Reluctant feminists?
Islamist MPs in Kuwaiti parliamentary documents after 2005

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Abstract
May 2015 marked a decade of Kuwaiti women’s enfranchisement. In this paper I look at Kuwaiti parliamentary documents that cover the period 2006 – 2015, with particular emphasis on the parliamentary Woman’s and Family Committee (WFC). A sharp rise in the number of proposals raised through the WFC occurred while the four first-ever female elected MPs served between 2009 and 2011: around half of all proposals raised in the WFC between 2006 until date were raised during these two years. Most importantly, Islamist MPs – many of whom voted against granting women the franchise in 2005 – were those most eager to address women’s social, legal and economic conditions.

This paper argues that Islamist MPs can be seen as reluctant feminists and diligent opportunists. Between 2009 – 2011, they reformulated demands pertaining to poverty alleviation and social assistance by focusing on women as mothers, widows and caretakers. In law proposals raised through the WFC, Islamist MPs emphasized gender relations in ways where Kuwaiti women, particularly those married to non-Kuwaitis and stateless Bidun, were seen as capacitated citizens. Kuwaiti women, some Islamist MPs argued, should be able to act as legal guardians (kafil) of their husbands and children; be brokers of material welfare services such as free education and health services; and get access to financial commodities such as public housing schemes and jobs in the public sector. After the exit of female MPs from parliament in 2011, Islamists stopped arguing along these lines, and their demands on behalf of women dropped sharply.

Introduction
Four years after Kuwaiti women were enfranchised in May 2005, four women – Aseel al-Awadhi, Rola Dashti, Salwa al-Jassar and Ma’souma al-Moubarak – entered parliament as the first ever elected female legislators. In a forthcoming chapter, I analyze all questions and law proposals the female MPs raised during their two-year tenure between May 2009 – December 2011, and discuss the impact of the entry of women in parliament on female citizenship in Kuwait.¹

This paper grew out as an offshoot after analyzing documents related to the parliamentary Woman and Family Committee (WFC) which was established in October 2005, ¹

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between 2009 – 2011 were formulated in ways which emphasized women as capacitated citizens who could access social welfare benefits and support their

families. Ideologically, Islamist MPs are strongly in favor of patriarchal family models where males are seen as principle providers and heads of household. In their proposals they nevertheless acted in ways that breached with their professed conviction on preferred gender roles. They supported and pressured for women’s autonomy as capacitated citizens because these efforts served two other political interests: first, they sought to raise the case of marginalized, and to a large degree, impoverished tribal constituencies that inhabit peripheral areas outside Kuwait city; secondly, they articulated the social and political plight of families of mixed marriages between Kuwaitis and noncitizens through kinship ties or tribal alliances where the stateless Bidun population constitute a significant part.

Indirectly, perhaps even reluctantly, preferred patriarchal ideals gave way to other politically more prioritized objectives, such as addressing the economic hardships of

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1 It is important to emphasize that the term ‘tribal’ and ‘Beduin’ (Arabic for badu) interchangeably to denote the kinship relation and lineage background of some Kuwaiti MPs. The term ‘tribal’ or ‘tribalist’ is not used as a concept that denotes a “way of life” or an “essentialist identity”. As Al-Nakib argues, the hadar/sedentary and badu/nomadic distinction in Kuwait exists, but conceals that 99 percent of tribal groups have settled and have since the 1970s become urbanized. Farah Al-Nakib, ”Revisiting Hadar and Badū in Kuwait: Citizenship, Housing, and the Construction of a Dichotomy,” International Journal of Middle East Studies 46, no. 01 (2014): 6.

2 The total 41 law proposals (iqtirah biqanun) and expressions of support (iqtirah birighba) addressed to the WFC between November 2006 and February 2011 consisted of 29 expressions of support of which 20 were raised between 2009 – 2011 while the four female MPS were present in parliament, and 12 law proposals of which 9 were raised in that two year-period.

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households where women are *de facto* though not *de jure* heads of households, along with the social malaise of statelessness as politically unresolved issue. Parliamentary documents shed thus light on arenas of social tension and political conflict inherent in Kuwaiti society, and provide insights into how gender intersects with the distribution of civil and social welfare rights in a Gulf state.

**The theoretical departure:**

**Scrubnizing the principle of male guardianship in Kuwaiti parliamentary documents**

At heart of my investigation of parliamentary documents lies an interest in looking at how the principle of male guardianship over female citizens in state legislation is supported, challenged or opposed in the most liberal state in the Gulf.⁴ Exploring the structures and societal underpinnings of male dominance codified in state laws and reflected in social organization and practice is a central theme in feminist research.⁵ A feminist analysis seeks to identify, problematize and compare restraints that females face whether these are of economic, social or political nature when it comes to participating on an equal footing with males in the public, as well as in the private spheres.⁶

Male guardianship refers to the capacitation of male citizens within state laws in ways that limit the subjecthood and legal autonomy of adult female citizens, rendering thereby adult women *de jure* legal minors.⁷ In practice, male guardianship spells out as the capacity of fathers, husbands, brothers, grandfathers and uncles to have key decision-making power over adult women in issues such as marriage, divorce, custody over children, household economy, mobility, education opportunities, and work.

In Kuwait, as in the majority of the 22 member states of the Arab League, the principle of male guardianship permeates state laws mainly through family law, criminal law and nationality law.⁸ While the constitution proclaims the principle of equality and human

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⁴ The Gulf includes here member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GGC) Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).


⁷ Within Islamic jurisprudence, the principle of male guardianship is most clearly embedded in stipulations regarding marriage and divorce, and in religious tenets related to the concepts of *wilaya* and *qiwama*. See Welchman, *Women and Muslim Family Laws in Arab States: A Comparative Overview of Textual Development and Advocacy*, 61-76. On *wilaya* and *qiwama* as principles of male guardianship in Islamic *fiqh*, see Ziba Mir-Hosseini et al., *Gender and Equality in Muslim Family Law: Justice and Ethics in the Islamic Legal Tradition* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2013), 9-11.

