a practical way that helped them to win parliamentary seats in following elections.

**Who Are Today’s Islamists?**

One point that shines through from my conversations with Islamists in Kuwait is how little we really know about them from an empirical and academic vantage point and how easily they are breaking the stereotypical images of Islamists in popular media. The real Islamists of today are well-read Salafists and young intelligent working moms who voted against their right to vote. Some wear the veil, abaya, or long beard, while some wear a Western suit. But we can begin to put the pieces of the puzzle together about where they stand on the idea of an indigenous Islamic feminism. From the qualitative interview ISAS data (see Figure 2.1), we can see how Islamist conservatives argue that Islam supports women’s rights and make some additional observations about today’s Islamists.

- *They hold a holistic worldview that intertwines religion and politics.* First, Islamist conservatives most frequently listed “holistic reform” as the way they believe Islam supports women’s
rights. Second, they viewed the Qur’an as providing insights for informing public policy toward women’s rights. As was true of my Islamic feminists, political Islamists uphold religion as a piece of their ideological framework. However, unlike Islamic feminists, the political Islamists uphold religion and politics to the exclusion of modern contemporary realities that may be present in the community. For example, the individual freedoms that have penetrated the culture, and which Liberals recognize, are some of the most contentious points of debate between Liberals and Islamists. Women’s individual rights to dress how they want, to work in any occupation outside the home, or even to adopt a secular lifestyle, are mostly off the table for political Islamists.

- **They view community activism and charity work as Islamically mandated.** The next most frequent response that Islamist conservatives listed was that they viewed an Islamic approach as providing access to a broader constituency by reaching out to more Kuwaitis with Islamic sensibilities. The fact that Islamist activists view their charity work and community engagement as a religious duty motivates their activism and makes them consistent regardless of political trends. The fact of just “showing up” dressed in traditional Islamic dress lends a powerful message to their cause. One Western convert to Islam wrote this about the source of her personal beliefs:

I believe that Islam requires that all citizens are social activists, since the Quran asks us all to “enjoin what’s good and prevent what’s bad.” This applies on a personal level of course, but also on a collective level. We all have a responsibility to do whatever is within our power to enact positive change and development (Prophet Muhammad said, “If you see a wrong, change it with your hands. If you can’t, speak against it. And if you can’t, at least hate it in your heart, and this is the weakest of faith.”) I believe that as a person becomes more educated about and focused on the teachings of Islam, he will become more involved in social activism, whether male or female because he will realize his own responsibility for the state of the community.12

- **They distinguish themselves from Secular Liberals.** The politically engaged Islamists, unlike fundamentalists who isolate themselves from mainstream society, might still consider their Liberal counterparts as Muslims by birth and culture, but they are quick to distinguish their secular views as misguided and unacceptable. Dress, such as the Islamic veil, or gender segregation of schools and work places may be symbolic markers of what
sociologists like to call “in-group” identification, but the differences extend in very real ways to the rest of their social organization. Though criticized by Liberals for their conservative beliefs, many Islamists seem to make popular inroads among the poorer and less educated segments of the society, simply because they make themselves available to, and perhaps appear more like, the “average” citizen in their majority Muslim societies. Secular activists are also keen to point out their ideological distinctions. One Liberal university professor spoke of the Islamist foothold in her society:

The role of religion in promoting or demoting women’s participation? I think it really plays a double role,…it has multiple perspectives when you look at it. I think in certain sociological,…areas, the Islamic groups did promote the role of women. They got people…you know, spreading Islam among Christian expatriates, non-Muslim expatriates in Kuwait. Not that I think that’s a very important role to play in…you know, in the world now. Converting people from their religion into another religion. They may think of it as something that is worthwhile, I…I think it doesn’t much matter, because it’s a…it should be a personal preference.

But it did give the women a role to play. And they also have their own charity committees.

Such as the Social Reform?

Yea…they all have special committees run by women doing charity work among women. And the poor, and the widowed, and…so I think in this area, this [is] good social work.

But, when you look at the wider political perspective—no. I really think they curbed the political participation of women. And they’re very…you know, ill-founded Sharia education of Islam. You know, they were against the participation of women in the parliament and for Kuwaiti women to have their political rights for a very long time. And even when the government was keen and intent on making this happen, they remained against it till the very end.\(^\text{13}\)

- **They have internal divisions.** As became clear from my interviews with Islamists from the more moderate ICM, there are divisions between their approach and that of the more conservative Salafis. Naturally, there are also sectarian divisions among Sunni and Shia Islamists, and philosophical divisions within those groups. Much like the various denominational and sectarian splits within majority Christian countries, Islamists have historical, theological, and political reasons for these internal divisions. This is important to keep in mind so as to not overgeneralize political
Islamists. One independent university professor describes some of these divisions:

Liberals...they’ve freed themselves from any obligations against religion. Of course, at the beginning, there are for sure some limitations, or some obligations that come from our religion, our faith. Now, the Liberal people, they free themselves from all obligations, including those against the female. Now these are controllable sector[s]. The Islamists...I guess there are different groups...While I’m checking the Salaf and the [Muslim]Brotherhood, I see that the Salaf are two groups, actually.

*The Scientific and Traditional, right?*

Yea. The Traditional people are more...rigid toward this topic. The Scientific, no, they are more open. Which is very...(laugh) encouraging. The Brotherhood, as I said, they go with the trend. Now, if the trend is against them, they will stop, they are ready to sacrifice their principles, and they have no problem with the [women’s] rights. Now if the trend is with the Salaf, and against the [women’s] rights, they will go with the trend. They will go against females.\(^\text{15}\)

One of the Salafists also thought it important to review the historical differences between them and other Islamists in politics:

If you look back to history, since [the] 1920s in the last century, there is always Salaf and *Ikhwan*.\(^\text{16}\) They are different schools. We concentrate more on the religious issues. They concentrate more on the political issues. We don’t consider ourselves as a party. We are a religious group. There are sometimes a lot of differences between ourselves on predicting, how to understand Islam. They are like a party. Very well organized...they have this organization covering all the Muslim world. They have branches in every Muslim country. We don’t have this. We are a school, trying to find this school in every country, but we don’t have those bounds, administrative bounds, information bounds...between them.

You will find Salaf in India, you will find Salaf in Morocco, but not administrative, financial bonds with Kuwait with, for example, Sudan, no. But we have the same Islamic schools way back since [Prophet] Mohammed and his friends. Then came the age of Ahmed al Hanbal,...then the age of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in Saudi Arabia,...so our school is very old. [The Muslim Brotherhood] Islamic school [of thought] started in 1924 by Mr. Hassan al-Banna, who was a very good man. They, for example, in some countries, gather Sufis, and also other sects. But see in Salaf, or our group, it’s only Salaf, we don’t take other groups, or mystics, or other sects. We also insist that we represent the pure Islam.\(^\text{17}\)
So we see that Islamists of today are winning elections because they come from a wide spectrum of ideological and social backgrounds that incorporate an Islamic worldview. In Kuwait, ideological differences among political Islamists are largely obscured by a common enemy—the secular Liberal agenda. And yet besides ideology and politics, we must understand the real social demographic shifts that also add to the Islamist ballot box.

**Political Islam and Democratic Transitions in Kuwait**

The history of political Islam in Kuwait continues to develop. Accompanying demographic shifts that shifted the balance of popular sentiment toward Islamist sensibilities, after the Iranian revolution of 1979 and after the perceived failures of Arab Nationalism in Egypt, political Islam spread in various forms in various sectarian fashions all throughout the Middle East. Some forms include the Muslim Brotherhood out of the Sunni school of thought while others come out of Iran’s Hezbollah Shia movement. Added to the mix is that Kuwait’s parliament has shared a balance of power with the ruling family since 1962. In the late 1970s, Kuwait’s ruling family was at a crossroads to consolidate its power within the parliament:

And so you have a new political leadership. And you have political Islam.

The ruling family [thinks]: what to do? You have two options: Either help Liberalism, Liberals who start to educate young Kuwaitis. Or . . . help the Islamists.

The Liberals wanted [many] reforms. They wanted free education, less government control, free economy, freedom [in the] press, freedom everything . . . human rights . . . all this . . . was a lot of work—and a lot of headache for [the] government. So they all[ied] themselves with the National Assembly and political Islam. Thinking they could control them, be under their hand, but look at them—they have their own agenda. They don’t [just] want a seat in parliament, I mean . . . just two or three ministries . . . They want their organization to flourish.  

Some politically Islamist groups advocated the use of violent means for social change while others did not. The heavy hand of government regulation of political parties in Kuwait (where political parties are still illegal) served to quell any violent sectarian uprisings. The Iraqi invasion of 1990 dealt the final blow to a belief in Pan-Arabism in Kuwait, and some scholars have cited this period as the beginning.
of both an eager Westernization and a simultaneous reengagement of political Islamism. With Islamist sentiments entrenched in the Kuwait National Assembly, an initial government proposal for women’s political rights in 1999 was rejected by the all-male parliament—Liberals and Islamists. One political science professor emphasizes this point in his account of the history of Islam and politics when it comes to women’s rights in Kuwait:

Well religion always plays a role [in the discussion of women’s rights], but how, what is the text of the role that religion is playing is the important part. There are still some Islamic groups who say that women should not be put in this political situation. And just to remind you, there was in 1999 a change of the election law which was rejected by parliament. Well, the idea it has always been that it was the Islamists. It was not the Islamists. It lost by two votes and the two votes just abstained, and the two votes that abstained were supporters of women rights. So it wasn’t like that [Islamists alone who blocked the legislation], and people just take this at face value and they just don’t go into the details. And at that time the government itself—not the Islamists—was divided. And some government ministers were playing against it. So it’s not really a situation as simple as it looks. Women’s political rights has always been a political issue, not a religious issue, and the Islamists come and go and play with it. They have a stand and then they…like you know, a mainstream major Islamist political party like the Muslim Brotherhood, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, they say that they are against it but they supported it! And when they saw it coming, they announced they were against it for social reasons, not for religious reasons. While there are some Salafis and others who remain on the same track by saying, no, it gives women a general mandate and this is not acceptable by Islam and they continue the same line. While the Islamist group like the Muslim Brotherhood, they changed their mind. They changed their mind just to allow themselves if the law was passed (and they were sure that it would pass), nobody would come to them [saying] that this should not happen because this is anti-Islamic. Now everybody who said it was anti-Islamic, they are working with it! So this is politics as anywhere else.

After women were granted their political rights by the government in 2005, both political Islamists and Liberals had to battle popular stereotypes to gain the women’s vote. While Islamists battled the popular notion that they were against women’s political rights and moved ahead with support for women’s right to vote, Liberal and Secular women activists came across as divisive, individualistic, unorganized, and out-of-touch. Instead of emphasizing their individuality
as political actors, women candidates in the first elections of 2006 were criticized for working against each other for political power instead of supporting each other. Their individual efforts to fund and raise campaign support further alienated many women candidates, who by education and economic status appeared out of touch with the average Kuwaiti woman. One Liberal Kuwaiti activist delineates some of the reasons that, in her opinion, no women won seats in their first election:

There were like 32 women candidates, I honestly didn’t think any of them would have made a great candidate. First of all, they were not supported by any political parties. If you want to make it to power, in any country, Kuwait is not an exception, . . . you need to have political backing.

. . . I think a lot of the women were not in tune to the Kuwaiti beat. They just weren’t in tune. I remember talking to this one woman candidate. The biggest issue in the elections last year was electoral district reform . . . This [one] woman [candidate] said “No, there’s no need, the system is fine.”

And I was so shocked! I thought, is this woman serious? We’re talking about an educated woman who actually thought she would make it to power by saying we do not need to change the system. “25 electoral districts is fine. Why should we change it? We have bigger problems, let’s work on health care.” And I just thought it was so politically naive of her! And to say it with such conviction! She lost my vote. I didn’t vote for her. And I mean, I wasn’t gonna vote [for her] just because she was a woman, I mean, I’m sorry . . . I have a duty towards my country as well. Yes, I am a feminist, but I’m also a Kuwaiti. I’m gonna try to put a good person in power, regardless if they’re a man or woman. I voted for the person who spoke for electoral district reform. So, this is the kind of political naiveté that I’m telling you, about the political women candidates. They’re not bad people. They’re all intelligent, highly educated, highly qualified, professional women—they’re just not politicians. And if you want to make it to power, you have to play the political game. 22

In addition, Liberal activists had to contend with the readiness with which Islamist politicians incorporated women into their fold, which included giving them access to political resources, or at least their valuable time and attention.

No, I really think that you know, the big Liberal parties in Kuwait . . . We should have put their money where their mouth is . . . ? Or whatever that saying is? And support just one female candidate! They’re Liberal,
they’re supposed to be pro-women. I’m sure there’s a place for one competent female candidate... They have to get over this element of fear that, you know, we’ve never seen a woman’s performance in parliament before, so I’d rather run with a man whose performance I know, I mean... new [male] candidates. Nobody’s ever seen their performance either.

So forget the gender issue, and just go for someone who you think will be able to represent! That’s it.  

So while Islamists may have gotten an international reputation for being against women in politics altogether, in Kuwait both Islamists and Liberals had reasons to fight for the new women’s vote. So we can observe recent Islamist campaign efforts to see how Islamists have gained popularity in the Kuwaiti polls. But undergirding their recent popularity are some fundamental societal demographic shifts and cultural traditions that benefit political Islam in Kuwait.

**Demographic Shifts in Kuwaiti Society**

Another reason for the popularity of Islamists in Kuwait is attributed to the demographic shifts of rural bedouins to urban centers. What started out as a migratory quest for new opportunities in work and education became a new generation of Kuwaiti students, government workers, and voters with traditional, conservative cultures of a bedouin upbringing.

Under British rule, Kuwait began to see the powerful, tax paying merchant class as rivals for power. They were economic elites and university educated, and demanded political representation, which threatened an authoritarian agenda for political leadership. At the time of Kuwait’s first parliamentary elections after gaining independence from Great Britain in 1961, the royal family foresaw the need to combat the excessive merchant influence in politics and instituted programs to bring in Kuwaitis from rural bedouin backgrounds in to the urban workforce who were later expected to become loyal government partisans.

In 1960, we have a very enlightened ruling emir (Sheikh Abdulla Salem). So they started a new constitution, which started Kuwait towards democracy. The royal family discovered after 1960 [during the] first election, that the majority of [the] member[s] of parliament were [far more] from the merchant class which constituted the position of the parties. At that time, in Kuwait [they were] Arab Nationalist.
So the government...thought naturalization of [the] *bedouin* would...help the royal family against the merchant class. Especially *bedouin* Arabs...

They were poor, illiterate, [but] all of them managed to be employed in the army and police force because they were loyal to the royal family. What happened? The children of those bedouins started going to school. They became (slowly, gradually) very critical of the government. Because they saw the economic gap that comes between them and the merchant class. The merchant class (still until today), they come for market, start market, and control big companies, banks, companies...everything—[still] until today.24

As many points in history, the unintended consequences of government incentives to encourage bedouin integration in to the urban centers was a convergence of contrasting ethnic cultures that continues to shape political debates in Kuwait today. The influence of tribal bedouin culture on the social conservatism of Kuwaiti politics is reinforced by one Liberal women’s rights activist:

Here’s the thing in Kuwait. Recently in the past twenty or so years, there has been a major rise in the bedouin population of Kuwait. *Major* rise. I mean, they would have, Kuwaiti educated families would have maybe what, four to five kids?25 They’d have ten. You know, you cannot compete with a man who has ten kids and teaches them to be just like him, okay? Bedouins tend to be not as educated as the rest of...as urbanized Kuwaitis. They tend to be more conservative. And they...tend to...in a way, manipulate Islam in a way to take what they like and leave what they don’t like. And that makes it really easy for Islamists to gain popularity among them. When in terms of urbanized Kuwaitis...they’re educated. They think. They know what the deal is. And they understand that Islam is a lifestyle for us, but it may not necessarily be a political platform. With the bedouin conservative lifestyle, Islam found an amazing match and...I think honestly, Islamists sort of thrive off the bedouin community. I mean...they use them to build their constituencies, and that’s how they gain popularity. And with numbers there’s power. I mean that’s what politics is all about.26

Another male activist adds his perspective to the discussion of the importance of recognizing demographic shifts and their influence on the acceptance of women in politics:

See, two things. You know, Kuwait...the society in Kuwait, we have different thinking, different origins. We have tribal origins, and these...have been affected by the manners and...social effect from
their tribes. And you know, women, especially in the tribes, in fact, they don’t have any rights, not [just] political rights—any rights. They have to stay in their tents, then, just doing cookies, raising the kids, nothing. And because of that, they are still having this kind of idea. The merchants are different because they are more civilized. Merchants went to different areas in the globe. Interacted with different civilizations there and because of that, they took this kind of civilization here [to] Kuwait, and because of that, they wanted to apply the different kinds of political issues, and political thoughts that they saw there… Those people...(the Merchants and the Liberals and the religious people who were from this sect—not from the tribal sect) they are good women and they are working a lot to get women to be in the front lines in the parliament and even in the government. But those people who were affected from the tribal manners and…thoughts, they are still having problems praising women to be in these kinds of political positions. 

[However,] I think there are a lot of changes now. Especially after passing the [women’s political rights] law. You may see that this is a very small percentage of women that understand their rights, but I think this is increasing a lot. And during the previous year, we had an election for those…we have small open markets…jam‘aiya. You can see that there are women listed, (even in Jahra!) they…suggested their names for the elections, and this is…a good indication that there is an understanding of women’s rights even in Jahra. And I think ten years ago, if a woman put her name there in Jahra…it would be a big crime, heh? But since the reaction of the Jahra people for those two women who put their names for election in the jam‘aiya, didn’t show that they were angry, or whatever… I think this is a good indication that they are changing their minds, and within a span of five years, we’re going to see a lot of changes.28

Urbanized Kuwaitis characterize conservative bedouins as tribal and uneducated, much like a liberal New Yorker might depict a Southern Baptist farmer from small-town Texas. Secular Liberals depict political Islamists as manipulative of religion for political purposes but uncomfortably concede their reputation for being “morally” above board when it comes to allegations of corruption. The Liberal woman activist continues her analysis of the influence of this demographic shift and rise of bedouin culture into the arena of women’s political rights and how bedouin conservatism has undermined a Liberal political agenda for women’s political participation:

The Liberal Political parties….they’ve been very pro-women. They were out there rallying with us, they attend our lectures…and
they’ve been very cooperative. Surprisingly, we don’t have a problem recruiting men. We have a problem recruiting non-educated women. Non-educated, conservative women. Most of Kuwait’s Liberal men are probably pro-women. Most of them. It’s the women, it’s the bedouins, the ones that are not so educated, the ones that are not so exposed to the West. Traditional, conservative thinkers.

Well, in politics in general, women tend to vote conservative . . . and Kuwait is no different, so . . . With women joining men at the polls this year, we had the largest number of Islamists in the parliament ever. And that was actually one reason why prior to us getting the vote some [Liberal] men were resistant to women getting the vote.

We had a lot more Islamists win this year than they have won in the past. Having said that, a lot of the vote-buyers also got out. Cause women are more moral voters; they don’t take bribes easily, they vote with a conscience. So why? We did put in more Islamists in, [but] at least they were honest men. Granted, they may not be good for us, but—they are honest, decent people. [Laugh] Some of them.  

Practically, what the tribal connection means for aspiring women’s activists is that, instead of ignoring the cultural customs of their societies, they must work within the existing structures to further their causes.

You know, when you talk, really with people, you know . . . it’s good to have contact. Many of them, they didn’t come to the [women’s rights] lectures to see what you are offering. Most of the people, you know, they are waiting for the last day, and then they go and they think “oh, my husband said this is a good man . . .” or my brother, or somebody. And they take decisions as a group, you know. All the house. “Ok, we think we can vote for this one.” Why? “Because he was good, you know. He came when my father died. He came when my brother was sick in the hospital.”

The personal connection.

Exactly.  

Move of the bedouin background Kuwaitis to urban spaces also enabled them to obtain jobs after university graduation. Many times these jobs were provided by the government sector.

So where do the young bedouin go? To the bureaucracy. And who employs them? The government. So, gradually, those young Kuwaiti bedouin government [workers], they became young graduates, teachers, lawyers, engineers, you name it. So the government started to employ them, [it was a] very normal process. What happened? Those
young people started [their] political parties. In the [19]50s…they were influenced by Arab Nationalism.

Then after the 1967 defeat…Arab Nationalism…collapsed. So political Islam started…and they greatly influenced the bedouin Arabs of Kuwaiti society. Because they are simple people, they are very conservative people, and they thought this was their opportunity to rise to power. Through what? Popular elections. National Assembly. So, what do you have: the new marriage of political Islam, and the bedouin. So you have a new element. Bedouinization of Islam. “Bedouinization of Islam” means: in terms of Islam, according to the Wahhabi and the Salafi concept. Then it became the crisis of the merchant class (which was very enlightened, open-minded), and the bedouin element. This crisis started beginning when the bedouin became the majority of the National Assembly. Then they started to control…what they did control? [In] the government bureaucracy they are a majority and the National Assembly. So [the] merchant class…they are cornered now. Then what we said that “No, problem…that’s what the government wanted!”

The depiction of the bedouin Kuwaiti’s shift to power from a previously marginalized beginning is a powerful lesson to scholars of Islamist movements in politics. Not only are ideas important to carry social movements but so are also the people who carry them—their ethnic background and cultural origins. Besides rural and urban ethnic distinctions, in majority Muslim societies a cultural tradition of gender-segregated norms also influence the establishment of Islamic sensibilities. One such catalyst is the Kuwaiti tradition of male-only gatherings, or diwaniyas, discussed more in detail in later chapters.

**Islamist Ideas Matter**

One Salafi parliamentarian gives his account of why Islamists are winning—he believes the Islamist political agenda rescues Kuwaiti society from a future of decadent (in his view, Western) demise from within.

Our society is changing to the West[ern] values, and motherhood is suffering in Kuwait, almost all women in Kuwait bring nannies from India or the Philippines to take care of their children. The number of children in one family in Kuwait is usually five or seven or ten. So everybody is married in Kuwait. Maybe in the West most people are not married, they merely live together, and if they are married, they don’t have children, or one or two, that’s it. But here, we have very big families and they need to be taken care of. That’s why here in Kuwait,
we passed a law two years ago that women can stay at home and take care of children, and they can get half their salary.\textsuperscript{32}

I start to think about the demographics question again. Maybe the relatively large size of Islamist families also contributes to their majority composition in the population. Is it possible that conservatives are in fact outbreeding Moderates and Liberals?

We passed a law…that the judge must not bring about the divorce until they’ve tried to achieve reconciliation…This law was spreading before as a decree [from the Ministry of Justice in Kuwait], but now it is a law. But it helps only a maximum 30 percent of the cases.

\textit{Why is that?}

Because the society is changing. They are now more affected by the Western values. Financial independence of women, [this is] the first cause of the increasing number of divorces. She thinks she’s independent and she can live…she has a job and if there are children, the children will live with her by law in Kuwait until they become a certain age. So this is important because…[there are] a lot of effects now from the press and the TV and commercial channels…that [are] affecting our families.\textsuperscript{33}

Interestingly, Islamists do not deny a breakdown in their family-based society but blame an adoption of Western values and offer Islamic-based solutions to fix them. During my fieldwork in the Gulf, the proliferation of government-sponsored faith-based social welfare initiatives such as women’s clinics and family reconciliation centers were becoming more apparent. However, the details and comparative effectiveness of “faith-based” initiatives for social welfare may require a more systematic, empirical assessment. He continues:

I voted against the decree [for women’s political rights]. This is not a role for women in Kuwait. There is nothing against voting, but running for office…this is forbidden in Islam. Because in Islam, the very important thing is to preserve the family and taking the woman away from the family will have [a] bad effect on the family. And thirdly, suppose a woman work[s] in [the] office eight hours in one job and work[s] in politics, and of course she must have her own social life, what is going to be left for the family? Nothing!

I believe that every man or woman if he joins the parliament or the government, he must know that he will be away from the family long hours every day. Sometimes for months, traveling every week or most of the summer, and the children grow away from him. So taking also
the mothers from the children, from the homes, playing the same this role away from the family will have a very bad effect on the family. And maybe it’s difficult to explain it to you, but I will try.

Prophet Mohammed didn’t send any woman to be his minister. When he sent his minister to Heracles, who was ruling the Romans and Syrians and Yemen, to the Persians (who was ruled by a woman at that time), he didn’t send a woman, he sent a man. And he said, in prayer, for example, that men must be in the first rows and women must be in the last rows. And if you look to the prayer site in his mosque in Medina or in Mecca, you will see that the women were away from him. Also, he said that for a woman to pray in her house, she will be rewarded a hundred thousand times more than if she prayed “in my own mosque.”

I can explain why. Every Muslim dreams of praying in the Holy Mosque. But Prophet Mohammed said “for a woman to pray in her house is a hundred times more rewarding than for a woman to pray in my mosque,” why? That is an invitation from Prophet Mohammed for women to stick with the family as much as possible. There is no tradition against women working or praying in the mosque, but he always reminds us that houses or homes or families come first. For example, any Muslim woman can go to work, but she must bear in mind that this should be not against her family interests. She must have balance. And we in this session room, session building, must help her. For example, now we are trying to pass a law that . . . part-time jobs. To not affect the family, women can work four hours instead of eight hours. And women can retire and have a very good pension, social security, I mean, at a younger age than men. All those laws are to keep our religion and Sharia in this modern age.

Besides the bedouin demographic shift, it cannot be understated that Islamists are winning elections because of the popularity of their ideas and political agenda. A counter-hegemonic discourse that puts Islamic heritage on the offensive as a matter of honor against the “decadent, warmongering” Western presence in the Middle East will win popular sentiment, not only in prosperous and peaceful times, as Kuwait has enjoyed, but also in desperate and devastating times of social upheaval. The banner of political Islam carried by Salafists in Kuwait has persuaded masses because their ideas, rightly or wrongly, bring hope for the future in a sea of chaos. In exchange, women’s political rights seem like a small price to pay.

By teaching the traditions of Islam, we preserve families better than the West. And this is all proven by statistics—from the West itself! In the West you say “a woman’s work is never done” . . . Back when I was
studying [abroad, I heard this]… so I think it’s very important not to neglect the families. And we all… we, men, and women, also children go to politics… politics is just a part of life, it’s not all life. The family is the most important [part] of life. And the role of the family is, the role of… motherhood, you also have the same tradition as we do, that “the woman who rocks the cradle rocks the world.” Something like this. I think it’s important for any child that comes back from the school that he finds his mother in the house, taking off his clothes and telling him “what did you study today in the school?” and try to communicate with him and tell him what’s wrong, what’s right. Most of [Kuwaiti] children come to the house and he finds the Philippine nanny. That’s why we call them “remote control mothers.” They stay in the job, and she calls the house every 15 or 20 minutes… “How’s the baby, did you feed him? Did you change his diapers?” This is “remote-control” job, this is wrong.

Hypocrisy is very well-practiced in the West. The laws are different from what’s really practiced in the West. For example, the American Dollar, “In God we Trust” is written, very clearly… but their social life is away from God. They pass laws concerning homosexual marriage, and abortion and it’s against human nature, against human anatomy…

And they said well, “we are seculars and we believe in science.” I said ok, if you are secular and you believe in science… HIV virus is related to homosexuality. Why don’t you then forbid homosexuality because it spreads this virus? [Western scientists] said “we know, but it’s up to them [whether or not to practice homosexuality].” So these seculars are not scientific. They are hypocrites because we know exactly that this is a disease spread by this unnatural practice…

[And] their laws [regarding homosexuality] are changing every few years. But Islamic laws concerning those matters are by God. That’s why our main job is to persist our Islamic laws, our Islamic culture as long as we can. We know we are weak, we are not as strong as America who want to impose their values on us. I read this book by Huntington… Clash of Civilizations, I’m afraid this is true. I’m afraid what he said is believed by a lot of Western politicians. They want to impose their culture on us. And that’s why we are in the parliament here… to resist or to delay this as much as we can, as long as we can.

The last threshold for the political Islamists is the pathway toward incorporating women in their political aspirations. Some women pointed out that their involvement in their country’s politics emerged from a time of political crisis, whether war or invasion, in their country. Many looked on in astonishment at the black-robed masses of women who went out to demonstrate in the streets of Sanaa, Damascus, and Cairo during the recent wave of social revolutions throughout
the Middle East. As one Egyptian woman, speaking of the role that women played by protesting alongside men in Tahrir Square in Cairo to overturn longtime Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, said: “Women were in the square . . . they cannot go back.” So one test for political Islamists, in particular for Salafists, is their position of limited engagement of women in the public sphere. I asked the Salafi parliamentarian which cultural battles over women’s rights were worth fighting for, and he gave the following response:

Well . . . [pause]. Some laws make irreversible damage. Running women in Kuwait for the parliament, I think this is a very, very bad law. It will have irreversible damage on the family in Kuwait and also on Islamic laws. And soon Kuwait will suffer like Morocco and Tunis, from changing other laws in order to achieve the same Western ideas that women are not only equal to men, but must practice the same jobs. Now, a lot of pressure is being put on Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait also to drag us also to the same . . . not only bringing women to the parliament is the goal, no! A lot of laws . . . for example marriage and divorce law, personal status laws, maybe other laws will be changed, for example heritage laws. For example in Islam it is very clear. All Muslim countries have the same heritage law. Women inherit half of men. But according to Islam, men are responsible for the families, to support the families, not the woman. So this will be changed. They will inherit exactly like men, but then they will also have to support the family. This is the idea from Islam. In Islam, if I am poor and my wife is rich, I am responsible for supporting the family, not my wife. And if she wants to put something in the family, she is not obligated to do this. And also, for example, nationality law, maybe it will be changed. According to Kuwait law, anyone born to Kuwaiti father will have the Kuwaiti nationality, not from the mother. Maybe this will also be changed in the future.

*And is this more tied to Islamic value? Or…*

This nationality [issue] is not Islamic, it is up to every country to decide. But imagine, Kuwait is a very small country, and maybe every year thousands by this law will have the Kuwait nationality and Kuwait’s soil will be changed. I know that thousands of Iraqis married to Kuwaitis, thousands of Iranians married to Kuwaitis, and if this law passed, by the same headlines, same that “men are equal, so why men give their nationality to their children, women Kuwaitis can’t give to their children, so they must be equal.” Then after 15 years, no Kuwait anymore. Switched Iranians, Iraqis, Syrians, but no Kuwait. And this is exactly what happened in the West. Margaret Thatcher, when she came to office in 1978 after Prime Minister Callaghan, one of her important policies was to put some kind of immigration law because
they suffered from a lot of immigrants. The last election in France, this was a very important issue in the election. So it’s important for every country, not only Kuwait.\textsuperscript{35}

Though this Kuwaiti Salafi parliamentarian was unequivocal on his personal reservations of incorporating women, at the political level, his group is having to adjust to the times:

My group will never . . . it is our belief that it is against our \textit{Sharia}. So we will never vote for a woman. But the women can vote . . .

\textit{Is there any organized effort to work with women’s groups that share your values? To train and teach women how to vote according to their values?}

Yes, they have weekly meetings and those meetings become very accelerated during election times. Lectures and meetings . . .

As we heard earlier from politically engaged Islamist women themselves, these women view themselves as more in touch with the public, since they not only look, talk, and dress like their constituents, but they are also living the realities of upwardly mobile, middle-class women who are balancing work and school, family and career responsibilities, and don’t necessarily have the time to campaign full-time. Even the fact that Salafi parliamentarians are making time in their busy schedules to meet with young Islamist women (and Western social scientists) speaks to the changes they are making. As one interviewee observed, even the most conservative Islamists are having to get with the program: “Either they participate, or they’re gonna lose. So, because of that you’re gonna see people from Salaf . . . women from Salaf, gonna come. Wearing \textit{niqab}, or without \textit{niqab}.”\textsuperscript{36}

What my conversation with Salafi parliamentarians, among the Kuwaiti elites shaping and influencing women’s rights in Kuwait, showed is the power of morality in politics, particularly for Islamic contexts. Not only are Islamist politicians intrinsically motivated, but they are also more persuasive when they feel justified in their politics by their Islamic beliefs. The challenge for traditionalist Islamists is to show how their policies of gender discrimination will keep them competitive as a nation should their economic fortunes change. As many other less-wealthy Muslim nations are working out, how can moral ideals of maintaining traditional family roles compete with the economic benefits of incorporating half of the workforce back into productivity? But as with the citizenship question, the Salafi politician is right that in the current global political system every nation has the sovereignty to decide such things for themselves.
The Islamist Approach—Religion Is Life

Aside from sociological factors underlying the fertile ground for Islamism in Kuwaiti politics, including demographic shifts and patriarchal cultural traditions, we see that Islamist ideology resonates deeply within popular Kuwaiti culture. An Islamist approach to politics is holistic. It is a religious worldview that infiltrates all areas of life. To repeat one of the HADAS ladies, the Islamist approach holds the belief that “there is no separation between politics and religion.”

And when it comes to politics, conservatives are in it to win. Gains in parliament and public opinion polls were the result of intense and strategic grassroots mobilization. When you have motivated pious women to cheer for Islamist candidates in droves, looking and talking to their mothers, fathers, and aunts from within their Islamic culture and tradition, is it any surprise they are perceived as the candidates closer to the public? Outside observers may be surprised at the innovations of the conservative Islamists to compete with their Liberal counterparts—including women’s groups taking “democratic votes” among themselves and voting for candidates who would oppose their right to vote in national elections, or conservative male candidates engaging Western women in debates and entertaining local women’s groups to gain their votes. Where women were not to be seen or heard a few years ago, the reality is that they are now valid constituents—and a good politician knows that every vote counts.

Instead of leaving women’s rights as a short-term stopover toward political rights, some Islamist women, like a large number of both Islamist and conservative men, saw the ineffectiveness of isolating women’s political rights from other systematic social concerns for women. Another Islamist women’s rights activist put it this way:

Not all women [voters] accepted the women candidates. They didn’t work on themselves [their image]. Women in Kuwait are very mature. So mature. They said: “We will support the best candidate, not because he is male, not because she is female.” This response was not known before.

Twenty [women] candidates running independently hurt their chances. They presented themselves as fighting for particular issues (like health, education, etc.) instead of addressing all the issues. This made them seem very narrow in their platform. Also as independents they didn’t have money for tents…they were not prepared.

In Kuwait’s maturing democracy, Islamist women’s rights activists insist on voting for issues, not genders. Interestingly, they are linking
women’s rights with human rights. Some strategies within the Islamist approach to social change include shaping modern institutions and developing a distinctive political identity. One way Islamists are gaining a foothold in politics is by *shaping modern institutions* and reprioritizing public funds.

I think it’s good in Muslim Countries, to have Ministry of Awqaf.\(^{39}\)

What is its most important contribution? Spreading Islam, understanding Islam. Also, you know ... Islamic trust. *Zakat* and trust. Trust, any Muslim can make a trust, and if he said not more than 30 percent is allowed. And if he made it into real estate, cash, or whatever, it will last forever and no one can touch it or take it. And every Islamic country sends, since the beginning of Islam, 14 centuries ago, there are trusts still going on until now. Especially in Mecca and Medina, and Egypt, and Morocco, and Syria. And this is one of the greatest things in Islam. My real estate, my building, I want to ... [keep] forever, and what he orders in his testament must be kept forever. For example, if we say my trust, and the revenue from my trust must be spent by the courts, it’s effective forever. No rulers, or governors, or any man can change it. For example, for education, or for health, and in Kuwait, since 1951, the late Abdulla Salem passed a law that all trusts must be under the government custody. In the past, my son would have been the governor of my trust, and his son, and so on, but now, [it is] the government.

Also, the charity, *zakat* [is] one of the jobs of the Ministry of Islamic Affairs.\(^{40}\)

Even in conservative societies such as Kuwait’s, the stated progressive goals of former bastions of conservatism, such as the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs, seem to acknowledge these social changes for women at the institutional level. Among the goals listed on the website for their strategic plan are the “expansion of the programs of social development relating to Women activities,” “comprehensive assessment of the women employment in the Ministry,” and “legal religious grounding of contemporary issues related to women.” Among what this Islamic government institution lists as “successful indicators” of “programs and activities directed to the family” are: “conducting assessment study of the experience of the women employment within 6 months from the starting date of the Plan,” “preparing three studies relating to the issues of the women and the family from the religious point of view within 6 months from the starting date of the Plan.”\(^{41}\) All of these goals seem quite inclusive of the opinions and needs of women, including extending them
opportunities for employment. The Awqaf Ministry also incorporates community outreach in their business plan, including: “communicating with effective institutions and personalities in the field of Women affairs,” “holding combined programs and activities with the parties concerned with women affairs,” “concluding cooperation agreements with the institutions concerned with women affairs,” and “holding four symposiums and dialogues with the leaders of the Islamic activities in the charitable societies.” Clearly, the fact that political Islamists are engaged with political authorities forces them to reach compromises at the institutional level. Instead of marginalizing women from religious affairs, they must learn to conform to the general political trend in the country, which is to incorporate women into all professional fields. In this way, despite personal reservations, political Islamists are becoming creative in the ways they incorporate women at the institutional levels, such as in the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs.

A second way Islamists are winning elections is by developing their distinct political identity. A reality in politics is developing a political strategy that distinguishes oneself from a political opponent. And with the popularity of political Islamists in Kuwait, the increasing field of Islamist candidates to choose from makes it important for the candidates to differentiate themselves within political Islamist movements. One functionary in the Kuwait National Assembly pointed out some of these internal differences among Kuwaiti Islamists:

The ICM [Islamic Constitutional Movement, or Muslim Brotherhood] is the most likely (to include women in the future on their lists). The Salafis are working with them (women), but so many women are involved and supporting the ICM. Also, there are the tribal motives for those that may not accept women as running candidates.

One political scientist observed the ease with which the political Islamists transitioned from being against women’s political rights to adapting to them as constituents:

I could see that both sides, especially Islamists have immediately changed gears and addressed women and they’ve created their own women’s committees. So there was no problem. And I always said that. This is a quite politicized society and you could see jargons and people talk about…and even those people who are against women voting, they just jumped on the wagon and that’s it. It’s not really a problem. Imagine, illusion, people think there is a serious position on this side, but when it comes to politics, it is politics as usual.
They want to talk about it [strategy to reach women voters] and now since women are in the voting political structure, I think they will not miss the opportunity, especially that women are more than men.\(^4^4\)

While prioritizing religious and political priorities over transient community concerns, the fact is that to win in politics, Islamists must contend with the modern realities of the community. One staff member of the Kuwaiti parliamentary committee for the Defense of Human Rights provided several key insights of how both political Liberals and political Islamists handled the emergence of women in politics.

*How are you addressing women voters now that women have gained the right to vote and run for political office?*

We were against this, but reality has enforced this change.

*What makes you more successful in attaining the majority of women’s votes?*

Liberals are too narrow in their campaign focus, and not as active. Islamic women’s organizations are more active, more organized. Also, Islamists are more committed to the program.

*So what exactly is your “program” or long-term strategy to address women’s issues?*

Well, we have two ways we are addressing women’s issues. There’s the Women’s Committee in the Parliament that is one and a half years old. In 1992 we thought about having a subgroup within the Human Rights Committee so as not to politicize the issue.

*What are some of the important issues facing women that you in the Human Rights Committee are trying to address?*

Having them attain all their civil and social rights; addressing family law and personal status laws, not just of their children; housing; security, like obtaining permanent residences for them; giving both the father and mother the ability to give nationality to their children (this involves changing the current law); and pass citizenship to children of Kuwaiti mothers regardless of being able to change the current law.

*So does your committee cooperate with the Women’s Committee and work together on these issues?*

We realize that by having a separate women’s committee, we were able to bring the Liberals in to address women’s issues, and by having a women’s subgroup within the Human Rights Committee, we were able to bring in the Islamists.\(^4^5\)

While Liberals and female candidates campaigned on the novelty of their presence, the Islamists were focused on holistic programs that
addressed their aptitude to tackle a variety of issues. One strategic approach was to listen to all the parties interested in the broader issue and find ways to incorporate their different interests, approaches, and ideologies.

**Kuwait’s Unique Pluralism in Politics**

In 1796, outgoing US president George Washington left office with a warning against political parties. Over 200 years later, the American political scene depends almost entirely on the mobilizing power of two dominant political parties for political candidate nominations. Interestingly, the government in Kuwait has also been leery of the potential evils of party politics, so much so that to this day, political parties are officially banned. In a part of the world where extreme antigovernment groups have a history of turning violent and mobilizing against the establishment (the Arab Spring revolutions are the most recent examples), one can understand the sensitivities against formalizing party politics in Kuwait. In addition, many anti-Islamic and even moderately religious reformers decry the influence that informal political organization, particularly Islamic groups, have on the voting public. However, the influences of sectarian and ideological divisions is easily identifiable and many—both political Liberals and Islamists—believe that legalizing political parties in Kuwait will facilitate women’s viability in a male-dominated political arena.

The opportunity to negotiate within a pluralistic society and the freedom to debate ideas in the media is unique to Kuwait and offers a case study in a democratic approach to Islamist politics. The Kuwaiti perspective offers its own advantages.

The obvious advantage and what makes Kuwait unique among the GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries is that educational reform started in the GCC in two places: in Kuwait and Bahrain. And by the 1950s we had the first group of women go study abroad. That is a major player! When you talk about educational reform, that is going to set the pace for what’s going on in your country. So that’s what makes Kuwait unique. Besides that, it’s geographical location. Our next door neighbors are Saudi Arabia and Iraq, and across the sea, Iran. I mean...Kuwait has been a battleground for a lot of different...Islamic and non-Islamic schools of thought. A lot of political intrigue. So our society has had to learn to practice political, social, and ethnic tolerance to survive. Do you understand what I mean? That makes you very politically savvy.
The other thing that Kuwait is absolutely unique in is our freedom of press. Any... I was at a lecture the other day, and the ex-head of a political body made this funny comment. He said “in Kuwait, people say it’s a very democratic country because we get to say whatever you want, but the government gets to do whatever it wants!” So... and when you have an open and free press, and you can go after anyone in Kuwait except for the emir. So there’s no protection for government members, there’s no protection for... actually MPs are more protected than government members. Because you can’t pursue an MP when he’s an MP... You can’t, you know, have... any sort of... legislation against him. I mean, you can wait until he finishes being an MP... but there’s no way to prosecute him as an MP. So... That gives you a lot of freedom to express your views, you know, if you have a problem with somebody else you can say it. But you also have to say it in this... air of tolerance.47

Clearly, as we see regional differences in the strategies and fates of the populist revolutions throughout the Middle East, we would do well to analyze the methods and strategies of Islamic activists who know how to work within their culture and political system to selectively address systematic grievances that disempower women. In this case, Kuwaiti women had the opportunity to run competitively as individuals in political campaigns and were criticized for appearing to work against one another in the process. This criticism was not completely grounded, since we see how inexperience in political life could have disadvantaged many of the candidates. We need only to look at the success of female candidates several years later when four of them gained seats in the Kuwaiti parliament to see the advantage of increasing political experience.

**Why Islamists Are Winning—Liberal Perspectives**

With so much global criticism and suspicion of political Islamists, it is no wonder that Kuwaiti Islamists face critics within their own political field. One Liberal activist had criticisms of both sides when it comes to women’s rights:

To be honest, Kuwaiti secularists are not 100% dedicated to women’s issues as their foremost important cause. Yes, they are liberal and they are pro-women, but they are not their priority.

Islamists, on the other hand, use their anti-women policies to seduce their constituents, who are mostly Islamist bedouins. Women
are easy to use as a doormat, than say, economic reform, or ending governmental corruption. Islamists just pretend to be doing their job at legislating in the National Assembly when they are working against granting women more rights, when in fact, they are merely escaping from the fact that they neither not have a serious political platform to follow, nor an economic reform agenda to implement.\textsuperscript{48}

The young activist recognizes that there are a few pointers that political Liberals could take from the efforts of the political Islamists:

Well, when it comes to Islamists, they will be willing to do whatever they need to do and they will manipulate whatever hadith they want in order to stay for them in power. If that means allowing women to drive, vote, work, they are going for it. They are masters...see Islam is like a...Islam is an institution that can be interpreted in several ways and the Islamist parties are wizards at manipulating the faith to match their political agenda. So when it comes to Islam as an institution, it is a respected and revered institution, but when you mix it with power, you kind of manipulate it. So I think the Islamist political parties...

So what’s their agenda?

The agenda’s political power! That’s it. If they need women, they’re going to vote for women. If they don’t need women, they’re not going to vote for women. And really, it’s not about morality, it’s just about political—I mean, they’re politicians! I mean we are all Muslims, but they’re politicians. And as for the Liberal parties, well, unfortunately really, they are really not so organized...They’re very open about it with women, but the Liberal parties...are aging. There’s not a lot of recruitment of young people. They need to do that. Islamists are always recruiting...I mean, they’re like an army! Mashallah! I mean, they’re so organized. We need to work on our own organization, we need to get our own house in order.\textsuperscript{49}

While Liberals recognize the many strengths of the Islamists, the Islamists are challenged to define their political platform beyond socially conservative issues such as requiring female public officials to veil, or maintain gender-segregated institutions. How will they improve the economy? Will they stand together with Liberals on issues such as citizenship for children born of mixed marriages with stateless Kuwaitis? Until Islamists unite with Liberals around some of the most pressing issues, they are likely to continue to face criticism of substance from voters outside their parties.
ISLAMISTS ARE WINNING ELECTIONS

FROM POPULIST REVOLUTIONS TO IDENTITY POLITICS

Sociologists Marty and Appleby wrote of Islamic resurgence as part of a worldwide social reaction toward religious fundamentalism. At the time they situated Iranian revolutionaries in the same volume as the Afghani Taliban, posing that the sociological umbrella of religious fundamentalism covered a large ground of the world where:

Masses of people living in formerly traditional societies experience profound personal and social dislocations as a result of rapid modernization and in the absence of mediating institutions capable of meeting the human needs created by these dislocations. ⁵⁰

What I observed about today’s Islamists in Kuwait, though not as extreme as the Iranian Hezbollah or the Afghani Taliban, demonstrates further proof to the argument that in times of economic and social uncertainty, a message of hope and social organization around religious traditions finds a welcome match in Islamist politics. Where politically engaged Islamists succeed over their radical jihadist counterparts is in being a pro-active force when permitted to participate actively in politics. Unlike the previously marginalized Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, the moderate Islamists of the Gulf, where allowed to engage with the state, have staved off violent extremism because of the fact that they have democratic outlets for their social and political activism.

Since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, Islamist parliamentarians, more than anyone, are concerned with an image of Islam that is tarnished by violent acts. However, instead of running from religion, as secularists do, politically engaged Islamists attempt to incorporate their religious principles in a way that reforms the image of Islam in the world, as well as addresses the underlying reasons for the violence—marginalized voices who cry for legitimacy. While reprehending the use of violence to spread their Islamic message, politically engaged Islamists still emphasize the fact that Muslims should not have to be apologetic about their faith. As one female Islamist pointed out:

Islamists are closer to the public—they represent and talk respectfully about Islam. In many ways they gain public trust more easily and they can talk better about their [practical] problems. Liberals, by the way they dress and they behave come across more out of touch with the average Kuwaiti. As you see in any society, the more elite, the less conservative. Here in Kuwait you can see that the higher class and social status, the less you see them wear hijab. ⁵¹
Political Players by All Legitimate Means

Interestingly, I found that not only did many political Islamists tend to consider Liberal or secular Muslims their opposition, but they also considered violent jihadists, or radical religious Muslims who would espouse terrorism as a tactic for their political agenda, as an enemy just as dangerous and cancerous to their societies. I found this helpful to my theory of legitimate authority and its application to Islamic feminism, in that, political Islamists who seek to be politically engaged in whatever form of government is present in their country, distinguish themselves from Islamic radicals, fundamentalists, or religious terrorists, precisely because they are willing to work within the legitimate sources of authority and political structures that have been granted to them by their local governments. Not only was a recognition of the legitimacy of the local political authorities important to political Islamists, but it may also be the critical marker that separates them and their framework for action from other false Islamist leaders who would not respect the human rights of others under their local laws.

A theory of legitimate authority ties in past research with current findings of Islamist activism and can be used beyond discussions of women’s rights. However, it is important to note that the theory distinguishes politically engaged Islamists from jihadist radicals. According to social scientists, religious fundamentalists can be characterized by a reactivity against secularism and other modern ideologies, selectivity about the use of technology and other points of dispute within their tradition, duality of absolute truths and the delineation of good versus evil, authoritative deference to a literal interpretation of scriptures and adherence to what they term as “God’s law” versus “man’s law,” and an apocalyptic teleology. In this case, I distinguish politically engaged Islamists in Kuwait from radical jihadists who tend to isolate themselves from government, universities, or other modern cultural institutions for fear of compromising their beliefs. I realize that many “moderate” Muslims may be afraid to speak against radical jihadists for a lack of terminology to distinguish themselves as believing, practicing Muslims, from violent Muslim jihadists, while maintaining their own Muslim integrity. Even Muslims in minority contexts, such as Muslim women in North America and in Europe find themselves in a struggle to live out their faith but also to blend into the societies they have adopted as home. One commentator wrote about this
struggle in an essay titled, “Why I Am Not a Moderate Muslim.”
A poignant part of the essay explains her dilemma:

In the aftermath of September 11, much has been said about the need for “moderate Muslims.” But to be a “moderate” Muslim also implies that Osama bin Laden and Co. must represent the pinnacle of orthodoxy; that a criterion of orthodox Islam somehow inherently entails violence; and, consequently, that if I espouse peace, I am not adhering to my full religious duties.

I refuse to live as a “moderate” Muslim if its side effect is an unintentional admission that suicide bombing is a religious obligation for the orthodox faithful. True orthodoxy is simply the attempt to adhere piously to a religion’s tenets.  

Instead of a support system for violent and radical forms of Islam in majority Muslim countries, I found that there is actually a real struggle for politically engaged, democratic Islamists, if you will, to distance themselves from the radical extremists such as Al-Qaeda or the Taliban or Hezbollah and to establish themselves as legitimate players in the future of their governments. Now, after the wave of populist revolutions spreading across the Middle East and North Africa, the true mettle of organized Islamist politicians as legitimate political actors is being put to the test.

This struggle to distance themselves from the violent radical face of Islam has encouraged quasi-religious and quasi-government institutions to state their goals and objectives for social change very clearly. For example, Kuwait’s Ministry of Islamic Affairs Strategic Plan says that one of the main components of its plan is to adopt:

The motto of a “moderate people,” as moderation is the character of any Islamic religion. It means the moderate thinking and belief, moderate worshipping performance, moderate cultural origin and moderate moral behavior. In all these efforts, we confirm that so long as moderation prevails, the two abnormal trends (i.e. deviation and extremism) will disappear as moderation means straightforwardness.

Later, it states that regarding interactions with international development entities, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs:

Confirms refusal of extremism and fanaticism. Furthermore, it must deepen positive interaction with contemporary Culture while maintaining the main features of the Islamic entity. Moreover, this
approach concentrates on reinforcing the mission of the Ministry as the front of the active role of the State of Kuwait in supporting moderate Islamic Culture via its active effective existence in different international fields.  

Clearly, these stated goals support an institutional effort to prevent Islamic extremism, not encourage it. Thus, I am clarifying that when I speak of Islamists in this study, they are limited to nonviolent and politically engaged elites who justify their activism by the tenets of their faith. Though scientific research on violent jihadism is highly valuable and necessary, it is not the focus of this book.
I support a quota—not for the parliament, but to oblige parties. Party lists should be at least 30 percent women because they are disadvantaged in terms of money and support, and require more effort. I was surprised on my visit to the US [to see] that women in politics face the same disadvantages there. We need to support women so that we can convince [the general public] that women will bring strength.

—Kuwaiti female Islamist activist

A well-respected Kuwaiti leader sits me down in her majlis with a few of her friends and a generous array of sweet and savory snacks and tea. We begin by discussing the long struggle it took for her to get through her own doctoral program, because though she started out as a candidate at a prestigious British university, she was unable to find advisors there to support her work on Islamic-based political rights for women. She then moved to another European university and tried to complete her degree long distance while also raising her children in Kuwait. Again, she had issues working with her advisor who disagreed with her central thesis. She finally appealed to the head of the department and finally got her degree. What a struggle! She said, “But this is my issue, my struggle. How can I forsake it?” She wrote her first book about the social changes in Kuwait in the 1970s and how many Kuwaiti women started to take off their abayas and hijab.

They tried to be in their appearance and way of thinking like Liberal people, you see. My book was about this new culture in Kuwaiti society and about the culture in the future. [I predicted that] most Kuwaiti women, would [either] take off their abayas and hijab, or wear them more. [This book was written] like a kind of [social] analysis, you see.
Then, I thought that more of them would wear the Kuwaiti "hijab and abaya again [in the future]—and this is what really happened!²

My interviewee’s prediction is interesting considering the popularity of the wave of Liberal secular feminism among Kuwaiti elites of the early 1970s. At a time when it might have been popular to take off the abaya and hijab as vestiges of an old way of thinking (such as underwire bras and corsets of the United States in the 1960s), this female leader foresaw an inevitable “culture war” in Kuwaiti society—one akin to the US culture wars of the 1980s between religious conservatives and secular progressives. Who would win the culture war within the majority Muslim Middle East?

*And what made you predict this [culture war]?*

Because it was the beginning of Islamic [political] activities, and also it was around 1972 or 1971. Two [political] movements, different from each other [one Liberal, one Islamist]…which one of them would succeed in my, in Kuwaiti society? What is the vision for the future?

With the death of Egypt’s president Nasser in 1970, Anwar Sadat succeeded him to continue the vision of a Pan-Arab socialist (and secular) government. During postcolonial rule, many Arab states, such as Syria and Iraq, later adopted Egypt’s Arab socialist and nominally secular form of government in attempts to unite the region and fight the existence of the Jewish state of Israel, or what many Arabs prefer to term “occupied Palestine.” The success of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran offered Muslims an alternative to the secular state and a somewhat oppositional vision to the secular socialism of Nasser and Anwar Sadat. Islamic extremist military officers in Egypt ultimately assassinated secular and socialist Sadat in 1981. But as my interviewee points out, the culture war over Islam and secular feminism in the Middle East is too complex to be simplified into a dichotomy of “secular-Liberal” against “religious-conservatives.”

*Was there a specific reason that made you predict that women would remain more conservative?*

Conservative? [No, Kuwaiti women were] not [conservative] in their mind, [but] conservative perhaps in appearance. And my book [was] also about that, to tell people that I was the first [Kuwaiti woman] to wear this [points to her hijab and abaya] in Kuwait University by my own behavior, not forced by my parents, no.
By choosing freely of her own volition to wear an Islamic hijab and abaya at the university at a time when it was not popular in Kuwait, this Islamic feminist set a trend for the present thousands of Muslim women who wear their Islamic dress at institutions of higher studies all throughout the Middle East. I was struck as I looked at class photographs at Kuwait University of graduating classes from the 1970s to ones closer to present day, and there is an obvious and dramatic shift in popularity of women choosing to wear the Islamic veil and abaya now—in contrast to the secular feminism that disavowed that Islamic dress in their mother’s day.

For some everyday observers, the underlying reasons for the current popularity of the veil in Kuwait and in many other Islamic contexts is inexplicable. Therefore we take a look at the possible sociological explanations for the rise of the hijab, including its cultural capital, demographic shifts, global influences, and the incorporation of women into political activism.

The Cultural Capital of the Veil

Clearly, one advantage that politically Islamist activists have is their ability to utilize culturally pervasive and powerful images, such as the veil, to merge their interests with other populist grievances. Sociologists call this power behind the veil “cultural capital” that benefits a certain person or idea. Images from the crowded streets of Tahrir Square, in Cairo, Egypt, where thousands of protesters gathered to rush in a new era free from autocratic rule, showed women in black robes and veils merged with men. Whatever their particular motivations, the sea of black made a statement by standing and praying together with men. Now, if there are politically Liberal women in a crowd who just happen to be culturally or religiously modest, and choose to wear a veil, they would be more likely mistaken as Islamists, simply for their dress. In fact, the image of a woman protester being attacked by Egyptian police, ripping off her abaya and revealing that she wore a bright blue bra, became a symbol of the ruthless Egyptian state against an unexpected rival in the young, trendy, perhaps even, sexual—but cloaked in black—female protesters. Wearing black abayas gives women in the Middle East a convenient cloak of anonymity and the cultural capital to rally support out of social custom and tradition.

A Liberal Kuwaiti addresses this point:

Well, look, um. I’m a Muslim. It’s my duty to prevent harm, all right? Whether that harm is in a personal sphere, a community sphere, a public
sphere, and whether the harm is monetary, it’s physical, it’s... social, right? So... it’s our duty. And it’s our duty to give alms to the poor, it’s our duty as Muslims. Like zakat, right?

Um... it is very easy to designate yourself as part of a group by wearing a uniform. And what is the uniform of the Islamists or the Islamist parties? Short dishdashas for the man. Beard. You know, sometimes they wear a thick headdress. And for the woman it’s a black hijab, and what they call the Islamic abaya. Even though, you know, those forms of abayas didn’t exist at the time of the Prophet, so I don’t know what makes them Islamic abayas, right? So that’s the uniform! That’s like the communist uniform in [Mao] Tze Dong’s China. It’s a uniform. It’s a political signifier, right? But it also has this added uh... level of piety. Right? If you look at it just from a cognitive recognition standpoint of view, you see someone who’s dressed in slacks and a shirt, and you see someone next to them either in that... short dishdasha and a beard, or in an Islamic abaya and a veil, who are you gonna assume is more religious? Right? So I mean, that’s how we are, you know. We go for first impressions. 5

An Islamist woman argues for the social advantages of the veil in daily life in Kuwait:

Most of the people, they think when a woman put[s on] a hijab, they think she’s perfect, she didn’t do wrong. That’s why they get surprised when they see they are human, they have their faults and you know, even culture... They look to people with religion as an example. They are not, not everyone. But it gives an advantage... Even if you’re giving an advice, they will take it from a woman with hijab, because they think she knows everything. Maybe she doesn’t. But it gives an advantage. 6

The fact that a woman is veiled and carries cultural capital in her society is not the same as saying that she is progressive minded, that a woman must be veiled to be an Islamic feminist, or that men are precluded from such an identity. As stated earlier, I define Islamic feminist simply by the use of an ideological framework that places women’s rights within an Islamic dialogue, or framework. The case of Islamic feminists in majority Muslim contexts challenges the assumptions of Western feminist theorists and activists who have largely marginalized religious voices from feminist debates. The fact is that for the women of the Arabian Peninsula, whether in oil-rich states like Kuwait and Qatar, or poorer states like Yemen, women must bear multiple identities that give them the flexibility to negotiate for more rights while satisfying the demands of their culture.
Many might be surprised that instead of serving as a symbol of patriarchal oppression, many women are freely choosing to wear the veil. I was surprised to note the increasing number of women in headscarves in university class photos of today compared to those of the 1970s. But it became clear to me that the more interesting fact was that more women wearing veils were graduating from university. One Kuwaiti male professor observes the rise of popularity of the hijab among the female students in his classes:

Well, I just think people are more... leaning towards Islam[ists] than Liberal. In my courses, almost all my courses, I see (in the female sections) you see like 80, 85 percent wear hijab. Against the 20 or 15 percent who are not. Which gives an indication that they are more Islamic. You know... than the other mentalities. So I think the Kuwaiti society is more moderate, [but] more towards the Islamists than the Liberals.¹⁷

There are several sociological explanations for this. One is a demographic shift of bedouin-background Kuwaitis moving closer to urban areas and taking advantage of the public education system as a means of upward mobility. With a college education, male and female students from conservative, rural, bedouin, tribal backgrounds are more qualified for postgraduation employment in bureaucratic positions available all throughout the country. Better quality jobs and salaries enable previously marginalized groups to carry more income to their families and better meet the ever-increasing expectations of an urban consumer lifestyle (including better prospects for marriage). Even economics plays a factor.

Now, why do they wear the hijab? I don’t know whether this is in compliance with the wishes of their mothers and fathers, whether some of them have tribal backgrounds and that’s the conditions that the family would set that you have to dress up like this if you want to be going outside everyday and work in an atmosphere where there are teachers and men and the girl would make the concessions. Some of them like it because really, it is so inexpensive to dress up the Islamic way. You have maybe three, four black abayas and headgears, and you don’t have to worry about what matches what, okay? So it’s again, we come to people group because they don’t want to spend money on expensive clothing, they can spend the money on something else.⁸
Speaking of marriage prospects, many young women may choose to wear the hijab out of respect for family customs and traditions and as an inexpensive way to project their readiness for the responsibilities of married life. But simply wearing the hijab does not promise a happy marriage or preclude a divorce. One university professor made the following observations about her students:

You know, it’s just...socially, they think that a woman with *hijab* would probably be a better housewife. The marriage will hold better. Not that it *does*. You know, that’s still the general...what do you call it...idea. It is an idealistic thing that people hold in their head that if she’s wearing a *hijab* and this type of dress, then she is a person who is very serious about family values and keeping the marriage and pleasing the husband and being obedient, and doing all of her wonderful Islamic obligations towards her own children and her family. But from real experience, no, they’re just like any young woman. She would seek a divorce if it is an unhappy marriage. If the husband is not kind, if there’s no romance in her life, if there’s no money that’s coming in, if the marriage is ruining her career. You know, I have so many students who are *muthajibat* and they are divorced. And the reasons for their divorce is *no* different from the reasons of the woman who does not wear the veil. But you know, people go...with a certain perception. Not that the perception is well-founded in reality.  

Despite these negative cases, the belief that wearing the veil will bring blessings to a woman’s life holds power in Kuwaiti culture. Many young girls I spoke with expressed a sentiment akin to the fact that if they did not already wear the hijab, that they would at some point in the future—like a mark of growing up into adulthood. One thing I found surprising is that even some politically Liberal and generally secular-minded women spoke of wearing their veil as a way to “complete” their religion. One former female parliamentary candidate, a middle-aged woman who did not wear a veil when I met with her at her home, explained her own political relationship with the veil:

> It is not [up to] me to get it or not, it is from religion, but...[it does] not change my mentality...I like democracy...but I put [on the veil] for my religion. [To] complete my religion. But not [for increasing] my votes, or like this, no.  

This secular, Liberal, democratic, parliamentary candidate wears a hijab out of a sense of completing her religion, not because she is herself aligned with political Islamism. However, it is arguable that
as a cultural symbol, the veil also has clear advantages from a political perspective. As one interviewee put it: “It gives [an] advantage for women, if they wanted to run [for political office]. Maybe they think she is . . . credible. As long as she is religious, then her outside should reflect her inside.”

And yet like many women’s rights activists in the Middle East, a discussion surrounding the veil brings up feelings of frustration and disbelief. When there are so many important social issues facing women today, why focus on a piece of clothing? Another former parliamentary candidate believes that much of what Muslim women are accomplishing in the Middle East today is getting mired by a distracting focus on what in her opinion boils down to an individual choice:

In general, if you go to the community, you will see that there is a freedom of choice. The problem that we see in the media, they misinterpret or misunderstand, you know. There is a difference between what happened in Afghanistan [with the] Taliban, and Kuwaiti women. Big differences. We saw films [about it], and really, we hated it.

It’s unfair. Even the dresses, you know, these are not our dresses. Maybe . . . we see in our media women when she was hit, like in Saudi Arabia, she went to Oprah, and you know, what’s negative is published. There is nothing positive published. We wish to see something positive published in your newspapers, in your media.

. . . Oprah was in Kuwait . . . why didn’t [she] ask to interview some women in Kuwait who had accomplishments? Kuwait full of—go to Kuwait University where you will see full of women there! You know, with PhDs, master’s, and the stories. It’s not easy for Kuwaiti women to travel. Especially me. My husband had to resign twice. He had to put his career on hold till I finished my PhD. We have many stories like my story. I’m sure every professor there (female professor), she has the same story.

You know, there are many positive things to take from this society. Why to take the negative? You know. When we think of the media . . . it’s mean to us, really. Tell you the truth, you know, this is what we see.

So a discussion of the paradoxes of the veil and its relationship with Islamic feminism in Kuwait must mention the fact that Western stereotypes about the oppression of Muslim women must stop overshadowing the stories of empowered women in the Middle East.

Quantitative Views on the Veil

When I asked about the importance of the veil in Kuwaiti society in survey format, I began to appreciate the extent to which this
religious symbol is mostly interpreted by a respective cultural lens (see Figure 3.1).

Unlike Muslim women who veil in non-majority Muslim contexts in the West, for women in Kuwait, this part of their identity may be determined by their family and community as much as their individual beliefs. Yet most of the veiled women in the sample claimed that they chose to wear their veil because of their “personal religious faith.” When asked whether it was important for a woman to wear a veil in public places, the data from the World Values Survey (WVS) shows very clearly that the individual opinions of Muslim men and women is conditioned by the particular history of Islam and politics in each country (see Figure 3.2). For example, Iranians, where in their country there is a legal mandate for women to be veiled in public, show strong support for the veil. In Turkey, where political secularism is the norm, Turks express that it is not at all important for a woman to be veiled in public. The empirical evidence supports what many of my respondents told me about the importance of the veil in their own majority Muslim societies—at the macro-level, it is culturally conditioned.

Iran and Saudi Arabia are exceptions when it comes to legislating a mandatory veil. Media-targeted conflict zones such as in Iraq and Afghanistan may be populated by women wearing different kinds of veils, because it could serve them as a means of protection in a dangerous environment. However in Kuwait, I found an ideal case study in asking about the veil because of the variety of responses.
This is a response I got to a question about the veil from a male respondent:

The way Islam... bans or allows or gets freedom for women—it depends always on interpreting Islam. If you are the follower of people who are very conservative, you will explain it somehow; people who are fundamentalist explain it; people who are moderate would like to understand and allow women to participate in the social and political life would allow it and so on...

You have now people who voted for Islamists in Turkey, [so there] we have the Turkey experience, we have Sudanese experience, we have the Taliban, we have the Iranian [experience]... We have so many... and it’s not the same always. They are different. Of course you have general lines. About the veil, about this, about that. But the degree of tolerance and the points of stress are not the same in Kuwait.¹³

The fact that many Muslim women—most, in fact—continue to wear the Muslim veil in Kuwait is a paradox for many people. One does not have to wear a veil to be an Islamic feminist. Neither does not wearing a veil mean one is progressive about women’s rights. What I note here through the WVS data is that at the macro-level, Islam influences attitudes about the veil as a more desirable trait in women in some majority Muslim contexts. There are also cultural and familial
influences at the macro-level that condition Kuwaiti women to preserve the hijab as a symbol of Kuwaiti Muslim identity in a world that is increasingly globalized and that threatens to swallow up a Kuwaiti identity. As in any culture, it is important to recognize the macro-level influences that constrain an Islamic feminist’s individual choices and attitudes about the hijab.

**Veil Test Case**

The question of the veil was a hot topic in Kuwait after women got their political rights to vote and run for political office in 2005. Would female parliament ministers be required to wear the hijab as representatives of an Islamic nation? The legal regulation of the hijab, particularly for government ministers, was an important test of the extent of Islamist ideology and its relationship with the experiment of representative governance in Kuwait. The cultural and political importance of the veil in Kuwait came to a head in the case of then Minister of Education Nouriyah Al-Sabih. Although she was heckled by some Islamist parliamentarians as she was sworn in without hijab in 2007, there was not much consequence except to show that women would be allowed to serve the country without being made to wear the hijab against their will. One male political science professor points out how the hijab can in fact become a political marker, particularly for setting precedents for women in politics:

Well the first test was when the Minister of Education was appointed and she was not wearing *hijab*. And some members of parliament raised their voices against it and they said we will not allow it. And it passed without incident. She came and you know, all ministers will be de facto members of parliament when they are appointed, so they have to come to parliament…So when she was doing that, some Islamist members of parliament announced that they would block that and they would not allow it because this is against the law because the election law says that the *Sharia* considerations have to be observed for women…[the law was] too general.

So when she came in, only one member of parliament, (who is a loud voice anyway on all other issues)…he raised his voice. But the Education Minister went, and she said what she had to say and she didn’t pay attention to him, and that was that.¹⁴

Still, since that incident, two of four women elected by popular election to the parliament (in 2007) chose to wear the hijab. A third admitted to wearing the veil in conservative areas so that she could
reach potential voters during her campaign. I asked my interviewees, both men and women among the educated elite in Kuwait, if they felt that wearing the hijab had a political advantage?

Some think the veil gives a political advantage because of its reach with the majority of Kuwaiti women voters (who also wear hijab), or in particular settings, such as searching for employment in an Islamist organization. One male university professor points out that the politicization of the hijab in politics made the veil an issue at first, but that in his mind a female political candidate’s qualifications would win the day.

*Should the first woman that is elected in the parliament wear hijab or not wear hijab?*

Oh, because the Congress here is more controlled by the Islamists, it’s the biggest party [movement] now...it’s...like about 18 or 20 members in their party. This is why [it might be an issue]. But other than that...no, I guess, it’s equal opportunity for the ladies. I guess we have no problem. For me, at least. it makes no difference if she is wearing hijab or not.

*You treat her the same?*

Yea, I guess. As long as she is doing her job well.

*So it doesn’t convey that she’s more religious?*

[Pause]. No...I cannot say yes...no. I guess it’s...for me, you know...well, sometimes, thinking about it, is it a more religious signal to see a lady with a hijab or not? I guess, yea, maybe. But at the...in official places, it means for me nothing. I mean, I will not give more weight for a hijabed lady than an un-hijabed lady, it would be...like the Minister of Education, for example. It’s not that much an important variable. So I prefer Sabih to be [there] over any less-qualified lady who is wearing hijab.16

Those with Islamist worldviews go further by saying a woman who is qualified for political office and wears a hijab is more desirable, and yet in Kuwait’s experiment of an Islamist democracy, the first un-hijabed female minister was allowed to conduct herself as she chose. The freedom of choice in Kuwait regarding the hijab makes it unique among the Gulf states where social pressures, tradition, or personal preference influence more of the local women to wear the hijab and abaya. It is worth pointing out that the qualifications of the female political candidate are upheld by both Islamists and Liberals above her personal preference to wear the veil. And yet, the veil is still worn and upheld by a majority of Kuwaiti women.
Islamist Views on the Veil

The issue of the veil in majority Muslim societies is not unrelated to the discussion of women’s rights. As seen in Figure 3.3, a number of Kuwaitis look to the opinions of religious scholars to determine their political rights. The Muslim veil may be a controversial symbol in nonmajority Muslim contexts, such as in the United States or Europe, because of its recognizability as a Muslim symbol. But in a setting where the veil is a “normal outerwear,” to question the veil might seem silly. As one person put it, “Do I come to your country and ask why you wear blue jeans?”

But what may have largely been a cultural tradition is still for many people a symbol of either personal conversion or a broader allegiance to the community. For many Islamists, the veil is a requirement of their religion, but it also serves a sociological purpose by identifying those women that identify themselves publicly with their religion.

[For] our religion [it] is [a] must, wearing hijab. I think that... I just explain in my own words, it’s like “secure-looking”. It’s coming from inside. Give more respect, but not all kind of hijab, understand me?... It has to be a reflection of the inside. Because some women [are] wearing hijab, but from the inside, no. And some women [are] not wearing hijab, but the inside is so honest, and clean...
[The *hijab* has advantages] for everything, for me, it’s a kind of power. It’s like it comes . . . to be a respected woman. And if a woman, she is carrying all these characteristics and wearing *hijab* . . . it’s like the ideal woman. This is my point of view. But at the same time, it doesn’t mean I don’t respect a woman, if she is not wearing *hijab*, but still they have good manners, good personality, very intelligent woman, it doesn’t mean I don’t like her or I will not work with her because she is not wearing *hijab*.18

One Western convert to Islam believes the increased presentation of women wearing hijab in the media is a positive sign of the times for Muslim women:

I think it’s positive, because I think it brings the focus on women as people, not on their bodies or beauty. I don’t feel it is a symbol of oppression or subordination as is the view of many in the West, but rather a symbol of liberation from the pressures of the public eye on femininity, sexuality and beauty.19

Clearly, the veil has many meanings and significances for its wearer, but in a majority Muslim society, though it has many advantages, according to Islamists, in of itself it will not guarantee success in life or politics. She continues: “Hijab is not a political advantage for women, in of itself. People will see through a façade, so it is about a lifestyle, a holistic approach to all aspects of life.”

Another female Islamist women’s rights activist recognized the identity politics present in wearing hijab:

No . . . for a Kuwaiti? It’s a free choice to put *hijab* or not. But to the *bedouin*, it is their cultural living. In the past, they put [on] the *burqa*. Now they find it easy to wear it like this [*niqab*]. Especially the younger generation . . . But still it is a way of life, not [necessarily] because they are religious. Even now, sometimes some of the very conservative families, the daughters maybe just wear the *hijab* to go out freely, to gain trust from her family . . . it might not be about the appearance, it’s what’s in the inside. I say, I think it is the inside we should believe in, this [*hijab*] is to complete your personality, your beliefs.20

About the *hijab*, one of the ladies (O.W.) from the HADAS Islamist group said: “Maybe the one [female parliamentary candidate] who didn’t wear *hijab* . . . Maybe she’s better, or more professional . . . [It’s] not about *hijab* . . . [it’s about if] she will give the goals.”21 So with a cross section of opinions among politically engaged Islamists, the veil is an important symbol of a sincerely pious life. But when it comes to politics, they are not swayed by appearances alone.
Liberals on the Veil

When asked about the importance of the veil in their societies, political Liberals, most of them not wearing the hijab themselves, offered a different assessment than many of their Islamist counterparts. Instead of seeing the veil as a symbol of a personal, inner worldview, political Liberals often emphasize its use as a cultural and at times political marker, as it has for many Muslims in non-majority Muslim contexts. One Liberal female university professor who does not wear the hijab notes that for young Kuwaitis the veil often serves as an entrée into adulthood and professional life:

There might be a bit of [political] advantage for women who are more conservative, but—we were so relieved that Dr. . . . Mrs. Sabih, you know, did not oblige to wear the hijab going into the parliament because she made a statement. Had she put the hijab on, none of us would have been able to get into the parliament without hijab. So she made a statement, and that’s new hope. “No, you’re not gonna control that.” I think, I believe that women without hijab, without the conservative look, would be able to make it to the parliament, I would have to believe in that. If it’s easier for conservative women? Yes! As it is for conservative men. It is easier. And I know a lot of people—a lot of my students who just graduated—just grew a beard and shortened the dishdasha, and when I, you know, have that question mark on my face, they’re like: “It makes our life easier. We get work down in the ministry. We get hired for jobs.” And it’s true! That’s the situation.

[In Kuwait] It is a free choice legally, but there is a lot of social pressure. It all depends. Like I don’t see a social pressure in my family, at all. Maybe some distant parts of the family, yes. But my immediate family? No, no pressure at all. Totally accepted. But you see, the norm now is the abaya, hijab, veiled women, not the other way around. Yes, a lot of people do it because of social pressure—because you want to fit in. You know, because you want to feel like part of the society. You don’t want to be an outsider. This doesn’t mean that we don’t have, I mean a lot of women are not wearing hijab in Kuwait. But I don’t think they’re the majority, no.

Another young Liberal added her thoughts about the veil, how it is a matter of individual choice but at the same time also serves as a political symbol for traditionalists regarding women’s roles and public responsibilities in a so-called Islamic society:

Well, honestly. Hijab in Kuwait is not a big deal. Because . . . [for example] My mom. My mom is extremely liberal and she wears hijab.
I don’t. So with us it’s more cultural. First of all, in Kuwait, most women do it by choice. The vast majority of women wear it by choice. Nobody does it because they’re forced by their husband or their father. That’s a little different from Muslims in the West that are sometimes forced by their families in order to promote a certain cultural aspect, or in order to hold on to their national identity. So it’s not like—*hijab* in Kuwait is not by all means like *hijab* in France, where it’s politicized. Or even *hijab* in Turkey. Or with American Muslim converts. Honestly with us, it’s neither here nor there. You want to wear it, fine. You don’t want to wear it, that’s also fine. The only time, the closest time we ever got to a *hijab* controversy in Kuwait was when Dr. Nouriya Sabih who was the Minister of Education, she refused to wear it [in the Parliament].

The traditionalists said she should wear it because the amendment that allowed women to vote in Kuwait and run for power provided that they follow the Islamic regulations. It didn’t say what the Islamic regulations are. So, and honestly, it was something the government just put there to shut the Islamists up. And so, Nouriya Sabih was a test case by going in and…I mean, Massouma Mubarak already wears *hijab*, so there you go. And Mubarak’s extremely Liberal, by the way. And Nouriya Sabih was, you know, she doesn’t want to wear a *hijab*, so let’s see—is she gonna do it? Is she not? It was kind of controversial. All the columnists were telling her either ‘do it’ or ‘don’t do it’…she didn’t do it. And that was the only *hijab* controversy we had in Kuwait.

And what happens is the Islamic parties actually asked her to wear it. They did it with a paper, they went up to her and they said “you should wear it. You are a role model for Kuwait’s teachers and young women, you should wear it because you have to be a good role model.” Which was absolutely ridiculous! If a Kuwaiti girl is gonna wear *hijab*, she’s gonna wear it regardless what her dad says, if she’s not gonna wear it, she’s not gonna wear it regardless of what her dad says. My mom wore the *hijab*, and my dad didn’t like it. If I decide to wear the *hijab* in three, four year’s time, I can *tell* you my husband won’t like it! It’s just one of those things that’s just your own choice. You do it out of your own personal religious convictions, and never to make a statement. Very, very rarely do you do it to make a statement here.

**Well with Nouriya Sabih, do you think not wearing it was also a statement?**

Umm…I think with her not wearing it…it was proving herself. I mean, she’s a grandmother! The woman is well over 50! Why the heck should she be asked to do anything? These Islamists were probably her students when she was a teacher! It’s—the audacity of them to even demand that she would wear it! And, you know, she’s a well-groomed, conservative, respectable woman, she wears respectable
clothes. Why should she be asked to be more conservative? It’s just ridiculous! You would think this is what women should look like? Who are you to decide what role models look like? There are a million and one Kuwaiti women that don’t wear hijab. Are you gonna ask them to wear hijab? It was really a dangerous trend. Once the Islamists start to get into our wardrobe—that’s something you don’t want to set. And bravo to Nouriya Sabih for not giving in to them.26

So clearly, in Kuwait, where the majority Muslim culture takes the veil for granted, the political nature of the veil seems overblown. There was an attempt by political Islamists to gain a bigger share of cultural capital by claiming the veil as a macro-level symbol of Islamist political dominance, but in the test case of Nouriyah Sabih, they did not succeed.