⁸ Tunisia and Morocco are the two notable exceptions where the principle of male guardianship has been limited and contained – most clearly reflected in the state’s personal status codes, also known as family law which were codified and recodified in ways that narrow the gender gap between male and female citizens in 1956/1993 and 1957/2004 respectively.
dignity\(^9\), other state laws trump in practice constitutional provisions because a Kuwaiti woman is legally capacitated through her male kin.\(^{10}\) In the 1959 Nationality law, for instance, article 2 states that Kuwaiti citizenship is transmitted through a male citizen, depriving a Kuwaiti woman the opportunity to transfer citizenship to her children if married to a noncitizen. In criminal law and family law, a Kuwaiti woman does not have an autonomous legal personhood because marriage, divorce, custody of children, sexual harassment, domestic violence, rape, and the right to independent abortion are matters conditioned by the consent, mediation or abrogation of male kin. Social security laws premise in general that a Kuwaiti family is constituted of a Kuwaiti male head of household who is perceived as primal provider (\textit{mu’il}).

These gendered state laws embody the principle of male guardianship and give rise to a patriarchal political order where the unequal distribution of civil and social rights is embedded in, and bolstered by, patriarchal family structures characterized by the dominance of males over females.\(^{11}\) Buskens defines a patriarchal family model as one where the dominance of males “grounded in their position as husbands and fathers, is expressed in norms about gender, descent, obedience, sexuality, the use of space and freedom of movement, as well as about the economy of the household.”\(^{12}\)

The permeation of the principle of male guardianship within state law in Kuwait and other MENA states, creates a theoretical anomaly within modern polities in the region: that of the enfranchised legal minor. A female citizen in MENA has political rights, but lacks an autonomous legal personhood unmediated by male kin. Female citizenship is therefore distinct from, though it overlaps and intertwines with, that of male citizenship. This point explains why the concept of autonomy is central within feminist theoretical approaches towards addressing and unpacking female citizenship in MENA.

Researchers differ in their theoretical definition of the concept of autonomy. Nawar, Lloyd and Ibrahim underline, for instance, the importance of “personal autonomy” and define it as “the ability to think and act independently of others to achieve one’s goals and intentions.”\(^{13}\)

Joseph, on the other hand, emphasizes interdependence and support that derive from a group. According to her, rather than autonomous subjects endowed with inalienable

\(^9\) Article 29 states that “[a]ll people are equal in human dignity, and in public rights and duties before the law, without distinction as to race, origin, language or religion.” The Constitution of the State of Kuwait issued on 11 November 1962, published by The Secretariat General of the National Assembly, n.d.

\(^{10}\) On Kuwaiti women’s civil rights within state laws, see Badria Al-Awadhi, Al-Huqq Al-Siyasiyya Wal-Qanuniyya Wal-Insaniyya Lil-Mar’a Al-Kuwaitiya [Political, Legal and Human Rights for the Kuwaiti Woman] (Kuwait 2006), 55-57, 208-10, 27.

\(^{11}\) A patriarchal social order reflects a social organization which privileges male and elder rights. Philippe Fargues, "Changing Hierarchies of Gender and Generation in the Arab World," in Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context, ed. Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 179.


\(^{13}\) Laila Nawar, Cynthia B. Lloyd, and Barbara Ibrahim, "Women’s Autonomy and Gender Roles in Egyptian Families," in Family, Gender, and Population in the Middle East: Policies in Context, ed. Carla Makhlouf Obermeyer (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 1995), 151.
rights, citizens in MENA engage in relational rights that accrue from membership in community or kinship systems. Fairly common within social anthropological studies on women in MENA, analysis of relational rights are also central within theological and religion of history approaches. Roald, for instance, points out the centrality of gender complementarity, i.e. the differential and egalitarian, though not equal, status and rights of men and women within Islamic sources and practice.

A third approach emphasizes female autonomy in economic terms. Mogahdam stresses the ability to participate in the paid labor market as means to enhance female citizenship, through the extension of social rights. By ‘female citizenship’, she refers to empowerment of women’s rights pertaining to political expression, work and mobility, family formation, education, health and sexual control.

Finally, a legalistic theoretical approach is one where the concept of autonomy is seen through the organization of legal orders. Focus there is on how legal boundaries between religious law and state law spell out with regards to the organization of personal status, and the distribution of civil and social rights at the individual and domestic state level. Autonomy seen from this perspective implies the legal capacitation of females in state laws in ways that expand girls’ and women’s civil, economic and political scope of action.

The latter two approaches – the economic and the legalistic – can be seen as separate, but nevertheless intertwined. Basically, they represent Marshall’s differentiation between social rights and civil rights as these developed historically in successive phases in

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18 "Female Citizenship in the Middle East: Comparing Family Law Reform in Morocco, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon,” Middle East Law and Governance 5, no. 3 (2013): 282-83. See also, Mary Hallward-Driemeier, Tazeen Hasan, and Anca Bogdana Rusu, Women’s Legal Rights over 50 Years: Progress, Stagnation or Regression? (The World Bank, 2013).
Western polities.\textsuperscript{19} While feminist scholars have criticized this model because it portrays mainly the development of men’s citizenship, they nevertheless agree on the fruitfulness of differentiating between the three sets of rights, i.e. civil, political and social rights.\textsuperscript{20}

Within the Marshallian model, women’s political rights in MENA can be seen in two ways: first, as means to potentially bolster civil rights in the form of strengthened legal autonomy where male guardianship principles are weakened\textsuperscript{21}; secondly, as means to expand social rights, which in a welfare state take the form of economic and financial benefits. Evidently, in a welfare state both sets of rights are linked: wider civil rights bring about strengthened social rights, and strengthened social rights provide important incentives for pressurizing for wider female autonomy, bolstering thereby women’s civil rights.\textsuperscript{22}

In this paper, a ‘feminist’ is understood as an individual who seeks to expand the autonomy and legal capacity of a woman through words – such as the formulation of legislative proposals and expressions of support –, or acts, such as individual or collective pressures to widen and strengthen female autonomy and legal capacity within state laws.