A False Consciousness?

The question behind the paradoxical reality that most Muslim women in majority Muslim contexts continue to wear the veil is—are women unconsciously subverting their feminist goals by conforming to patriarchal structures? In Marxist theory terms, are these women under a false consciousness? Well, yes and no. Some sociologists may choose to dismiss Islamic feminism as a mere “false-consciousness” by saying that an acquiescence to the status quo is simply a product of cultural brainwashing. Indeed, among political Liberals, there is a belief that Islamist women may be unwittingly reproducing patriarchal norms out of a combination of poor education, tribal bedouin culture, and a blind obedience to fundamental Islamists.

Though it is true that demographic changes, particularly a migration of rural bedouin tribes to the urban centers in Kuwait, has increased the popularity of Islamists in politics, I believe a simple dismissal of the entire enterprise of a thoughtful feminism within moderate Islamism is without merit. Instead of acquiescing quietly to the status quo, many of these Islamic feminists are pursuing their higher education, becoming successful in fields of business and education, and are picking their battles with political, religious, and cultural authorities selectively to achieve their long-term goals. For example, the experience of the Kuwaiti “culture warrior” at the opening of the chapter points to an important observation about the dynamics of women entering previously all-male arenas, such as politics. Women are maligned by some male activists for making their gender a divisive issue, but then when they looked for practical political and
institutional support from the Liberal male candidates, they did not find the support they had hoped for.

Many, many things, I have learned. I have learned . . . how people in Kuwait are conservative in their mind despite their Liberal [appearance], and in their speech, and [though] their speech was about supporting women’s political rights . . . practically? [Laugh] They are opposed [to women’s rights]. That was the first important lesson because there were no [politically] Liberal men that supported any of the women parliamentary candidates [in the first election of 2006] and it was a hard lesson for me and for the other [women activist].

One Kuwaiti women’s rights activist with Islamist leanings describes her battle as a writer in an Islamic newspaper:

In my own case, I fought against being limited to write in the women’s section of an Islamic newspaper because I thought my article should go on the last page (the one that is most read). Why should my argument be limited to the women’s section of the newspaper? But then I realized that most of my experience was coming from particular experiences that women face, and I stopped resisting to write in the Women’s section.

Since I don’t go to diwaniyas, how can I have access to information that men discuss there? But there are diwaniyas in all the world. Maybe in the US it is in a golf game, or in bars. Anywhere they discuss business, politics, and where important decisions are made.

This woman encapsulates an Islamic feminist mindset when she chooses to question the conservative constraints that limit her as a writer in the public eye and yet chooses to work within those constraints to make her voice heard. Instead of fighting the editors of the newspaper until she was dismissed from writing altogether, this Kuwaiti Islamist woman chose to see her position as still influential to the women who would be reading her segment of the newspaper and by affecting their minds through education would fight one front of the war for women’s rights. Instead of blindly accepting a submissive status, Islamic feminists choose their battles carefully. Fighting in the public for social or political rights requires a cultural change that is quietly disseminating through the hard work of these Islamic feminists in editorial newsrooms, corporate boardrooms, and now the halls of the Kuwaiti parliament. The work of Islamic feminists may result in the cultural change required to recognize the
value of having women and men share credit equally on any page of
the newspaper.

When at one time pants (specifically of blue-jean material) were
symbolic of a particular working class and male identity, do any
modern American women question their reasons for wearing blue
jeans as a feminist or proletarian statement? Similarly, many Muslim
women in a majority Muslim context, such as Kuwait’s where the
hijab accompanies a traditional dress, may wear the veil simply out of
larger structural, macro-level cultural influences. Yet when Muslim
women choose to deliberately reclaim their identities by taking on the
veil, they are taking a cultural symbol of gender differentiation and
turning it into a symbol of conscious empowerment. Instead of wear-
ing the veil out of a false-consciousness, many women are redefining
the veil as a powerful personal choice.

Strategies of Empowerment

An extension of the paradox that Muslim women are still choosing to
wear the veil is the fact that as they pursue higher education, they are
becoming leaders in fields of education, business, and, now, politics.
One former female parliamentary candidate addresses the discrep-
ancy of qualified female Kuwaiti graduates with their representation
in politics and business.

The main issue (which I think is very important)—the number of
women in this society is more than men. This is number one. The
second thing, the education [of] women, . . . we have 47,000 [female]holders of university degrees, and we have 20,000 men only, my dear.
And when you go to the cabinet, you will see in all the higher [posi-
tions] . . . when you go to the work, the leaders . . .

. . . It’s according to [data from] the Ministry of Planning, they
have a yearly report, there are only 19 women. Out of 400 plus jobs
in leadership. Why only 19? Half of the community is women! You
know, and most of the women are educated more than . . . men are . . . I
told you 20,000 and women 47,000. Come on! Please, be fair! Don’t
look at me as a woman or man. Be fair! You know, we need fairness
in this community. One minister, two ministers, [is] not enough! Not
enough! 29

Of course, the fact that women are excelling in their preparatory
courses does not mean that their success in education is translating
into monetary compensation or in terms of professional advancement.
However, this situation does point to the cultural lag of Kuwait’s
economy and society in incorporating their qualified and educated women into male-dominated fields such as politics.

What makes women fail in Kuwait is that when they represent themselves [politically], they started to speak like men. They used men’s speech in addressing women. So, it is always the man’s speech which is the masculine discourse.

I mean that if women want to address women, especially if they want to represent themselves, they have to speak to them in a different way. So, men shifted [their discourse]...because they are experienced [politicians]. They started to speak to women about their rights in housing, their rights in giving their husband their nationality, you see? Women have been speaking about these things for forty years! They [the men] just said, “yes, yes.” When it comes to real [votes], so we can go into the parliament and we can speak [publically] to, or start to make [legislative change] for their benefit, they [women voters] preferred the men. Because men [are] experienced in addressing people. We took training in how to address people, and the media...but we failed! Even [those] who work for women’s rights...[and are] experienced in this, they failed. [Because] they started to speak like men. They didn’t choose a new speech... (Don’t ask me what they should have said!), but they should start talking to women, or change the speech. Bring something new.\(^{30}\)

An Islamic feminist critique of the use of a “masculine” discourse in politics is interesting, because it points to the awareness of gender that is embedded into an Islamic culture and worldview that accepts separate spheres of influence for men and women. Islamic feminism critiques a Western model of gender equality and a competitive, individualistic approach to obtaining women’s rights. Instead, it argues for an approach that prioritizes the authority of the community that sticks together and values women by using their femininity and Islamic identity as strengths to bring them together and not to divide them. However, there are other ways that women support patriarchal structures to the detriment of their empowerment goals.

As many of the most puzzling sociological dilemmas often happen, it seems that when women voters act individually, they reinforce larger patriarchal structures that undermine them. In many ways by voting for male candidates, women voters did reinforce patriarchal structures by keeping women out of political leadership roles that would have enabled them to address concerns of substantive interest and systematic inequalities. In the example of the nascent Kuwaiti women’s suffrage experience, we see that it is votes, not the veil, that may keep women from gaining social and political equality.
Although secular approaches to advancing women’s rights have not “won the hearts and minds” of many conservative Muslims, Islamic feminists in Kuwait speak articulately about how they stand for their political and cultural rights while preserving their deeply held traditions and religious beliefs. The horizons they must approach and overcome are inherently self-defined by their culture and self-limited by their own social location. For example, the reticence of hiring women for jobs previously held only by men, such as a parliamentary candidate or economic advisor, has been mitigated by the fact that the women of the Arab Gulf are outperforming their male counterparts in terms of education and job performance.

Each country is negotiating boundaries for women in public spaces, business, education, and politics. This book highlights the case of Kuwaiti women entering politics as a means to a future where women in public leadership is the norm for their conservative Islamic society and social rights are fair to women. Notably, women are experimenting with strategies for political success and are already gaining parliamentary seats as in the 2009 elections. But first, it is worthwhile noting that women have already been successful in leading their communities and in businesses by pursuing their education and are now entering the political arena with similar strategies for empowerment.

Islamic Feminists are Leading in Their Communities

One distinctly Islamic feminist cultural argument recognizes the value of the group above individual excesses. In majority Muslim contexts, “the group” takes on a very important meaning. In particular, the concept of the ummah is essential to understanding an Islamic perspective on women’s rights. Slowly, women are expanding their presence through education as well as economics and are seen more and more as university professors, lawyers, doctors, and even in fields such as engineering. One Kuwaiti lawyer and parliamentary candidate from a rural bedouin tribal area points out the social roots of conservative attitudes against women that are present since the beginning stages of children’s education:

You see women need to learn more about their laws—what they have and what they need to do. I think women here in Kuwait are not interested to know what [is in] the law against them, and what [is in] the law [that is] with them.
Because in Kuwait we are not studying law in school. So... you know, human rights, or something like that laws, they should learn it in school, from when we are small children when we learn that these are our human rights and we should fight about it or fight against...[so that] they...they will grow up with this, but we have here in Kuwait we are not teaching the human rights, never. For that ladies, what they said, “what they will give, I will live [with it]”, you know?

Oh, “I will live with what they give me”? With what they give. So, it’s not enough! It’s not enough.31

One female advantage to Islamic feminists is their shared embodied experience of marginalization, systematic disadvantage, or injustice. As in every society, not just Muslim societies where gender segregation is the norm and where gendered stereotypes flourish, women have battled harassment to gain respect in the workplace.32 As Kuwaiti women exercise their political rights, they are gaining prominence for their opinions and their potential to lead in and speak for their communities. When asked who the major players are when speaking of women’s rights, one male professor and journalist responded this way:

Well, if you take the history [of Kuwait], and study the informal political groups, you’ll see that in the last four years, they are giving the female more important [positions and responsibilities]. For example, our representatives in the parliament, they have a specific day during the week to meet with females to discuss with them their political aspects of the country, I think...most of them—including the Islamists. Which means...it’s a good indication that they have taken the female into consideration for future voting. So this means that the female is...enforcing herself on the society. She’s giving her ideas, she’s...introducing her problems and what she’s wondering and what she’s looking for in terms of the society. Which is something that we didn’t hear about in the past.33

So Kuwaiti women are entering politics after being leaders in their communities, legitimating their presence as mothers, sisters, wives, professors, lawyers, businesswomen, and now political advocates.

Knowledge Is Power—Leading in Education and Business

Women in Kuwait make up about two-thirds of university graduates.34 The women of my interviews, conservative Islamist or Liberal, were
all quick to point out the distinction that Kuwaiti women had in the Gulf by having access to higher education since the 1960s. Though admittedly, Islamists were very much against women’s secular education in the beginning, they themselves have come to recognize the social significance that university-educated women have given to their country. First of all, it changed the social expectations for women. With access to local university education, women were given a chance to develop their academic and professional talents without having to overcome additional cultural and social hurdles to go abroad for their studies. Also, as women gained higher education, they were able to qualify for jobs previously held solely by men in professional fields such as engineering, medicine, and law. Interestingly, it is not only a formal education that Muslim women are becoming aware of, but it is also a shift in cultural understanding of their rights within Islam. The female Kuwaiti lawyer and former parliamentary candidate continues:

_Haram_ is what our Prophet said is _haram_. But what is traditional, we can change it. By our laws, by our ways, by how we teach our children, you know? Also that our children study in the school that women, she should work only in the house. Only! [Good] for cooking, for washing. You have to see that Islamic books, or Arabic books [only print]…like [see] “my mother cooking,” “my mother cleaning,” “I help my mother in the house”!

This is our laws, you know. And I think…the parliament, when they [make these] laws, I think they…they know that it’s a problem…but they didn’t stop [it or] move against this law—that means they agree…We say…if you didn’t say, “no, I don’t like this one,” [or]…shut your mouth about it, [that] means that you agree [with] this law. And…when I show you my children’s books you can see! Why you don’t see in the book, “my mother work in…like…a doctor, engineer,” “my mother [is a] teacher”…why, “my mother working in the house”? “My mother cooking,” “my mother preparing my bed”?35

By pursuing higher education and professional careers, women who want to have careers outside of the home are challenging limited stereotypes for women. A male university professor observes how women have become leaders in school, which is a precursor for their leadership possibilities in the workforce:

Let me give you some numbers: Kuwait University…in the college of Business Administration, 70 percent of the students are female,
and 30 percent are male. In the College of Education, you have 95 percent female, 5 percent male. College of Medicine, you have 60 percent female, 40 percent male. College of Engineering, you have 65 percent female, and 35 percent male. You know what they did in [the] College[s] of Medicine and Engineering? They told the people that for a female to come in, they have to have a GPA [of] more than 3.5 up to 4. For the male, they have to have just 3 up to 4. Why? Because, you know, from the history, they saw that most of the people who had the higher GPA were female, not male. This is an indication that female can do a lot better than male when they concentrate in their jobs. And because of that, I usually say that it is you know, kind of...inhumane not to give a woman the chances to be everywhere...but not in those places which I told you, in some tasks, that they cannot do their job. Not [so] in politics. In politics, they can do a lot better than men.36

With increased education, Kuwaiti women have started leading in business and have become more than one-third of the Kuwaiti workforce, the largest among its neighbors.37 Even Islamists are opening up spaces for women in business, through employment in gender-segregated Islamic banks.

I think that one of the things that you know, the Islamists or religion has done for women is through the establishing of the Islamic banks. Women are entering the field of economics. And engaging in also activities that is also based on...investment and making money and doing work with the stock market. Some of these Islamic groups, they want special sections just for women. And they also want women who can sit with a female client about getting a loan, doing this, doing that. So I think, you know...Islamic banks have opened a channel for those who want to enter the field of economics, but again, they don’t want the stigma associated with the regular banks, or Western-style banks.38

So ironically, policies of gender segregation in public life, as Kuwaiti Islamic tradition upholds, have benefitted women in business because of the demand for service workers who can reach and interact with the female clientele. As one example, with higher education, even Islamist women from conservative families can find employment after graduation in women-only Islamic banks.

**Now, Politics**

With success in education and business, women have become serious candidates for the political field. Though both Islamists and Liberals
were hurt by the lack of time to prepare their campaigns, many political Liberal women who were interested in running for parliament in Kuwait found themselves unprepared by not having invested in the social activism of their communities to the scale that the Islamist women had. One Liberal candidate describes how unprepared she felt when it came time to campaign in the first election:

I prepared to [run for] parliament in 2007, but you know, [when] the parliament [was dissolved in 2006], because of that we didn’t have any time, only one month, [to prepare] and we [faced] the election. But it [was a] very difficult experiment. Very difficult. Because we didn’t have time, only one month . . . we had no time to relate with the people. And very difficult because this was the first time [for] the women [exercising their political rights].

Clearly, this female candidate reflects on a main obstacle to her success—that she did not have time to promote her candidacy or, in her words, “relate with the people” in time for the elections. This was not the case for Islamist women who had already made a huge presence in the society through their charity work and were easily recognizable for their conservative outerwear (the black abayas and hijab). However, not only were Liberal candidates perceived to be more out of touch with the average Kuwaiti female, but also conservative mentalities predisposed women voters to vote against the new candidates. One female former parliamentary candidate pointed out such socially conservative mentalities, which disadvantaged women candidates at the polls:

The Kuwaiti woman took her political rights in May 16, 2005 and at that time the big party against them were the Islami[sts]. But unfortunately, when the elections came, most of the highest number of Islami[st political candidates] won the election, and were supported by women.

…There’s so many reasons from my point of view. Because, first of all, some of them, [were] still looking to give their votes to a man because still they don’t believe…that women they have their own right and it’s the time ready to participate. Two, maybe, from their point of view, none of the women whom they nominated at that time were well-qualified to give their vote. This is what so many told me.

…Maybe it’s an important reason, but still, we are a democratic country, and they use the elections in the university, in the social cooperations, in so many companies, government companies…and we have a number of women who are members of the board of those
companies. But still, vote and participate [is] the main objective for men, not for women. And if you take a look at like 99 percent from all union associations, unfortunately 90 percent of the board is men. Some have no women. So there should be a big push to let them start there.  

So clearly there were many lessons that female political candidates learned from their experiences from the first elections, and one important lesson was the need for a civic and political education for women voters themselves. If women were perceived as ill-prepared, why were some men able to pass that hurdle? Is it because the men had more political resources through their men’s only diwaniyas? Or because women indeed needed more political experience? It will be interesting to see whether women who run as Islamists, Liberals, or Independents will become more prominent players in Kuwaiti politics in the following years.

Some of the ways that Islamic feminists are raising awareness of women’s rights are by addressing the need for civic education and involving long-term strategies. Islamic feminists are reaching the hearts and minds of their societies wherever they can reach: through public education and in the privacy of their own homes. One former female parliamentary candidate shared her views on the importance of public education as a long-term strategy for women’s rights:

Because in the education, in the media also, still they put the woman in the corner, she is not very well understood in life. In the rights, or in the … you know, the education, the university and high school, most of the graduates [are] women. And they are [the ones] who take the high degrees—who are very clever! And this is not shown in the media.

This former parliamentary candidate highlights the influence of the media in shaping gender stereotypes and expectations. Although women have been succeeding in fields of education and business, the mediums of mass communication have not promoted these achievements. It is interesting, then, to consider the broader perceptions of outsiders into the lives of women in the Middle East through the lens of the available media that they receive. Instead of promoting Middle Eastern Muslim women as educated and empowered, they are reflected as submissive and unrecognized. Perhaps as more women enter the fields of media communications, more stories of successful and empowered women, still true to their Islamic traditions and values, will be recognized.
Battling the Misuse of Religion for Women’s Rights

The progressive shift in women’s roles in Kuwaiti society provided a scapegoat for many who were unhappy with the resulting social changes, particularly in the structure of the traditional Kuwaiti family. One of my interviewees noted:

This social change happened so fast. Within 40 years. What took the West 400 years to break [up] the family. With an oil-producing state, now [it’s] a problem. Other issues, you should follow on in the Gulf States: the divorce rate [is] one of the highest in the area!...For every three marriages, one divorce.

This change and other changes, as far as family and as far as women going to the [public] market, and all other changes...women going and getting more educated, more sophisticated, starting to go to work...this didn’t reach the [Islamic] fundamentalist areas in Kuwait. So they came out with the idea that the whole thing [was] because of—all the breaking away—because we are away from Islam. We should go back to Islam, and the whole problem would be solved. Even your personal problems, housing, finding job, getting higher income. The [solution] to the problem [is to] deal with the human being, [it has] nothing to do with Islam. 42

Another university professor documents a rise in religious fundamentalism and its effects on contemporary politics in Kuwait:

Maybe what started the whole religious wave was...I would say, starting from Reagan in the States who came you know from very conservative, fundamentalist ideas, and kind of encouraged that whole fundamental[ist] movement in the world, which...and then the...Revolution in Iran inspired the religious wave. And I believe most revolutions in the world start with very noble ideas. Despite the fact that I differ personally with the concepts in them. But they go to extremes. Because you know, leaders...are no more, and then next generations come with more fundamentalist ideas. And so you see this wave comin’ in. And there is no stronger weapon than religion to scare people. Right? If I come and I tell you that you’re gonna spend your eternal life in Hell if you don’t listen to me, then you would do anything to spare yourself that. And this is what's used against people, this is what’s used against women to turn women against themselves, you know. How do you convince women that she’s less than she should be, that she’s not worthy to participate in politics? Some women even believe that women are evil, or you know...conspiring...all these ideas. And they’re...convinced that
this truth is, of course, wrong use of religion. Or the misuse or the abuse of religion. And so...maybe tradition, maybe the fundamentalist movement. I would say also, even the comforts. The financial comforts of Kuwait that makes many women not aware...of why they really need their political rights. Because you know, when you have...the financial comforts, then you’re not going to be very eager to stand in the parliament and ask for your rights. Now, in the last ten years, more women started to suffer, and divorce rate is high, housing is a problem now, all of these issues. So then women started feeling “Hmm. Maybe we need someone to represent us. Maybe we really are suffering,” you know? And I think women are becoming more and more aware of this as we...advance in life.43

An additional facet to the empowerment strategies of Islamic feminists who advocate for women’s rights within Islam is to speak to the cultural sensibilities of Islam in the hearts and minds of the majority Muslim community. Speaking of women’s equality within Islam is a powerful segue into bringing in less educated (but religious) women into politics and social activism. The professor continues:

I think, till now, still, religion is guiding...a big percentage of women. And even when their husbands or their scholars come to them and tell them, “If you don’t vote for this man, you will do something wrong and God will punish you for that.” And those women are...you know, poor women, and they don’t have the idea of understanding of political issues,...but [are] simple women, and they believe this kind of thinking.

And because of that, I’m telling you, what we need from our active women here (especially on political issues), they have to work hard to let those women understand whatever those people are telling them is a lie. They have to understand Islam likes for them to have the best. Whoever that man or that woman is, if she can do good in her political position, they should vote for her or for him. Not for those people who, you know, their scholars, or their husbands, or their fathers, or their brothers are telling them to vote for.

One progressive religious scholar puts it this way:

I think Islam, and all the religions, they give women their right position, and we must understand that position and increase it in the society. And if we, believers, if we don’t do that, who will do that? It’s very related: faith and movements.

I think the strategy of all these things is that we must change the knowledge of the community.
The people must read the knowledge of Islam, knowledge of American society and the knowledge of the British society, all the knowledges. We must read them and see the good things and we must take and use them for the goodness of the society. The knowledge is very important because it is the background. If the database is not good or correct, everything in the [rest of the] experiment will be incorrect. They must have a good database for all the works we want to do in our society. The political works, and all these issues.44

Interestingly, even male religious scholars and politicians who believe in women’s equality in Islam are advocating the importance of women to continue their education and then move forward into political activism.

One male professor remarked how regardless of the fact that women did not win parliamentary seats in the 2006 election, the experience of political participation as voters was revolutionary for women’s political activism across generations of Kuwaiti women:

I’m sure now, more women are interested to get into politics. Now more women have worked during the past election, even though it was a short time. But in the women’s committees, hundreds of thousands joined forces with the candidates, and worked in their committees and I’m sure they’ve tasted the work...

My mother, who’s an old woman, went three times for public rallies just to listen, ok! And I never thought that she would be interested at all. These things develop over time.45

Islamic feminists have led the way toward a religiously grounded social activism and emphasized the compatibility of addressing women’s social and political rights from within an authentic and organic Islamic worldview as a way of compassionate conservatism. The Islamic approach is in contrast to a secular-based, Western model of feminism. But due to the Islamic sensibilities of the majority of voters in majority Muslim contexts, even politically Liberal and secular Muslim women’s rights activists argue that their approach is authentic and true to the democratic and pluralistic roots of Islam.46 The main conclusions from this section are that whether Liberal or Islamic-conservative, women in Kuwait champion political rights as a necessary but symbolic step. In the words of one activist, “they are means to an end” and that end differs by political affiliation.47 For Liberals, women’s political rights are a symbolic and procedural means of beginning a legitimating process where women are awarded power to speak on behalf of constituents in their society. For political Islamists, political
rights are a means to address un-Islamic injustices toward women in their society, whether that is a poisoning of traditional values through male abuse of power in the public spheres of politics and business or in the private spheres of marriage and family. For both political Liberal and political Islamist women, a thoughtful reinterpretation of women’s social rights and renegotiation of women’s personal status laws are some of the main issues to be addressed. Breaking the glass ceiling of politics is one means to address those issues.

Beyond the personal achievements that Kuwaiti women are attaining, politically engaged women realize that they need more experience in politics to catch up to their male counterparts. And for some, this means playing by men’s rules and using men’s tactics in the meantime. One Liberal female parliamentary candidate described her experience:

We [the female candidates] need a lot time to have this [kind of] experience. Because we are naive. We are very clean, idealistic, and we say what is in our mind…but they [male politicians] don’t say that. Because some of them [have spent] thirty years in the parliament and they [are]…just shouting every period and they didn’t do really…[any]thing. Ok, they are shouting, and they make some kind of ballot, but…we don’t see any movement really. 48

Interestingly, the debate about women entering politics is argued from the viewpoint that women are more authoritative on women’s issues because of their embodied experience. But at the same time, a focus on gender at the expense of a holistic approach to human rights in Kuwait easily segregates women from other important areas of governance, such as foreign policy, defense, and other legislative reform.

Through education and increasing political experience, women are becoming more suited for job positions, at times even more qualified than the men of their same age. And social scientists are already addressing the new demographic challenges as women choose career aspirations over a sequestered married life and note the disadvantages of a generation of unambitious and unemployed young men. 49 Islamic feminists are becoming more visible in political matters, as was seen around the world during the wave of recent revolutions.

These examples of women from Kuwait embody a passion for women’s rights in the public sphere while incorporating their Islamic identity, values, and worldview. By appealing to sources of religious and community authority, they are ensuring a long-term foundation for the goals they would like to achieve. The final appeal to legitimate
sources of authority, that is in the political arena, are contingent upon regional differences that are the product of many historical factors. For example, a focus on the elites of the Arab Gulf is appropriate considering the resources available to that part of the Arabian Peninsula relative to the rest of the Middle East. Many women’s rights activists in the Gulf are frustrated with the discrepancies they see with their historical and cultural ideals, and the actual state of deviation from those ideals. Legitimate grievances are giving rise to an Islamic feminist activism that becomes apparent in very creative ways. Some examples are the organized protests of women drivers in Saudi Arabia and women protestors joining men, though still segregated by gender, on the streets in Egypt and Yemen. However, the political and professional advancement of women is a universal challenge, even for women in Western democracies who adopted women’s suffrage before 2005. One Kuwaiti political scientist reminded me that significant cultural change takes time:

These things develop over time. They don’t happen just because you change the law. And if you look at it [globally], how many women are in the congress? Ok if you go to the world, you will see maybe Sweden, Denmark, Germany have taken the lead. You will see that the United States is not really. If you want to just go and check on the levels of participation in elections, you will see that the United States [has] one of the lowest. So where do we put that? Do we say that Americans are not into it [women’s political participation]? How do we [analyze that]?

This Kuwaiti brings up a good point for outside observers of the women’s suffrage movement in Kuwait—to remember that “all things come in good time.”
CHAPTER 4

Men Are Enabling Islamic Feminism

Women’s issues can either be promoted or hindered by the real decision makers, all of whom happen to be men in high-ranking political positions.

—Kuwaiti female activist

Another surprising paradox of Islamic feminism in Kuwait is that men are not actually resisting it—they are enabling it. Like the variety of women activists, the men interested in women’s political rights in Kuwait may differ in their approach but all—from secular Liberals to conservative Islamists—are working hard to persuade and incorporate women into their political agendas. Since women were given their political rights to vote and run for parliament in 2005, Kuwaitis of all political affiliations have had to contend with the fact that women are now one important half of the country’s constituents.

As loyal husbands, fathers, brothers, uncles, and sons, men have been some of the strongest believers in the abilities of their women. Though many have blamed men for the patriarchal system that marginalizes women from public leadership, it is interesting to see how many men, including religious Islamists, are paving the way for able and qualified women to participate alongside them in public life. While there are certainly gender differences in approach to supporting an Islamic feminism, there is no doubt that when women justify their progressive activism from within the patriarchal structures of their Islamic tradition, Islamic feminists have both genders on their side.

A summary of my findings is that men are enabling Islamic feminism in Kuwait, but their approach differs by political affiliation. Liberals tend to downplay gender and emphasize the importance of women becoming politically savvy (such as joining secular-Liberal political associations, groups, and diwaniyas) to further the Liberal
agenda and combat the political Islamist reach toward women voters. Moderate and progressive Islamists of the ICM or the MB emphasize that Islam doesn’t prevent women’s political rights. It is important to note that there was some controversy at first about supporting women candidates for political office among the Islamists because of the Islamic prohibitions against women being the head of an Islamic state. But since the government decided in favor of women’s candidacies, the ICM Islamists have been working hard to incorporate women into their political agenda. Salafi Islamists have not wavered on their belief that women should not run for political office and emphasize that this is because in Islam women play complementary roles to men and are more suited for the private realm. This is a significant difference from the ICM Islamists who may keep Salafists in Kuwait from gaining more votes among Islamist progressives (possibly women voters and youth). Since women were given their political rights and have become more and more sophisticated in their political activism, Salafists have lagged behind the ICM in obtaining a percentage of the votes from the Islamist-affiliated population. This is largely due to the fact that instead of engaging women at the political level with the same rigor that the ICM Islamists have, Salafists emphasize an opposition to the status quo of Kuwaiti politics because of their belief that women’s political rights represents a liberalizing conformity to individualized Western (foreign) values. But because of all the reasons outlined in previous chapters on why Islamists are winning in politics, voters from rural, tribal backgrounds form a large base of support among Sunni Salafists. These supporters include women and youth from bedouin backgrounds.

And yet even the intellectually conservative Salafists in Kuwait defy what sociologists call classic “fundamentalism” because of their will- ingness to engage in conventional, democratic politics. The politically engaged Kuwaiti Salafists do not shun away from politics, though some other branches of Salafis in Kuwait may in fact shun from politics on ideological grounds. But politically engaged Salafists have strained their relationships with radical, violent jihadist ideologues precisely because of their desire to gain credibility within the Kuwaiti society and the Kuwaiti political system.

The Pro-Women Politician

My next male interviewee is a charming man. He is friendly, kind, attractive with a full but short-trimmed beard and has a great intonation in his voice, like the seasoned politician, orator, and university
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professor that he is. What I didn’t realize is that he also claims heritage to the holy Prophet Mohammed—a distinction he takes seriously. So as I intuitively stick out my hand for a handshake as we meet in his office for an interview, he is taken aback. “I’m sorry—I don’t shake hands [with women]. Please have a seat.” Of course, in an Islamic country, it is deemed inappropriate and impolite for unrelated women to shake hands with men, particularly upstanding ones. “Oh! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to offend!” I quickly apologize.

Now that the ice has been broken into smithereens, we begin speaking of how he began his interest and activism regarding women and politics in Kuwait. Having completed his graduate studies abroad, he returned to Kuwait to teach at the university level. Before the current 1995 law required gender segregation in the university, he taught when both male and female students interacted in the classroom.

So because of that, I have an idea about women rights. Especially when you are dealing with students and these students are the best minds in the community…And you know, [the university] is the community where those people who are, you know, open-minded in the society, come to.

…With this kind of experience…that gives me a good background to know exactly how we can deal with each other as a human being—not as female and male. I usually say that we have to see to each other as human beings. There are specific areas that women can work, men cannot work in it, and specific areas that men can work in and women cannot. I cannot be pregnant, but women can. We cannot change this because this is a creative [act] of God. We cannot do anything else for that. Some hard [labor], or you know, or jobs that women cannot be in…because of the origin of the women and the origin of men, some specific tasks, they cannot take the role of each other. But in politics, thinking, putting strategies for the country, for the society…I think, from what I hear and see from [the] university, I can tell you that women can do a lot, a lot better than men.5

This interviewee not only supports the competent women around him with moral support but also provides practical support when promoting the women in his sphere of influence to leadership positions.

When I became a member of the parliament, I told the people that the first thing I’m gonna fight for is women’s rights. And that’s what I did, in fact…We had a lot of lectures in…different universities, and different diwaniyas, just to explain for the people that human rights will not contradict with the Islamic thinking and issues. That it is absolutely
wrong to see a contradiction between Islam and human rights. Islam
lets females have human rights, especially political rights. Then, I was
one of the people to vote for the law for the women to have the political
rights…and thank God, it passed and the women took their rights.

This professor and politician encapsulates several of the main points
of Islamic feminism from the male perspective—that far from being
against women’s rights for misogynistic reasons, the Islamic culture
and framework allows men and women to pursue their rights beyond
a gender-specific dialogue. Men are free to comment and join the
fight for women’s rights within an Islamic framework by considering
women as fellow human beings, partners in their responsibilities to
cultivate the earth and to “enjoin all that is good and forbid all that
is evil.” In a theory of legitimate authority for progressive women’s
rights activism, men focus on the appeal to the community—that is
the political realities of convincing the general public that women
are as able as men to do the same jobs, in politics and professional
life. Several men, particularly the more Islamist-minded, refer to their
Islamic worldview as the basis for their belief in gender equality. One
important thing to point out is that the political dimensions are not
always addressed by women’s rights activists in Kuwait because of the
implicit assumption that the government was for women’s rights. This
is not always the case for women’s rights activists elsewhere in the
Middle East who must lobby the government for their cause to be a
priority among many others on the agenda.

In my quest to find a distinctly Islamic brand of feminism, I realized
that my answer would not be complete unless I also gathered the per-
spectives of those Islamists who were seemingly so against women,
or at least against their political rights. But some of the answers I
received, both from Islamist conservatives who happened to be male
and political Liberals who also happened to be male, began to fit
under distinctly male categories, which I outline in this chapter. The
broad, but distinctly male, commentaries are: other women, not men,
are working against women’s ability to progress with their rights;
women must understand political realities better if they are to suc-
cceed in politics; women need to look beyond the issue of gender if
they want to move forward with practical grievances; and interest-
ingly, how men welcome the partnership with women to achieve their
own vision for a society with a balance of their traditional values and
modern realities. Some interesting conclusions I was able to gather
from my interviews with male Islamic feminists, or those male elites
in Kuwait who desired a better quality of life for the women of their
societies, are that men are themselves on a journey to define their own relationship with women. Men are accommodating political and social realities that allow women into areas they held principal control of in the past, such as politics and government. Instead of putting down a misogynistic foot, as may be assumed by many outside observers in the West, the male cultural elites, Islamists and Liberals, are thinking through how to best work as partners with women so that both can work to cultivate their societies together.

The idea of male Islamic feminists is a very different story than is often assumed of men in Muslim societies, again because of the residual bias from the actions of extremists who have used their faith to justify violence against women, such as the Taliban in Afghanistan. But in the majority Muslim societies where patriarchal, tribal structures are realities for both men and women equally, it appears that men who have an interest in women’s political and social rights work within their cultural framework to justify their activism—just like the women activists. Also, like the women activists, not all male activists have the same methods to reach what they consider their own pro-women agendas. Conservative-minded men would argue that shielding women from the public responsibilities of duties outside the home is the more pro-women strategy. As one Salafi parliamentarian put it:

If you are an employee and you have children and you are given the right to leave work for a couple of hours or so, would this proposition serve you or not?

If we propose a motion that after fifteen years of work a woman can retire, would this harm the woman or would this benefit her in the long run?  

Instead of denying me, an unveiled, Western woman, an interview or ignoring my questions altogether, I received an adamant defense of Islamist policies as being “for women.” This example from a Salafi politician reinforces the thesis and paradox that men are enabling Islamic feminism in Kuwait by framing their political agendas to incorporate women constituents. Political Liberals, however, both women and men, criticize such rhetoric from the Islamists as a smokescreen for keeping women out of public life. From the Liberal male perspective, such policies will keep women from obtaining their rights to further economic and political achievement. As one of my Liberal male interviewees unequivocally said of Islamists: “They hate women.”

No—Seriously! They want to isolate women. [In] the beginning, they were straightforward. No bone[s] about it. And they suggested, under
this law to “protect” the women, and the woman should have holiday up to one year after [giving] birth. Then—[it was] fully paid. That’s one thing. What happened as a reaction to the law? The private sector, the community, they shied away from employing women. Especially single women [who they expect will] go and get married. They know if they get married or are just married, they’re going to have a baby. If you know that as an employer you have to pay her salary and she’s going to have [a] baby every three years...

That’s one thing. Second thing is that the problem [of] today came with the law that if you want women to raise her children and be around her family, to protect the family, a woman should retire after fifteen years of work.

That means[s] if you are [a] young woman, you graduate when you’re (on average) 21, or 20, that means you’re retired after age 35! [In] what [other] society [does] that happen? That happens in the society and [now] we have a shortage of manpower. So how can you come [out] with this stupid idea [that has] nothing to do with Islam? But they say this all the time to women. And they succeeded and passed the law...Now women [are] using this law, to keep retiring...social...benefits...

To make [things] worse, the Islamists suggested last week, through one of their political agenda[s], (the [Muslim] Brotherhood), the new law, the “protection of women” law. “Family Law,” they call it. Basically, the woman receives [a] salary by sitting [at] home.9

So clearly, men are enabling Islamic feminism but have a difference of opinion about what constitutes pro-women policies. Aside from subsidized parental leave, gender segregation in school is another point of contention.

That’s what! They stay at home! And this...we have a problem at Kuwait University. [It] used to accept women and men equally. [For professorships?]

No, [students at] certain colleges, medical schools [for example]. Women’s grades were higher, they were very well educated...but they accepted 50–50 to give the men a chance. Now, Kuwait University is trying to make men more than women. The question [is] why? Because they discovered (after spending hundreds of thousands of KD10...we’re talking about 300,000 or 350[,000] dollars per student), when he graduates, all it’s used [for is] to stay home, she doesn’t practice medicine. What a waste!

Salafi [are] more harsh. They protested more than Brotherhood [against women’s rights], but in the end, they are the same, they’re united in this...As far as they relate to women, they want to isolate women. That’s all they believe in.11
Among the men, as with the women, political affiliation impacts policy agenda in the name of being “for” women. While Islamist men support subsidized childcare and gender segregation as a way to support women, the politically Liberal men believe that the Islamists only want to isolate women away from public life. But I did not have to look far among the so-called Liberal men to see that there were intolerant strains that would also inhibit women’s choices, sometimes in a fashion more subtle than that of the Islamists. For example, one generally progressive and Liberal male academic I spoke with, when I explained to him my interest in studying women and Islam in Kuwait, told me that he would “boycott” his daughter if she chose to wear the veil. I found this statement ironic because it seemed to me that a more liberal perspective might value the principle of individual choice for women rather than the fact that this choice would be intolerable because it would break with his own family values system. Another politically Liberal professor I spoke with, when I asked him if he would allow his daughters to come to America for their university studies once they turned 18, was rather taken aback and almost scowled as he said, “Why? What for? We have good universities here in Kuwait!” So in some ways a paternal instinct can turn patriarchal on either side of the political aisle. These incidents remind us to continue to look for systematic gender differences among Muslim elites in Muslim majority contexts. By sorting out contradictions between individuals’ self-described identities (whether as Feminists, Liberals, Conservatives, or Islamists), and probing further the real actions that individuals take, we see the true implications for women in Kuwait. By remaining consistent with the values they were raised with, elites prioritize the sources of authority that are legitimate for them to make their choices—whether they are their religion, their community, or political authorities.

**Where Have All the Chauvinists Gone?**

The differences in approach by political Liberals and Islamists within an Islamic feminist agenda are real and appear many times self-interested. However, myths about how men confront the increasingly public presence of competent women in fields of politics, business, and education include the idea that Muslim men are inherently misogynistic because of their religion. In fact, throughout my fieldwork, interviews, and survey research, I find significant support among men for gender equality within an Islamic framework. ISAS data from over 1,000 Kuwaiti college students shows that over 60 percent
have a belief in gender equality.\textsuperscript{12} About 60 percent of the male students surveyed agree that Islam is a source of personal motivation for them to fight for women’s rights. Such results blow through stereotypes of Muslim men as uniformly patriarchal and misogynistic. In fact, the opposite seems to be true. Men are enabling Kuwaiti women to succeed.