In the following, I elaborate on how Kuwaiti male MPs acted as feminists – albeit reluctantly and indirectly. Whilst, a significant number of these men voted against granting women political rights in 2005, they acted in ways that sought to strengthen female citizenship. Clearly, and perhaps ironically, voting against women’s enfranchisement did not impede some Islamist MPs in articulating proposals that sought to bolster women’s social and economic rights when they explicitly argued for strengthening women’s autonomy and portrayed women as legally capacitated citizens.

**Methodological approach**

My methodological approach relies heavily on institutionalized forms of communication through Kuwaiti parliamentary documents.\textsuperscript{23} This lego-institutional perspective is chosen for

\begin{footnotesize}
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    \item T. H. Marshall, *Class, Citizenship, and Social Development: Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 78-91. His model implied that the development of civil rights during the 18\textsuperscript{th} century included individual protection of arbitrary rule by state authorities, freedom of speech, thought and faith, the right to own property, equality before the law, and the right to justice; political rights during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century encompassed the right to vote and to run for political office; and social rights during the 20\textsuperscript{th} century which included social welfare services and benefits according to an (undefined) standard of living common in society.
    \item Mounira Charrad, "Becoming a Citizen: Lineage Versus Individual in Tunisia and Morocco," in *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East*, ed. Suad Joseph (New York: Syracuse, 2000), 73. From a Western liberal citizenship perspective, feminist scholars point out similarly that men and women experience restrictions to their political participation differently: women have to cross additional, theoretically more complex, barriers because of the implicit and intertwining of patriarchal marital relationships with what is defined as the public order which varies depending on the widening or restricting of a woman’s individually-based rights. Helga Maria Hernes, *Staten - Kvinner Ingen Adgang?* [the State - Women No Admission] (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1982); Nina C. Raam, "Gender Equality and Political Representation: A Nordic Comparison," *West European Politics* 28, no. 4 (2005).
    \item This process is multi-dimensional and occurs at different levels. My main focus here is the state level, hence my focus on state laws.
    \item Parliamentary documents are accessible at the Kuwaiti National Assembly’s website (www.kna.kw) through the entry key *ibhath fil-watha'iq al-barlamiyya*. I thank Mr. Ahmad al-Saffar at the KNA’s Documentation
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two reasons: First, the 2011 Arab uprisings demonstrated the continued will of citizens in the MENA region to promote and support legislative institutions. Although authoritarian rule has re-emerged in new-found ways, pressures for reforms in Kuwait persist. Despite turmoil, parliament has proved to be a vital public arena for participation in officially sanctioned institutions and procedures where national issues are debated and conflicts resolved. Secondly, Kuwaiti parliamentary documents were digitalized and made open for the global audience through the Internet in April 2012, a mere 16 months into the Arab uprisings while parliament was dissolved. The step signals that the ruling regime sees its interests strengthened by transparency.

I have reviewed all law proposals and questions which the four female MPs raised i) individually; ii) in collaboration with each other; and iii) in collaboration with male MPs between May 2009 and December 2011, i.e. during the two years the four women served as MPs. In addition, I tracked down all proposals raised to the parliamentary Woman and Family Committee (WFC) between June 2006 and March 2015.

Parliamentary documents are sources whereby political issues are articulated and addressed explicitly. They reflect the range of recorded and publicly accessible venues through which Kuwaiti MPs express opinions and address requests in four main ways: individually by raising questions (as’ila) in plenary sessions which are responded by the involved Minister or Ministry; collectively through law proposals (iqtirah biqanun), expressions of support (iqtirah biraghba) or law proposals (mashru’ biqanun) that are passed to an appropriate parliamentary committee (lajna). If accepted by the committee, the proposal is presented in a plenary session, voted over in two separate rounds, and then approved by the government before being issued as law published in the Official Gazette (aljarida ar-rasmiyya). In this paper, I look mainly at law proposals and expressions of support raised by MPs without following up as to what happened to some of the proposals, although information on the outfall of some of the proposals is invariably presented.

A short note on Kuwaiti state and society
Among the Gulf states, Kuwait has an unparalleled historical record of political participation, and a rich heritage of autonomous and semi-autonomous organizations. The constitution,

Unit who instructed me on how to use the website during my fieldwork in Kuwait between 20 February – 6 March 2014.

27 As of October 2014, parliamentary transparency includes also running a TV station through the Internet which hosts weekly discussion programs with MPs, journalists and professionals on contemporary political issues, and the issuing a 12-page daily newspaper called al-Dustour. The first digitalized issue of al-Dustour dates 29 July 2013. It came out twice each month until 28 October 2014 after which it turned into a daily publication, http://www.kna.kw/clt/run.asp?id=2008#sthash.gJYNbMjJ.dpbs.
which was formed in 1962, a year after independence, delineated the powers of the ruling Emir and main merchant families. Elections followed a year later to the 50-seat National Assembly, and have been carried on with interruptions in 1976 and 1986 when the Emir dissolved the parliament. Parliamentary life resumed after 1992 following the Iraqi invasion to Kuwait in 1990.

The most significant feature of Kuwaiti political participation is its internally exclusionary traits which have historical parallels to Athenian democracy (around 400 BC) where the legal stratification of inhabitants ran along gender (only males participated), as well as along divisions that mark the legal status of citizens and noncitizens. The demographic constitution of the Kuwait state is of political importance for two reasons: First, citizens form a minority of around 35 per cent the state’s total 3.5 million inhabitants because of the high percentage of migrant and long-term noncitizen workforce from MENA states and Asia. Secondly, the divide between citizens and noncitizens has, since the establishment of the modern state in the 1940s and the formation of the 1959 Nationality Law, been blurred. Unsettled territorial boundaries, politically motivated nationalization schemes, and the politicization of census figures after Kuwait’s liberation from the Iraqi occupation, are three factors that have given rise to a significant group of long-term resident Bidun population that counts between 100,000 – 200,000 stateless persons.

It is this latter group of denizens – i.e. the stateless noncitizens who are part of Kuwaiti social fabric but who do not have citizenship certificates – that figure recurrently in proposals raised by MPs in parliament. Parliamentary documents reflect thus a contested

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28 Only Athenian citizens participated, excluding citizens from other Greek states, as well as metics. The latter group was constituted by long-term residents of Athens and their offspring who were not citizens, among which Aristoteles (384 – 322 BC) is, most probably, the most famous.