What struck me as interesting when I began to look for male perspectives for this book project was that I realized I had made the same assumption of a patriarchal society that many other women would have—that men are responsible for the success of women because they are mostly in charge. However, as I began to interview more men, I realized that there was a clear shifting of the blame. In hindsight, it may have been unreasonable of me to think that any of the Arab Muslim men I spoke with would prostrate themselves in shame for the state of inequality of their women, but instead of any acknowledgement of the unfairness of patriarchy, men insisted that it was women themselves who keep other women from succeeding. To some extent, an acknowledgement of their status as guardians and gatekeepers, as my male interviewees expressed, gives them a burden to actively support the motions to include women as decision-makers in certain realms of government and politics where they are discriminated against solely on the basis of their gender. But beyond some formalities, men were much more likely to want to focus the attention toward systematic social change that could prepare women for leadership positions—such as improving education and professional experience.

Instead of finding a blanketly antiwoman campaign among men, even among Islamist conservatives, I began to see a more complex set of beliefs underlying the men who were active with regard to women’s rights, promoting what they viewed as a progressive strategy—which included letting women fail at politics in the short term until they gained political experience that would allow them to effectively work with male candidates in the long term. One male journalist turned around my question about men’s empathy with women’s rights issues in Kuwait: “I don’t think \textit{women} are involved with women’s rights issues. It’s not that [men are not involved]. I don’t think many women, the majority of women, are not really involved in women’s rights issues.”\textsuperscript{13} One male university professor advised that Kuwaiti women with political aspirations should focus on their own voices and agendas, not on their gender or marginalized status:

They [females] have to think seriously about how they can enhance their society and the political life of Kuwaiti society with their strategic plans.
Just [by] saying “We are afraid, we have been not given enough...share of this life,” it’s not enough. It will not convince the male who is still controlling everything in the society. So we need to convince them that “we are a think tank and you are not giving us a good chance! Just leave us speak and control, and we will show you that you are doing a good job.” I think that they need to do a good deal of work here.

They should try to connect themselves with one big, important issue in the country. And she’s not doing good enough in this aspect. They kind of isolate their cause...

They are isolated also [by saying] that “we are female, society, hey, society! Just think about us!”

Even a male religious scholar seemed able to provide some practical political advice to aspiring women candidates:

I think they must be very active with the real issues that the people want of them. [The women candidates] were very interested in just the speeches, as not related with the reality. They were just talking about some “pink dreams;” they must not ignore the reality, they must understand what people want. Because the first time, you can’t change the people’s ideology, you can’t ignore them, you must speak with them, understand them, learn from them, and then the second or third time, you can do something good for them.

Later, this Islamic religious leader suggests that women broaden their audiences through an Islamic feminist worldview that pushes them to fight for their rights as a fellow human being along with men in the wider Muslim society.

It is a good thing, and the main thing, that you are raising the children, but you can do something better for all the community, not just for your children. So I think that the Islamic knowledge that some of the ulama give to them, about the importance of raising the children, make[s] women afraid of going forward to political matters, and the many issues that interest the community.

...You must know that the reality of life requires us to be active and that will make the community, or the human being, all the communities change their mind on many things. I think it was very important to the ulama that they forbid in the first place these rights [to maintain their political authority], but we must read better Islamic teachings and the Qur’an. And we must know that Qur’an doesn’t forbid these things.

This clearly progressive male religious scholar offers valuable insights for a sociological understanding of Islamic feminism. The religious
scholars and political activists who will be at the forefront of a political future in Kuwait’s participatory political structure are those who “move forward” with opportunities for women’s involvement and find ways to justify these changes from within their religious culture and heritage.

**Enabling Islamic Feminists in the Public Sphere**

One important point for outside observers of Middle Eastern politics to grasp is that the issue of women’s rights cannot be understood outside of political realities. Political rules set up by respective governments, political actors, and international pressure affect the ability of women to be successful in politics as much as men. One Kuwaiti political scientist was keen to impress this point about the first elections in 2006 where women ran for office but did not win any seats:

> I think the result was not really surprising and should not be seen as a result of the traditional attitude against women. I think this is important because many people are talking about, that “Look, women ran for election and they didn’t win”… I mean, that [was] the expectation. I think that it would be safe to say, let’s wait and see about the next election. And next election will be the test, rather than the past election. In that election, nobody was prepared, even some men didn’t run for election because it was just coming as a surprise, it wasn’t scheduled, parliament was dissolved, so everybody was not ready.

> … Even men, because the election law has been changed to five districts instead of 25. And I can tell you with full assurance that even men are confused with the issue. They don’t know and have not yet prepared themselves. So it’s not a problem for women, it’s a problem for everybody…

> So there will be a lot of changes that need to be addressed in a different fashion than just saying that women [failed].

A more measured analysis of why women didn’t win any seats in parliament in their first elections, at least from a male perspective, sees the gender issue as a smokescreen and not at the center of the discussion. Another male Kuwaiti activist agrees:

> First of all, I think the next election [after the change from 25 electoral districts] will be very difficult to run on an individual basis. You are either a tycoon, someone who is well known, he is a real public figure that everybody knows. Even for men, not only for women. Even
for men, it will be a very difficult task. One thing, women will have
to be included within the support of the political groups and parties.
There will be no woman who will succeed if she thinks she is going
to run on her own. And then the woman candidate has to be a credible
person, well-known, she has some achievement in social standing. Not
just anyone. And that will have an impact. If that doesn’t happen,
it’s completely political issues. Yes, women will have a harder task to
market themselves, that’s for sure. But it will not be impossible. It’s
easier . . . you know, you’ve been here, so you can see that the society is
very open, and you really don’t have a difficulty moving around, and
it will not be a problem on social standing. Women are accepted, and
yes, there are certain discriminations against women here and there,
but it is not outrageous.\textsuperscript{18}

This male pro-women’s rights activist insists that political participa-
tion is a real means for women’s advancement in Kuwait and legitima-
tion as political leaders for the society. However, like the men, they
will have to become strategic about creating alliances that will enable
them to win politically—not just socially and culturally.

Besides knowledge of political strategy, a lack of political experi-
ence and knowledge of important political issues was also listed by
men as a reason that kept women from achieving their political rights.
One female candidate had worked tirelessly for years to tackle the
issues of women’s lack of preparedness to rule in public office:

They have to do so many [things]. First they have to get themselves
trained to be elected. Because I found most of [the female political
candidates], they have to be trained very well. Just because I have some
good characteristics doesn’t mean I’m good to be nominated, no.

You have to be trained, well-organized, prepare your party group,
have to have some expert people to run your campaign. They need
to have so many skills, like how to give a public speech. They need
to mobilize so many skills in their personality. Some of [the female
candidates] don’t have an open-mind, they don’t read well, they don’t
know what’s going on. They lack information. One of my main
objectives . . . now we are working to plan a program to prepare women
as leaders for all kinds of leadership [positions], to run a company, or
party or as a candidate.\textsuperscript{19}

One interesting suggestion was to have a husband or brother beside a
female candidate giving a speech to support her candidacy. The can-
didate pointed out rightly that even in US politics, the campaigning
support of spouses goes a long way to raise the profile of a political
candidate by reinforcing and underlying family values. When asked
who would be an ideal candidate, she described her in detail: “First of all, [she] should have good education, and good support from the family. Because we are coming from very traditional and religious families.”

**Enabling Islamic Feminism in the Private Sphere**

Though they may not label themselves Islamic Feminists, like many of their female counterparts in these majority Muslim societies, there are many ways that men are promoting women’s rise into the public sphere by their own private activism and within their own culturally legitimate perspectives. When not lobbying for women’s political rights in the newspapers or on the campaign trail, this activism takes on more subtle forms, such as in education of their students and with their family members. One male Kuwaiti professor says that to promote independent thinking for women, men can play a role in educating within the family through generational change:

> Giving a new revolution to the way that we educate our people, our kids, will be a good idea. The majority of the people here are...I mean the old people, were uneducated. And they took what they learned from their old generations...and without thinking they just took it as...the basics of life. And they just transferred it to the new generation. Maybe this is the whole story. 20

In Kuwait, the family is the main front for change. Training up one’s own children is an effective way to reeducate a generation about the future possibilities for the women of their societies. Data from the ISAS project indicates that Kuwaiti young men who believe in advocating for women’s rights and in their possibilities for political office, tended to have mothers with at least some college education.21 Such findings support the thesis that educating women today who then educate their sons tomorrow eventually has a large-scale impact on the whole society’s attitudes toward women.

Another female activist attests to the role that gender equality based in mutual love and respect played in her own formation:

> I think it’s the way I was raised, to begin with. My mother and father. I’ve always paid a lot of attention to...human cases around me. And religion was always something between me and my God. And my father and mother never made me feel guilty about this...So, all of these prejudices and negotiations, and divisions were not current in my house. And then, you know, you grow up and you see and
you have a family of your own and I have children, and I do want to secure a better life for them, and I want to see my daughter having better chances than I had. And a better life, and... as lovely as my life is, but I still want something more—better for my children. Maybe... less obstacles. And I would say that... I mean, after my father and mother, I would say I owe a lot of my success and a lot of my... work ability towards my husband who [has] taken a lot on himself and on our family and a lot of the work to give me the wings that I need.²²

The male professor and politician of Interview 15 has a personal inspiration for the women’s rights he fights for in the public sphere—through the example of his own family in the private sphere:

Okay, let me tell you one thing. Let me give you my experience. When I sit at home, I see my wife, discussing political issues with me, telling me, “this is wrong” and “this is right.” And telling me why this is wrong [taps the table for emphasis] and why this is right [tap]. And I see, you know, how bright she is. In my mind, I think, “How come people like my wife cannot have a chance to represent people in the parliament or even in the government and let these kinds of thinking and thoughts to be active, huh?” When I sit with my students... and these are female students—and see how they can think brightly, and they are sharp in their opinion—how come these people cannot be our representatives in the parliament or even in the government? I really become sad. And because of that, I think we have an excellent-minded people—female—and they have to have the chances to be in this kind of position, political position.²³

This pro-women politician is passionate about promoting women’s rights from within his own spheres of influence, including the women of his home and his university classes. Most importantly, he adds that his personal opinion is backed-up by sources of legitimate authority, according to his religious worldview, grounded in his knowledge of religious texts, scholarship, and tradition:

The other thing, there is no conflict between religion and political rights. I don’t see any conflict. I went through the history of Islam, and the history of Prophet Mohammed (sall' Allahu aleyhi wa salam), I usually take that how the Prophet tells his wives, even his daughter to teach other people the facts about Islam, the facts about dealing with each other. And these were simple political countries and communities. Why cannot I project that situation on our situation here in Kuwait? So there is no conflict.²⁴
Even this religious leader recognizes the important role that men play in pursuing women’s rights—by helping to encourage, in his words, even “push,” the mindset of the society forward toward a vision of women sharing equally in leadership: “It won’t be encourage, it will be a push! [Laugh] The woman [’s importance] in this society, or any society, must come from the knowledge of the men in the society. And the marriage must be from the heart and from the mind.”

This progressive sheikh recognizes that aside from public approval of women in leadership, men play an important role in their own families by uplifting even their wives in marriage out of love and respect—“from the heart and from the mind”—and not by forcing their opinions for some sense of personal gain. Though the strategies of these male Islamic feminists may not be the same as their female counterparts, they are taking up complementary roles in public and private spheres to shape the next generation of women in leadership.

A former parliamentary candidate from a rural bedouin tribal area insists that her husband’s support made all the difference in her personal success:

Without the men’s help, we cannot do anything. Also, you know, because it’s like a company. Women and men, it’s like a company. In the house, the man in the house, he cannot live alone. Also, the women, they cannot live alone! So this [is] like a company, each [help the] other to grow this company. They will bring their children, they will take [care] of their children, man cannot by himself take care of the children, and also the woman, she cannot! It’s like a company. So, in the house, it’s like a company. So what about our big house, which is Kuwait! Kuwait is our big house. So we should share that . . . to grow our country, this is our country, so without sharing, so we cannot [grow]. So like I said, men should . . . okay, by like private [means], or by government, they should help the women to take their right[ful] position.

This Muslim Arab woman makes the point that change for women’s status in a traditional society must also bring men alongside them to grow the larger society. This concept of shared responsibility in the society also stays away from the idea that women should be competitive with or seek to “out-do” their male counterparts. In a way relieving women of the pressure to compete like men reflects a perceived weakness by Islamic feminists of second-wave Western feminism.

One takeaway from this discussion of the enabling of Islamic feminism in Kuwait by male actors is that it is founded on a base of mutual respect. Male leaders in Kuwait can argue for women’s political rights
and leadership in the society based on their shared Islamic worldview that respects women as equal actors, not as competition. Even acknowledging patriarchy and gender inequality as incompatible with the principles of gender equality in Islam is a huge step forward for women’s rights anywhere in the world, a lesson from the experience in Kuwait.

Women Are Their Own Worst Enemies

Hoffman and Torres’s study of gender and social networks revealed that women are underemployed in the United States not only because women are less likely to hear about quality job leads, but also because women who hear about job leads are more likely to pass that information on to men instead of other women. One of the rationales for their findings is that women may be threatened by the idea of more women in their workplace, view them as competition instead of as colleagues, and fear for the loss of their own positions. Although such explanations are still contested in places that preach gender equality like in the United States, I found a similar analysis in Kuwait. One criticism from among my male interviewees, whether secular Liberals or conservative Islamists, is that instead of focusing on male oppression from patriarchal societal structures, that women would do well to examine how women themselves may be spoiling their own chances for success.

One criticism among women’s rights activists in Kuwait was that in the first election, the female parliamentary candidates did not appear to support each other. Instead of legitimating their cause through common cultural beliefs, some believe that they missed an opportunity to bring women together based on the cultural values they shared.

That happened, and you know, especially after the last election [in 2006], when they gave the women’s right to vote. I found out that...I don’t think I am wrong...still, I believe if you believe in a thing, you should cooperate with everybody for the cause. What I discovered...[is that] nobody works for the cause. All the women in Kuwait, and I am sorry to say it. Everybody belongs to somebody. To an organization. To a party...

So I found out that I wasted a long, long, long time trying just to get women together.28

The organizational dilemma of having too many “cooks in the kitchen” of women’s rights in Kuwait hurt the image of Kuwaiti
women vying for political candidacy. For example, in the 2006 elections, several women ran against each other in the same political area. Not only did it divide the pro-women candidate votes in that particular district, but those women candidates were also cited as examples of the political inexperience and egotistical individualism of women candidates in general.

It is my belief, now I don’t belong to [just] one society. I work with every [women’s] society. And lately I found out something that makes me sad. That if you are not of our group, “we will work with you, we will take whatever you give,” but in the end, “you don’t belong to us.” So you find yourself alone.

... It is difficult to get women together. We need time, you know. That is why I am against a quota. Because if we got this quota, they would stay as they are [divisive and uncooperative]. I want them to fail two, three times, so they’ll know that if they don’t get together, they won’t pass.\(^\text{30}\)

One male political activist put it this way:

Well, we have between two choices. A woman who is searching for prestige and show, and the woman who at least has something from the Islamic point of view she wants to achieve. They will elect her. The problem is with women themselves. They have no strategy. They have no aim, they have nothing to give to the society. They are looking for show. “I need to be the first woman who reaches the parliament.” And I explained this for you, seven women in one area. So all the women are laughing! What they are doing?!

... Before you ask me, what is my role [as a man] to encourage women, don’t ask me first, ask her. First find a good woman, with a good mind, that she has a strategy, and after that, you ask her. So how can you ask me to change my mind and she is not changing her mind?

You know why? Because each woman [was] involved in this parliament elections for one reason: “I want my photo to be published in the press, I want to be the first woman to be elected.” This is the end.\(^\text{31}\)

The male Kuwaiti elites I interviewed overwhelmingly separated women’s issues as a niche topic of discussion that, for the traditional, conservative men, might fall under the “family and children” section or perhaps in some instances under a “human rights” rubric. But as far as commenting on why women were not gaining as candidates in the polls too quickly, they were very quick to point out the
fragmentation of women’s societies, which divided their own cause and hurt the public image for their causes. Instead of viewing a diversity of perspectives as a positive by-product of a pluralistic society, most men interpreted a lack of coordination as a sign of indecisiveness and weakness.

Interestingly, it was not their Islamic religion, but a lack of education about the ways Islam empowers women, and the cultural conservatism against public roles for women, that were listed among the top obstacles for women’s rights (see Figure 4.1). Following lack of education and cultural conservatism, women listed a lack of experience and resources and infighting and disorganization above misguided religious scholars or manipulation of Islam as the biggest obstacles for addressing women’s rights in Kuwait.

As one Salafi Islamist parliamentarian so directly put it: “The main problem here is that women who speak for women are enemies for women, and they are only there for personal purpose rather than serving the issue as a whole.” Interestingly, this Salafist assumed that he had women’s best interests in mind and actually redirected any misogynistic tendencies toward other women. From his point of view as a successful and experienced politician, many of the women entering politics had lost credibility because of their individual agendas, instead of sacrificing their personal success for the sake of a larger

![Figure 4.1](image-url)  

**Figure 4.1** Most Listed Obstacles for Addressing Women’s Rights in Kuwait.  
political issue or goal. It is possible that many female women’s rights activists feel similarly wary about focusing their platforms toward a gender debate. One female Kuwaiti parliamentary candidate said:

I myself, I don’t like to cooperate with women. [Laughter]
I prefer to cooperate with men who are open-minded and it is better for me. Because if the woman is not using her mind, and acting emotionally, she will lose everything. It is better for the woman to use her mind and to treat the human beings . . . regardless, of sex.  

The National Democratic Institute (NDI) conducted focus groups to gauge public opinion on the prospects of women’s political leadership in Kuwait in 2007, which confirms these findings. The NDI report notes the negativity among Kuwaitis about women in politics because of their performance in the 2006 elections. Indeed, women parliamentary candidates failed to win seats in 2006 and 2008 but finally won four seats in 2009. The fact that many Kuwaiti women’s rights activists appeared in conflict with one another is an observation that women’s rights activists around the region have taken note of. Muslim women’s rights activists outside of Kuwait have seen the Kuwaiti example and attempted to modify their strategies to work cooperatively with the religious, community, and political sources of authority within their own societies.

Men are opening doors for women—not necessarily literally, but figuratively opening opportunities for women to enter new fields of business, education, and, now, politics. The fact that the various countries of the Arabian Peninsula are very economically disparate also adds to the efficiency of an appeal by Islamic feminists who are aware of their respective regional histories in achieving women’s rights. For example, though women in the countries of the Gulf may benefit from the oil and gas revenue, some activists believe the availability of material comfort may in fact keep some women from working to develop their future potential. One interviewee said of the female candidates:

[If] you are rich, you have the money, don’t expect most of them to be worried about human rights, or women’s rights or to give something. This is the reason most people like the Islamic extremists and elect them. Because they don’t appear to have as much money?
That’s right, and at least they have something to . . . some agenda.
Even if 95 percent of them it’s a private agenda, [the remaining] five percent they will give or do something for Islam, for pure Islamic principles. But what about these women? I’m telling you and maybe
nobody is telling you about this matter. Maybe most of them are hiding this. If you ask a woman privately, they will tell you the same thing I’m telling you, that they [the female candidates] are in for their private interests.\(^{36}\)

An Islamist woman activist reinforces the fact that Kuwaiti women sabotage their own success when they are too comfortable to fight for their rights:

In fact it was women who were against their political rights. People do not appreciate anything that does not come from pain and need. They did not recognize that political rights were not an aim—they were a way of getting better things.

In Kuwait women are too comfortable. The Government does an excellent job of providing benefits. Even when you are facing divorce, you have so many benefits. *Hamdulilah*, I don’t have that many problems in my life, but I recognize that if you don’t have suffering, you will not feel your need for your rights. This [attitude] needs maturity.

People finally learned during the [Iraqi] Invasion that politics is not just a man’s role. In fact because we share the consequences of the political leaders’ decisions, we should share in the decision-making. If politics was meant only for men, then they only should have to suffer the consequences!

This is why from the beginning I supported women’s political rights, because I knew that we [Kuwaiti women] should feel that we are participating, and this way political decisions become more important to us, we will take more care. Now more good things will result. Now what women say they want is more important and requires government attention.\(^{37}\)

A systematic Islamic feminist approach to gender equality also means attention to unequal opportunities in education and employment. The same female Islamist activist added to her comments about material complacency by saying that many Kuwaiti women may not actually value their political rights:

Primarily, political rights helps those women who work [outside the home]. And the fact is that most women prefer to stay at home, so they don’t see the need for expanding political rights. But the mentality has to change among women to realize that there are some women who were meant to be political leaders, just as there are some men who are good cooks. At the same time, women in politics need to show public respect for women’s traditional roles in the home and in child-bearing.
It seems that from the male perspective, a large part of the female lack of political success in Kuwait is due to their own infighting, divisiveness, and lack of organization. However, as men work sincerely to enable an Islamic feminism in Kuwait, they are accompanied by a necessary process of contrition for their own patriarchal sins.

**Acknowledging Patriarchy**

In Kuwait, patriarchal societal structures are still the norm. Gender segregation is encouraged, and women have been systematically kept out of politics, among other professional pursuits. The gender stereotypes that accompany such cultural norms are still very much present. For example, when asking Kuwaiti college students how their religious communities (what I term “mosque networks”) would react to various women’s rights issues, there was a clear gender difference, where men were more likely than females to preserve the status quo. Interestingly, their female counterparts believed almost as strongly that the same communities would actually encourage female participation in politics and public life (see Figure 4.2).

![Figure 4.2 Perceptions of Mosque Networks by Gender.](source: ISAS Kuwait 2007. N = 1139.)
One young Kuwaiti acknowledged the double standard present in Kuwaiti culture for males and how it infiltrates their perceptions about women:

Speaking as a man who is involved in male sections of the society, or main[ly]...the male...diwaniyas...you do hear different reviews. You do hear how some people talk about muthajibats, how people talk about non-muthajibats. How there are all these stereotypes that go along.

...But the funny thing is they tend to speak so much more freely about other women. Not their own. Not their mothers. Not their daughters, not their wives, not their sisters...They kind of ignore that they have female relatives. But this is stupid. I mean, you do see that sometimes, you'll be sitting some place. And see, alright, a pretty girl walking by and they start...pretty much howling—quite literally—and you know, the girl is decent, she's you know, minding her own business, you know. And then suddenly, if someone would do the same for—again, if you even hint at something like that...Like if a guy came up to me and said “oh, I saw your sister, she’s pretty.” The natural reaction would be to be upset: what do you mean, she’s pretty? [Laugh]. You seem to become very defensive with it.39

In addition to the social stereotyping, he acknowledges that prevalent patriarchal beliefs also affect women’s abilities to succeed in politics, business, and social life.

A lot of the men do think they’re doing their woman...a favor. They’re protecting her. It’s for her own—she doesn’t know...what’s in her best interest. We do. Why? Because there is this...again, another fallacy. Women think with their emotions, not with their brains. The men think with their brains and not with their emotions. And therefore, women are not capable of taking logical, rational decisions. Whether it’s politics, economics, or it’s at the social level. That’s why you also find...a lot of young women, the father finds the husband for her. He finds someone who’s very suitable. And a lot of women are very happy with this. A lot of the girls are, they’re like “Oh, yes! My dad found me someone” like Mr. Right, you know...and it’s true! It’s unfortunate, but...again, mine is not to judge. If that’s what works for them, good for them.

Even the latent patriarchal attitudes of both men and women in the society is something that female parliamentary candidates became experienced in addressing.

Again, here, there [is a] male-dominant community. “The man is bet-ter,” you know. Some people, they came to me and they said. You
know, when we have a problem, usually we understand that the representative of the parliament, they go for him when they have a problem. [For example] their son [is] in the jail in the middle of the night. They said, “What we will do?” I said, “Instead of one person going with you to the police station, you will have two—me and my husband!” . . . So you are coming talking with a woman, and we are going to use the muscles of the man! Go with us!40

In other words, women candidates had to speak to women and allay their fears that they would have just as good an advocate in a woman as a male representative in the parliament. While Kuwaitis might be used to having a man politically represent them, by having a female representative, they would have someone to speak with directly, and who would bring along “the muscles” of the men that support her.

One university professor discusses what she believes to be the biggest obstacle for women entering politics and public space in Kuwait and around the world:

It is the patriarchal ideology, the patriarchal thought, and by that I mean, not just men. But women, who think in a chauvinistic way. And this is caused by several . . . reasons . . . of course, traditions that have been here for a long time. Although, you know, if you look at real traditions of Kuwait, old Kuwait, you’ll see that it was a very, very kind of feminist society, in its own way. Women had a lot of responsibilities, men left the country for six months going pearling, you know. And women took care of everything, ran everything in the country. And it’s reported that even in men’s diwaniyas, women would actually go in and say “hi” to the men and mingle with them. Which is all not looked at or regarded or considered nowadays.

It changed because of the religious wave that came, starting from the [Islamic] Revolution in Iran, and pulled towards the whole area which created—not particularly the Revolution, but the consequences of the Revolution and the whole religious wave that came over created many fundamentalist cells that flourished in the area.41

So just because men are enabling Islamic feminism in the public and private spheres does not mean that they are not battling a patriarchal status quo. Much of the prevailing patriarchal attitudes are conditioned by other societal norms, including diwaniya culture and tribalism.

**Diwaniya Culture and Kuwaiti Tribalism**

The emphasis on tribalism and kinship structures takes many modern forms. In many Arab societies, this can take on a form of weekly
male-only gatherings, or diwaniyas, where important matters of politics and business are discussed. Some have drawn parallels of diwaniya culture in Kuwait to “men-only” social clubs in Europe and the United States.\textsuperscript{42} Though these formal discriminatory practices are less and less common in the West, empirical studies show continued gender discrimination in less formal ways, such as unequal pay and job advancement.\textsuperscript{43} In Kuwait, the gender-segregated culture lends itself to a segregation of women out of important meetings where decisions of consequence take place.

I think, and honestly speaking, one of the major blocs we have as women, is getting into key positions of political authority, whether elected or appointed. The diwaniya culture in Kuwait. It’s a closed boy’s club. Right? These sort of networks have been slowly . . . eradicated. At least, on a public level in the West. Right? But it took a good 300 hundred, 200 hundred years. I mean, in the 1700s, members of parliament in Europe were still discussing whether women have souls. So I think we’ve come a good way.

In Kuwait, the diwaniya culture is where business deals get done, it’s where you go . . . I mean, I needed to go see MPs\textsuperscript{44} in the past two weeks. I’ve been trying to get appointments with four MPs, I’ve seen one of them in four weeks. Not because they’re busy, [but] because when I can see them, it’s during the time they’re actually in parliament, they’re actually doing their office hours—my brother can go see them anytime he wants to in their diwaniya. Or in one of their constituent’s diwaniyas. Do you understand? That door is closed [to me as a woman]. And when you’re thinking of deals that are under the table . . . I’m not talking about bribe, cash, money, whatever—monumental corruption, but I’m talking about just, you know, pleading your case. About why should you go with that company instead of my company . . . you know . . . I’ve got a problem getting this issue resolved . . . if a man’s gonna vote for a woman candidate he’s gonna think “how the hell am I gonna get access to her?” Right? And people here are still sensitive about gender issues in the public-private divide. You can’t call up a woman in her house, you know. You can’t just go see her wherever you’d like. People here are very conservative about these things. So absolutely without the diwaniya culture re-worked, there’s no way that a woman candidate has credibility in Kuwait. No way!\textsuperscript{45}

Then again, as women increasingly take their place in the public sphere, they are creating and establishing their own parallel institutions, such as “women’s diwaniyas” in Kuwait or Qur’anic reading sessions in Egypt\textsuperscript{46} and Syria\textsuperscript{47} to better educate and inform
themselves and so close the information gap left from years of political marginalization.

I think the biggest inconvenience is that she does not have the mechanism that will make her win because... why do the men win? Because they have diwaniyas and they can go to diwaniyas and they can do all the lobbying and the networking that they want to do. A woman does not have access, or they have not yet created that channel of networking. They do not have their diwaniyas. It’s hard for... you know, a man, when he is supportive of another man, will lend him part of the house to put (for free sometimes, eh!) for his diwaniya, but a woman... you know, if the men need at seven o’clock to do their political discussions, their networking, their lobbying... seven o’clock she is sending the kids to bed, she’s doing her motherly duties. So that is the disadvantage, I think. The disadvantage is that society has not yet developed the means for women to be effective at networking. Because of social habits, because of social customs.\textsuperscript{48}

An interesting point about “conservative” attitudes toward women’s rights, that is that their place is relegated mainly to the home and not toward politics, was present not only in politically Islamist circles, but also among the politically Liberal men. As one female Islamist activist said:

There were even a lot of conservative-minded [about women’s political rights] politicians in the non-Islamist parties. Particularly those who came from bedouin backgrounds, those outside of the city. Those outside the city, in rural areas are always the last to change—all over the world. They are the last even to buy mobile phones, much more so to change their ideas about women’s roles. But even among conservative, non-Islamist, non-bedouin, politicians simply didn’t support women’s political rights because they believed that Kuwait’s own democratic political experience in parliament was not mature... and they doubted what women can add [to that experience].\textsuperscript{49}

Accompanying rural, bedouin traditions is the often-maligned tribal system, where Kuwaitis will stick to clan-based societal divisions out of respect to tradition and family honor. While well-meaning reformers since before the time of the Prophet Mohammed have attempted to unite Arabs across tribal divisions, the source of conflict is also at the heart of what keeps Arab kinship culture and tradition so strong—families are held sacred.\textsuperscript{50} Islamists as well as Liberals acknowledge the
tribal influence on their culture and recognize its influence in modern politics.

In this regard and in other issues, bedouins play an important role in refusing quick change. They bring a balance that sometimes helps everyone. For when you go there [to the bedouin tribes and homes] you see Kuwait.

The keen political candidate needs to convince the voters that they cry for Kuwait, that they hold Kuwait in their heart, that it is something inside you. Speaking of reaching the voters, you need to speak to them in their dialect, in a way they understand. Here you can’t escape the influence of your family in politics.⁵¹

One Islamist parliamentarian put it this way:

Voting doesn’t depend on a certain issue, one issue. [It depends on] a lot of issues. Mostly [the] families issue. For example, I am one of the Islamic movement, my wife, and my sisters must vote voluntarily because they feel they are very close to me, so they vote for me, out of respect for me. And for example, my Liberal friends, their families will vote for them, their sisters and their wives will vote for them; this is natural in Kuwait. So giving this right to women doesn’t change anything about Kuwait. The results of the elections [were almost the same].⁵²

In short, patriarchal attitudes remain strong in Kuwait due to demographic shifts of traditional and conservative bedouins to urban centers. But tribalism closely accompanies the “bedouinization”⁵³ of Islam in Kuwait and is reflected in local politics.

In addition to inherited philosophical differences of opinion created by Islam’s vast and complex history itself, we add demographic shifts from rural to urban life, and tribal and kinship traditions, as was emphasized by the political Liberals. Politics, gender relations, and religion can usually seem conflated in a majority Muslim culture like Kuwait. However, Islamic feminists are working to disentangle cultural conservatism from religious truths. The “pro-women politician” offered his observations:

See, I think now…the Liberals…they don’t have a lot of number of women with them in practice, still.

I think Kuwait is, still…we have a cover of the religion in every single house here—even in the Liberal people. Still, you know, the strict Islamic habits, and strict Islamic…activities [are] still there. And just to be out of that…still, we need time. We need to teach those
people that...there is no contradiction between Islam and having the freedom to vote for whomever is better for the country, to whomever is better for us. Still, we are under the veil of that kind of religious restriction which is not from Islam. Still, I am telling you, this is a kind of tribal habits, huh? Still, not from Islam.\(^{54}\)

Even a Salafist points out how women’s education progressed despite the inherent conservatism of Kuwaiti culture:

In the past, a lot of Kuwaiti families insisted that when their daughter reaches a certain education level, she must leave the school and marry. But now, this is not the case anymore in Kuwait. For example, my mother learned how to read and write in house schools, late in the 1930s. All in Kuwait’s history we taught girls, but after a certain level, 15 or 17 years, she stopped learning and got married. But now, no. All girls can reach all degrees of education without any problem.\(^{55}\)

**Patriarchy Not for Men Only**

Patriarchal mentalities are not just for men. Women notoriously perpetuate the status quo of patriarchal norms just as much as men, even if it hurts them in the short term. Part of this is due to what Bourdieu and Passeron called the “social reproduction” of culture.

This is the way that we educate our females, our people. Now...“this is what I believe in, so I will reflect it into my new generation,” my kids. And they will carry it on without thinking about it if it is true or not. If it is good or not. So they will reflect it into their actions. Even if she is a female. I mean, she is trusting me as a father and she is reflecting it in her activities in life. And she is giving the whole respect to the male (which is good!), but more than good, it is like...stupid thinking [Laugh]. So...this is why I guess...what we did, we control their minds. And tell them that you are nothing, you have no qualifications to compete with the male in the society. Again...

*And by “we” you mean...*

Men. Males. I guess this is the main reason why the female either voted against their rights...\(^{56}\)

One male Liberal journalist recognizes the conservative tendencies for women to vote for the status quo, though in his opinion, it might not serve their short-term political interests:

Well, women’s vote usually is more conservative. They are pro-family. They are taught somehow, or under the influence of the religious
writings and preaching which comes to them from every side. So if that’s shaped their minds such that the only way to protect the society is through the religious groups’ programs... and [that] they are the political power which protects the society from leaning towards all these problems of modern societies like crime and drugs, and all things like that... and also, these religious groups are very active among women.

They have meetings, sessions, with their societies... of course, things are open even for the Seculars to do things like that—but... religious groups have much better leverage. Like the system of education is supporting them, they have mosques, they have their cultural background... so many things which help them. So they don’t have to... persuade anyone about their point of view [Laughter]. Two-thirds of it are already taught by school and by general education about religion. It’s just like any religious movement in any part of the world. I mean, most of the information and support comes from—not from the party itself or from the organization—but simply from the cultural background or religious background of the society itself. 57

Another source of religious authority for Islamist women’s rights activists is found in the opinions of their religious Islamic leaders. The fatwas are important when determining whether certain actions are determined to be “lawful” or “legitimate” in Islam. In addition, the reputation and example of religious Islamic activists and politicians also plays a factor.

But Islamic feminists, the men and women who believe in women’s rights from within an Islamic worldview, are combating patriarchy by fighting tribalism and “misguiding religion” with civic education. Sincere, believing Muslims find something irreverent about the misuse of religion in politics, and political Liberals believe this to such an extent that they stick to the secular-leaning side of the spectrum, which prefers religion to remain relegated to the private, not the public, sphere. The pro-women politician emphasized the negative effects of misuse of religion and its relationship to the perception of political Islam around the globe:

I had the opportunity to see exactly those people who are from religious origin, and those people from the Liberal origin. And since, as you can see from my face, if anyone [who] sees me, they say “I know that you are a religious person, [and] of course, we think that anyone that is religious, he must be very strict in everything.” I think the Islamic religion is not strict. [It] is the most open religion... for the people, and to contact each other, sit with each other, to discuss things with each other, is Islam. But the problem is from the people,
the Muslims—not from the religion itself. They didn’t understand the religion of Islam correctly, and because of that you see these kind of abuse of religion from some people. So we have now Al-Qaeda and some different names that you can hear and see here and there. 58

He also speaks about the fact that male and female activists are fighting conservative tribal mentalities with civic education about women’s abilities in business and politics:

In 2006, when we had the elections for the parliament, some women, they...registered their names to be as a candidate for the parliament. But since it is a very new issue in Kuwait for the women to have their political rights, and since the women didn’t have enough time to understand their rights, and to just, you know, just probe themselves out of the clothes of the men, they need the time to understand their rights, and that they have the right to pick and to vote for whom they want. Not for whom their husbands, or their brothers, or their fathers [want], as usually we have here in Kuwait.

One female academic believes that civic education about women’s rights in the Kuwaiti Constitution will help to motivate and mobilize women for their rights:

It requires...incentives. Everything in this world boils down to pure economics. What are the incentives for women who don’t know their rights? They don’t know what rights they’re missing. They have to know that...Article in the Kuwaiti Criminal Law that’s anti-Islamic, that basically...protects and propagates honor killings. There aren’t a lot of honor killings in Kuwait, it’s not an issue, but if you highlight that it could be—the law protects him! He can barge in on his mom, his sister, his wife, right? And if he catches her in a delicate act and kills her in a moment of passion, then it’s treated not as an actual criminal offense, but it’s treated as a misdemeanor...I mean, that sort of legislation, this is anti-Islamic. In Islam, it says you need four witnesses to prove any sort of sexual misconduct. You can’t just barge in and kill people! You get women upset about housing laws. You get women upset about...passport laws. You know, the actual law in Kuwait is that a woman cannot renew her passport without the written consent of her husband! A lot of women aren’t aware of that. You know why? Because that law isn’t activated. It’s not strictly enforced. But the more conservatives we get into power, the stronger it’ll be applied. Personal status laws, you know...

This is, like I said, a welfare state, an opulent state, it’s still...run by kinship values and kinship process, right? So...women candidates need to understand this role. They have to appeal to people based
The solidarity of kinship structures came into play during election time as a former parliamentary candidate observed how it came up on her campaign trail:

Yes. This, you know, when you come in religion, as you see in Iran, in Lebanon, in every hot point in the world, religion, especially Islam, you can’t touch it. So, the [ones] who believe in God, who wear hijab, or abaya, or . . . or as you mentioned as Islamist, she will not use her mind and her vote for herself. She will go to the big boss of the group—husband, brother, or anyone. Even the Liberals. In my opinion, even the Liberal women in that election (the 2006 election), they didn’t take their chance to vote. In the last moment (a lot of them told me) they went to their husbands, and their brothers, and their fathers and said “who [do] you want [me to vote for]?” Even maybe she take one vote, but she give her husband or the men in her family the other vote. And they (the men) brainwashed the women in the last days [before] the election . . . [saying] that “even if you want . . . any one of the candidates, but they will not have a chance in this election, so don’t lose your vote. Give your vote to another man who . . . we want [or] need him.” And they always have promoted some ideas such as “Kuwait is going to a very dark point! We have to solve the problem! Women, at this point, they can’t do anything!” They always put women in the corner of weakness. And this is what happened in last election.

Eliminating the Gender Issue

Nevertheless, it is important to further analyze the variety of strategies among Muslim women’s rights activists and pay particular attention to group dynamics and how it is they construct their agendas. Within women’s societies, some female activists are echoing what male activists say—that women themselves are hurting their cause. By focusing on gender, they are isolating women’s issues when they should bring these issues into the fabric of the rest of the society.

In my opinion, people are focusing too much on women. While men forgive themselves for their political failures, we should be addressing social problems as societal problems, not just isolating them as women’s or men’s issues.

For example if you focus on women’s societies and NGOs, they are the most active in addressing societal problems. And it’s good that the
elite are focused on the needs of others. But the media is focused from [the] men’s point of view...

If you see women’s societies around the world, at first they were only women, then they gained male members. I even heard about a women’s society in Spain that now has all male members! They say they are there to support women’s rights. So it just takes time.\textsuperscript{62}

In a way, this argument sounds like yet another paradoxical statement of Islamic feminism: if you want to be a successful feminist—stay out of the gender box!

A last resounding theme among the male elites was their focus on convincing others that women’s rights are human rights.