29 The Kuwaiti Central Statistical Bureau estimates the Kuwaiti population at 3.3 million whereof approximately 1,3 million is Kuwaiti (35 per cent) and 2.1 million is non-Kuwaiti (65 per cent). Annual Statistical Abstract 2012, p. 47, http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan_Statistic_EN.aspx?ID=18.


31 Hammar denotes ‘denizens’ as privileged resident aliens. Tomas Hammar, Democracy and the Nation State: Aliens, Denizens and Citizens in a World of International Migration (Aldershot: Avebury, 1990), 12-14. Lately, the term ‘denizens’ has been used by scholars in urban studies to refer to marginalized citizens such as the homeless and long-term unemployed who are excluded from public space. See Clifford Shearing and Jennifer Wood, “Nodal Governance, Democracy, and the New ‘Denizens’,” Journal of Law and Society 30, no. 3 (2003); Marc Schuilenburg, “Citizenship Revisited - Denizens and Margizens,” Peace Review 20, no. 3 (2008).
issue closely linked to the kinship affiliation between Kuwaiti women and noncitizens, including stateless Bidun, and the status and rights of children born of mixed marriages between Kuwaiti mothers and noncitizens.

The Woman and Family Committee (WFC) 2006 - 2015
In October 2005, a few months after Kuwaiti women were enfranchised, the Woman’s Committee (lajnat al-mar’a) was established in parliament. Two years later, “family” was added and the WC turned into the WFC. The WFC has over the past decade and until date, been headed by MP Saleh Ashour (b. 1953), a vocal supporter of women’s rights and a prominent Shi’a representative of the Justice and Peace Alliance (tajammu’ al-‘adala wal-salam). Ashour’s leadership was interrupted between 2009 and 2011 when the four female MPs became the committee’s main members under the leadership of Masouma al-Mubarak, with Ashour acting as secretary.

Before doing my analysis of all proposals presented at the WFC between 2006 and 2015, I anticipated that female MPs would be particularly active behind the proposals raised through the WFC during the two years they were present in parliament (May 2009 – December 2011). At least, this is the impression one gets when looking at table 1 which indicates the frequency of issues raised through the WFC over the past decade.
Table 1: Suggestions and law proposals presented to the Woman and Family Committee (WFC) according to type of issue defined as related to Kuwaiti women 2006 - 2015

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<tr>
<td>Housing issues</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
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<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monthly grant to non-working women</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maternity leave / reduction of working hours to mothers / increase children’s monthly allowance</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social assistance free access to health &amp; education to husband and children of K-women married to non-K</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Law on women’s civil and social rights</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woman’s capacity to act as kafil and guarantee residence of husband and children</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of research center for women, conferences, awareness programs</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Financial insurance for working women / widows</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consultancy and service center for marital issues</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Divorced women’s capacity to get children’s allowance if children in her custody (hadana)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Restriction of women’s working conditions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Law on the child</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
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32 In this table I have categorized number of issues raised, and not number of proposals because MPs presented law proposals which sometimes covered several issues. For instance, Dr. Faisal al-Muslim presented an expression of support on 15 June 2009 that a Kuwaiti woman married to a non-Kuwaiti is enabled to guarantee for residence of family members, i.e. act as guarantor (kafil) for her husband and children. In the same proposal he suggests that working mothers be given a raise in children’s allowance (‘alawat awlad). This proposal is categorized as touching two issues. This methodological choice explains why the total number of proposals presented by MPs, and the number of issues categorized in the table is not identical.

33 The date 22 March 2015 refers to the date of writing, and not the end date of the 14th parliamentary session. The sparse amount of documents available for the year 2012 reflects a turbulent period where parliament was dissolved and new elections occurred in June and December 2012.

34 Mikhlid Raashid al-‘Azimi suggests on 17 February 2010 that working mothers who become widows be exempted from work and receive a full salary until their children reach of age.

35 Two separate expressions of support, one raised on 11 March 2014 by Mohammad Hadi al-Heweila (tribalist Ajman, 5th circle) and the other on 11 March 2015 by Abdelrahman Saleh al-Jiran (Salafist, 2nd circle).

36 Three law proposals were presented, but these were dealt with as concerning one issue by the WFC as rendered in the Committee’s report (taqrir al-lajna) dated 4 February 2007.

37 Law proposal raised 4 June 2014 by four Shi’a MPs (Saleh Ashour, Abdelrahman al-Tameemi, Khalil Ibl, Khalil al-Saleh) and one Sunni MP Jamal Hussein al-‘Umar (3rd circle, al-kitla al-barlamaniyya).
Table 1 shows that housing issues – raised on 23 occasions in total – were the most frequent demands. Housings issues were particularly articulated in the 11th parliamentary session right after women got the franchise, and during the 13th session while the four female MPs were in parliament. Repeated housing proposals reflect the economic centrality of access to public housing and rent free loans in Kuwaiti society. These are part of social welfare services offered to Kuwaiti citizens as will be elaborated on further below.

Proposals related to granting non-employed women a monthly grant were raised on 15 different occasions, while 13 proposals were related to maternity leave and increase in children’s monthly allowance. A fourth set of demands was connected to one particular segment: Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis. In total, eleven proposals were related to the provision of social welfare such as access to education and health services to their children while five proposals concerned a Kuwaiti woman’s capacity to guarantee, i.e. act as kafil – for the residency of her husband and children. In addition to these ten proposals, a significant number of housing issues raised related specifically to the situation of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis.

After cross-checking which MPs raised the proposals and their political background during the 13th parliamentary session, two findings crystallized: First, female MPs did not forward law proposals through the WFC, preferring other avenues such the Legislation and Law Committee and the Health, Social and Labour Committee. The four female MPs raised only one law proposal and two expressions of support through the WFC while they were in parliament. The law proposal raised on 28 April 2010 concerned the establishment of a Housing Fund for women. It is significant because it is the only proposal raised by all four female MPs as a collective during their two year tenure in parliament. In addition to the all-woman housing proposal, one expression of support was raised by Rola Dashti on 12 May 2010 regarding amendments in the social security of widows, and another by Masouma al-Moubarak on 10 February 2011 regarding school registration of Kuwaiti women married to a person whose citizenship is unidentified.

Secondly, male MPs with conservative leanings, many of whom had voted against female suffrage in 2005, were those most active in raising law proposals through the WFC between 2009 and 2011. Particularly noticeable was the dramatic increase in number of proposals raised following the entry of female MPs into parliament in 2009.

In the following, the political background of MPs who raised law proposals through the WFC between 2009 and 2011 is pointed out before analyzing the political framework that surround the type of questions raised during the two-year period while women were present in parliament.

38 Because citizenship is transmitted only through male Kuwaitis, the children and the noncitizen husband of a Kuwaiti woman are categorized as noncitizens, and thereby subject to the kafala system. The kafala is primarily an elaborate sponsorship system that regulates the entry and presence of the noncitizen workforce in all Gulf states, but affects Kuwaiti women who marry non-Kuwaitis.
Islamists and the Kuwaiti political scene

In Kuwait, the upsurge of political Islam after 1980 bolstered the influence of Islamist groups such as the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood called The Islamic Constitutional Movement (al-harakah ad-dusturiyya al-islamiyya), known by its Arabic acronym Hadas while members are popularly referred to as ikhwani (from ‘brother’). Since the turn of the millennium, Salafist groups have been increasingly articulate proponents of puritanical understandings of religious orthodoxy, particularly unitary (tawhid) theological viewpoints supported by the political regime in Saudi Arabia.39

While Ikhwani and Salafi Islamist strands in Kuwait may differ with reference to theological underpinnings, they share common conservative ideologies around gender roles in the family where women are seen primarily as homemakers and caretakers, while males are perceived as principle financial providers and heads of household. Tribal (qaba’ili) groups, particularly those who reside outside urban centers, are a third Islamic oriented grouping where some members share traditional norms and values around gender roles embedded in Salafi or Ikhwani theological ideals.40

The terms ‘Islamist’ and ‘Islamic oriented’ are here used interchangeably and denote MPs who are members of, are supported by, or share ideological views pertaining to gender relations within the family supported by these three groups. Together, these groups constitute a powerful triangle through which norms and ideals that buttress patriarchal family models are sustained and reproduced.

The Islamization of the public sphere in Kuwait, and its impact on gender relations in ways that reinforce gendered and segregated relations between women and men in the public sphere have been observed since the turn of the millennium.41 For instance, the enforcement of gender segregation, previously non-existent, in post-secondary schools and universities through a legal amendment voted over in parliament in 1996 is perhaps the most visible expression of the power of Islamists in imposing gendered norms outside the realm of the family. Also, Islamist and Islamic oriented MPs, have since the re-opening of parliament after the liberation of Kuwait in 1992, repeatedly voted down proposals to grant women political rights. In 2005, however, the enfranchisement of women went through, although all Islamist MPs voted against extending the franchise to women at the voting session on 16th May 2005. The margin of 6 pro-women votes that finally tipped the scale towards women’s enfranchisement reflects a fairly conservative atmosphere among Kuwaiti males. In total 59 votes were cast: 35 were for, 23 against, one abstained, and five MPs were

40 The distinction between ‘Islamist’ and ‘Islamic oriented’ is introduced and used by Roald, “‘Benevolent Patriarchy’: Palestinian Women between “Ideal” and “Reality”,” 336. Membership in a tribal group and an Ikhwani or a Salafi group is not mutually exclusive. The point here is that MPs with a tribal background represent a third separate group where traditional gender role models are potentially more widespread than in urbanized hadhar areas.
not present when Kuwaiti women were enfranchised. Together with the abstention and those not present, MPs who opposed women’s enfranchisement in 2005 amount to 29 votes out of the 50 elected MPs. It was therefore a (relative) minority of 20 elected MPs along with the 15 appointed ministers who eventually secured women’s enfranchisement.

The political composition of the Assembly 2009 – 2011

Around 60 per cent of the approximately 385,800 registered Kuwaitis voted at the 2009 parliamentary elections. The historical entry of four female MPs was accompanied by an overall loss of ten positions previously held by Islamist MPs.

Roughly categorized, the 2009 elections showed that MPs were distributed along these lines: Sunni Islamists: 11 seats (down from 21), including 2 seats for The Islamic Salafist Alliance (ISA) and 1 seat for Hadas; Shiite groups: 9 seats (up from 5); six tribal groupings held together 20 seats; while liberals held 8 seats (up from 7).

Not all of the elected MPs raised proposals through the WFC. However, 24 out of 50 MPs – nearly half of all elected MPs – did. Table 2 indicates the political affiliation of MPs who raised proposals through the WFC between 2009 and 2011, and denotes voting over women’s enfranchisement for MPs who were present at the women’s enfranchisement session in May 2005.

The table shows that a disproportionate number of Islamist MPs raised proposals in the WFC. Roughly categorized, 9 MPs had membership or were explicitly affiliated to Islamist political groupings, and eight MPs had tribalist connections, resulting in a total of 17 MPs who are here defined as politicians who support traditional and patriarchal Islamist notions pertaining to gender relations within the family.

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43 In addition to the elected 50 MPs, the National Assembly includes the 15 ministers in governmental positions, making the total number of potential voters 65. The Kuwaiti electorate numbers around 420,000 registered voters (December 2012 elections). The Kuwaiti Central Statistical Bureau estimates the Kuwaiti population at 3.3 million whereof approximately 1.3 million is Kuwaiti (35 per cent) and 2.1 million is non-Kuwaiti (65 per cent). Annual Statistical Abstract 2012, p. 47. http://www.csb.gov.kw/Socan_Statistic_EN.aspx?ID=18.

44 One factor that may have contributed positively for the election of women is that female candidates were disproportionately covered in the media compared to male candidates, according to Kjetil Selvik, Jon Nordenson, and Tewodros Kebede, “Print Media Liberalization and Electoral Coverage Bias in Kuwait," forthcoming, The Middle East Journal (2015).