[Female candidates] have to have propaganda to let women understand their rights, and [that] they should participate in the political issue here in Kuwait. I think, still, they are not doing their job right. They need to communicate with each other, to participate with each other to let the people here in Kuwait understand that women are human beings exactly as men. And they have the right to vote for anybody they see that [they think] he deserve[s] to be the representative in the parliament. Still, we don’t have this kind of understanding of voting.\textsuperscript{63}

In the end, eliminating the gender debate is part of rationalizing faith and feminism from within an Islamic worldview. Part of the lesson that secular feminists can take from the experiences of Islamic feminists in Kuwait is the ability to leap over a gender debate by anchoring their arguments in a shared Islamic tradition. Another male interviewee describes his own process of rationalizing his faith into his politics:

Islam is more...[of] an external life. It’s not something that we do in the mosque and just forget it, no! I guess it’s...Islam is more like an ethical world[view] for me. I use it like an ethical...theoretical background. You know, that [I use] to take my actions in the society. I guess...I practice my life with a mixture of Islam and, you know, my experience with the people. So it’s like a mixture. Islam is like, I cannot forget it in all my relations.

I’m one of the people who, you know...pushed towards giving the rights for the female. I guess...this is their right. And I’m not sure what...I...have a right to take or to give. But the...customs, culture, made such complications. Now, we have no [restriction] in religion or in other aspects to give the female the right to vote...

Islam gives like a wide umbrella. And everyone of us [is] taking one side of it and trying to fix these...generic-type statements into what
he likes. Which is a very bad thing. So I guess, no. Islam has a…very open-minded mentality…and very peaceful, and very respectful to the people…and Islam treats people…you know, equal. For the female…we have no limitations whatsoever. I mean, why should we take it [their right to vote and participate in politics] off?64

This male interviewee’s struggle to rationalize his faith and his feminist beliefs within an Islamic worldview is the same struggle for politically active Kuwaiti women and indeed is a microcosm of the debate that is happening at the sociologically macro-level in the larger society. The fact that men are struggling to reconcile their faith and feminist beliefs is evidence of the fact that the gatekeepers of this male-dominated society are enabling feminism from within their Islamic worldview.
Arab youth and Islamic feminists are emblems of a “third way” in Kuwaiti politics. Importantly, underlying this third way in politics is a sociological co-existence of traditional Islamic values and pragmatic modern interpretations that offer solutions for the larger Middle East. What Courbage, Todd, and Holoch call a “convergence of civilizations,” González and Al-Kazi call a “co-existence” model—a third way between Islamism and Liberalism in the Middle East. Courbage, Todd, and Holoch cite the diversity of fertility rates, ideologies, and country-specific case studies to conclude that Islam does not determine demography and that “Muslim unity, unchanging Islam, and Muslim essence are imaginary constructs.” Their examples are diverse groups within the Islamic world, but in this book, I contend something more of an adaptation to modernity while retaining as sometimes disconnected and nostalgic memory of the past in a co-existence model of conservative traditionalism and progressive liberalism—a third way. This chapter provides a sociological picture of contemporary Kuwaiti youth perspectives on women’s political participation, showing a pragmatic balance of individual-progressive and communitarian-conservative attitudes toward women’s rights. In this chapter, we see how social activism grounded in sources of legitimate authority requires a pragmatic balance that the youth are
negotiating with current authority figures. Holding the key legitimating authorities in balance of community, political, and religious authorities, previously marginalized populations will continue to find their voice and pave their own way.

What does the future hold for Islamic feminists in light of the so-called Arab Spring of revolutions throughout the Arab Muslim world? Arab Muslim young people, many at the forefront of such revolutionary changes, are optimistic. The youth in Kuwait, like Islamic feminists, embody the best of both worlds—the ancient values of their Islamic culture and religion, while recognizing the demands of modernity and globalization.

**The Superwoman’s Guy**

When I asked where we could meet for the interview, preferably a place where local young people might tend to hang out in Kuwait, instead of being directed to a local coffee shop or restaurant, my interviewee suggested that we meet at . . . Starbucks. “The *souk is mainly for tourists,*” he explained. This young man in his mid-twenties comes to our interview wearing a t-shirt with a picture of Superwoman on it—he is clearly making a statement. A Bing Crosby CD recording is playing in the background of the Starbucks on the main road near the trendy and upper-class Marina Mall. I was accompanied by my friend and sometimes translator, but this interview needed no translation for it would be conducted entirely in English. “I studied in the US for a time, and came back to work at an English-speaking university in Kuwait, so I am actually more comfortable speaking English than Kuwaiti sometimes.”

He has invited some of his friends to join in the conversation, but thankfully, they show up late enough to give us time for a more lengthy review of his answers to my standard set of questions.

I’ve always been pro-women’s issues, and pro-women’s rights in Kuwait. Especially most recently being the right to vote and have a place in parliament. But the thing is that my view on it tends to be kind of in the middle. Ideally, I would like to see women in the parliament, I would like to see women get the vote, have more political power. But one of the things that we always have to consider is the timing right now. Unfortunately, you still have many men who are married to multiple women, who have more than one wife. And unfortunately because of the way these women were raised, they have to be very . . . submissive, I think, to whatever the man says . . . What concerns me is if women do get the vote right now, they will be voting
for whoever the husband tells them. Now, most of these men who are married to multiple wives tend to be (for my taste) a bit too much on the conservative side. By giving the women the right, women are a big part of the population… I would think, I feel Kuwait would not be taken in the direction that I would like us to go.  

Interestingly, here we see a young, self-declared political Liberal Kuwaiti who is unsure if giving women the right to vote was a good idea because it would benefit social conservatives. In other words, in the interests of political Liberalism, it might be beneficial for Kuwaiti women not to vote. This logic promotes an anti-Liberal argument that to promote a progressive agenda, it would be beneficial to restrict women’s political participation. The young man considers why it is that women are not being represented positively in the political arena in Kuwait:

Maybe religion plays a big role in it, I think. Or the misunderstanding of religion? I mean, if we look at religion in a historical way, women were always very active economically, politically, you know. If you look at it Islamically. But now I think what’s going on is there’s been this confusion of… religion, tradition, and culture. Some things that stem from cultural origins are now being confused with being religious…

Like you see the women covering their faces. Now when Muslims go to Pilgrimage (Hajj), it’s by law in order for your pilgrimage to be attested by God, women are not supposed to cover their faces. Well, you see now… like when you go around here [in Kuwait] you see women covered up, you can automatically just think “Yea, they’re more religious, more conservative,” which is not necessarily true. Because… I don’t know why, I just feel that if in God’s house, Mecca, you’re not supposed to be covering your faces, why are you covering your faces when you’re not? I think maybe, this isn’t based on my interaction with anyone in specific, this is just a guess, that they’ve just been taught that to be closer to God they have to be more… chaste. And in order to be more chaste, you have to completely become… sort of… de-humanized in a way. And it loses any level of femininity that the woman might have. Because when they have the veil and the abaya, and the hijab, you really cannot tell what’s under that.

This attitude toward religious garb for women as a matter of individual self-expression may be characteristic of a Kuwaiti youth who is making his way between a traditional conservatism and a political Liberalism. This perspective might be shared with many outsiders who do not understand the cultural reasons behind a majority of
Kuwaiti women veiling. But as we will see in the following interview, we have many different perspectives represented among Kuwaiti youth. Their ability to bring various religious, political, and ideological perspectives together in a way that is mutually respectful is a testament to the fact that Kuwaitis have learned to co-exist with a variety of expressions of the same faith and way of life.

**The Third Party Islamist**

Another male interviewee, an “informal” Islamist this time, has also set aside the traditional *ghutra, agal,* and *dishdasha* and appears at home in a dark Western business suit. Interestingly enough, as with my previous young male interviewee, we agree to meet at Starbucks for coffee. The “third party Islamist” is a man of many talents. He is a journalist and writer, has a master’s degree from abroad, and is a member of several local and international associations. From the interview, it becomes clear that he views political issues and human rights issues as very much global in nature, both in essence and in solution. He is also markedly traditional about certain social issues, yet perplexingly progressive and modern in others.

We try to show also how Islam protected and gave women, even the political rights. Some also gave women the right to vote, to be elected, to be a candidate. We are also trying to face the political Islamic leaders who are using the Islamic principles to achieve their political agenda. These are our main goals.

*So who do you think are the major players of the people you are trying to raise awareness to in Kuwait?*

Two things. The Islamic political leaders, and the other is the civil societies, especially those who are involved in women’s rights. [We] try to raise the awareness, like I told you, that women have the right, and Islam gave women the civil rights, the social rights, the economic rights. And, shall I say, in arranging or organizing some conferences, some workshops, or issuing some statements, or official visits...these are the tools we use to achieve our goals.

There are some groups who are using the women issue to achieve their political aims. So that is our main problem. Islam has nothing to do with the matter of denying women’s rights. Actually we have two groups: the Liberals...the Secularists, and the extremist Muslims...between two brackets the “Islamic” political leaders.

We are trying to focus [on the fact that] women should be aware of their political rights, their political or ideological conflicts. There is a conflict. We are trying to get women away from them.
The Liberals are accusing the extremist Muslims that they are denying the right of women. The extremist Islamists are accusing Liberals that they are trying to impose Western ideology and Western principles and ignoring Islamic principles. So this is a conflict. This is a political conflict. So we are trying to purify the women, we are trying to...

*What do you mean by “purify”?*

Purify because they [the opposing groups] are using women as a tool. Everybody is saying that “it’s mine, and I’m the one who is defending.” So actually they are putting their dirt on women. Take your dirt!

You have the right either the political rights, social rights, civil rights, either from the Islamic point of view, or from the pure Western view. But don’t use this conflict, this struggle, and don’t use women as a tool to achieve your goals.

Liberals are using the Western ideology to encounter the Islamic ideology, Islamic extremists. And the Islamic extremists are also using the Islamic principles to attack and criticize the Liberals.

Even the Islamic extremists that refused to vote for women’s rights, women in Kuwait know that these extremists are not pure Muslims, or she knows they [the politicians] are using them [women]. So they are voting for Islam, not for them. “I know you are lying and you are using me, but I will vote for that person because he is a real Muslim.”

The problem…is [that] 99.99 percent of women[’s rights activists] touch, or cross the red lines of Islamic principles. So the extremists are gaining.

The Liberals, some of them, say that women in Kuwait should marry any person, from any religion. And the women, if she is a Liberal, even if she is born in America…she refuses this! “Stop! I’ve been created to follow these things. And if I do any things like this, reason for being here [on earth] is nonsense. So, my death and my life is [Islam]. So I must not [vote] for the Liberal. So I must vote for that (stupid, or that cheater, or whatever you want to call it)…” Actually, we don’t have third parties. If we had third parties, then everything would be okay. [So] then, we are the third party.

*Who’s “we”?*

…The educated, the non-political, the associations that promote the awareness of women’s rights without political agenda or religious affiliation.

Let me tell you something that may…it will be useful for you either here, or later [in life]. We are Muslims. We cannot separate the Islamic aspect from all aspects of life. So Islam is the only power which guides us. So there is no disadvantage of that. I will vote for this person, and Islam protected me. Islam gave me the right. No matter how these people [think] who are using it.
This interviewee exemplifies a modern Gulf political Islamist for his grounding in a philosophical worldview that upholds Islamic principles at its core. And though he believes that certain Islamic traditions go against a Western, Liberal, or Secular political agenda, he goes out of his way to promote the idea that Islam has a lot to say about women’s political rights without extremist tyranny and violence.

Informal or nonpolitically affiliated young Islamists play both against the libertine path of political Liberalism as well as against the dogmatic fundamentalism of Islamist politicians.

The problem with the Liberals is that they are putting all their things, or ideologies, with Western ideology. They do not know how to play, they are not like the Islamic extremists. So in politics you have to be more flexible. Don’t agree with everything that the West adopts. Give yourself a chance to agree with them [Islamists]: “Yea, we agree with you!” [Liberal women’s rights activists]: “No!” Everything they say [In a feminine voice:] “No! No! No! We are against it! We are against it!”

So the majority will not like you because you are totally Western.

*Are there any areas of cooperation, you think?*

No. They are totally contradictory. I would call them “extremist Liberals” and “extremist Muslims.”

Although some sociologists of religion observed the rise of religion in politics in the United States in the 1980s as a form of identity politics within a milieu of previously marginalized voices—including women, ethnic minorities, and others—I found something similar but different to identity politics for political Islamists in Kuwait. Social conservatism, by using the language of individual choice to assert their religious convictions, including “rights” for religious women to attend university veiled and in gender-segregated environments, has grown among the youth. Perhaps an increase in students from bedouin rural backgrounds has added to this number. But maybe an ideological movement in defense of Islam is also occurring. Young Muslims in Kuwait and perhaps the larger Arabian Peninsula might find political Islamism attractive simply because it asserts their right to be proud of their cultural, national, and religious heritage. A renewed sense of pride is especially important when the global politicization of Islam has shamed many Muslims into a defensive posture toward Westerners and Western media.

**An Unapologetic Secular Feminist**

From a Liberal young Muslim to a “third-party” informal Islamist, we come to an unapologetically Secular young Kuwaiti academic with
an international perspective on women’s rights. The young feminist states her gripe with political Islamists in her country:

The Kuwaiti Constitution says that Sharia law is one of the sources of legislation, right? So, for all intents and purposes, Kuwait is used to being a secular state, right? And um, this idea of having Islamist parties, I think, is very controversial. Just talking about the indigenous, the national population in Kuwait, 99.9 percent are Muslim. So what does it mean when you have an Islamist party? What does it make the rest of us? So you can’t claim spirituality, or religion in a place where there are no other religious, ethnic minorities, right? We’re all Muslims at the end of the day. What is this divine authority that you’re claiming to yourselves, you know? What, when you ... designate yourselves as the Islamist parties, what does it make the rest of us, pagans? Or ... I just think that it’s very dangerous ground and it’s a kind of manufactured identity that ... you know, this is a by-product of cultural anxieties, disillusionment, it’s a part of ... you know, rapid change in a very short space of time, so people have all these ... nostalgic ideas, and unfortunately, they can exploit this by political parties who ... you know, designate the Islamic cover for themselves as an agenda to gain power. As everybody is, you know, when you’re talking about politics. You’re talking about power and power-sharing. 7

When asked why it appeared political Islamists had an advantage over Liberals in recent elections, she offered her comparative perspective on the Islamists:

They have much stronger, what we call a grass-roots movement. They’re much more ... organized. Their ... base is stronger, their voter base is stronger. They get a larger share of the so-called moderate society because ... 

... Because they ... tend to be ... a lot less vague than the Liberals. Which is the same problem you have in the US, right? Compared to the [conservative] people like [former US President George W.] Bush, at least the voter knows what he stands for — and against! Whereas the Liberals, you know, they’re a lot more wishy-washy. But of course, the Liberals here aren’t the same. You know, we’re Liberals in the sense that we’re non-Islamist and secular, but we’re not liberal enough to support gay-marriages or send around a petition for animal rights. No. But still, they have the advantage because at the end of the day they can claim divine authority and we can’t. You’re trying to ask good questions of rationality and citizenship and statehood, and a lot of people in this part of the world operate on a kinship level. They don’t operate as like a citizen of that state.
She continues:

I think spirituality should not enter into it... I could be a good Muslim but a bad politician. And I could be a good politician but a bad Muslim. Those two are not mutually exclusive. So... the point is. As a representative in government, I need to represent the people who are voting for me. The constituents in whatever district. Whether I’m male or female, whether I’m Islamist, or Liberal. Whatever personal leanings I have should not enter into the equation. I am a representative. Who I am doesn’t matter as long as I’m an ethical person. Do you understand what I mean? I’m just a vessel. But hopefully a vessel that can argue, a vessel that has sway, but I’m a vessel carrying their wishes. So at the end of the day, that’s what should matter. And that’s I think, what a lot of people should get.

This cross section of Kuwaiti youth points to the fact that the future thinkers and constituents of this debate over the future of women’s rights in Kuwait are very diverse. Their commonalities come from being highly educated, well-travelled, and comfortable inhabiting both the local conventions within their culture as well as conversing and considering the ideas of other cultures. Some of the influential sources of divergence come from a number of demographic factors, which we will consider.

All in the Family Background

ISAS data shows family background, particularly the example of the mother, has an important effect on youth attitudes toward women’s rights. Mother’s education is consistently correlated with liberal attitudes about Islam and women’s rights. Having a mother with at least some college education significantly boosts both male and female youth’s opinions of women’s potential for political leadership in Kuwait. Throughout the interviews, we also begin to see the influence that family upbringing has on a variety of individualistic attitudes toward women’s rights, and more specifically of their dress.

From my mother’s side, all of my aunts were covered up long before my mom. My cousins, the moment they hit puberty they covered up, and started wearing veils. Whereas on my dad’s side, it’s just something that’s very rare. Like a couple of my aunts just decided to wear the veil, you know. Again, and just because they started wearing the veil, it’s not an indication of how religious or not religious. They are religious, but I think it is one of the big fallacies that come along with
it. Meaning what? Now, normally you’re walking down the street, it’s a natural assumption if you see a bunch of women covered up and non-covered up, you’re gonna think the one who’s covered up is the more conservative, is the one who knows her God, is the one that is more pious, more religious, more… it’s a natural assumption. Which is not true. Again, I have known a lot of women and I love them and everything, and many of them weren’t covered up. I think, you know, they were among the most pious, most charitable people that I’ve met! It’s not an indication. I think there has been an emphasis not necessarily about how religion is practiced, but about how it looks.9

The young man continues:

If I’m a girl, and I was raised in a household where everyone was covered up, of course I’m gonna cover up. Whether someone tells me to or doesn’t. You know, I don’t want to deviate from that. So again, there’s that kind of familial, kin indirect pressure that goes along with that.

It follows naturally that if youth are so influenced by the many cultural tenets of their upbringing, but also hold in tension the values of open-minded and critical thinking from their formal education and personal experiences, this would be reflected in a variety of views about the importance and significance of the Muslim veil in their societies. For this young man, tribal traditions did not affect him as much as family upbringing on shaping his attitudes toward the veil.

I think one of the differences is like who’s the guy who’s talking about [a girl]? How was he brought up? Did he go to a [gender] segregated public school? Or did he go to a mixed school where he had interaction with females, and non-related females? Middle school, high school? Now, a lot of people who do end up going to government schools, and then go to the university where it’s segregated, have not seen non-relative women as people. [Laugh] You know? It’s always been something to abstain from. “Don’t look at women. Don’t talk to women.” Not because … again, I think it’s socially enforced behind a shield of religion, where “it’s what religion says” when it’s not what religion says.10

Generational bonds are cultivated in long-standing social rituals such as marriage, and the courtship rituals that eventually lead to marriage. Self-reflection by women about their roles in the institution of marriage may continue to affect the decisions of many increasingly educated Arab Muslim females to leave abusive marriages or to not get married at all. At the same time, we gain insights from this young
man’s male perspective, which exists alongside those of the veiled and non-veiled women he describes.

**Criticism of Both Liberal and Islamist Parties**

Another characteristic of Kuwaiti youth who hold both modern and traditional values is their criticism of both Liberal and Islamist parties. The third party Islamist had this to say about the difference between political Liberals and Islamists in his country: “The Liberals have no identity and they have no supporters, and that is why they are using Western agenda, as the majority of Kuwaitis say.”[^11] It may be important to point out some criticisms of the political Liberals in Kuwait, as well as their origins and their contributions, to see why it could be that they are not as popular as their Islamist counterparts in the polls. One criticism by young Kuwaitis is that **Liberals have no indigenous agenda** aside from being puppets of the West. A second criticism of political Liberals is that **they are an isolated elite** that is out of touch with the average citizen. Many Islamists claim that they have popular approval because of the investments they have been making in their communities through social activism. The young female Islamist activists of HADAS believed this was largely why their candidates were so successful in the 2006 elections. Not only were young female Islamists effective liaisons for their male Islamist candidates and complemented their efforts, but they had also already been more socially connected, were on the ground anyway, and thus had gained the trust of their neighbors, particularly the women. A third criticism of political Liberals is that **they are not actually “progressive”** because changing the status quo might mean making more room for Islamists in power, which would not be in their interests. As mentioned earlier, the example of the well-respected but Liberal professor who said he would boycott his daughter if she chose to wear a hijab would seem illiberal to some. Also, criticisms of politically Liberal men who seemed unwelcoming to women on their campaigns in the first election also speak to this desire among an elite Liberal establishment to keep things as they are and not allow potential threats to steal their powerbase. This chink in the philosophical armor of the Liberals may come back to haunt them if they do not learn to accept and work with Islamists who have a substantial following in the population.

Another criticism of political Liberals is that though they purport to fight for progressive individual rights, at the same time, many have been in power since the government reforms of the 1960s and have not adapted their political ways to the social realities of the present day. In
some ways, they appear more invested in the status quo than so-called political conservatives who appear progressive simply because of their demands for change and reform.

And there is [a] second thing I don’t like about Liberals. They are the same people since the ’60s! Why is there no second in line, you know? [One Liberal politician] he’s almost 80 years old. And he’s still there!... There is no second line. There is no third line of Liberals.

All our ideas our liberal! We want to be part of this party, but there is no party! And [at] the same time, you know, we go and we are the one who [are saying] “yea, good!” and think about it, you know. Why he can say what I can’t say, you know?

Just ask yourself why there is no second line? It’s always what I ask myself, you know.

They are using Liberality to win chairs... in the parliament. And [at] the same time, they are not... you know... good ideas and all people everybody like you and everybody are voting for you because you are Liberal, you have good theories, but what did they [do] in the parliament? Nothing! 12

Addressing a legislative proposal to ban Bluetooth technology by the Islamists, 13 one young university professor emphasizes what she sees as the subtle dangers of legislating morality. She points out how both Islamists and Liberals can make this “mistake” of overstepping their legislative powers to encroach upon individual liberties in Kuwait:

It’s a technology, for God’s sake! Are you gonna imprison technology? I mean how stupid is that? And yes, I said “stupid.” And so... I don’t see there are true Liberals now in Kuwait, but if you vote for people. I mean, you’re more comfortable with people because they’re Conservative, or Liberal, or because they have certain political agendas. But the danger comes when you vote for their religious inclinations, because then as you are dividing your parliament, you are dividing the streets, and this is where the danger lurks.

Do you think there are any issues where there can be cooperation between Islamists and Liberals?

Oh, yea! There has been a lot of cooperation. There’s been a lot of incidents where Liberals voted with the Islamists, and that’s why you see we’re angry at them now (Liberals who are in the parliament). Because they are not acting as Liberals, for God’s sakes. I mean, that last law is against imitating the other sex. So it’s basically like against cross-dressing. In a way. Imitating the other sex means when men act, or behave in a way that’s just like women and women behaving just like men.
In public, you mean?

Yea! Well, who says if I cut my hair very short and wear pants, am I then imitating? I’ve done it before! I had very short hair[cut]s, and I often wear pants! And if a man wears...I don’t know, more of silky pants, and lets hair grow to his shoulders, is that imitating women? Who says what’s imitating men and what’s imitating women? And then the whole issue with Bluetooth! Incriminating Bluetooth!

[Laugh].

I mean, how does this sound to you? You’re actually incriminating Bluetooth...poor Bluetooth! They’re gonna put him in handcuffs and take him to court. I mean...can you—how do you speak to those people?! And Liberals, as well as Islamists voted for this! So part of the reason for pursuing a third way among Kuwaiti youth is a lack of representation by the prevalent “old guard” among progressive elites. In fact, it appears that many young Kuwaitis, like in other parts of the Middle East, are joining Islamist movements simply because they pose an alternative to an out-of-touch vanguard of secular Liberal elites.

One unfortunate side effect of a generation that feels stuck in the middle of many levels of traditionalism and progressive Liberalism is a feeling that they lack political representation. Frustration with the prevailing political system may result in political apathy.

I lost interest in politics, because again, I don’t feel that I am being represented, I don’t feel that I am going to be represented and it’s reached the point where I really don’t care if I’m being represented.

This is a very unfortunate, very selfish kind of attitude about this, but...again, the parliament itself hasn’t lasted long enough to implement certain laws, to implement certain things. So regardless of whether I...let’s say now I find a group, I come across some parliament members who are representing me, yea, there’s always this...this expected...there’s something inevitable about it. It’s always dissolved.

The fact that the balance of power in Kuwait leans in favor of the executive branch, the monarchy, leaves its parliament vulnerable to dissolution, which is when the ruling leader decides to suspend the parliament for any reason and declares upcoming reelections of its candidates. The Kuwaiti parliament has been dissolved often in times of political crisis (see Table 5.1) and heavily influences the composition of its members by holding spontaneous reelections.
The same young Kuwaiti, when asked if he voted for a woman, brought up the influence his political apathy has had on his lack of political involvement:

_Did you vote for any women?_

I’ve never voted…right now, it’s not the time for democracy in here.

_And why do you think that?_

I don’t know, I don’t believe in the system. I mean, democracy works some places, and there are different levels of democracy. But again, there’s also a time for democracy. Is Kuwait ready for a democracy? Right now, and this is on a very superficial level, because like I said, I’m not very much into politics…I just don’t think it is. I really don’t feel that it is. We need a leader. A single leader to fix things…hopefully to my liking! Again, I have to be just honest about this, because of my lack of knowledge about politics, because of my lack of knowledge about what is going on, I found out about this law yesterday that women can’t work after eight. And why do a bunch of men get to decide that time? [Laugh].

Besides an apathy for politics due to present feelings of misrepresentation, the issue of material comfort making women too lazy to take advantage of their political rights came up again and again.

Many women, I mean regular women, I’m talking about housewives, and college students, regular employees. They really don’t care about their political rights, they don’t care about that. They don’t even read the newspapers. You know, they’re living a pampered life, and they like it that way, you know. 17

And yet, particularly among Liberal youth activists, lies the optimistic belief that with more knowledge of women’s political rights
guaranteed in the Constitution, Kuwaiti youth will become empowered citizens for legitimate change. One young female journalist gave an example of this:

Because most of the education is, in one way or another, controlled by the government, the government is responsible for educating these people! Frankly, I don’t think any civil organization, no matter how hard they work are gonna do much about it. I know, in my student volunteer work…we did councils summarizing the Constitution. We’ve done seminars about constitutional awareness…We actually did this thing where we were sitting in malls wearing t-shirts [and] passing out cookies along with a copy of the Constitution. We did all of that, but I mean, how much did we tackle? What—200 students? What about the 500,000 that are left? And that’s why we need governmental involvement in this issue.

[The government has] to pick their battles with the Constitution, and…the parliament’s really strong. I mean we’re not like one of those…there are elections every day in the Arab world, but really they don’t really count. They don’t count in Egypt, they don’t count in Lebanon…they really don’t count, they’re just for show. In Kuwait, elections actually do count, I mean the parliament members are men with power. So sometimes they make it to power without having enough wisdom to know what to do with this power. And this is a problem the government has. This is a problem we, the Kuwaiti people have.18

One young woman mentioned a quip from a poster: “It’s three pictures. Kuwait: the past, Dubai: the present, and Qatar: the future.”19 The perceptions of the rise and downfall of individual nations is certainly a temporal consideration, as the subsequent economic crisis in Dubai largely attested to.20 However, the importance of the global connections of Arab Muslim majority societies is a fact for any women’s rights activists to consider and take advantage of. Again, some political Liberals would see the gain of political Islamists as going backward, where perhaps “progressive” Islamists might see the redistribution of power in the legislature as not only a reflection of the will of the people but also as a way to work out some of the kinks in their own development of democracy.

At the end of the day, it seems that Kuwaitis agree on the importance of upholding democratic ideals and a participatory form of government rather than an inflexible autocracy. In other words, an imperfect democracy is better than no democracy at all. One Liberal activist describes it this way:

This is the disadvantage: the advantage that we have in having a very strong parliamentary system, a very established one that had its…you
known...we got independence about [19]61, 62, Constitution in about [19]63. Parliament started working since then. So we have a long political history, a legislative system that is absolutely correct, you know, a democracy...but it also hinders us. First of all, because the GCC, with all due respect, are autocracies. There’s a ruler, he wakes up one night, he has an advisory board, they say to him: “Listen, the world is moving towards granting women’s rights. We need to grant our women’s rights! They need to vote!” So, you accept the next day, write the decree. Presto! Women can vote. Right? Change, and it really happens overnight. In Kuwait, it has to pass through parliament. And it’s not easy to pass anything through parliament anywhere in the world. You know what I mean? So, what also makes us unique hinders us. Right?

Democracy! Democracy can be a pain sometimes, right? We have...we want to revitalize our private sector, we want to do A, B, and C. Great. Let’s get all fifty members of parliament to agree on this. That’s not gonna happen, right? Whereas in Dubai, the ruler says “Oh, ok. Let’s jump into place like a 25-year plan! Implement it tomorrow.” It’s done! You understand what I mean?

So this is why when people look at Kuwait, they go “What happened?” What happened? Let me tell you what happened. The Invasion happened. And living under the constant threat of having your country disappear overnight; re-building people’s morale. The crash of the 1980s stock exchange, a complete change of the Kuwaiti demographic system. I mean, what—population explosion after the occupation. The random nationalization they started, alliance. All these things happened!

From this cross section of perspectives, we can see that among Kuwaiti youth, there is a realization that the democracy that makes Kuwait unique, including a variation of a check and balance relationship with the parliament and the ruling government, is constantly developing. Liberals, who have been among the ruling elite, would like to see more government intervention for their progressive agenda, while members of Islamist factions want to see more of their policies pass through the legislature. Islamic feminists recognize the tensions of the precious pearl of democracy being tossed around like a football to the loudest players. They are making their voices heard and seeking out a balance of many inherited identities.

Yet in the midst of all this social tumult, the monarchies of the Gulf are retaining their relevance as mediators of the changes required to move their societies into modernity. In their book Getting to Pluralism Ottaway and Hamzawy describe the mediating role that governments of the Arabian Peninsula are playing to manage the social changes of their traditional peoples into modernity. One female
university professor echoes this pattern of the fears that accompany social changes:

The pattern that we see, [is] the government initiating a progressive step and making it happen in society. That coheres with so much in the history of Kuwait. When the female education was first introduced in Kuwait, all the Islamic groups were against it. They thought that...you know, next time you see her writing love letters to...I mean, to them that was the end result of teaching women how to read and write, okay? You know, so they were against that. But it’s actually the government that took the step, the initiative and encouraged people and later on made it legal. That’s the same for Kuwaiti women, the first generation going abroad to study at the university level. That was also initiated by the government.

For example, setting a certain age for marriage for women so that she’s not married at the age of 13 or 14. That was also done by the government. So I think, you know, when it comes to a step like this in the history of Kuwait, if the government doesn’t take the bold step, it’s not going to happen.  

But the bargain made of welfare states is a silent acceptance of government regulation in all spheres of life in exchange for seemingly unlimited resources.

_A Case of Multiple Identities_

As I conducted my fieldwork, I began to see a multiplicity of identity measures among the religious yet progressive Kuwaiti youth. Figure 5.1 shows by gender the primary affiliations of a sample of Kuwaiti college students. Among the females the identification was first with religious sect, next with family, and the rest more or less widely distributed among other possible affiliations including ethnicity, occupation, and political ideology. Among the males who selected a primary group affiliation, religious sect also was at the top, followed by occupation, family, and so on. Because of the large number of “don’t know” responses, it is difficult to gauge the validity of this particular question statistically, but the larger story is that aside from gender and religious sect, Kuwaiti identity encompasses a number of possible affiliations. This is not a case of multiple psychological identities but rather a set of multiple social identities. But interestingly, it could be the case that the definition of a healthy society is similar to that of a healthy person. For both a person and a society as diverse as Kuwait’s to find wholeness is to accept and integrate their multiple
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social selves into a harmonious balance. If they succeed, they will be a valuable figure in a world that is just as diverse and complex. In fact, the case study of such strategic figures as Islamic feminists in a society as relatively diverse and complex as Kuwait’s can illustrate the possibilities for leadership of traditionally marginalized actors elsewhere in the Middle East. It might be these very complex figures that will carry the negotiation skills necessary to navigate increasingly complex regional problems and turn them into opportunities for growth.

The societies in the Gulf are expected to be modern, and yet their people seem to want to hold on to traditional Islamic-based values. As they see what they view as a moral decay in liberalized American and European societies, they are seeing the contribution they can make by seeking a middle road between tradition and modernity, as emblematized by Kuwaiti youth. This tension of balancing the old and the modern is not new and not particular to Arab Muslims on the Arabian Peninsula. In fact, other nations, such as those in Central, East, and South Asia, are dealing with these development questions themselves.

However, the academic study of Islam is a special case in the sociology of religion because of its still thriving (and reviving) institutional and public role for religion as well as its felt influence in more privatized expressions of individual religiosity. The ISAS 2007 asks additional belief and belonging items to further assess where the respondent’s

Figure 5.1  Primary Group Affiliation by Gender.

beliefs place him or her in a range of multiplicities of belonging in the Islamic context. By “multiplicities” I mean the multiple spheres where religion has had an influence. For example, Figure 5.1 shows, by gender, the respondent’s primary group affiliation as they selected from the ISAS questionnaire. From a precursory look at this data, we can readily begin to locate religion’s important place in the multiple identities of these Kuwaiti college student’s lives. We can also begin to see differences of identity and group affiliation by gender. The majority of females in the sample identify first with sect (whether Sunni or Shia), next with family, and then with religion (Muslim). The males in the sample also identify first with their sect but then are almost equally divided between family and religious affiliation. Ethnicity (whether urban or bedouin tribal background) for the females, and occupation and political ideology for the males seem to also be important groups of affiliation. This is telling because in future analysis we must recognize the multiplicity of meanings that sect, family, political affiliation, ethnicity, and religion may hold for men in this majority Muslim context, while women may imbue their religious identity with more meanings, perhaps even including political and social matters within a religious ideological framework.

In the Islamic context, where religion can be infused into the political and legal systems as well as popular culture, it is important to consider measures of religious belief and belonging in these various spheres. The acknowledgment of the co-existence of multiple identities among Kuwaiti Muslim youth breaks previously assumed (limited) categories and ranges of Islamic belief and expression of religiosity. One such assumption is that Islam is more of a public religion, and that individual Muslims are less likely to view matters of their religious life on a personal, individual level, as is the case with many Christians in Western countries. However, the ISAS data show that in fact, Muslims in majority Muslim contexts do claim to have personal, private religious experiences while also practicing communal religious rituals. I took from Stark and Finke’s assumptions about the sacralization of culture and assumed a range of religious expressions (including infusing social and political attitudes) of Muslims in a majority Muslim context. It is important to note that these multiplicities may or may not have been assumed of Muslims in a minority setting in previous research but can certainly be useful in future studies.

Interestingly, important divisions by political affiliation may be a product of remaining in homogeneous social enclaves, or, as some of the youth reported, it could be that the media is distorting the extent that the Islamists and Liberals don’t get along. Among the
youth, there seemed to be a sincere effort to reach across political lines and dialogues. Evidence of youth collaborating across political lines includes cooperating against financial corruption, redistricting against political corruption, and “grilling” politicians to keep them accountable to make advances in education and health care. An interesting point that the HADAS ladies made during their interview, and what became obvious to me as I drove all over Kuwait trying to listen to different perspectives, was how easy, even in such a small space, it was to never cross paths with those of differing ideologies and lifestyles and thus become vulnerable to fear and antagonism of an opponent that was largely unknown. Or a creation of fear created in the media.

O.W.: The thing that make us together is more than the thing that divides. But, you know…
Ms.C.: The media shows the division.
O.W.: It’s too much.\(^{26}\)

Among the many identities that Kuwaiti youth subsume, one of the top listed in the survey data was sectarian affiliation. In the Middle East, like divisions among Christian religious sects of centuries ago, sectarian affiliation usually accompanies regional and ethnic identities. For many reasons, sectarian divisions are usually considered too sensitive to address in public debate in the Gulf countries because of the fears that upsetting a harmony created by political regimes would have devastating consequences. And these fears are not without merit. Sectarian divisions have risen to violent scales in places where authoritarian regimes had maintained some semblance of stability, although with its own price. The most glaring examples of this are Iraq and Afghanistan, where war has unearthed violent conflict among citizens who were once neighbors, friends, and even relatives. In the wake of the Arab Spring, such internal fissures have erupted in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Syria, and Bahrain. Regional politics, particularly the balance of power between Shia Iran and Sunni Saudi Arabia, the Israel/Palestine conflict, and the effects of insurgent radical terrorists remain unresolved sources of regional tension. Last but not least are the spillover effects from Iraq’s war and reconstruction, and remnant immigration from poorer neighboring Arab countries including ones vulnerable to recruitment from terrorists. Beside the macro-level, global political problems that loom over the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula, there are the mezzo- and micro-level societal problems that may or may not have been
inevitable consequences of modernity, such as increasing deaths from speeding car accidents, increased divorce, increased unemployment, and increased numbers of unmarried females who cannot financially support themselves. Even the fears that accompany the introduction of modern technologies, such as Bluetooth wireless technology, may be additional sources of fears about the future that have Kuwaiti youth retreating to the comfortable nooks of tribal and kinship affiliation. Scholars should continue to view the college student population in the Middle East as a good gauge for the future of their countries. Not only are they likely to represent a cross section of future elites in the country, but they are also arguably the most capable sample of the population to handle the mix of pressures that vie for their national identity.

In fact the variety of expressions of being pro-women in Kuwait gives the youth the characteristic of co-existing with the diversity caused by these internal social divisions. One thing that is interesting about women’s rights activism in Kuwait is when religion is a constant variable, some activists might identify other strong social institutions in their society, such as the tribal kinship system, and designate their activism as something other than “Islamic” feminism and something more akin to the social networks they see around them. Yemeni activist Nadwa Al-Dawsari has experienced what she calls “tribal” feminism. In her work on conflict resolution in tribal areas of Yemen, she notes the special efforts that women make to break traditions of staying at home and staying away from public matters when they use their negotiation skills to serve as mediators for conflict resolution among various tribes in their communities.

**Gender Relations Revisited**

The rise of women in education and business is raising a lot of questions for the role of men in the future of the entire Arab Gulf region. Some authors have even started to document the social changes in educational and professional opportunities for women in the Gulf, which may be having adverse effects on previously defined male roles and identity. Interview data as well as empirical data suggest that men may be as frustrated as women are about the difficulties of finding a right balance between modern realities and traditional values—“Does mom still know best who I am to marry or can I marry a girl who is my intellectual and professional equal?” Men may be officially “in charge,” but they know how much women direct the lives and fluidity of their societies. If women are given free rein in the home
outside of it, what will men do to succeed and contribute? For example, when asked why more men don’t come out publicly in support of women political candidates, the young man of my interviews put it this way: “One of the social and peer pressures I think I would come across is like, well, would I be giving up my masculinity by voting for a woman?”  

Interestingly, as the issue of women’s rights has risen to prominence in discussions of the Middle East, a more recent and unexpected social shift is taking place and bringing about a splinter set of activists fighting against male discrimination in education and the workplace. As women are increasingly entering the university and excelling in terms of grades and graduation rates, university administrators are having to rethink their policies to encourage more men to enroll, improve their grade point averages, and graduate on time.  

Amidst demographic shifts, it is also important to recognize that men are still searching for their place, with traditional expectations as well as modern pressures from the variety of perspectives about gender that they have been exposed to in their formal and informal education.

**Local Identities and Limitations**

In keeping with the juxtaposition of multiple identities of Kuwaiti youth, the global connectedness that opens up possibilities for women’s rights activists in the region is also kept in check by the realities of the close bonds of their local religious, community, and political networks. Demographic shifts and changes in social expectations are constantly checked by the legitimacy of the lasting sources of authority that surround them. One of the Liberal female youth activists was suspicious that men were threatened by sharing leadership with women.