45 The Kuwaiti parliament includes 50 elected MPs and the 15-member government which is appointed by the Emir. In total it has 65 seats. This distribution is rendered by Inter-Parliamentary Union, Kuwait, Elections 2009 http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/arc/2171_09.htm. The total number of seats rendered by the IPU-overview is 48, and thereby short of two seats because the Kuwaiti parliament is constituted of 50 elected members. For additional information, see the political affiliation of each representative as rendered by Michael Herb through his Kuwait Politics Database, 2009 elections, http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/maj200900.htm.
Reluctant feminists? Islamist MPs in Kuwait

Peace All Abdallah Jawhar

Democratic Alliance

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Abu Ramieh, Mikhlid Raashid al

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between 2006 and 2009, the majority of MPs who raised proposals through the WFC were

Islamists or

Islamic Brotherhood (Hadas) and Ahmad Baqer of the Salafist Movement, who both belong to urban electoral districts, all Islamist MPs who

opposed women’s enfranchisement in 2005, and who presented proposals through the WFC, had tribal background or belonged to groups with Islamist leanings.

Even before the entry of women in parliament, Islamists were eager in raising proposals

through the WFC. In the two parliamentary periods before female MPs were elected, i.e.

between 2006 and 2009, the majority of MPs who raised proposals through the WFC were

Islamists or they had Islamist leanings. Checking for voting on women’s enfranchisement in

2005 and comparing with MPs who had seats in parliament between 2006 and 2009

indicates that 15 MPs had voted against female suffrage in 2005\(^46\) while seven had voted in

favor.\(^47\) Except for Naser al-Sani’ of the Muslim Brotherhood (Hadas) and Ahmad Baqer of the

Salafist Movement, who both belong to urban electoral districts, all Islamist MPs who

opposed women’s enfranchisement in 2005, and who presented proposals through the WFC, had tribal background or belonged to groups with Islamist leanings.

\(^46\) The fifteen MPs who voted against women’s enfranchisement in 2005 belong to different groups, and include (roughly categorized here because MPs change their political affiliation over time) Salafis: Hussein Mazid al-Muteiri, Dr. Walid al-Tabtaba’i, Abdallah ‘Akash al-‘Abdali; Ahmad Baqer (not present at the 2005-women’s vote session, included here as opponent); Muslim Brotherhood (Hadas): Dr. Naser Jasem al-Sani’, Jamal Ahmad al-Kadari, Dr. Mohammad Mohsen al-Buseir; Independent Islamists: Ali Salem al-Diqbasi, Khaled Salem al-‘Adwe, Dr. Faisal al-Muslim, Mohammad Khalifa al-Khalifa, Abdallah Ra’i al-Fahma, Dr. Daifallah Fadil Abu Ramieh, Mikhlid Raashid al-‘Azimi, and Musallam al-Barrak of the kutlat al’amal al-sha’bi.

\(^47\) Those who voted for women’s enfranchisement in 2005 are: Mohammad Jasem al-Saqir (The National Democratic Alliance), Khalaf Dumaithar al-‘Nezi (independent tribal), Dr. Ali Hamad al-Hajiri (tribalist); Ali Fahd al-Rashid (tribalist). Three MPs were shi’a whereof two — Abdelwahid Mahmoud al-‘Awadhi and Dr. Hasan Abdallah Jawhar – belonged to the kutlat al’amal al-sha’bi, while Saleh Ashour belonged to the Justice and Peace Alliance.

Table 2: MPs who raised proposals through the Woman and Family Committee 2009 – 2011 with reference to voting on women’s enfranchisement for MPs who were present in parliament on 16\(^{th}\) May 2005:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Muslim Brothers &amp; affiliates such as kitlat al-tamniya wal-islah, al-kitla al-Islamiyya</th>
<th>The Islamic Salafi Alliance al-tajammu’ al-islami al-salafi &amp; affiliates eg. al-haraka al-salafyya al-ilmiyya</th>
<th>Tribalist</th>
<th>Others: Independent / liberal/ shi’a groups/ traditionalists</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Khaled Sultan Bin ’Isa</td>
<td>Dr. Mohammad Hadi al-Huwella</td>
<td>Dr. Masouma al-Moubarak (shi’a)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ali Saleh al-‘Meir</td>
<td>Shu’ayb Shabab al-Mouizri</td>
<td>Dr. Rola Da什ti (shi’a)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Jum’an Thaher al-Harbash</td>
<td>Salem Namlan al-‘Azimi</td>
<td>Dr. Asil Awadhi</td>
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<td>‘Askar ’Uweid al-’Nezi</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Reluctant feminists? Islamist MPs in Kuwait / Rania Maktabi, BRISMES paper / work in progress, 2 June 2015 at 17:20
In short, both before and after the entry of female MPs in parliament in 2009, Islamist MPs were particularly active in raising law proposals that addressed a variety of issues related to women’s health, education, social welfare and civil rights.

In the following, I shed light on four main types of cases raised which reflect the sort of issues addressed by MPs, and then discuss how Islamist and non-Islamist MPs, formulated their claims with reference to women. The four sets of issues relate to i) social assistance and monthly grants to non-employed women; ii) housing; iii) Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis; and iv) the formation of a law regarding Kuwaiti women’s civil and social rights, and suggestions to establish research and educational centers.

After a presentation of each of these issues, I discuss how and in which ways proposals related to that issue support or discourage efforts at strengthening Kuwaiti women’s autonomy and legal capacity. The analysis stretches at times beyond the two-year period between 2009 and 2011 when women were present in parliament. This is done to point out recurring pressures pertaining to a particular issue in order to identify either changes in approach, or the political fall-out of a proposal, i.e. whether it was adopted by parliament, dismissed or rearticulated in new ways.

i) Monthly grants to non-employed women

Immediately after the Committee’s establishment, Islamist MPs – Salafists in particular – perceived the WFC as a significant political arena for addressing issues pertaining to their ideological views on women’s role as care providers in the family.

Judging from how frequent an issue was raised since 2006, proposals related to housing were raised most often followed by proposals demanding monthly grants for non-working women. The “monthly grant”-issue was first presented in 2007 by independent tribalist Sa’doun Hamad al-‘Utaibi when he suggested that Kuwaiti women who do not work should get a 250 KD (around 900 USD / 650 Euro) monthly grant (mukafa’a shahriyya).48

After women’s entry in parliament in 2009, Salafist MPs and MPs with tribalist leanings raised six legislative proposals in support of direct financial grants to married and single women outside the paid labor market.49 The arguments ran along the lines that regular monthly grants “safeguard and protect women and a dignified life as rendered in the noble Hadith by the Prophet Mohammad (be trusted in kindness to women) […] and as pointed out in the Constitution, the family is society’s fundament whose existence is

48 Law proposal by Sa’doun Hamad al-‘Utaibi raised on several times, for instance on 5 May 2007, 29 November 2007 and 3 December 2008. In May 2014, 1 KD corresponded to 3.55 USD; 2.6 Euro and around 21 Norwegian Kroner (NOK) which makes 250 KD the equivalent of 5,250 NOK.
49 The four law proposals were raised by MB-affiliated Mikhlid Rashid al-‘Azimi (21 June 2009) and Faisal al-Muslim (6 July 2009), tribalists Mohammad El-Huweila (8 July 2009) and ‘Askar al-’Enezi (12 August 2009). Two suggestions of support were raised by Salafist Mohammad Hayef al-Mutairi (20 July 2009) and tribalist Mikhlid Rashed al-’Azimi (17 February 2010) who proposed to “grant the married Kuwaiti women who has children and who is not employed 200 KD to assist in monthly expenditure in face of high prices in local and international markets.” Mikhlid Rashid al-Azimi om 21 June 2009 targets all women aged 35 years or more who has no regular or part-time job in the public or private sector.
50 In Arabic it reads, istawsu bil-nisa’ khayran.
protected by law whereby motherhood and childhood is shielded”51, “support a woman’s monthly income in face of high prices in local and international markets”52; “ease the burdens of daily life expenses (tazayud a’ba’ al-ma’isha) (and) safeguard a dignified life for [the woman] and her children if her husband is Kuwaiti and is unemployed, or if she is married to a non-Kuwaiti”53; and “reduce pressures on employment opportunities in the Civil Service”54.

The policy regarding monthly grants for unemployed women was opposed by the female MPs, who saw it as a ‘pull-factor’ that did not encourage female citizens to seek work outside the home. Masouma al-Moubarak saw it as a populist hand-out by Islamist and tribalist MPs.55 Proposals regarding monthly grants were repeatedly voted down at the WFC while women were its main members and constituted a majority of three and four votes against the one pro-vote by Saleh Ashour, the committee’s male secretary.56

In response to monthly grants, Masouma al-Moubarak allied with other MPs and proposed on two occasions that public kindergartens be established in institutions where more than 25 women work.57

The two types of suggestions – monthly grants for unemployed mothers on the one hand, and the establishment of public kindergartens for employed women on the other – illustrate classical divisions pertaining to the role of women in society as reflected in social welfare policies. The first – monthly grants – can be seen as a pro-natal policy that sustains domesticated womanhood through support of women’s nonpaid carework at home.58 The second – public kindergartens – targets Kuwaiti women’s employment opportunities and supports their participation in the labor market.

The issue of monthly grants to non-employed Kuwaiti women was eventually settled through a decision issued by the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs granting women over 55 years a monthly allowance of 550 KD.59 The Ministerial decision conditioning that women be 55 years can be read as a way of placating cases related to poverty alleviation among older strata of women, avoiding thus the more politicized side-effects of a grant that supports non-working younger women.

51 Law proposal by Mikhlid Rashed al-’Azimi (close to Hadas), 21 June 2009.
52 Law proposal by Mikhlid Rashed al-Azimi (close to Hadas) on 17 February 2010.
53 Law proposal by Dr. Faisal al-Muslim, 6 July 2009.
54 Law proposal by Askar al-Enezi, 21 August 2009.
55 Interview with author, 22 April 2012.
56 Fifth Protocol (al-taqrir al-khames) of the WFC dated 8 September 2009 signed by the Committee’s leader Masouma al-Moubarak provides one example of three votes against and one pro-vote.
57 Both proposals were sent to The Legislation and Law Committee. The first was raised by Masouma al-Moubarak, Rola Dashti, and Abdel-Rahman Fahd al-’Anjari of the Democratic Forum on 5 May 2010. The second was raised by Masouma al-Moubarak and Rola Dashti on 29 November 2010.
59 Author interview with current leader of the WFC, Saleh Ashour on 18 March 2015 who pointed out: “We are still in favor of giving other younger segments of Kuwaiti women monthly grants, and not only the older segments who are in reality grandmothers.”

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To sum up, through proposals related to monthly grants, Islamists revealed a predominantly Islamist and politically conservative ideology where women’s unpaid carework at home was emphasized.

When it came to housing issues, however, the picture was more complex, as elaborated on in the following.

**ii) Housing as women’s issue**

The Kuwaiti state’s housing security scheme is stipulated in Law 47 of 1993, and administered by The Public Authority for Housing Welfare (*al-mu’assasa al-‘amma lil-ri’aya as-sakaniyya*, PAHW). 60 This scheme is part of the state’s welfare program to support the family as core institution in society, and to encourage Kuwaitis to marry and establish homes.

In principle, the law grants Kuwaiti couples – upon marriage – a house, an apartment, or a plot of land along with an interest-free loan from the Credit Bank (*bank al-ta’min*). In practice, there are long waiting lists for acquiring public houses. Approximately 110,000 Kuwaiti families are on lists, the waiting period is between 15 to 20 years, and the yearly distribution rate is approximately 12,000 houses or plots of land (*qasima*). As an administrative measure to reduce the waiting period, eligible Kuwaitis – i.e. married couples – receive a 150 KD monthly housing grant called *badal ijar* (literally meaning compensation for rent), and 70,000 KD if they choose the land and loan scheme (*ard wa qard*) instead of waiting. Most Kuwaitis rely heavily on these rent-free loans, credit grants and publicly funded housing which constitute a significant part of monthly expenditures and life savings. 61