Yea, well...you know, you may have a husband supporting his wife, but I don’t think the Islamic political groups will be supportive of women representing them. They want the women to vote them in, to give them the power, but not to stand behind a female candidate to have her represent the party. I mean, some now, they’re against for example, women being judges. We’re going back to the same thing. They were against her political rights, now they’re against her being in the position of a judge. Today, for example, in the papers, some of them were not supportive of her entering the police force. So they’re always reluctant when it comes to women entering a new space, a new field, doing something new and different. They’re often opposed to it. And I think eventually they will see this as a threat to them. Not as
Islamic groups, but as males who think that they’re more entitled to the benefits that come with the post.\textsuperscript{34}

However, the unapologetically secular feminist reminded me of the importance of keeping an eye on the status of men in her society in tandem with that of the women:

Look. As a feminist, I always think in terms of gender. So, you know. Simone de Beauvoir wrote a book in the ’50s and it was very seminal work called \textit{The Other}.\textsuperscript{35} And she proposes this theory that the woman is the Other. The idea of the second-sex, just to make it more American for you. Right? So you’re always a mirror for the reflection of the man. So we can’t... chart the progression of women unless we chart the progression of men... So before you look at the new Kuwait woman... you have to look at the man in his country, right? People go on and on about the oppressive state of women in Saudi Arabia. I’m like it’s not a surprise! Look at the oppressive state of men in Saudi Arabia! [\textit{Laugh}]. So, That’s the fact.

I’m not saying that men are better than us, or... or that... you know. But you have to have a standard and then you have to have deviation, right? You have to have a comparison. Usually it starts with men. And compare their standards. Because they then, we as women, we’ve been universally marginalized for so long. You have to look at the issue of men. What have they accomplished? What’s hindered them? And then look at women.\textsuperscript{36}

One male professor references the reverse gender discrimination in politics:

Here the level of [civic] participation is quite high, it passes 80 percent. Women, even though they were taken by surprise for the short time [to prepare for their first elections], I think there was a real discrimination \textit{for} women, not against women. Because at that time they were not registered. So at that time a decision was taken to register women \textit{en masse}. And that was a discrimination against men who didn’t register. That’s never mentioned. Nobody mentions discrimination against men who didn’t register. [\textit{Laugh}]

Yea, this is true! There should be... it was a decision that everybody should have been taken on board, not only women.\textsuperscript{37}

Even more than their global networks, Islamic feminists must negotiate their activism within the boundaries of legitimate authorities that spring from their local connections. The young man of Interview 30 addresses the cultural constraints that keep Kuwaiti youth from
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So what do you think are some obstacles for women moving forward in public life?

I think it’s both men and women. [Laugh]. Men and women are the women’s obstacles.

In what ways?

Again, cultural habits, societal habits. The most basic of which is gossip. That’s the most basic of which.

For example. We’re sitting here innocently enough, you know, how we’re sitting. And comes…let’s say, an aunt, who is slightly more conservative. She walks past and comes and says hi and everything, and then she leaves, and she’s like “Oh, my gosh, can you believe so-and-so’s daughter’s doing this, she’s ruining the family’s name!” And it’s a natural thing! It’s such a cultural thing. And I think that it’s why the way it is…because Kuwait is still a very small country. Where the community pretty much knows…everybody, you know? Everybody knows everybody.38

The realities of both demographic change at the local level as well as exposure to societies outside of the Arabian Peninsula through the powers of the Internet and satellite television have opened up young Kuwaitis to accept their way of life among a multitude of others. In many ways the increase of what sociologists call “bridging social capital”39 has lessened the bonds of their previously homogeneous societies. Acceptance of multiple identities, their own and that of others, may make for a plethora of lifestyles, even in their own neighborhoods.

I have some muthajibat friends (some friends who are veiled), and…every time we go out, I’m like “You’re supposed to be conservative! You know. Covering your hair or whatever.” Even casually, or jokingly I would say that and they would say, “yee so we are covering up, but it doesn’t say that we can’t wear sequins!” Again, you don’t want to stereotype and just because they’re covered doesn’t mean that they can’t have fun. It’s just something that they do by choice to make themselves feel closer to God, and meanwhile…I mean, they’re girls and they want to have a good time, and I mean, they are my friends, they’re friends with a male, and their family knows me, and everything, and it’s fine. It’s more of a personal choice. Again, I think you know, there’s more than just “veiled” and “unveiled.” There’s veiled, unveiled, and within each category there are categories.40
The individualistic attitude for this young Kuwaiti also extends to his political preferences.

When it comes to voting and finding a place in parliament, I don’t think people should be voting for “men” or “women,” they should be voting for their minds, and what they’re trying to do. Regardless of covered up, not covered up. Whether he has a beard or doesn’t have a beard. What ideas do you have that I want to support? That’s what I’m looking for, and not the person sitting in front of me.

...Again, if we’re going to talk about advantages, you’ve got to talk about statistics. The number of women covered up is a lot higher than those who are not covered up. And...I can imagine that there is some kind of loyalty when you’re faced with...should I hire someone who’s like me, who’s covered up or someone who’s not covered up?...I don’t like to feel it, but I do feel that that does play a role—even if it’s minor. Again, that’s not saying that men and women are shallow like that, where ok, I’m gonna vote for whoever looks like me the most. But it’s natural to assume that that does play a factor in the decision-making process.

What this young man is saying, that we vote for people based on appearance, is a known truism in political science. But how does that work in a majority Muslim context where the landscape of lifestyle choices for young people is increasing?

As part of my own participatory observation research, I joined in a ritual that many Kuwaiti youth engage in to entertain themselves and combine with furtive meetings of the opposite sex, many times unchaperoned. The dangerous place I describe is none other than that of the modern, glitzy, no-expense-unpaid shopping mall. The modern, air-conditioned shopping malls of Kuwait are some of the few acceptable public spaces for both men and women to frequent for social outings. At the mall one will see all kinds of people: women who try to bargain at the counter, women who don’t bat an eyelash at extravagantly priced sunglasses and throw diamond-studded designer cuff links into their shopping cart, women veiled so that only their eyes show through slits in their niqabs, foreign women who are showing too much leg and cleavage, men with traditional Arab head-dresses, and young boys who look like they rolled out of bed (with the spikey hairdos to show for it). One can occasionally see a proud young father actually pushing his child in the baby stroller. It seems that in the milieu of people able to congregate at the mall, more than one social taboo can be easily broken. And I realized that no amount of black clothing will squelch girls from being girls. Among the veils
and abayas, there were fake eyelashes, bright blue eye shadow, hot-pink lipstick, and blonde hair weaves. Not to mention little strips of glitter studding the black robes and veils. In a smorgasbord of lifestyle options, young Kuwaitis are continually pushing the boundaries of their local connections and limitations. In a way, this inner diversity on display in the shopping mall enables a kind of indigenous feminism that we have not seen emerge before in the Gulf. Both internally and outwardly, Kuwaiti females can combine their tastes—from fashion to politics—in new and innovative ways.

Access to the Internet and Its Global Implications

One advantage for Islamic feminists living in the twenty-first century is the ease of transport and connectivity to other women around the world through the Internet. The realization that Kuwaiti Arab Muslim women share many things in common with their sisters across the globe can be an enlightening experience in and of itself. But the potential to join their activism in Kuwait to a larger fight for women’s equality around the world adds meaning and support (both emotional and material) to their causes. One female academic describes the influence her global connections had on her individual motivations for women’s rights activism:

The motivation I got is from traveling. From mixing with other people from other countries. Especially with the broader Middle East conferences I was invited to…I have learned a lot from mixing with other people and listening to issues from other countries. And that has motivate me into planning, being there for any kind of movement or strategy. 41

Another former female parliamentary candidate spoke of her belief that one can solve internal problems by learning from the experience of others:

Yes! We have many problems. We can solve it by taking [the] experience of other nations. You know, there is [a] beautiful experience in Russia, there [are] beautiful experiences in America, there [are] camps, you know, for fat children. They’re working very well! They are taking children from all over the world. For fighting obesity, and why not? Why not adopt something like this? You know, by this you are giving the children self-esteem, and you know, when you have all these [temptations] of self-esteem, then you can say “No” to that, to other problems. 42
Global connectedness may be an inevitability for most nations but is particularly true of the foreign policy approaches of Middle Eastern countries, for both political and historical reasons.

Well, all the GCC, I would say all Arab countries look at each other, and I would consider any achievement for women in any of the Arab countries an achievement of our own. Because we know that we look at each other and we’re affected by each other. So we’ve been looking at say, for example, the Egyptians, or the Moroccans, the Algerians, the Syrians, the Lebanese experiences and we’ve been using them in Kuwait. We’re like “Look at these women! Look at what they’re doing, Look at the country, look how the country’s treating the women. Are those countries Islamic countries as well?” I mean, so you use these things. Sure, any achievements for women in Kuwait, the GCC would certainly be initiating their achievements for women in other parts of the Arabic world. And you see that Qatari women, Bahraini women are moving strongly now, and I think it’s the reaction to what’s happening in Kuwait. Definitely.

The influence of each individual country is largely a matter of perception and personal opinion. Whereas one elite might see their country as a leader, another might see it as a follower.

Well, no, I think Kuwait influenced the other countries, but the other countries you know, when… it’s like a bird when you teach how to fly and then it’s out…

*It flies [away on its own]*?

Yea, exactly. So it’s that same with the… Gulf countries. They had [women] ministers before we did, they had [women] judges before we did, they have… you know… Which is a good sign, by the way, I think it’s a very good phenomenon… When something happens there, it will happen other places.

Just look at, for example, the system of the weekend—from Thursday to Friday, to Friday and a Saturday. Many Islamic groups are against it. They accuse people who [are in] support of this idea [say] that… you know, “you forget that we should make a point of being different from the Jews.”

I don’t know, the Jews have nothing to do with this. Their Sabbath, they stay home and they don’t move, they don’t cook, they don’t ignite fire, and this and that. While here, you know… you’re traveling, you’re celebrating, you’re… very active, I mean. And economically, it’s best for the country. But the argument is, the other Gulf countries have done it, and a long time ago, and they’ve benefited from it. So they cannot be less Muslims than we are! So this is, for
example, I’m just citing as an example of how a progressive change, or a positive change anywhere in the Gulf would have its reverberations in other parts.\textsuperscript{46}

The young Kuwaiti of Interview 30 has lived abroad and continues his personal insights on the influence of globalization on his society.

I think one of the advantages that our generation has that also our parent’s generation has but not as much as our generation, is definitely like the…result of globalization. Not necessarily about going to the US, or elsewhere, but also about how accessible information is. If you look at the Internet, the television, the radio, the news, music…all those things, I think plays a role. And especially the accessibility of the countries. Like our generation is so much more well-traveled than the generation that came before us. And our reasons for traveling are quite different than theirs! I mean, those in our parent’s generation…most of their traveling had to do with either studying, or family trips. Our generation is a lot more independent when it comes to that. And I think one of the things that being a well-traveled generation does have a certain eye-opening, humbling, effect on individuals. Again, I cannot be generalizing and saying yes, all people travel. No, because again, you’ve got people who travel [just] to say they’ve traveled, you know? They go somewhere and they do the exact same things with the same people they see here…they won’t let be influenced by the culture they’re in, whether it’s Arab or otherwise. Again, I think like traveling has played a major role, for sure. The fact that we’ve traveled and seen so much of the world. Globalization…Look at the youth, what they’re wearing now!…I think globalization is making everyone look the same. You know?\textsuperscript{47}

This young man highlights the globality and technological savvy-ness of Kuwaiti youth, like many young people throughout the Middle East who are interconnected by personal experience and virtual networks to a global community. At the same time, this young man is very aware, however, of the local networks that constrain his possibilities, including his family, the close-knit community, and cultural customs.

The blogging community provides a major outlet for…expressing your political views, your social views. From the smallest things to the biggest things. You can clearly criticize the government if you want, or the ruling family, or whatever, and not be held liable for it. I think those are the people who are very politically active, and a lot of them are.
The reality of virtual communities of young bloggers, initiated by the ease and anonymity offered by the Internet opens up spaces in the digital arena and facilitates meetings of young minds across a number of social characteristics, such as gender, class, ethnicity, or a whole host of other primary affiliations that might have kept these young people from ever meeting a previous generation ago. One university professor points out this generation gap in technology use:

People are counting on the Internet, but a lot of the older generation (and I mean by the older generation people in their forties and above), they’re not connected to the Internet! They don’t do things that way. So that’s why I said, any campaign to give leeway for women to have more civic life and be civically engaged has to focus on the senior high school and the college student. Because they’re the ones now making use of the new technology, and their idea of networking is different from people from my generation or others. 48

The democratization of the Internet, and its omnipresent influence despite parental restrictions or reservations, is opening the pathways for ideological communities to build around social restrictions.

New technologies, and particularly that of social media, have arguably paved the way for the contemporary generational shift from authoritarian, opaque ruling regimes to more responsive, participatory governments. The instantaneous media that facilitates global network sharing by individuals all over the world has transformed the relationship between people at an individual and community level with their political authorities, notably in the Arab world. The potential for macro-sociological change rooted in the accessibility of the Internet as the main medium of expression was predicted by some social thinkers. 49

But like most new technologies, the Internet has facilitated a whole host of unintended consequences, arguably for both social gain and loss. While the world has been able to become more connected, for some societies, the opportunities to untether their underlying social weaknesses and inconsistencies have allowed for what may seem like social chaos. At least, chaos may be what social transition looks like, for example, in the conflicts in Libya, Syria, and Egypt. Even now, the fate of popular opposition movements throughout the region is unknown as some governments attempt to maintain their legitimacy and control by force. The role of the youth in Arab movements in the era of instantaneous interactive social media is a new area for sociological study. Arab youth have held unprecedented success in mobilizing and facilitating populist revolutions throughout the region.
In addition to recognizing the complexity of identities facilitated by globalization, there are also real geopolitical international pressures on Kuwaitis to define their stances toward issues such as women’s rights. One young Kuwaiti recognized this when she wrote who she believed were the major players in the discussion of women’s rights in her country:

Human rights activists, women societies, political analysts, Arab parliamentary figures, and most importantly Arab governments, because of the great authority they hold, are the main players in this discussion. Powerful international governments and organizations play an important role in the participation of women in political life. Due to the instant pressure they exercise when it comes to these issues.  

Co-Existence, a Counter “Clash” Model

Using ISAS data, González and Al-Kazi point out that though Kuwaiti youth appear religious in belief and behavior, it does not negate their beliefs about gender equality. In fact, the analysis of data from over 1,000 Kuwaiti college students reveals that gender and mother’s education account for significant effects on support for women’s rights. Those Kuwaiti college students who were raised religiously demonstrate more conservative patriarchal attitudes toward women’s qualifications for political office. Islamist political affiliation also appears tentatively to work against women’s rights. However, the fact that the majority of the students in the sample express support for gender equality and believe that “Islam is a source of personal motivation to fight for women’s rights,” demonstrates that Kuwaiti youth do not necessarily equate a pro-women’s rights agenda with a pro-Western style feminism. The evidence from the statistical data of a sample of Kuwaiti college students serves to bolster the arguments about Kuwaiti youth that were discussed in this chapter. Kuwaiti youth carry with them a multitude of competing identities in a culture that is composed of both traditional Islamic customs, a co-existence with political liberalism, and a respect for a plurality of cultures. Kuwaiti youth symbolize in a very real sense a third way between political Islamism and Liberalism and carry both hopes for a future where women are equal partners with men in the society and yet remain true to their religious upbringing. Among Kuwaiti youth, a co-existence of traditional values and modern realities is possible. Both male and female Kuwaiti youth are significantly pro-women in their beliefs about gender equality and the inspiration they receive from their faith to fight for women’s rights.
The largely unavoidable Western influence also has an effect on the mindset of young males. Not just in regard to women but in a way young men’s opinions about women’s rights, roles, and responsibilities come back to the image they have for themselves in the society. When the economy is so precarious, why wouldn’t it be appealing to marry a wife with her own job and thus provide a second income to the household? It follows then, that if she is providing a second income, that a young Kuwaiti couple should be able to afford daycare and household help to accommodate two working schedules. For those men who had the opportunity to conduct their studies abroad, they may have become too broad-minded to settle for a woman who has not for herself a more advanced education or experience abroad. The interesting thing is that these opportunities are not limited to an elite and Liberal upper class, as they once were. The accessibility of travel, access to the Internet, massive oil wealth, and the demographic shifts of rural bedouins to the urban areas, have brought Islamist conservatives to the same universities, shopping malls, and Internet cafés as the foreigners and Liberals in their country.

Many questions lie ahead for Kuwaiti youth, and perhaps the broader Middle East, in such a dynamic global political environment. In the meantime, it appears that the men are happy for women to join them as cultural partners in the struggle for their Arab and Islamic identity in light of a changing world. This is a social inevitability for male Liberals and an Islamically justified mandate for women to share in enjoining the good and forbidding all evil, including the evils of injustice wherever it is present in society.

_A Third Way_

Of all the actors in this book of politically engaged Muslim elites in Kuwait, the youth appear the least tied to a certain political ideology when it comes to issues of women’s rights, but they are well aware of the constraints that their family and culture places on them. With so many identities to contend with, and multiple pressures to conform, Kuwaiti youth, perhaps like many other youth of the Arab Peninsula, are still developing their ultimate sources of legitimate authority. When thinking about the future role for women in their countries, they might appeal to their personal faith, or their parents’ and community’s opinions, or even their political principles.

Kuwaiti youth, like Islamic feminists more broadly, are emblematic of a population that seeks to enact change by combining the best of
ARAB YOUTH ARE MODERN AND TRADITIONAL

the Liberal and Islamist options and creating a third way. One of them put it this way:

    Right now I feel Kuwait is going through a type of war. It’s going through an identity crisis, you know! [Laugh]. It doesn’t know where it belongs. Is it Liberal? Is it Conservative? And what kills me, is why does it have to be one or the other? This is...why can’t there be...both sides. Okay, Liberals have good things and bad things. Conservative side has good things and bad things. Why not just find some common ground?\textsuperscript{53}

Expanding the issue of women’s rights within a broader political framework is something that young Arabs in majority Muslim countries like Kuwait are doing, not just because of their progressive inclinations but as a way to build bridges across ideological lines within their own society. For example, appealing to the Constitution and a national political identity is a way to legitimate their campaign for women’s rights within a nationalistic framework. This is one part of the triumvirate of sources of legitimate authority, including the religious and community sources, which furthers their arguments for women’s rights.

Instead of denying or avoiding their religious or communal values, they are appealing for progressive rights within a more holistic framework. This source of legitimate authority has become an increasingly important touch-point for the energy of youth activism in the Gulf in recent years. As many have seen throughout the so-called Arab Spring,\textsuperscript{54} both political Liberals and political Islamists have found ways to unite under the rubric of a cry for political reform. Both sides of the political spectrum in Kuwait have found ways to come together for political reform in the past. Now we will see if they can succeed in bridging the gender divide while staying true to their Islamic values and heritage.

It is also important to note that besides incorporating women into their agenda as a matter of political shrewdness, Islamist men and women by conviction seek to harmonize their beliefs. This means that political Islamists will inevitably work to address their female constituents’ concerns out of their religious conviction because they appeal to their religious sources of authority. Another Muslim activist expressed herself this way:

    Some people say they are religious and that is why they are against women’s empowerment. Then some people say they are religious and
that is why they support women’s empowerment. But when I remem-
ber that Muhammad, as both a prophet and head of state, restored
women’s rights, gave them authority over their persons and their
belongings, and enforced a respect for females of all ages, then I feel
that (true) religion will facilitate women’s rights.⁵⁵

In conclusion, the youth of Kuwait appear generally optimistic
that they bear the vestiges of a great civilization handed down to
them by God, their parents, and unfolding historical events. They
are determined to continue their education, learn more than one
language, and show the West that you don’t have to be Western to
give women the power they are looking for—that the answer is to be
found at home, however imperfect. In their own societies they will
negotiate the legitimate authorities they need to break through the
present horizons.
Conclusion: Legitimate Authorities in Balance

We call upon you to remove this stain by joining forces with many impartial intellectuals worldwide who are actively defending the rights of peoples and nations to...fight for their rights to freely choose their representatives and those who would manage their political and social affairs, to retain their human dignity and their ability to resist humiliation and occupation, and to stand against injustice using all legitimate means.

Personal freedom is central to western democracies...It should then be one of the fundamental rights of women in a democracy to have the personal freedom to choose their own clothes as far as they are not contradicting any general moral or social value...The world’s women-rights groups have not taken any concerted steps to defend the rights of Muslim women. We cannot help but wonder how the right of nudity is accepted and defended while the right of decency is attacked and questioned?...

If the “West” has abandoned this legacy of decency, does it mean the rest of the world must follow suit? We reject the “war on decency” in today’s world. We also do not accept the notion that this is the price to be paid for modernity and prosperity. Could the attacks on the veil of Muslim women result from the fact that, in itself, it represents just another symbol of decency?

—“A Call for Reassessment: A Letter Addressed to the Intellectual and Opinion Leaders in the West”

Something that is important to take away from this discussion about Islamic feminism in Kuwait is that Conservative and Liberal Muslims are working diligently and bravely to put forward a progressive rights agenda for women. Using the sociological framework of legitimate authority, we see that the actors most successful in pushing forward progressive rights for the previously marginalized are those who balance the appeal to community, politics, and religious authorities. In conclusion to this exploratory study of elites in Kuwait, I would like
to point out several issues that have surfaced as some of the most prominent concerns for Kuwaiti women which are being negotiated from within their Islamic tradition and culture.

**What Islamic Feminist Women Want**

Islamic feminists are addressing systematic and social sources of inequality. This is made through an egalitarian argument—that is, an appeal to the legitimate sources of legislation. In Kuwait there is a mechanism in place for an appeal to political authorities through their parliamentary representatives. This mediated system of checks and balances guaranteed in Kuwait’s political system allows the Kuwaiti Constitution to balance political and religious authorities by stipulating that the Islamic Sharia is a main sources of legislation, not the only source. The Kuwaiti Constitution and political system offers a platform from which Islamic feminists can make their egalitarian arguments.

Women’s approaches and opinions about the unequal status of their personal and political rights vary by social class, family socialization, ethnic background, education level, and age as much as individual personal experience. However, based on the ISAS data, there are some valuable observations we can make about how women’s responses differ from men’s responses and analyze why those differences exist (see Figure C.1).

![Figure C.1](image-url)  
Figure C.1  Most Important Women’s Issues by Gender.  
From the data set including the 30 interviews, gender differences become apparent not just from the way that women’s issues are discussed, but even in order of priority. For example, according to my analysis, women in interviews viewed the most important women’s issues in their country as:

1. *Economic Independence*
2. *Political Participation*
3. *Personal Status Laws and Personal Security*
4. *Educational and Professional Achievement*
5. *Access to Healthcare*

Whereas the men listed the priority for women’s issues as:

1. *Political Participation, and Educational and Professional Achievement*
2. *Personal Security*
3. *Personal Status Laws and Access to Healthcare*
4. *Economic Independence*

From this data, we see that women view their economic independence—that is, the ability to obtain a job with sufficient wages, or a fair share of inheritance or an alimony in the case of their father’s death or a divorce, as their top priority. Interestingly, the interviewed men list economic independence *least* frequently as a concern for women, while listing other priorities such as political rights, education, and professional achievement.

Women seemed to focus on economic independence as a key to addressing other important concerns, which is an important point to bring out when considering women’s perspectives on increasing their role in the public sphere. One woman even put it this way:

> In my opinion, education progressed women’s roles out of the home because with increased education they expected to use their training in the workforce. An expectation of a job outside the home has done more to shake up the “traditional” family in Kuwait than granting women their political rights.²

Another Kuwaiti scholar highly emphasized the importance of women’s economic independence for social change:

> Let me tell you something. Economic independence has done what none of us could have achieved by social means. Economic independence
has achieved what no amount of preaching, or media campaigning, etc. can achieve. Regarding women in Kuwait now...some 70 percent of Kuwait University graduates are women. The majority of the women in Kuwait want to work. I can’t say the majority of them [do] work, but it’s a healthy number. Like 50 percent of women work. A lot. So, once you’ve established economic independence, no one in their right mind...[Would go back.]

No! Because it’s an economic necessity. People no longer support themselves being a single-income family. They need a dual income family. Nobody can touch the right of women to work right now, right? And once you’re working, once you have your own in-flow of cash...it’s very hard for someone to dictate something to you! You’re gonna respect certain things out of tradition, out of Islamic practices, out of kinship obligation. But nobody is going to tell you how to think or what to think because it’s your money at the end of the day, right?

So economic independence has given women a lot more freedom than anything else. I mean the divorce rate in Kuwait, unofficially it’s about 60 percent. But officially, it’s still very high. It’s about 45–50 percent, right? Twenty years ago that would have been unthinkable. Unthinkable. Right? Just because of the sort of...shameful repercussions of being a divorcé in Kuwait. Today, every household, there’s a divorcé. Women no longer feel the stigma about being single mothers or being divorced, or so on. Very important social change. And if you’re getting divorced, what do you care about personal status laws, right? [A lot!] You understand what I mean? And that brings you to—legislation! Right? How can I change this stupid law? By being part of the legislative process? By being politically involved.

Overall, increased and more effective political participation seemed to be a pressing concern for both male and female activists, which makes sense since Kuwaiti women had only recently received their political rights at the time. It was even at the top of concerns for the men. A close second is educational and professional advancement. Women seemed to focus on economic independence as an equally important concern, while men seemed to say that matters of personal security (safe living conditions, protection from harassment at work, for example) were of particular concern for women. Interestingly, everyone from all spectrum of gender and political affiliation seemed to point out the importance of addressing personal status laws. In Kuwait this includes the question of whether a mother can pass her nationality on to her children, regardless of whether she marries a Kuwaiti. In some ways, personal status legislation affects all areas of a woman’s social
and economic life, because it stipulates matters such as inheritance rights and custody rights in the event of a divorce. What cannot be read from this data are the nuanced ways in which political Liberals, Independents, and Islamists see how they must go about addressing women’s personal status laws. Based on ISAS interview data of elite women’s rights activists in the Gulf, here is a snapshot of the most important women’s issues by political affiliation.

Political Islamists:

1. *Political Participation*
3. *Educational and Professional Achievement, and Economic Independence*

Independents:

1. *Political Participation*
2. *Economic Independence*
3. *Personal Status Laws, Educational and Professional Achievement, and Personal Security*

Political Liberals:

1. *Educational and Professional Achievement, Economic Independence, and Personal Security*
2. *Personal Status Laws*
3. *Political Participation*
4. *Access to Healthcare*

Figure C.2 offers an interesting comparison to the top women’s issues by political affiliation. For both male and female political Islamists, the most often mentioned priority was for increased political participation of women. For political Liberals, economic independence, educational and professional achievement, and personal security shared equal priority. Independents also prioritized political participation but didn’t even address women’s need for improved access to healthcare. While this data from qualitative interviews provides a preliminary idea as to the different priorities of agenda by political affiliation, the policy implications of gender and political affiliation will need to be looked at by tracking political behavior over time.
Among the most prominent common agenda items and goals of the Islamic feminist activists in Kuwait is the reinterpretation of personal status laws, or laws that originate in Sharia and discriminate women from men, but which need to be understood in light of modern realities. Among these are unequal distribution of resources where some women do not have the material support from their husbands to survive as costs of basic food and living expenses continue to rise. Domestic abuse and the rise in numbers of women who choose to remain unmarried are also posing problems for the Sharia-based welfare systems of the Gulf. One Liberal male Kuwaiti professor voiced the idea that social rights for women may be fundamentally more important for women than even their political rights—an argument typically made by conservative female Islamists:

[Historically], not a single [Arab] woman came into the National Assembly through elections. Not a single one. They came [during] Nasser[’s] time, came [through] the…system of the quota. Which [was] used in Egypt, Syria, Algeria and all the rest of them.

In the Gulf, now they [are]…asking for [a] quota…[But]…putting [a] woman minister, or in the parliament won’t change anything—unless there is genuine power.
So what advice would you give to women voters, or even women running for office?

I am...over with giving women political rights...I realized I am wrong in my approach.

Before politics, woman should have social rights. Her personal rights. Her personal status [is] more important. Unless woman liberates herself from social [oppression]...There’s no way. Politics, you can talk from now until tomorrow, and then your brother decides if you’re going to get married (if your father [is] dead). Islam allows women to marry herself [off to someone]. But what you have in the Gulf [is] a Wahhabi version of Islam, not an Al-Azhar Egyptian version, or Phoenician Persian Liberal Islam, but a woman [here]—no way she can marry herself! Even if she is 21 years old. I know cases...where women over 30, [the brothers or fathers] marry them.5

This interviewee brings up some profound points. In a country where the version of Islam that is interpreting its Islamic-based laws is still being decided, without standardized social rights, a woman over 30 may be able to vote but not choose if or to whom she will be married. In a country where women have different interpretations of Islam that limit her social decisions on a daily basis, what good will her political rights be to her then? She may even take some of those rights for granted as superfluous to her daily life.

Under the banner of personal security, some of the interviewees brought up the issue of domestic abuse. The rate of divorce is increasing in the Gulf, and only now as women enter the political arena are issues such as domestic violence being addressed systematically and efforts being made to provide practical assistance to women and children whose Islamic family values system fails them.

And the second thing that I talked about it that nobody talked about it before, [is] to have a house for abused women. In Kuwait, we have many men who’re abusing their wives, in the end, they don’t have anywhere to go. You know, she goes to the police station, she complains, she goes back to her husband’s house. Imagine!

In my situation now, my mother died, my father died. I have nobody. My uncles, they take care of themselves. We are more now like Europeans, everybody for himself. And then I [could] come back into this house in which my husband abused me! You know, after I report against him...I mean, I report him to the police station, I come in there, I sleep in my house. And maybe in my room in my bed with him, sharing with him the bed.
You see, because the women in Kuwait have no place [else to go]. Even [if] she knows, “I’m ready! Stop this violence against me, against my children!” but then, she doesn’t have anywhere [else to go].

We don’t have anybody…except just now Kuwait created. They have the Independence and Constitution since [19]60s! [19]61, 62. But still, we don’t have…you know, people coming and thinking about these [abused] women. And these children.

Many unmarried women in Kuwait, what will they do? In a situation like mine, now. We have house in which three of us don’t want to sell, and the daughters want to sell. If I have [an] unmarried sister, what will we do [about] her? You know, she will get pennies in which she can’t buy a house or an apartment. What would happen to her?

We have, especially now in Kuwait, we have many unmarried women, you know, but they are not thousands like you can’t afford [to give] them housing. Don’t give them villas, you know, just give them [an] apartment! And you know, normal housing, I mean, when we do housing for other communities, we should think about…you know, our women [who are] not married.

In this community, how many women [are] not married? Maybe 100? Maybe we have 100 apartments. What’s [there] to stop us? Kuwait is a rich country! You know…[at] the same time, it will not be owned by her. In the end, maybe this apartment she has the right to live while she’s alive, all her life…but if her situation changed, then she has to leave. [If] she get[s] married, she has to leave…But why are we not doing it, you know? We have many house projects. Put one project for the women, you know.⁶

“Honor killing” is a term often used to describe the practice of compensation in the event of a wrongful death. The ancient tribal practice of honor killings, often justified by religion, is an issue for Islamic feminists, but particularly outside of Kuwait.

Like you don’t have the issue of, it doesn’t exist [in Kuwait], the honor killing. It doesn’t exist! A lot of women, whether they’re divorced women, or single, they can just go and live on your own. No one will say you are not allowed, or we will go and kill you. So this is something that when you go around in the [Middle East] area…Honor killing is excessive in Jordan, for instance. Yet Jordan looks like more open society, while it is not. It is more conservative in many ways.⁷

This interviewees’ comments that honor killings are a minimal issue for women in Kuwait are corroborated by a Freedom House report that documents only one honor killing in Kuwait in 2006 and an incident where a woman was given police protection for allegations
of possible violence from her family over an affair in 2008.\textsuperscript{8} Though it may not be a prevalent practice in Kuwait, just the fact that women raise the issue is an example of where Islamic feminists are pushing the boundaries, “the horizons,” of what were considered previously taboo subjects in their societies. It is likely that in the same way that women’s rights in Kuwait were affected by the events and achievements of Arab Muslim women in the rest of the Middle East, Kuwaiti women will also provide a positive impact to women outside of Kuwait.

While ancient codifications of compensation for the death of a woman reflected her status as less than a man, even among the most conservative societies where the equal status of women is receiving more and more attention, political and religious leaders are being faced with arguments for gender equality within their Islamic faith. One Qatari activist who wanted to be referred to as “Ms. E.” detailed such an experience:

So I told them even if one woman got killed, she deserved the honor to know that her life was important. It’s the same like a man’s…to God, she is the same…. This is one of the things we worked out…. We were attacked in the newspapers… But I’m very glad because we started the debates. In Yemen, now, it’s the same. They started the debate [about compensation for wrongful death] after us and they got it fixed before us!

The discussion is in many countries now, where it applies. It does not apply everywhere, but we started the discussion as men and women who believe really in Islam, we need to challenge the misconceptions and misinterpretations, but at the same time, we have to draw the line. There are things in the Qur’an where men and women were treated differently, and we need to accept this.\textsuperscript{9}

In the case study of Islamic feminism in Kuwait, we can see several touch points to the courageous work being done by women’s rights activists all throughout the Arab Gulf, arguing for more equal rights for women from within their faith.

Western feminists are challenged by the ability of Islamic feminists to balance their desire for more women’s rights by bringing along their communities and political and religious authorities toward social change. As this brave Qatari women’s rights activist articulates, her opinions stem from her Islamic faith and provide her a foundation for moving forward with her convictions.

Some women’s rights activists are daring to voice concerns for women where none of their male representatives have gone before,
particularly in matters traditionally considered private, such as access to women’s healthcare and family planning.

You should show the government that (this is what we are asking) that you can support four wives. [Show that] you can support all these children, or you have no right to have them. Why bring children [to] life and stay on welfare? You can’t just bring children [into the world] like this. This is a crime! What’s the difference between killing a life, and bringing a child [to life] that you don’t know how to take care of? You are killing him! What’s the difference between these two? I don’t see any differences.

And nobody talks about this in the government. You see? This is one [example]. You know, I’m talking about the best thing for the children. This is what our politicians should think [about]. But if they talk like this, nobody will elect them. While women, we are not afraid to talk about it. You know. In the end, this money that the government gives, for welfare, it’s from our pockets, the money of the government that we could use to build our country.¹⁰

**Social Rights Over Political Rights**

Something that Islamic feminists want in Kuwait is greater influence on determining their social rights, such as personal status laws, access to resources, education, health care, and professional opportunities. For the politically active Islamist women, it was clear that political rights were seen as a means to this end.

[We wanted] social rights. There is something more important. The woman needs something before . . . what she needs, what she is suffering from something. So we have to solve her problems before, then we’ll talk about another right. It’s important to see what’s important for women now . . .

. . . More rights for the women . . . Like maternity leave, or [flexible] working hours for women . . . because we think that women, they have a lot of roles in life. We don’t only run for the political, we . . . have other roles and priorities in life. Like we have to have like family, or our role in the house as a wife, mother, daughter . . . ¹¹

Some Kuwaiti feminists agree that the emergence of women’s rights in Kuwait has facilitated the discussion of the rights of other marginalized groups:

I [went] to all 25 districts and [went] into the tents of women and male candidates and [saw] the lectures that the male candidates were giving
to the women voters, etc. And it is the first time in Kuwait’s history—in the forty plus years of political history (and I mean democratic, political, electoral history that we’ve had in Kuwait) that the women’s rights issues—and I’m talking about things like polygamy, things like housing problems, things like personal status problems, things like—Kuwaiti women married to non-nationals! And the problems they have getting residency for their kids, the problems they have...you know, securing a nationality for their kids, the problems they have getting the children into schools. It’s the first time that I’ve seen any candidate in Kuwait address that.

So do you think there’s going to be change, or maybe it’s going to be another forty years before the actual application [of change] could be suggested?

Well, you can’t change legislation if you’re not represented in the legislative body, right? And what is the legislative body in Kuwait, the government? No, the parliament. Right? Until we [women]’re represented in those, there’s not a lot that we can do to change legislation. We can lobby until we’re blue in the face, but until we’re actually there, and the issue is pertinent to you and your livelihood.....

One particular issue in Kuwait that women have managed to address regardless of political affiliation is the issue of the *bidoon* or stateless Kuwaitis, which is a complex issue, but basically refers to a group of people who did not register for their Kuwaiti citizenship in the early 1920s and now hold the same legal status as, say illegal immigrants in the United States. Where there is an added complication is when Kuwaiti women marry a bidoon, their children are not granted Kuwaiti citizenship, but their husband’s stateless status is passed on to the children, precluding them from many benefits of the state, including education and healthcare, and they have difficulty finding employment without official status. Interestingly, I found this issue of bidoons addressed by both Liberals and Salafi Islamists as a human rights issue, though some people may see how this affects women as a separate issue. One politically Liberal female professor spoke of her activism on human rights and women’s issues:

There are a few very prominent [human rights] issues currently. I would say, most importantly now is the bidoon issue. You now, people with...stateless or with no nationality. And we like the term ‘bidoon,’ it’s kind of globalized now, everybody realizes what that means. And...you know, this is one very, very prominent and very disturbing human [rights] issue here in Kuwait. And we have been lobbying, and we had several seminars, we’ve had several gatherings, we’ve seen many officials about this. And I think one of our latest
seminars that we had…raised the issue and…really brought the issue to the surface. And we’ve seen a lot of official movement after that on the bidoon issue. Which particularly, I mean [is], all of the bidoons are suffering horriby, but particularly women because they’re even…their chances are even less. So we’ve been really following up on that issue. I think domestic labor is an issue and we’ve been lobbying to try and you know, put their words, put their presence in Kuwait in a more legal form to protect them and to protect the employers as well. But mainly to protect them and their rights.

Women’s issues…I would say particularly housing, social laws, family laws. One particular issue we’ve been looking at is women in prison, and the way they’re treated. So, these are all very prominent issues….We do a lot of also cooperation [with] NGOs from all around the world.13

One Salafi Islamist I spoke with also addressed women’s issues as part of a broader human rights agenda, and there was a difference of opinion about how to handle the bidoon issue:

Conditions of human rights are not only related to women’s rights. But the right to naturalize their children has nothing to do with human rights.

We have issues that are greater than that of naturalization…we have established a team to help women’s rights, and its main task is to supervise women in jail and in care centers, whether Kuwaiti or not Kuwaiti, as well as female laborers, domestic labor, to better their conditions as a whole. This is a deal that is quite greater than naturalizations.14

The difference of opinion about the bidoon issue is beside the point that both Liberal feminists and Salafi Islamists are approaching women’s issues within a human rights framework. This is an extraordinary achievement in a region where ethnic and sectarian identities, in addition to gender and political identities, have the power to stop and start discussion altogether. The strides that women activists are making to bring their issues to light before decision-makers of all backgrounds is a testament to the creativity of their efforts and the multiplicity of their approaches. In addition to naturalization of children, personal status laws affect marital rights, citizenship rights, custody rights in the event of divorce, and inheritance.

In many ways I was surprised to find many vocal advocates among the Islamists for taboo issues such as the children of noncitizens, or women in prison, or those facing internal poverty. Much of this might have to do with the fact that demographically many Islamists have
roots in the conservative bedouin and rural culture, which is only now incorporating itself into the urban spaces and government jobs and schools that were once dominated by more wealthy and urban Liberals. Also, political Islamists, who have been traditionally marginalized in politics, may also feel a kindred spirit with other marginalized groups, particularly ones that will benefit them politically. This may be the case with political Islamists elsewhere, as in Egypt, Yemen, and Syria, where Islamists are gaining in popularity. What is most sociologically interesting to this study, however, is that supposedly socially conservative Islamists still emphasize a holistic worldview when discussing issues that may be taboo in their communities.

It seems that one of the most pressing issues is the status of children of Kuwaiti women who marry non-Kuwaitis—they are not given citizenship. This is detrimental to society in many ways because it prevents some women from marrying and creates all sorts of residence problems for those who do. There are other inequalities in employment and housing, where men have the advantage as “head of the family” although many women head their households.

...Women have far more rights than foreign labor. Generally, I think that women are granted most of their rights that are specified in the Qur'an and prophetic teachings, for example, but foreign laborers are not as well protected. The government needs to get serious about the non-citizens, who should be protected equally under Islamic law.¹⁵

The cause of the bidoon and foreign laborers are just some of the issues that Islamic feminists are championing. Among the others are the needs of disabled members of the society. Many human rights activists throughout the Gulf are working toward improving education and volunteerism to incorporate disabled citizens into the mainstream society. A former female parliamentary candidate in Kuwait’s 2006 elections spoke of her strategy as one that would influence the things that would be brought to the forefront of campaign discussions:

I thank God, I had a very brief program, and it agreed with these three main things: First, job security. Second, electoral awareness; and the third thing, those with special needs. And I didn’t think that I had to crowd my program with many things because I believe that if I call for these [few] things which I really believe in, it will be ok.¹⁶

Underlying their political activism is the push for equality and for Islamic feminists that begins with gender equality. In addition to activism within their own society, they recognize the need to change
perceptions by outsiders who see Arab Muslim women as homogeneously oppressed and incapacitated. One female academic criticized the idea of focusing on “women’s issues” to the exclusion of men, as she had observed from some feminist movements outside of the Gulf:

I think the long-term strategy is again—not focusing on women as women. We have a problem with...some visitors who come to Kuwait when they try to segregate, or they try to group the country as they do to other Arab countries where the education is not paid by the government, where these other countries have women schools, women hospitals, for women, women, women in everything. And here we don’t have that. We don’t have that [and] it’s a blessing! Cause when you start, you give a different idea of women working with men together, which is what we want. We don’t want to segregate women from men, and get, again, trying to encourage the issue of helping women and focusing on women only. They should work together, and they should have shared projects together.

Now, starting from education [in Kuwait]—it’s free for men and women. I was surprised to hear from...(I can’t remember, it was a debate on television) somebody commenting on Kuwait and trying to help women in education. And I said, it’s compulsory for men and women! Why do you single out women? You have to know more about the country first before trying to group us with other Arab countries. And giving this third-world look at women here, because they did not get to the seats of parliament. That is not true. Women have been activists since the [19]30s. They have been...I’m sure they have been brave more than any other Western country into leaving the country to study and come back and taking a role [in the society].

They never came back as artists, or actors, or any other job just to make money. They come back just to give what they have learned to the youth. Even if they had to work with a very low salary. That’s how...they were. So they have led the country, even though not on the parliament seats. So that’s why I feel sad when I listen sometimes to some people [who] see this place as a third-world country, who feel sad for women...that’s not true...

Probably they have in mind to launch some programs which they cannot push here [in Kuwait] because education is free. You cannot fool other people and say “I’m going to educate the people.” They’re not gonna listen to it.17

Dr. Rola Dashti, though by no means an Islamist leaning politician, has rooted her campaigns in a strategy that acknowledges traditional roots and values and speaks to women as equal partners for progress in Kuwait. As a parliamentary candidate in 2006 and eventually
Dr. Dashti was elected to parliament along with three other women in 2009. Of the impact of the election of women to the parliament she says:

Kuwaitis were extremely joyful about having women in parliament; it reminded me of the joy after the 1991 liberation. The four of us were invited every day to parties, festivals, gatherings; it was as though the campaign was still on. But with that joy came high expectations; people see women as saviors, as the ones who will bring real change.

Within the parliament, we had to learn quickly, figure out the political structure, and get engaged in the important committees. In fact the male members started complaining that “you women are taking over the committees,” because on every major committee—finance, legislation, foreign affairs, health, education—there was at least one woman. And this was when we had only been in parliament two or three weeks. After the recess we became more coordinated and managed to chair two very important permanent committees: education, media, and culture committee; and social affairs, labor, and health committee, which I chair.

Women members also have brought discipline to the parliamentary system itself. We attend committee meetings and do our homework, which embarrasses some of the male members who do not attend. We don’t engage in the mutual flattery which is traditional among male parliamentarians, and we don’t hesitate to tell the media who shows up for committee and who doesn’t. We are trying to change the bylaws

Women need to show that she is interested not only in women issues. She’s interested in society issues. So everybody used to think when we’re gonna run, we’re gonna run on a “women” platform. So they were surprised in spite of every society and we didn’t run on a “women” platform. We ran on a “society” platform. We ran on education issues, we ran on issues of unemployment, on issues of corruption. We ran on issues of housing and income which affects everybody. So society even started to say, “Women knows what they’re talking about!”…

So I told everybody that we do have an interest in politics, and we want to re-shape the politics of Kuwait. Yes, we weren’t successful to have some candidate reach the parliament, but we are successful in every single indicator about participation in political life. In terms of turnout, in terms of during the process of the election, by being in the campaign, training, campaign rallies, and things. By attending all these rallies of men and hearing the debate. By forcing the agenda, by putting [forward] a platform that pushes everybody on the platform.18
because we cannot tolerate people being absent so much as they affect our output of finishing the required laws to send them to the floor for voting.  

Another former female parliamentary candidate who had invited me to meet her family brought up the importance of working in community to achieve common goals a little closer to home: “Maybe you saw before, my husband. We believe in partnership. Women, men together can do changes. As a family, you know. If you do changes in your family, you can do big changes in the society.”

From the Kuwaiti example, we see the power of social transformation occurring within the community as a means to greater social change.

Islamic Feminism as Negotiating Strategy

One way that Islamic feminists are changing Kuwait is by providing women with an alternative negotiating strategy. By arguing for their rights from within their Islamic culture, tradition, and religion, women are able to disassociate themselves with the Western, secular brand of feminism that has not taken root in Arab Muslim hearts and minds. One former parliamentary candidate believes in the power of bridging gender and ideological lines.

I think the Kuwait woman has all the capacity, all the efforts, all the support, but the problem is from the woman. They believe, but it’s like they’re scared, they have risks to participate, maybe one important issue because we don’t have this kind of sharing projects with all different kinds of women’s parties. So Liberals if they work, they attend by only Liberal women [’s parties], Islamic, only by Islamic [women’s parties]…and we need something to break this.

And this is one of my main objectives…we will have a big meeting, I will invite all women from the different parties, all the sectors, sitting at one table and discuss our issue…. Inshallah.

Anything else?

The last thought, I support and agree that our religion gives so many support, and all the support we need, number one. And political life also give[s] support, somewhat. But if we [are] looking to go for further…it should be done by Kuwaiti women. No one will push for her the chair. She will sit in the chair, and push it by herself.  

Again, the Islamic feminist perspective distinctly incorporates an indigenous worldview that recognizes women of conservative cultures
have all the tools at their disposal—in their communities, by appealing to political and religious authorities—to create new kinds of opportunities for women in their society. Once this realization, an “inner, true” consciousness is realized, the next step is to take social action for change.

**Islamic Feminists in Action**

For Islamic feminists, it’s the principle of the matter that counts. For them, the veil is primarily a symbol of an individual’s modesty and self-expression. Instead of disregarding the veil as a post–September 11 symbol of Islamic resurgence, Western audiences can see Islamic feminists reclaim the true religious meaning of the veil. This is an example of what it means to “do feminism” their way. Islamic feminists are:

- **Building Bridges Across Gender.** In addition to changing conservative mentalities by crossing ideological boundaries, Islamic feminists continue to build bridges across gender wars by working their way within the patriarchal structures that surround them and by incorporating men as partners in their struggles. One academic emphasized this point in her advice to future female candidates:

  I think we should stop working as women seeing ourselves as women because you have been in Kuwait for a long time, and many times, and you have seen that we don’t have [strict gender] segregation in the country, and we are not planning [to]—and we will resist [it]. Even if the idea comes from a foreigner. An American school for girls and British school for girls...we don’t need these ideas to come from foreigners. We fought the [gender] segregation, we don’t want it to come in English.

  We will work together. Probably as political parties, if the law is there. (I always like to follow the law). And be absorbed into political parties and try to set an agenda to resist other parties from using the issue of women, or trying to convince the women...because when you leave a vacuum...the other side will step in and say: “Ok, now let me see. What we can do for women is this and this and this...”

  So to keep this place has to be through political parties and [a] clear agenda. So not a woman speaking to a woman, it is political parties setting agendas. That’s it.\(^{22}\)

- **Tapping into Political Apathy.** One of the ways that Islamic feminism and actors within such a framework for social action are
transforming their societies is by tapping into the current malaise of political apathy.

In general, we’re an apathetic people...we really are. I mean, most Kuwaitis don’t really care about domestic politics. So...I don’t know how you reach out to them, I honestly don’t. I would say concentrate on day-to-day problems.

Well now...the electoral district reform issue has passed. So that issue is gone. However, now we can pay attention to real issues. Maybe better healthcare. Better education. Housing issues. Unemployment (because unemployment is really rising in the Gulf region, I heard a report on BBC about that). That’s something you want to pay attention to. Maybe if a candidate reached out to those issues, then they would be [more successful]...

So, Kuwait’s a welfare state. So nobody sleeps hungry, nobody sleeps without a roof, nobody sleeps thirsty...but the state...I mean, we’re a rich oil country and we pretty much take care of our people. So our day-to-day needs are met—sort of. They could always be improved, but they are met. Sort of. What you need to do is tell them it’s not just about that, it’s about promoting democracy. It’s about going for development. That’s civic education that starts at schools.

So, I don’t want to sound like “dooms-day,” but, you know—the adults are gonna go; you need to work with the kids. You need to have civic education classes from the ninth grade. You need to make sure that every single college student comes out of college knowing what his or her rights are in the Constitution. We don’t have that in Kuwait. I’ve known women, probably 31 years old, never read the Kuwaiti Constitution. That’s sad. That’s just a joke. They may drive a Jaguar, and, you know, carry an Hermès bag, they just don’t know what their rights are! And that’s what we need. That’s the kind of education we need. And that’s the kind of education that children need to have in high school. This is what we need to increase awareness about. 23

• *Raising Awareness.* In addition to tapping into political apathy, Islamic feminists are transforming their societies by raising awareness to previously taboo issues and the grievances of marginalized groups.

Family first. This is really how people live here. Women will deny their biological destinies and will not marry if someone disrupts that
kinship program, right? So...you know, people sacrifice themselves for this issue time and time again. Patriarchy still exists very strongly in visible and invisible ways. Right?

The way to do it is to raise awareness. To raise awareness you need to...speak to each group in whatever moves them the most. If it's the family issue, or the economic issue, the child protection issue. Right? So you really have to expose. People in Kuwait don't suffer from an educational...[Deficit?]

Exactly! They're educated to the gills! Right? The number of graduates is fantastic. Illiteracy rate is one of the lowest in the world...in terms of writing, mathematical skills, people here are really well educated. But are they exposed? Do they possess the skills for critical thinking? Can they look at their problems reflectively? No! You know why? Because they’re coddled. They don’t have to be competitive. They don’t have to think that way.

But...the status quo cannot last! Right? We’re growing (the population). We still rely on a foreign workforce. This is unsustainable what I’m saying, right? So. When the next [generation] starts hurting, then people will start changing. And...limping in the political sense, having women out of this arena in one form or another...is just...you know, illogical at this point.

And you can’t maintain an edge as a developed country if you go against the global flow of wisdom. And if the global trend is more women in government, women in key positions, they can’t keep fighting that, right? The legislation passed in spite of the majority of people in Kuwait being against women’s entrance to parliament. Why? Because international pressure! You cannot have this unique position of being the only economic democracy in the world that doesn’t allow women to vote. You just can’t. Which Kuwait lost, right?

Right before we got the right to vote...we’re unique. It can’t be that the entire Islamic world is wrong, that the entire democratic world is wrong, and we’re right! We’re just not special, right? So, you just can’t go against global trends. You can resist it and resist it, but eventually, you have to break.24

- Changing conservative mentalities. All of the interviewees, as elites and social activists, had some interest in changing the mentalities of their constituencies. These actors were convinced that the difference between progress and the status quo lies in the attitudes that the average citizen carries with her to the polls and into her own private life.

The other thing that we have working for us, is that it’s no longer an issue of cognitive recognition. Young people today growing up, they have women leaders. Women candidates who are running. They have...women in the municipalities, right? It’s no longer a
confused issue. Right? I mean, for me, it was infuriating that the woman who was representing Kuwait, our *ambassador in the UN* was a woman, and I couldn’t pick the representative to represent me in my own constituency. That sort of schizophrenia has disappeared right now. Right? But we’re still working with getting people to share their power-base. Right? And being a member of parliament is all about power. They don’t get paid a lot! It’s all about power! And people have never been good about sharing power.  

One Kuwaiti professor emphasizes that the power for change lies with the women themselves:

> Our main object [is] to prepare and empower young women because I’ve found that this group is lost, even with the government programs or any social sector of any group. I believe we are equal, but even this young age 16–30 occupy more than 28 percent of the entire population, if we don’t emphasize our effort on them, we will not be able to prepare them for the coming generation. Because we have so many things [that] should be changed in values, attitudes, so many things. If we keep things the same way, nothing changes.

> I found from my students [that] they are so interested but they don’t find active efforts to push them to mobilize their efforts. Because I find they have so much energy and they’re looking to play an effective role, but they don’t know how. Unfortunately, most of the families and the media around them just push them towards weak values which affects their souls, their interests, their personality, but they have so much energy.

As we saw from the last chapter, the potential of optimizing youthful energy and creativity in incorporating women as equal leaders in their societies works hand in hand with incorporating and accepting the values they hold—the values handed down from their parents and the values that they are coming to adopt as their own.

Islamic feminists, by their very circumstances, cross ideological boundaries. They are in a position to demand change from the current stalemate of political Islamists and political Liberals regarding the issue of women’s rights. As seen in times of crisis, many differing ideological groups can find shared ground when opposing a common enemy. One secular female academic may be a political Liberal, but she understands the importance of incorporating all perspectives, even Islamist ones, to work together for a cause.

Now I don’t know if it will work as a benefit to women, at least in Kuwait, yes, but in other Arabic countries, it’s…a different agenda.
We should not look at Islam as...you know, something that we are scared of where we can’t do this and that, because it is a lovely religion, and...when you read Qur’an, and you read the...(I wish you had a copy in English), and you read the...meanings behind the words of Qur’an, you will be fascinated! I think it was written for this time! It has [advice]...about negotiation, about conflict management, in Qur’an. So it depends on how we look at it...If we look at political parties, and we take aside the issue of religion, we will work more comfortably...Because what we call Islam isn’t fear, [there] are no more be aggressive with people who used to scare people around...

We had [a Salafi Islamist] MP, who I met...for the first time, we sat together...He was a very pleasant person. Very pleasant to talk to. Very polite! As a person. And...so we had an idea about that person—he had an idea about us! I mean, when I raised my hand to ask [a question], he was looking around, [to see] whether [or not] the question is being recorded...He didn’t know what we’re going to say. To accuse him of something. So he was afraid of us. And then...my question was totally [not] political, nothing to do....And then we sat together, we had [a] wonderful talk together. So there are bridges between us. We can probably have you know, agendas that could co-work sometime.

...It’s a talent we have to penetrate these kinds of groups who are human. And work together. Or influence them or show them something that is better than the thing they have.27

Perhaps one step toward crossing ideological boundaries between Islamists and Liberals is to depoliticize the cultural marker that has been a lightning rod and red herring for other substantive issues: the veil. A gradual de-emphasis of the veil as a public symbol of politically Islamic identity is present in some of the fresh faces of the youth and new female political candidates.

The hijab is cultural in the Gulf region, and has very little political significance in the region. The closest thing to hijab making a scandal was what happened with Minister of Education Nooriya Al-Sabeeh, when the Islamists demanded that she wear hijab inside the National Assembly and she simply ignored them. Some of the most liberal women I know wear hijab, so it is neither here nor there with us.28

Another interviewee also de-emphasized the importance of the veil as a politically divisive issue in Kuwait:

I think that the costume has nothing to do with the personality of the person. What he believes and how he interprets his beliefs into work, that is the most important thing for me. Our religion, we say that we
have to treat the people in the proper way, and that’s all. This is the religion for me. Not to mistreat the people and misbehave, and say “I am wearing hijab. I am ok, I am a good Muslim.” It has nothing to do with Islam, this hijab. The real Muslim, he is trying to be useful to his society, to his community, and to the whole world. This is the real Muslim.  

Again, the idea of showing defiance “within societal confines” is a recognizable trait of Islamic feminists in Kuwait. Not only are these women able to draw attention to their causes by respecting cultural mores and standards, but they are also preparing their communities until they are ready to listen to their demands. From the balanced appeal to all sources of legitimate authority, Islamic feminists are the best-poised actors to lead a progressive path toward women’s rights in conservative contexts, such as the religious societies of the Arabian Peninsula. Islamic feminists, as negotiators with a socially active agenda, symbolize the balance of tradition and modernity, the respect for modern complexities as well as transcendent truths, that may be the framework for the future of individual freedoms throughout the Middle East.

Islamic Feminism—Just a Mindset or a Legitimate Social Movement?

One question remaining to be asked is whether or not Islamic feminism can be defined as an identifiable social movement, or whether it is best analyzed at the individual level as a particular mindset, or worldview. When I asked this of my interview subjects, the vast majority did not believe that there was such a thing as a separate feminist movement in Kuwait. But I also couldn’t help but notice that the denial of a feminist movement was qualified by pointing out various strains of identifiably feminist activities creeping up in their societies: the increasing number of women choosing to advance their education and careers instead of marrying, the dilemma of having more qualified women than men to lead in the workforce upon university graduation, the increasing voice of women in the selection of their life partners, and the increasing popularity of having a wife who works and supplements the household with a second income. All of these were cultural realities that served as anecdotes to the larger public policy debates about women’s political and social rights to vote and hold public office in Kuwait.

What I have come to conclude is that Islamic feminism is both a schema for negotiation at the societal level as well as an individual
ideology. This is because of the reality of the constraints upon individual agents in societies where the individual is beholden to the rights of the broader community. This is particularly important to Muslim communities not only because of the Eastern, communitarian and clan-based culture from which it was formed on the Arabian Peninsula, but also because of the theological imperatives upon the individual to submit to the will of God for the sake of the ummah, or community of believers. For women’s social inequalities to be addressed frankly and systematically, both Liberals and Islamists have to recognize each other and the legitimate values they have in common. Finding common ground regarding the issue of women’s rights will pave the way for a future that recognizes a shared heritage and set of values, while accepting contemporary challenges and opportunities.

Already, we have seen examples of where Islamic feminism is identifiable among female activists at the individual, ideological level. But since the individual agent in a majority Muslim context does not exist in a vacuum, we can see how an individual ideological framework is functional only in relation to a larger community, as a schema of negotiation of status quo constraints. One example of this is the negotiation of identity within a family and then to social groupings—which women may be obligated to and expected to participate in, such as family gatherings or social calls—with others who may not agree 100 percent with their beliefs about the need to fight for women’s rights. One Islamist women’s rights activist explained her approach to balancing her many relationships while working toward her goals:

I come from a democratic family. My husband is with the Islamist parties, but he supports me because I support women’s rights, it’s not that I’m Liberal or anti-Islamic. But I’ve had to point out to my Liberal friends that I don’t agree with them on every issue. Here you have to be very clever. There are cross-benefits. Because I don’t agree with the Liberals on every issue, and the Islamists have seen that I’ve remained firm to support the women’s societies on this issue of political rights, so that has protected me . . .

This is why I go back to the fact that we need to work on awareness. That we all are partners—women, men, government, parliament. Women’s issues shouldn’t be left to women’s societies—we are all partners. This should be seen as part of the whole development of society. Don’t look at women’s issues, look at the whole. 30

This woman’s life obligates her to find an ideological path that attends not only to her family but also to various women’s groups within
her social circle. These constraints are particularly true of elites, who
often maintain their status by staying involved with charity groups
and civic organizations that address social welfare.\textsuperscript{31}

**Solidarity with Islamic Feminists around the World**

In Yemen, as in Syria and Egypt, opposition groups to the govern-
ment are persecuted by the national police and often include persecu-
tion of religious groups, when the governments are officially secular.
In Yemen, however, the intense pressure on the government from a
lack of resources and employment to meet the demands of an explod-
ing but severely poor and undereducated population makes politi-
cal authority extremely volatile. Political authority appears less of a
foundational source for progressive activism, as has been seen in the
success of opposition forces driving out former president Saleh. In
Yemen’s case, sources of political reform through an appeal to reli-
gious and community sources, religious clerics, and tribal leaders,
appear to be more authoritative and effective for mobilization even
than the veneer of nationalism that was maintained under the secular
Saleh regime.

Saudi Arabia’s women’s rights activism is also a unique case and
is exemplified by the women’s driving protests. Though women are
rigidly restricted in the public sphere by religious authorities that
rule alongside the political authorities, and are rather limited by
their gender-segregationist policies, women are pursuing activism
by highlighting the communal sources of authority—that is, tribal
structure and kinship networks. According to CNN correspondent
Mohammed Jamjoom who documented the online “Women2Drive
17th June” campaign:

> Women were told to adhere to full Islamic dress. Wave the Saudi flag
and plaster a picture of the king to show patriotism. It was best to have
an international driving license if you planned to drive. And have a
man with you.

> The campaign said it would not be responsible for any women who
breached a list of 14 such principles. They were asked to show defiance
but within societal confines.\textsuperscript{32}

The framework provided by a theory of legitimate authority allows
us to understand that an important source of legitimate political
authority is one which addresses internal constraints but also outside
international pressure. International forces shape Islamic societies in many ways, not least by providing comparative examples for future directions for women’s rights and roles.

Well, sometimes some people talk about the Japanese or Korean women also. The woman liberation wasn’t part of modernization in the Asian experience. That’s [a] very solid and very important point to discuss. That participation of women and liberation of women is a Western experience. And it is not a genuine part of modernization. So we can modernize our society, we can be even an advanced society, without giving all these freedoms to women. “Let them to take care of their families.” Okay, nobody so far has discussed this fully, as far as I know.

See, they will say, “do you want to modernize our society? Ok, we’ll do it along the Korean or Japanese… line. Why should we change along the French and German line, for example. Or American, whatever.” And… I don’t know. Nobody so far has discussed this and solved [it]. Or made a good comparison between these societies and the societies in the Arab world, or the Islamic world. 33

While women of the Arabian Peninsula may be paving their own path as Islamic feminists, Arab thinkers are indeed looking East for additional models of development. In an increasingly global world, women of the Middle East don’t have to compare themselves to the countries of Western democracies that purport to hold the gold standard for women’s rights. Women in the Middle East are looking to do things their own way and in their own time.

A New Approach to the Future: Legitimate Authorities in Balance

What does the future hold for the Islamic feminists in Kuwait? This question keeps on ringing with resounding importance in light of the so-called Arab Spring of populist revolutions that started in Tunisia and Egypt. Gulf women believe that their shared concerns for secure and stable families will somehow grow into balance with increased educational and professional opportunities for themselves and their daughters. Men seem to think that they still initiate the future prosperity of their culture by working toward better economic stability and political security. Liberals want to reign in the growing conservatism in the region while Islamists begin to temper the refrain that “Islam is the solution” with real conversations about the systematic injustices for women who fall through the cracks. Young people are
voicing the many identities they contend with as bridges between the East and the West, acknowledging the old ways while ushering in the new. Observing the unfolding panorama of social and demographic change throughout the Middle East, a discussion of the future prospects of Muslim women even outside the Arabian Peninsula benefits from the main findings of this study. Based on the diversity of perspectives on the topic of an indigenous, Islamic feminism in Kuwait, we have found that:

- arguments for women’s rights within Islam is the default position for both Liberal and Conservative activists in the region;
- both Liberals and Conservatives appeal to Islam as grounds for communication with each other and legitimacy for their differing positions;
- young people in the region express multiple identities and see themselves as both progressive and traditional;
- establishing social legitimacy by appealing to Islam as the backbone of a discussion, political position, or policy proposal opens new public spaces for previously marginalized groups, including women, ethnic minorities, and youth; and
- Islamic feminists, who hold their religious, community, and political sources of legitimating authority in balance, are the best-poised actors to lead reforms for women’s rights in the region.

In their own words, we have seen how each of the various actors within the discussion for women’s rights in Kuwait have placed a particular emphasis on one of the three sources of legitimate authority: religion, community, and politics. The women tended to prioritize community concerns but still incorporated religious and political sources of authority into their thinking. The men seemed to emphasize political strategy over religion and community, but depending on their political leanings would selectively incorporate the other two. Political Liberals tended to disregard religion altogether in their discussions of political activism but remained sensitive to the kinship and tribal structures that would ensure their political success. The Islamists distinguished themselves by marrying religion and politics even to the expense of progressive trends in the community, such as whether or not it was popular to wear the veil. Kuwaiti youth appear to be still moldable, very much aware of the various sources of authority that put pressure on them, but are still independent enough to not clearly select one of the three (religion, community, or politics)
above the others and in fact selectively incorporate where they take their ultimate identities from. In conclusion, it becomes clear that Islamic feminists, who hold all three sources of legitimate authority in balance, not neglecting one and not overemphasizing another, are best capacitated to lead the future discussions of political reform and women’s rights. The realities of the majority Muslim societies of the Arab Gulf require a unique ability to address all three sources of legitimate authority if any social strategy is to be effective. Disregard or overemphasize one of the sources and the actor paves the way for an opponent to step in and fill in the gap. The battle for women’s political participation in Kuwait is a perfect example of this kind of challenge, present uniquely in a majority Muslim country, with a politically and culturally Islamic heritage. Where else could a government have a ministry of Islamic Affairs that builds “community development” into its strategic mission? As one Islamist women’s rights activist put it:

The most important thing is to raise awareness in the minds of women about their rights. Women who support political rights and leadership need to be very clever and very wise (to manage the balance of their values and their responsibilities and cultural expectations about their roles).34

The question of Islam and gender at the macro-level is largely about whether the role of religion is itself the source of gender inequality in the Middle East—a region that is largely seen monolithically—or whether within Islam itself lie the key arguments and platforms to build a public space for which aspiring female leaders in the Middle East are attempting to negotiate. Consequently, how do the strategies of these “faithful feminists” reflect on or provide a counterpoint to the strategies with which Western feminists have approached issues of gender inequality? These questions may require a more comparative approach and provide the foundation for future studies of a global Islamic feminism as an example of a progressive activism born from within culturally conservative constraints.

**Kuwaiti Exceptionalism**

One final point to address is that using the case study of women’s political participation in Kuwait as a subject for the larger sociological discussion about Islamic feminism is its limitation as a country-specific study. Several of the interviewees referred to what they
viewed as Kuwaiti exceptionalism to acknowledge the limitations of comparing the trajectory for women in Kuwait to the political and social rights movements of other Muslim women in the Middle East—for good and bad.

Kuwait now is not a good example. It’s not marketable because we are too vocal for them, for the rest of the Gulf. [Laugh] And the communities and the political leadership of the Gulf, [are] using Kuwait as a scarecrow. [What do you mean by that?]

Just to scare people. “Look what’s happening in Kuwait! No minister is staying there! And they are grilling everybody!” So they are using it. And then they take the example of the economic advancement of a place like Dubai. “Look at what Dubai is doing, no democracy is there and it’s advancing! So, look at Kuwait! Kuwait was highly advanced, and now it’s backwards.” Even our leadership here in the government, they keep repeating that . . .

And because of that, and because of the similarities, not real similarities, but some similarities, I think . . . there is a resistance from the Gulf not to have an impact from Kuwait. Because we are not doing well economically and because our parliament is vocal, our press is very critical of the government. They are taking these examples and say, “Look at what’s happening. We shouldn’t really get into democratic reform because, look, we’ll be like Kuwait! Kuwait is not doing well.” That’s silly. Kuwait is doing well! I have a completely different opinion. I think it’s advancing and . . . there’s a price to be paid.

People are grumbling everywhere and talking everywhere. I think it’s a necessity. So you have really to live with it. I’d rather live in a place where I can express my opinion and talk and fight and say whatever I want rather than being in a place where I’m well off, but I’m not allowed to speak and all those people in the Gulf, they know very well they are not allowed to express themselves. Yet it is very hard for them to change. And when you have a place like Dubai that’s doing well economically [they say], “Ok, let’s hush it down and forget about it.”

. . . By 2008, we will have 12 daily newspapers, and so many openings here and there, and these are results of that [growing pains] . . . But there are many women who are ambitious in Saudi Arabia, in other places who look forward to get some chance. What the Gulf countries are doing are advancing women within the framework of the status quo political structure, not by changing it. Just appointing a woman as a minister, just appointing a woman as an undersecretary here and there just to appease things so that maybe they will stop the advancement of women on the Kuwaiti model.

I mean, here there are no free elections in the Gulf at all. Elections are controlled. Here [in Kuwait] it’s a free election. I mean, it’s hard to compare. And the structural changes are enormous in Kuwait.
Especially in the last six years. So I don’t think there will be a chance for exporting it.  

When asked if their country was a model for the rest of the region, I received very different opinions. But most Kuwaitis praised the democratic roots that allow them relative political freedoms:

Ah, yes. Kuwait is a leader. Kuwait, for all Arab countries, not the Gulf Area only, it’s like a model. It’s a model. And every other country, if it wants to compare its performance, it needs to measure its progress, it compares itself to Kuwait. We have a freedom. We have a Congress, we have a good media that criticizes everything and… so I guess Kuwait is a model, after Lebanon, Kuwait is a model.

One former male parliamentarian had this to say about his country’s role in the region:

See, I think, with all the difficulties that Kuwait passes through, I think Kuwait is… we have the best democracy in the whole region. There is no democracy, not in Saudi Arabia, not in Dubai, not in Emirates, not in Oman, not in Bahrain. The best democracy here is in Kuwait,… And a lot of pressure from the parliament. You can see that this parliament is very strong here. And because of that, I think we are affecting the area. Not the region affecting us. Because of our democracy, now they are trying to have kind of a democracy in Qatar, kind of a democracy in Emirates, in Bahrain, even in Oman… (and I know in Oman they are starting to have a kind of election, even if it’s not a complete election.)

In Saudi Arabia, there is a saying from the king that we are going to have some kind of election and some different [kinds] of committees and different… things there in Saudi Arabia. So I think that Kuwait is affecting those countries and you’re gonna see in about 10, 14 years, those countries must have… I’m not saying a copy of what we have in Kuwait, at least it’s gonna be more than 75 percent of what we have here in Kuwait.

Clearly adding to the case for Kuwaiti exceptionalism is the political structure, including a relatively independent parliament, which allows room for opposition within the government. It is not without defects, as are all attempts at democracy, but poses an interesting dimension to all the paradoxes presented here regarding Islamic feminism. When women are more involved in politics in the future, how will that change the nature of Kuwaiti politics? The answers are still yet to be determined.
Practical Recommendations

Based on the interview and empirical data presented in this study, we can make some conclusions regarding the role that Islamic feminists are playing and will continue to play in the search for women’s rights in Kuwait. In directly addressing what they view as obstacles to women’s rights, they offer practical recommendations on how to address their grievances. One is their capacity for negotiating and forging relationships across ideological and gender barriers. Among the major obstacles for addressing women’s rights listed among Muslim elites was activist infighting and disorganization. A general lack of education about women’s rights in Islam, or their proven abilities in the modern world, and an accompanying cultural conservatism born out of a rural tribal ancestry was another high-modal response listed as an obstacle for women’s rights in the Arab Gulf. A lack of experience and resources among women candidates for parliament or in positions of power was another commonly listed obstacle. This point brought several interviewees to discuss their support or lack of support for a quota system to be implemented to help women gain seats in the government. Some women’s rights activists, both Liberal and Islamist, argued against a quota saying that they didn’t want to prejudice a female in power against her male colleagues simply because of her gender. Other responses included a misguided view of religion or misinterpretation of women’s rights by Islamic scholars and politicians. Conservative Islamists listed an encroachment of individualistic Western values as a threat to their traditional, family oriented societies, including women’s rights. They believed the pressures of modernity such as political aspirations were “unfairly burdensome” for women and were committed to fight for women’s rights to spend more time away from work and at home with their children. Interviewees listed a general sense of apathy among their colleagues as an obstacle to achieving more equal rights for women in their society.

Particularly important to remember in light of a series of populist demands for regime change throughout the region is the importance of political pluralism as a safety valve. With no democratic outlets to express legitimate grievances, populist anger comes to demand nothing less than regime change. One of the many reasons that Islamic feminists in Kuwait are successful in staving off crisis situations that escalate into violent conflict is the difference in their approach—by respecting the political boundaries of their ruling regimes. As we have seen by the counterattacks of authoritarian
governments against populist revolutions throughout the region, the more space was given for pluralistic dialogue among peoples, the more options for peaceful resolution of conflict. Also the balance of powers within the government, particularly between the military and the ruling government, affected the ability to maintain order and peace in time of protests. In Syria and Libya, we have cases where the military was politically biased toward the ruling regime and fomented violence on behalf of the ruling government to maintain their power against the masses. This did not occur in Tunisia and Egypt, where the transition to power was relatively less violent. In Bahrain the case is also that the military supports the regime but provides a test-case where pluralistic realities exist among the natives of the population that have not been successfully addressed and are now being brought to light as points of division. The situation in Syria is reminiscent of Iraq, where after the deposition of Saddam Hussein’s secular Baathist regime, sectarian Sunni and Shia divisions were brought to the forefront and became the fault lines for future political violence.

In more homogeneous societies such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, sectarian divisions are kept at bay by careful government monitoring. Still, social divisions do exist, whether brought upon by economic disparities or ancient tribal power structures. Many of the present revolutions are addressing some of these dormant divisions and test the strength of the mandate of the ruling families. What became clear to me during my fieldwork and interviews was that permission to address social differences in healthy and proactive ways, as I found in Kuwait, was a safeguard against the kind of explosive nature that forcing these divisions out of the public debate is causing elsewhere in the region. This was also attested to by one activist in Kuwait:

Tell you the truth, because we have a free community, you know, in Kuwait after all. After all, when you talk a word [against the government] you don’t go to the police next week. Mostly they let you talk…and I don’t remember [that] any of the women [activists] was asked questions by the police. And this is rare [compared to] what’s happening in the Arab world. So…thank God, wherever we go we can talk. And this is one of the blessings that we are Kuwaitis.  

Besides the acceptance of political authorities, Islamic feminists are successful because they understand the importance of religious authorities and are making the message of Islam relevant to
contemporary realities. In fact, the demand from pious young women in the changing societies of the Middle East have spurred influential religious leaders to use modern means of communication as a starting point to make themselves more relevant to their societies. Islamic scholar and popular academic Tariq Ramadan is touted as an example of a “new voice” of Islam that engages non-Muslim audiences and translates Islamic philosophical values into modern debates over law, ethics and worldview. Muslim voices that are relevant to modern realities and offer alternatives to jihadist extremism are arguably the ones that could end the current global war on terror fed by the anger and marginalization of dejected young Muslims whose potential could be channeled for the social good of their societies. One Kuwaiti religious scholar had some advice about countering radicalism by example and actually engaging religious extremists.

You ask good questions. I think you must listen to some of the people that have the extreme ways of understanding this matter. Because we don’t have the problem, I think they have the problem. If you want to study, you must know their opinion...I think a scientific strategy must tell us what we must do to change the society. And this is the first period, and this is the next period. For that, I think it’s very important that you have an attachment with the extremists.

...I think today people are understanding the real law of Islam, not the law of the extremists who are claiming that they are Muslims. And I think it’s not a matter of a day or a year or ten years, but it is good that we begin in this way. And it will be having good results in the future.

It seems that the key to progress toward a more stable political future for the Middle East, as well as one that incorporates women as equal partners, is found by following the example of the Islamic feminists: by seeking a “middle road” on the “straight path” of Islam, by accepting and incorporating multiple identities, and by working within local networks while opening up to global possibilities.

Last Thoughts

I thought it might be fitting to end this book by highlighting some of the parting thoughts of my interviewees. In their own words, they share the last bits of advice they have for Westerners hoping to understand the complex relationship of Islam and women in Kuwait:

*Is there anything else you think I should keep in mind for my project on the role of Islam and politics on women in Kuwait?*
Yea. You have to separate between Islam and between Muslims. You have to separate between the great values of the American people from the policies of the State. You have to separate between the law and between the achievements.

So, you hear anything about Muslims, you have to know what is the real point of Islam about this matter. Suicide bomber... Islam does not admit it. This is politics. Islam does not neglect, ignore, the Muslims. This is Islam.43

And the last word from a former female parliamentary candidate on advice to future colleagues—advice we all could learn a bit from:

I hope that they [women] use their mind. I hope that they get rid of all the tri[vial] matters... jealousy, I don’t know what, and [that] they don’t waste more time, because we’ve already wasted more than half a century in not uniting. And I hope that everyone will look for the good things in the other person, and [that] we push each other forward. And ignore all the bad things.44
Appendix 1: Islamic Social Attitudes Survey (ISAS) Methodology

Comparative research in the sociology of religion can take many approaches. Among quantitative methodologists, the problem of determining nationally representative samples on a variety of attitudinal and behavioral questions may or may not reach elites and decision-makers. This section explains the rationale, data, and methodology of the Islamic Social Attitudes Survey (ISAS) of Kuwait University college students collected in 2007. The data in the ISAS presents a case study of Kuwaiti college students that is intended to both follow previous research in this area and to fill in gaps in current data and research to generate hypothesis testing of Islam and gender at the mezzo-level, or “middle level” of analysis between the macro- and micro-levels of analysis. That is, of the relationship of Islam and matters of gender as understood by individuals in relationship to their local communities.

The main points of this section are, first, a survey of elites in a majority Muslim context reveals a significant diversity of religious experience, practice, and social attitudes among individuals. This is important to note in an influential segment of a developing society—its college students—because they provide a potential indicator of future social trends, as previously noted in research on Islamic revitalization by Al-Thakeb and Scott. They should be measured against nationally representative samples to provide empirical evidence that would contribute to current theories of social movements (political as well as religious). Second, a breakdown of religious beliefs, association, and behaviors by gender is essential to the majority Muslim context. Some religious rituals may actually draw on Islamic texts and oral traditions to prescribe gendered differences in religiosity, but some gendered practices may also be exacerbated by local cultural practice. This stipulation is supported by previous theoretical and empirical studies of Islamic countries, but has not as of yet been an established norm.
in the study of Islamic religiosity. This can be tested by controlling for gender when analyzing various religious practices of a majority Muslim population. Third, in the majority Muslim context, religious and political affiliation may be second only to kinship ties when situating the hermeneutical “tool kit” or “religious portfolio” with which a respondent approaches a module of opinion questions. Knowing he or she is beholden to a certain set of ideological principles may give him or her consistency when being asked about current political and religious topics that are not as clearly defined in their religious texts. Political and religious affiliation may also be controlled for in an analysis of Islamic religiosity to isolate its effects. Lastly, this original survey data is important to the analysis of the relationship between the individual and his or her perceptions of their religious communities.

Previous Measures of Religiosity in Islamic Contexts

With recent interest in Islamic societies, there is surprisingly little data available for research on social; political; and religious attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of Muslims in Islamic societies. Where there have been comparative studies such as the World Values Survey (WVS) and International Social Survey Program (ISSP), traditional question items have been used, such as “frequency of attendance at house of worship,” that may not appropriately capture a truly comparable measure of religious salience. Other such Islamic particularities to be aware of in comparative studies include specifics of gendered Islamic rituals, cultural context, political context, levels of internal religious pluralism, and worldview and personality. Esposito and Mogahed used Gallup World Poll data from 35 nations with predominant or significant Muslim populations to study Muslim attitudes of Islamic identity, democracy, radicalism, women’s rights, and feelings towards the West. Moaddel and others used WVS data collected in 14 different majority Muslim countries, and explored measures of religious belief, self-described religiosity, and religious practice, as they related to issues of national identity, democracy, and women’s rights. Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali conducted a survey of 1,500 Kuwaiti citizens in 1994 that measured orthodox Islamic political and social attitudes and correlations with social status, social networks, religious identity, and Gulf War experiences on support for women’s rights. Almahmeed’s 2006 study of 601 Kuwaiti citizens on 26 question items also looked at orthodox Islamic opinions and women’s rights. Al-Thakeb and Scott also collected data of Kuwaiti college students
at Kuwait University to make generalizations about the revitalization of Islamic Penal Law in the Middle East. Like Al-Thakeb and Scott, this section does not purport that its findings are applicable to the entire Middle East, but it does provide a basis for further testing of its key findings in majority Muslim countries.

**Review of Measures of Religiosity in Sociology and Applicability to Islamic Contexts**

In the sociology of religion literature, many times religiosity is measured in terms of belief and belonging at the individual level. This, as Gorski and Altinordu point out, may be a result of the methodologism that constrains sociological study, in that our academic understanding of belief and belonging is limited to the data we are able to collect, mostly cross-sectional data of individual-level beliefs and measures of belonging.

**Sociological Measures of Belief**

Some common sociological measures of belief include questions about belief in angels, demons, God, Heaven, Hell, and life after death; some more recent belief items include questions about belief in monsters, UFOs, and other paranormal beings or experiences. Some questions about worldview belief items include questions about belief in evolution, whether God is angered by human sin, and the origin of man; existential beliefs and morality; God’s effects on the individual; and images of God.

Aside from theological belief items, other measures of belief include social and political beliefs related to religiosity. For example, the WVS asks respondents about belief in the following items:

- Clear guidelines on good and evil;
- Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office;
- Religious leaders should/should not influence people’s vote;
- Things would be better if there are more people with strong religious beliefs;
- Churches give answers to social or moral problems.

Similar to theological beliefs, beliefs about the Bible have also been incorporated to place a respondent in a range of beliefs related to
their “fundamentalism” or literalism of interpreting a scriptural text. Variants of question items about belief in the Bible include:

- The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word;
- The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything should be taken literally, word for word;
- The Bible is an ancient book of fables recorded by man.\(^{23}\)

In the Islamic context, where expressing disbelief in the truth of the Qur’an would be tantamount to treason or apostasy (resulting in legal punishment in some cases), this question has been approximated by asking:

- Which one statement comes closest to your personal beliefs about the Qur’an?
- The Qur’an is perfectly true, and should be interpreted literally, word-for-word, on all subjects.
- The Qur’an is perfectly true, but it should not be interpreted literally. We must interpret its meaning.\(^{24}\)

**Sociological Measures of Belonging**

Measures of belonging have been conceptualized in terms of affiliation (when a respondent affiliates himself or herself with a religious tradition), religious preference, religious tradition, and strength of affiliation. Within that conceptualization of belonging, more recent studies have sought further specification of affiliation,\(^{25}\) including affiliation by denomination,\(^{26}\) sect, or other sectarian movement within a religious tradition.

The WVS asks if the respondent affiliates or identifies with a particular religious denomination, if the person identifies as a religious person, and if the person was “raised religious.” These questions attempt to address the individual’s social location within a range of religiosity measures for the population under study. The ISSP 2008 asks a series of questions for the individual to locate himself or herself within a certain range of religious salience including:

- Would you describe yourself as extremely/very/somewhat religious;
- I am best described as: a follower/non-follower of a religion and consider myself to be a spiritual person interested in the sacred or supernatural.
The Baylor Religion Survey (BRS)\(^\text{27}\) also offers religious identity labels, which can be said to identify categorizations of belonging, such as: “Bible-Believing,” “born-again” “charismatic” “contemplative,” “evangelical,” “fundamentalist,” “mainline Christian,” “mystic,” “Pentecostal,” “religious left,” “religious right,” “seeker,” “spiritual,” “theologically conservative,” “theologically liberal,” and “traditional.”

**Composites of Belief and Belonging Measures**

The import of these measures to understanding religious salience and its correlations to other social and political realms of individual belief and belonging are exemplified by the revisions of Steensland et al.\(^\text{28}\) to the previously established “religious fundamentalism” index of Smith 1990.\(^\text{29}\) In further detail, the American index of religious fundamentalism (informally referred to as the “FUND” category, based on its coding abbreviation), assumes that religiosity may be best understood as belonging to categories of “fundamentalist” to “liberal” religious subgroups within a limited number of religious traditions.\(^\text{30}\)

Seeking to improve “the state of the art” of measuring American religion, Steensland et al. showed that by locating a respondent within categories theoretically based on their religious tradition, one could more accurately predict correlations to social and political issues. Their index of religious tradition familiarly referred to as “RELTRAD” redirected the focus of categories of religious belonging away from an ordinal notion of religious “fundamentalists” as *more* religious, but toward a simple nominal categorization. The distinction avoids confusing a respondent’s commitment to a set of conservative beliefs or liberal beliefs with the fervor with which they believe them. Also, available categorizations are coded by social analysts as “mainline Protestant,” “evangelical Protestant,” “black Protestant,” “Roman Catholic,” “Jewish,” and “other.”\(^\text{31}\) In their analysis, they show statistically that the RELTRAD variable, coming out of a conceptualization of belief and belonging rooted in a religious history and tradition (and not simply affiliating with its modern categorization), would more accurately predict social and political attitudes than the FUND index.

**Measures of Belief and Belonging in the Comparative Context**

Separate measures for belief and belonging as well as composite indexes that include both concepts can apply to the study of religion in the
comparative context. A main methodological hurdle, however, is that at the macro-level, belief and belonging may be measured (not altogether statistically accurately) as an aggregate of individual-level belief measures and then interpreted for its import to larger world trends. This comparative tradition finds its roots in a Weberian approach to measuring religious belief and belonging within a contextualized political and social culture.

Inglehart and other’s work with the WVS survey replicates Inglehart and Baker’s work locating belief measures within a framework of “traditional versus secular-rational values” and “survival versus self-expression values.” They state that “traditional” values emphasize that “Religion is very important” while secular-rational value would state the opposite. Using WVS data, Moaddel and others find evidence that Islamic countries have relatively similar basic values in comparison with societies with other cultural traditions, except for those that have experienced communist rule. Thus reinforcing that studies of belief and belonging in the comparative context must account for a country’s political-religious history and experience of government regulation of religion.

This is much of the case in the study of religiosity conducted in Muslim countries or of Muslim minorities in Europe and North America. Particularly in studies of Muslim immigrants in Europe, measures of religious involvement are incorporated to measure salience of religious belonging or opinions of the relationship between religion and politics. The theoretical assumptions are that perhaps in the minority context, Muslims may conflate their ethnic and religious identities with political and racial identities forming correlations between their personal beliefs and a public sense of belonging.

In addition to standard belief items, additional belief and belonging items explored for a majority Muslim context include (as copied directly from the original survey English translations):

- In general, which of these statements comes closest to your own point of view? Sharia must be the only source; a source; not a source of legislation.
- Please say whether your overall view of each group is very positive, somewhat positive, neutral, somewhat negative, or very negative: Atheists? Christians? Jews? Shiite Muslims? Sunni Muslims?
- In general, do you believe a basic conflict exists between Sunnis and Shiites, or not?
- With which religious tradition, if any, do you most closely identify? (Categories include Sunni, Shii, and Other; ISAS 2007)
In writing the ISAS, I have actually taken the Steensland et al. recommendation to ask the respondent to place themselves on a political continuum to be able to cross-tabulate with religious tradition to better place where the respondent belongs in a religious categorization.

* With what religious school of thought, if any, do you most closely identify? (Categories include Salafi, Muslim Brotherhood, Najaf, Qom, Muslim not committed to any group; ISAS 2007)

Along with traditional belonging categories of affiliation and denomination (or in this case, sect), I have asked the question: “How would you describe yourself politically?” With response categories ranging from “Extremely Conservative” to “Extremely Liberal.” But in the Arabic translation, the question was translated for respondents to choose from “Extremely Islamist” to “Extremely Liberal.” This translation of the question seemed more appropriate for the political categories available to the local population, where “Conservative” was synonymous with “Islamist.” As a result, the question in Arabic more accurately tests Steensland et al.’s recommendation for respondents to locate themselves on a Conservative/Liberal continuum with reference to religiosity.

**Multiplicities of Religious Belief and Belonging Measures Extended to the Study of Islam**

Literature in the sociology of religion furthered by cultural sociologists identifies expressions of religious belief and belonging in less institutional settings. The study of Islam is a special case in the sociology of religion because of its still thriving (and reviving) institutional and public role for religion as well as its felt influence in more privatized expressions of individual religiosity. The ISAS 2007 asks additional belief and belonging items to further assess where the respondent’s beliefs place him or her in a range of multiplicities of belonging in the Islamic context. By “multiplicities” I mean the multiple spheres where religion has had an influence. For example, Figure 5.1 in Chapter 5 shows respondent’s primary group affiliation as they selected from the ISAS questionnaire. The discussion of the data in Chapter 5 elaborates on these findings.

The extensive nature of the ISAS in itself makes a unique contribution to the way that sociologists understand Islamic religiosity because
of previously assumed (limited) categories and ranges of Islamic belief and expression of religiosity. One such assumption is that since Islam is more of a public religion, individual Muslims are less likely to view matters of their religious life on a personal, individual level, as is the case with many Christian practices in Western countries. However, the ISAS data show that in fact, Muslims in majority Muslim contexts do claim to have personal, private religious experiences while also practicing communal religious rituals. I took from Stark and Finke’s assumptions about the sacrilization of culture and assumed a range of religious expressions (including infusing social and political attitudes) of Muslims in a majority Muslim context. It is important to note that these multiplicities may or may not have been assumed of Muslims in a minority setting in previous research, but can certainly be useful in future studies.

Quantitative Data: A Pilot Survey of Kuwaiti College Students

The ISAS data come from a sample of 1,139 undergraduate students at Kuwait University, the oldest and largest university in the country. Local advisors facilitated a general announcement of the need for participants by word of mouth, and those professors who volunteered their classes were given surveys to distribute in various sections of their classes. Professors who had volunteered their classes for the spring semester were later solicited for distribution to their classes in the following summer semester. Because classes were gender-segregated, I was easily able to calculate how many female surveys and how many male surveys were to be prepared for distribution, so as to attempt to maintain an appropriate gender ratio to the general balance at the university. Surveys were distributed to all students in the class and given instructions by the professor as to the voluntary nature of the survey and their right to refuse to answer any questions or take the survey at all. Students completed the ISAS during the 2007 spring and summer semesters. Analyses use cross-sectional data collected in 58 undergraduate classes from 11 different departments (anthropology, sociology, psychology, statistical consultation, liberal arts information, English, electrical engineering, political science, education, business, and life skills) at all three campuses of Kuwait University (Shwaikh, Keyfan, and Khaldiya). When I compared my sample by field of study to the numbers for of Kuwaiti students enrolled at Kuwait University during the second semester, Spring 2005, my sample had less natural science, liberal arts, education, and law majors, while having more
engineering and Islamic studies majors. This must be considered as part of the sampling error, because no particular disciplines were oversampled; in fact I did not distribute any surveys directly within the faculty for Sharia and Islamic studies, so the fact that there were proportionally more of these majors in my sample than the proportion of majors in the university population as a whole must be considered as part of the sampling error. In other respects, such as sex and sect ratio, the sample approximately matched the university population. The survey was distributed to students during class time, and students were instructed to take the surveys during the class period on a completely voluntary basis. The response rate was 50.33 percent. In total, 2,263 surveys were distributed and a total of 1,139 completed surveys were collected.

The ISAS focuses on the measurement of religiosity, political attitudes, and civic engagement and contains some religiosity items approximate to those in the BRS. The ISAS for Kuwait has a total of 159 items including modules on religious practice, belief, behavior, belonging, religious networks, spiritual experience, and family religiosity. Social Attitude modules include questions on women’s rights, minority rights, attitudes about democracy, and relations with the West. Many of the questions were drawn from previous studies on these topics such as the WVS; the United States General Social Survey; the Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali 1998 study survey; and the Almahmeed study survey. Though the data presented here is in English, the survey version that was distributed and completed was in Arabic. The ISAS English version was translated into Arabic by a local team of translators and edited by social science faculty involved with this project. The data was then entered into a database by the Statistical Unit at Kuwait University and analyzed using statistical software packages SAS and SPSS.

**Demographics of the Sample**

The sample is majority female, between the ages of 21 and 25, in their last year of school, with an average household income between US$40,000 to US$100,000, single, Sunni Muslim, and the majority of whose mothers had at least some college education. Particular attention to gender ratio in higher education and percentage of mother’s graduate education provide unique contextual insights to continue to observe about elites in Islamic countries.

The data also hints at some important Islamic religiosity measures to consider in future studies. Religious practice in majority Muslim
societies may differ by gender. Cultural and traditional expectations may condition the range of behaviors available for religious public expression. Belonging to a sect or religious school of thought would also be an important indicator to control for when isolating religious practice versus identification. The fact that the majority of female students wear a veil to cover their hair reinforces the fact that in the majority Muslim context, religious expression may serve as a proxy for cultural norms. In this case, further analysis that controlled for simply wearing a headscarf would yield little significance. This may not be the case for analysis done of Muslim women who wear a headscarf where they are in the minority.

**Conclusions**

The main conclusions from this section are, first, a breakdown of religious experience and practice by gender is essential to the majority Muslim context. Not only are some religious rituals gendered by Islamic doctrine and tradition, but social customs of the local population may exacerbate these gender differences, which in turn influence the context for measuring religiosity in Islamic countries. Second, a survey of elites in a majority Muslim context reveals a significant diversity of religious experience, practice, and social attitudes among individual Muslims. This is important to note in an influential segment of a developing society, its college students, because they provide a measure of future social trends. Third, that political affiliation of Islamist to Liberal, or Conservative to Liberal needs further testing, but preliminary results show it to be an important explanatory variable to a host of other outcomes. Political affiliation could also be tested as a control when examining Islamic attitudes on a wide range of pertinent issues.

The ISAS project makes several contributions to the existing studies of Islamic religiosity. It offers a valuable research method, routinely practiced in the United States and Europe, of surveying college students as a way to obtain data about attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors of elites and future decision-makers in a developing, majority Muslim context. Most research has been done on Muslims in the minority context or of nationally representative samples (Gallup, WVS). These theoretical as well as empirical studies may have breadth of scope in a larger sample or population but may fail to reach elites in the country of whose results we may also be particularly interested. Elites, though hard to capture in most national random survey studies, are of particular interest because their influence could be presumed to be
more weighted in terms of future trends in opinion and behavior in the country.\textsuperscript{49} Also, to the extent that elites become employed by the government, are granted political positions and even as they regenerate and grow demographically, they are sure to both reflect and have exponential impact on their local spheres of influence, regardless of cultural background.

The ISAS also offers innovative and alternative questions to measure religiosity that should continue to be tested in future studies. Unique items include questions such as “Why do you wear a veil?,” “Do you wear a beard for religious reasons?,” and “Would you say you have changed profoundly as the result of a religious experience?”

The ISAS project is an exploratory survey that contributes to the social science literature in a variety of ways. It offers a sample of college students at a national university in an Islamic country as a methodology to analyze data of elites in a majority Muslim context. It also offers a breadth of data on a variety of social, political, and religious questions to be used in analysis of attitudinal and behavioral items. Further testing of the concepts and topics introduced in this section only strengthens the ability of social scientists to conduct religious research in a comparative context.
Appendix 2: Summary of Interview Responses to Select Interview Questions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
<th>How Islam Supports Women's Rights</th>
<th>Obstacles to Properly Addressing WR</th>
<th>Most Important Women's Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>05–28–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Islam is a positive thing for the society.</td>
<td>Bedouin background to blame for misinterpretation of Islam against women, but pointed out that some non-politically Islamist parliamentarians didn’t feel K’s democracy was mature enough for women to contribute; women too comfortable to fight for their rights.</td>
<td>Equal political participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>05–31–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Partnership with Islamic scholars is crucial to giving women rights in keeping with the modern realities when the Qur’an or Constitution isn’t clear.</td>
<td>Culturally conservative mindset; lack of education.</td>
<td>Political rights as a way to address civil rights; policies for women's status laws; status of children who marry non-Kuwaitis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>06–02–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Cannot separate; wants her political rights to come from her religion (a holistic approach); charity work through Islamist reform associations.</td>
<td>Encroachment of Western values; women's inability to get together across cultural, ideological, etc. lines.</td>
<td>Political and civil rights; status of children who marry non-Kuwaitis; <em>bidoon</em> (stateless).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Argument</td>
<td>Concern</td>
<td>Suggestion</td>
<td></td>
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<td>---------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–03–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Believes Islamic agenda is good for the country, reflects culture, values, and religion; refers to the Prophet and his wives as examples for social activism.</td>
<td>Women candidates who lack experience or heart – i.e. don’t represent their lives or values; activist infighting.</td>
<td>Social rights even before political rights; maternity leave, accommodating her home and work and study responsibilities; corruption, education, health.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–03–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Refers to the Prophet and his wives as examples for social activism.</td>
<td>Lack of experience; ideological divisions that keep women activists from cooperating.</td>
<td>Maternity leave, accommodating her home and work and study responsibilities; corruption, education, health.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–05–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Islam legitimates political participation; Islam is a holistic religion and encourages activism.</td>
<td>Misguided Muslim clerics.</td>
<td>Women’s political and social equality with men.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–04–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Islamists have a broader agenda, are more organized, and committed.</td>
<td>Lack of coordination between Islamists and Liberals in the parliament; lack of pressure from constituents; tribal conservatism against women candidates.</td>
<td>Civil and social rights; family law and personal status laws; Permanent housing; Pass citizenship to children of Kuwaiti mothers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–16–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Islamic values inseparable from politics; takes example from Qur’an and Sunna – the Prophet Mohammed didn’t send women to be his ministers.</td>
<td>Encroachment of Western values.</td>
<td>Family law (ex -requiring reconciliation attempt before divorce); preserving traditional families.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–17–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Islam gives rights and power to women (intrinsic motivation).</td>
<td>Women have lack of experience (not well-qualified).</td>
<td>Political participation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

continued
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Interview Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Political Affiliation</th>
<th>How Islam Supports Women’s Rights</th>
<th>Obstacles to Properly Addressing WR</th>
<th>Most Important Women’s Issues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>06–17–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Conservative</td>
<td>Holistic reform (“just” equality vs. absolute equality); working through mosques for social reform vs. government.</td>
<td>Political responsibilities are too burdensome (would add to Western imposition of their values); other women who will not cooperate with Islamists and give other women a bad name in politics.</td>
<td>Housing, safe working conditions, maternity leave, retirement benefits (economic independence).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>05–12–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Activist infighting; misguided Islamic scholars (manipulated by politics); women don’t believe in other women; lack of experience and education in voting; conservative culture; tribal loyalties and inequalities; lack of resources.</td>
<td>Political participation; economic equality; education; sexual harassment; government corruption with political Islamists; <em>bidoon</em>; economic independence for unmarried women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>05–21–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>The Qur’an has instructions for modern problems (like negotiation, conflict management); broader constituencies through charity work.</td>
<td>Activist infighting; lack of organization.</td>
<td>Political participation, economic and professional independence; education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Type</td>
<td>Comments</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–04–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Lack of experience and resources; activist infighting. Political participation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–04–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>God teaches that men and women are both human beings; Islam is flexible – has insights for modern problems; examples of women leaders; nothing in Islam against religious and political rights. Equal political participation.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–04–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Gains insight from the Qur’an and Sunna.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–05–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Islam provides an ethical worldview. Conservative culture; lack of interest; disorganization. Political participation; professional equality.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06–07–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Qur’an provides insight; women should serve as equal partners in the community; Islam doesn’t forbid. Activist infighting, cultural conservatism among Sunni; lack of education. Political and civic participation; education and professional equality.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>05–17–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Nothing that forbids, access to a larger group.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No.</td>
<td>Interview Date</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Political Affiliation</td>
<td>How Islam Supports Women’s Rights</td>
<td>Obstacles to Properly Addressing WR</td>
<td>Most Important Women’s Issues</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>05–22–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Activist infighting, lack of organization.</td>
<td>Housing, citizenship rights for children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men, improvements in family law, domestic violence, and confidential treatment; rehabilitation centers for addict husbands and sons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>05–23–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>No religious impediment.</td>
<td>Misinterpretation of the religion; cultural conservatism (this is reflected in the media and school textbooks).</td>
<td>Labor rights, domestic violence, discrimination based on gender, issues of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis; housing and social welfare for the divorced and the widowed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>05–25–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>Activist infighting; lack of coordination; lack of experience.</td>
<td>Job security (against discrimination), electoral awareness (political participation); special needs groups.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Party</td>
<td>Issue</td>
<td>Response</td>
<td></td>
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<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 05–30–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Manipulation of Islam by Islamist politicians; cultural conservatism against women in politics; activist infighting; lack of organization.</td>
<td>Formal and cultural education to promote women in public life.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28 06–03–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Conservative, patriarchal mindset (seen in both men and women); economic insecurity; religious fundamentalism which renewed cultural conservatism.</td>
<td>Women married to non-Kuwaitis; rights of stateless (bidoon); housing, social laws, family laws; conditions for women in prison.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29 06–03–2007</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Islamist groups give women a role to play in charity organizations.</td>
<td>Misinterpretation of Islam; manipulation by political Islamists; cultural conservatism; activist infighting.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 06–17–2007</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Gossip (cultural conservatism); women candidates lack experience and education; immature democratic process; confusion btw culture and religion; wrong focus on how religion looks versus how it is practiced.</td>
<td>Educational and professional opportunities equal to men.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Notes

Introduction

1. For a previous anecdotal exploration of Islamic feminism, see Elizabeth Warnock Fernea’s (1997) book about her travels around the world.


8. See also Goodwin 1994.


15. For a treatment of the power of cultural elites and matters of faith and religion, see Lindsay 2007.


18. Ibid.: 11.

19. Interview 2.
27. Ibid.: 26–32.
29. Interview 27.
30. Interview 20.
32. See “Kuwait” 2012.
33. See Hassan Al-Banna, 1947, Towards the Light, found online at http://www.ikhwanweb.com/article.php?id=802
38. HADAS stands for “Harakat Al-Dostooriya Al-Islamiya.”
42. Rola Dashti, 2007, Speech to the Aware Center, Kuwait City, Kuwait.
43. Interview 2.
47. See Figure 3.1 in Chapter 3.

51. Such as Esposito and Mogahed 2007.


53. See González 2011.

Western Feminism Has Not Taken Root in Muslim Hearts and Minds

1. Interview 4.

2. This must be reconciled with the seemingly contradictory account that at the time of the Prophet Mohammed and the rise of Islam at the turn of the sixth century AD, women were able to own wealth and travel, as did Mohammed’s first wife, Khadeeja.

3. Qur’an, 81:8–9.

4. Even though it was half of her brother’s.


6. Qur’an 4:11. At the time, the fact that it was set at half of their brother’s inheritance was beside the point that they would be able to claim any portion of their father’s wealth.

7. See Esposito and Mogahed 2007, Chapter 4.

8. One early activist, Fatima Hussein is documented as having marched in feminist demonstrations in Kuwait in the 1950s. She along with other women removed and burned their abayas in the main square. See Têtreault 1993: 282.


17. Interview 4.
18. The Arabic is As-salaamu Aleykoum.
19. Interview 29.
21. Interview 11.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Ibid.
26. Interview 11.
27. Interview 2.
29. Ibid.
30. Interview 14.
33. Interview 4.
34. Interview July 30, 2008, Doha, Qatar.
35. Interview 21.
36. Interview 20.
37. Ibid.
38. Interview 10.
39. Interviewee 7 written responses.
40. Interview 9.

2 Islamists Are Winning Elections

4. She is designated “O.W.” for “Older Woman.”
5. Interviews 5 and 6. “Ms. A.” was the designated spokeswoman for the interview, and where her comments preclude, I have designated the interview as Interview 5. I have included comments of various additional women who spoke more extensively than the others during the group interview, and their comments are credited as Interview 6. I identify the participants separately as Ms. C., O.W. (Older Woman), Ms. B., and Y.W. (Younger Woman) for those whose comments predominate Interview 6.

6. A less formal pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.


8. Various terms for the Islamic Constitutional Movement, or the Kuwaiti version of the Muslim Brotherhood.

9. Interview 15.
11. Interview 29.
12. Interviewee 1 written responses.
13. Interview 29.
15. Interview 17.
16. Short for Ikhwan Muslimeen, Arabic for the “Muslim Brotherhood.”
17. Interview 9.
18. Interview 20.
22. Interview 21.
23. Interview 22.
25. According to data from various sources, the average births per woman in Kuwait was highest in 1966 (7.42 births per woman) but lowered to 2.27 births per woman in 2007. See: the United Nations Population Division. World Population Prospects; United Nations Statistical Division. Population and Vital Statistics Reports; Eurostat: Demographic Statistics; Secretariat of the Pacific Community: Statistics
and Demography Program; and US Census Bureau International Database compiled online at http://www.indexmundi.com/facts/kuwait/fertility-rate.

27. Jahra is a relatively remote, predominantly bedouin, and tribal area in the desert outskirts of Kuwait.
28. Interview 15.
29. Interview 21.
30. Interview 12.
31. Interview 20.
32. Interview 9.
33. Ibid.
35. Interview 9.
36. Interview 15.
37. Interviews 5 and 6.
38. Interview 2.
39. The Ministry of Awqaf takes care of religious endowments, such as land, money, or other assets for public distribution.
40. Interview 8.
42. Ibid.: 39–40.
43. Interview 8.
44. Interview 14.
45. Interview 8.
47. Interview 22.
48. Interview 21 written responses.
49. Interview 21.
51. Interview 2.
NOTES

56. Ibid.: 18.

3 Veiled Women Are Leading

1. Interview 2.
2. Interview 3.
5. Interview 22.
7. Interview 17.
8. Interview 29.
9. Ibid.
10. Interview 19.
11. Interview 4.
12. Interview 12.
15. Rola Dashti presentation at the AWARE Center on her experience as a political candidate, May 23, 2007, Kuwait City, Kuwait.
16. Interview 17.
17. The popular Muslim Barbie doll, “Fulla” has her abaya and veil designated as “outerwear” and provides a symbolic foil to the Western comparatively “immodest” Barbie.
18. Interview 10.
19. Interview 1 written responses.
22. Dr. Nouriya Al-Sabih was Kuwait’s first female minister of education, who did not wear a hijab when appointed to the government, and was a test case for the requirement of women in government to be veiled or not.
23. The dishdasha is the long, white robe worn by Kuwaiti men. A shorter dishdasha (that cuts off above the ankle instead of reaching to the floor) is believed to be worn by more religiously conservative men, as are long-beards, to more closely resemble what they believe the Prophet Mohammed wore while he was alive.
27. Interview 3.
28. Interview 2.
29. Interview 12.
30. Interview 4.
31. Interview 16.
32. Interview 25.
33. Interview 17.
35. Interview 16.
36. Interview 15.
37. Katz 2010. See note 34.
38. Interview 29.
39. Interview 19.
40. Interview 10.
41. Interview 27.
42. Interview 20.
43. Interview 28.
44. Interview 18.
45. Interview 14.
47. Interview 6.
48. Interview 27.
49. See Foley 2010.
50. Interview 14.

4 Men Are Enabling Islamic Feminism

1. Interview 21.
2. The Islamic concept of “wilaya” or “guardianship” of a political and religious Islamic state is traditionally deemed for men only.
3. A comparative example would be extreme libertarian sectarianists who do not vote, pay taxes, or otherwise defy conventional civic participation in the United States to protest the reach of the US government. Some use their interpretation of Christianity to justify their beliefs and actions, even violent ones. Similarly, some sects of Islamic belief view political engagement with the state as a compromise of their religious or political beliefs.
5. Interview 15.
7. Interview 11.
8. Interview 20.
9. Ibid.
10. Kuwaiti Dinar, the local currency.
11. Interview 20.
15. Interview 18.
16. Ibid.
17. Interview 14.
20. Interview 17.
22. Interview 28.
23. Interview 15.
24. Ibid.
25. Interview 18.
26. Interview 16.
29. In Kuwait, there are various organizations that address women’s issues, and some are known as “women’s societies.” Several studies have considered the complex and at times competing agendas among the different women’s societies in Kuwait (Têtreault and Al-Mughni 2004; Rizzo, Meyer, and Ali 2002).
30. Interview 4.
31. Interview 7.
32. Interview 11.
33. Interview 25.
35. The National Democratic Institute lists the four women candidates, brief biographies, and number of votes at http://www.ndi.org/node/15508.
36. Interview 7.
37. Interview 2.
38. The measures for women’s rights in this figure were: regarding wearing Western clothing, listening to Western music, accepting mothers working, gender segregation in school, displays of wealth, and women running for political office.
39. Interview 30.
40. Interview 12.
41. Interview 22.
42. For more discussion about the origins of diwaniyas, see Têtreault 1993.
44. MP stands for “Minister of Parliament,” the term for political representative in Kuwait.
45. Interview 22.
46. See Mahmood 2005.
47. Qur’an teacher Houda Al-Habash has worked to empower young girls in Damascus by teaching them to read and understand the Qur’an. See Julia Meltzer and Laura Nix’s documentary (2012) titled “A Light in Her Eyes.”
48. Interview 29.
49. Interview 2.
51. Interview 2.
52. Interview 9.
53. Interview 20.
54. Interview 15.
55. Interview 9.
56. Interview 17.
57. Interview 26.
58. Interview 15.
59. Interview 22.
60. Interview 27.
62. Interview 2.
63. Interview 15.
64. Interview 17.

5 Arab Youth Are Both Modern and Traditional

1. Interview 7.
2. Courbage, Todd, and Holoch 2007: 120.
3. Interview 30.
4. This same argument has been made of previously marginalized populations around the world including against women and black Americans voting rights in the United States.
5. Khalil al-Anani uses the term “informal” Islamist to open up the categories for understanding Islamists. Here I use the term deliberately to categorize an interviewee with political Islamist leanings and affiliations, but who is modern and untraditional in demeanor and appearance, particularly because of his exposure to life in the West. See Khalil Al-Anani, 2012, “The Advent of ‘Informal’ Islamists,” Foreign Policy Middle East Channel, published online March 19 at http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/03/19/the_advent_of_informal_islamists
NOTES

6. Interview 7.
7. Interview 22.
8. See González and Al-Kazi 2011: 77.
10. Ibid.
11. Interview 7.
12. Interview 12.
13. Bluetooth technology was emblematic at the time of wireless technology that helps impressionable young Kuwaitis to pick up signals from strangers, invite them to chat rooms, or possibly steal their personal information. Conservatives in Kuwait wanted to ban it to avoid possible negative social consequences.
15. Interview 30.
17. Interview 29.
18. Interview 21.
19. From Interview 30.
21. Interview 22.
22. Interview 29.
25. The custom of “grilling” or cross-examining government ministers comes out of the British parliamentary system and is used often in Kuwait.
26. From Interviews 5 and 6.
29. See González and Al-Kazi 2011.

32. Interview 30.
34. Interview 29.
35. The book she refers to by Simone de Beauvoir is actually *The Second Sex*, published in 1949.
36. Interview 22.
37. Interview 14.
38. Interview 30.
40. Interview 30.
41. Interview 13.
42. Interview 12.
43. GCC stands for the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional organization which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.
44. Interview 28.
45. In Kuwait, the work week ends on Wednesday, to have Thursday and Fridays off, so that Muslims can gather for worship on Fridays. Other Gulf countries have modified their work week by taking Friday and Saturday off to match more of the work week for international businesses to operate more fluidly.
46. Interview 29.
47. Interview 30.
48. Interview 29.
50. Interviewee 24 written responses.
52. Qur’an 9:71.
53. Interview 30.
54. The “Arab Spring” refers to the wave of populist revolutions beginning in Tunisia in December 2010 and spreading throughout the Middle East.
55. Interviewee 1 written responses.

**Conclusion: Legitimate Authorities in Balance**

1. This excerpt is from a letter that was written and signed by Islamist Conservatives at the conference on “Glorification of the Sanctities of Islam” held in Kuwait City, January 22–24, 2007.
2. Interview 2.

4. Interview 22.
5. Interview 20.
6. Interview 12.
10. Interview 12.
11. Interview 6.
12. Interview 22.
15. Interviewee 1 written responses.
17. Interview 13.
18. Rola Dashti presentation at the AWARE Center on her experience as a political candidate, May 23, 2007, Kuwait City, Kuwait.
20. Interview 16.
22. Interview 13.
23. Interview 21.
24. Interview 22.
25. Ibid.
27. Interview 13.
28. Interviewee 21 written responses.
29. Interview 25.
30. Interview 2.
31. This is true of elite women’s groups all over the world. For a study of elite women in Texas, see Diana Kendall, 2002, *The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and the Social Reproduction of the Upper Class*, Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.

33. Interview 26.
34. Interview 2.
35. Interview 14.
36. Interview 17.
37. Interview 15.
38. Interview 12.
39. One such example is that of Islamic scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi and his success with, among other mediums of communication, his sponsorship of the Muslim website, IslamOnline: http://www.islamonline.com/


41. Interview 18.

42. Esposito 1991.

43. Interview 7.

44. Interview 25.

Appendix I: Islamic Social Attitudes Survey (ISAS) Methodology


15. Ibid.: 68.


22. ISSP 2008 also asks questions about religion in politics and tolerance of religious “extremism.”


34. 2007.


36. Also in line with Stark and Finke 2000.


43. 2000.


46. 2006.

47. See González and Al-Kazi 2011.


Glossary

**abaya**
Outer robe, usually black and floor-length with long sleeves, traditionally worn by Muslim women out of modesty.

**agal**
Black rope used by men to keep their headdress (ghutra) in place.

**Alhamdulilah/Hamdulilah**
Arabic for “Thank God.”

**As-salaamu Aleykoum**
Arabic for “God’s peace be upon you.”

**ayat**
Verses of the Muslim scriptures.

**bedu/bedouin**
Desert nomad.

**bidoon**
“Stateless” Kuwaitis; Kuwaitis who do not have paperwork to claim their citizenship.

**burqa**
Afghani face-veil which prevents eyes to be seen behind a mesh screen and which extends from head down past the waist.

**dishdasha**
The long, white robe worn by Kuwaiti men. A shorter dishdasha (that cuts off above the ankle instead of reaching to the floor) is believed to be worn by more religiously conservative men, as are long beards, to more closely resemble what they believe the Prophet Mohammed wore while he was alive.

**diwaniyas**
Male-only social gatherings.

**fatwa**
Legal judgment by an Islamic scholar.

**ghutra**
Kuwaiti term for men’s headdress.

**hadar**
A vernacular term for city or urban folk. This is in contrast to the bedouin,
tribal, or rural desert people with nomadic origins.

Hadith
Accounts in the oral tradition of the Prophet Mohammed and his companions.

Hajj
Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca; one of the five pillars of Islam.

Hakima
“Wise” in Arabic (referring to a woman).

halal
Arabic for “permissible.”

haram
Arabic for “forbidden.” Halal and haram are terms have generally religious connotations that add to their significance.

bikab
Headscarf or veil covering hair and bosom, arguably a religious mandate (in Iran and Saudi Arabia legal mandates) for women to show modesty.

Ikhwan
Arabic term for “Brotherhood”; a slang that stands for the Egyptian religious school of thought—the “Muslim Brotherhood.” The Muslim Brotherhood refers to a political Islamist ideology that originated in Egypt and is relatively moderate on some social issues, including that of incorporating women into politics.

Imam
Muslim preacher.

Inshallah
“Lord-willing” in Arabic.

jam’aiya
A local community center, open market, or town square in Kuwait.

jihadism
Sectarian strain of Islamic belief that emphasizes violent struggle to fight threats to God’s path in the world.

Kabbah
Black stone housed in Mecca toward which Muslims pray toward five times a day.

Madhab
School of Islamic jurisprudence.

majlis
Private reception area for receiving guests.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Majlis al umma</td>
<td>The Kuwaiti parliament.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mashalla</td>
<td>An Arabic phrase that means “Whatever God wills,” it is usually repeated after praising someone so as not to show envy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Masjid</td>
<td>Arabic for “mosque,” the Muslims’ place of worship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mecca/Mekka</td>
<td>City in Saudi Arabia; site of Muslim pilgrimage where the Kabbah is housed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medina</td>
<td>City in Saudi Arabia; site of Muslim pilgrimage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>muthajibat</td>
<td>A woman who wears a veil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>niqab</td>
<td>A veil that covers the face but not the eyes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>non-muthajibat</td>
<td>A woman who does not wear a veil.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qur'an</td>
<td>Literally “recitation,” it is the Muslim holy scripture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salafi</td>
<td>A Salafi Islamist is one who aligns ideologically with the strict, Wahhabi version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Outside of Saudi Arabia, Wahhabism is referred to as Salafism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sall’Allahu aleyhi wa salam</td>
<td>Arabic phrase that means “May God’s peace be upon him” and is usually repeated out of reverence for the Prophet Mohammed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharia/Shariah</td>
<td>Islamic law or jurisprudence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shawarmas</td>
<td>Traditional local “sandwich” or “wrap” filled with shaved lamb, or other meat.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheikh</td>
<td>Islamic religious scholar.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sheila</td>
<td>Another Kuwaiti term for hijab.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shura</td>
<td>The role of consultation in bringing about wise leadership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunna</td>
<td>Tradition of the Prophet Mohammed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ulama</td>
<td>Muslim religious scholars who often issue legal opinions, or fatwas, that Muslims should follow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umma/ummah</td>
<td>Community of believers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>umrah</td>
<td>A less formal pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Wahhabi**

A Wahhabi Islamist is one who is aligned ideologically with the strict, Wahhabi version of Islam practiced in Saudi Arabia. Also known as Salafi.

**wilaya**

“Guardianship” in Arabic. This term refers to the guardianship of a political and religious Islamic state and is traditionally deemed a role for men only. The term is often used to mean that women are Islamically mandated to stay out of top state authority positions. Progressives interpret this to mean women can exercise leadership in other ways.

**yanni**

Arabic filler word, such as “like” or “un” in English.

**zakat**

Arabic term for “charity,” and as one of the five pillars of Islam, it is considered a Muslim duty.


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