The Housing Law conditions that a loan be registered in the names of both the husband and the wife. However, gender enters the housing equation because another administrative measure which has to do with the registration of head of household, principles normatively a male as main provider (*mu’il*), resulting in de jure and de facto empowerment of men – be they husbands, fathers, brothers, sons or uncles as those who prevail over the home, and in many cases, also housing loans. 62

Pressures for addressing the shortcomings of the 1993 Housing and reforming it have been pending since the law was issued. 63 With women’s enfranchisement in 2005, pressures increased. MPs across all political and religious divisions demanded amendments: Islamist,


61 Interview with head of the Insurance Bank Salah al-Midf in *al-Qabas* 15 March 2015. During the waiting period each Kuwaiti head of household – i.e. the husband – receives 150 KD. See “*mashakel al-iskan*” in *al-Anba’* 8 March 2015. Kuwaitis who eventually receive public plots of land are announced in the newspapers. See for instance, the names of 396 citizens who received a 400 m2 plot of land in an area called “*Tusaat al-wifra*” in *al-Anba’* on 7 March 2015.

62 Author interview with lawyers Nivine Ma’rifi and Laila al-Rashed who deal with personal status cases in court where housing issues are part and parcel of custody cases over children, and right of abode in the marital home, 16 March 2015.

63 Interview with Dr. Badria al-Awadhi, 15 March 2015.
tribalist, independent and liberal groups suggested reforms that challenged administrative measures, social norms and state laws which explicitly or implicitly took as their point of departure a male as main provider (mu’il) and head of household (rabb usra). However, political groupings differed in styles of argumentation.

The first pressures pertaining to housing issues after women took over the leadership in the WFC came from Salafis who raised four separate proposals in June and July 2009. The first addressed specifically the situation of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis. There, Khalid Bin ‘Isa and Ali al-Emeir, both Salafists, suggested that women be given a monthly housing grant (badal ijar) on an equal footing as a Kuwaiti male married to a non-Kuwaiti woman. They argued that “the Kuwaiti woman plays a fundamental role in building society and educating it, and should therefore get the right to obtain, along with her children, all services and benefits which the state provides so that she acquires her social and economic rights.”

Mohamad Hadi al-Huweila, an independent MP with tribal background, raised two expressions of support. In one he argued that Kuwaiti women should be able to own the housing certificates if they live in houses which they rent because of “the position of Kuwaiti women in our society and the equal status she shares with the Kuwaiti man in rights and duties”. In the other, he raised the plight of divorced Kuwaiti women, including those who have children, on the grounds that “the social phenomenon of divorce is among the most damaging in Kuwaiti society [...] in particular the impact of the dissolution of the family on children [...]. Divorced women are often not able to find suitable housing that secures her and the children’s dignity.”

It was after these recurrent proposals by Salafists and tribalists that the four female MPs raised a proposal addressing the issue of housing a year later. On 28 April 2010, they suggested that a separate Woman’s Housing Fund be established, arguing specifically along the lines of safeguarding women’s interests in acquiring housing and loans independently of male kin. They suggested amendments regarding the size of loans, grants and conditions because the Housing law does not address a range of problems related to divorced Kuwaiti mothers, widows, Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis and Kuwaiti women over the age of 40 who have lost both her parents. [...] In the case of divorced and widowed women, her husband may have benefitted from the Housing

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64 Two expressions of support by Salafists Khalid Sultan Bin ‘Isa, Dr. Ali al-Emeir on 28 June 2009 and 1 July 2009 and two expressions of support by tribalist Dr. Mohammad al-Huweila on 6 July 2009 and 8 July 2009.
65 Expression of support raised on 28 June 2009.
66 Expression of support raised on 1 July 2009. The WFC approved unanimously in raising this issue in parliament but changed the wording of “the single women with no guardian” (al-‘azba’ la mu’il laha) to “the unmarried who has lost her parents” (al-ghayr mutazawwija faqidat al-abawayn). Second protocol of the WFC dated 7 September 2009.
67 Expression of support raised on 6 July 2009.
68 Expression of support raised on 8 July 2009.
Scheme (ar-ri’aya as-sakaniyya), or from the Credit Bank loan, and used it for his own interest or by means of inheritance.

The latter argument reflects a social practice and a trend among young males in recent years where husbands sign private bank loans in their name, giving them the right to have ownership of the house through the house certificate (wathiqat tamalluk) although the house is technically registered in the names of both spouses as required by law. Female lawyers who raise cases in court on behalf of women point out husbands’ misuse of prerogatives in ways that impoverish divorced women and female kin.69

The housing proposal raised by female MPs reflects that the legal position of women in the 1993 Housing Law does not conform with the ideal of life-long marriage, or to traditional and conservative notions of males as breadwinners and females as homemakers. In the explanatory memorandum to the law proposal the four female MPs suggest that a 500 million KD fund be established which can be used by divorced Kuwaiti women, the widow, those married to non-Kuwaitis and those who have reached the age of 40 and have lost their parents, arguing that “it is not reasonable that these groups’ [interests] remain unorganized” and that “the Kuwaiti woman married to a non-Kuwaiti needs housing in order to maintain her family life (yuhafeθ ‘ala kwayaniha al-usari), and grant her a dignified life despite the difficult conditions that surround her because the husband is not entitled to housing welfare.”70 Among the reasons behind the female MPs’ law proposal are Kuwaiti women’s growing participation in the labor market and corresponding strengthened economic status, rising divorce rates in society, and the incapability of males – for various health or employment-related reasons – to be the main financial providers of a household.71

In their law proposal, female MPs substantiated thus women’s economic interests and legal status independently of male kin. So did Islamist MPs, although their points of reference and arguments differed from those advanced by women.

Only one week after the four women raised their proposal, five Islamist MPs – three Salafists and two affiliated with Hadas) – argued along similar lines. They suggested the same sum of money – 500 million KD – to be used to establish a special fund to address the housing needs of two main groups of women: i) a widow, or a Kuwaiti woman divorced from a non-Kuwaiti and has children; ii) the single Kuwaiti woman, the widow or the woman who does not have children. In the explanatory memorandum, they argue that “the current law conditions that the head of household be a Kuwaiti male […] which has resulted in Kuwaiti women being deprived of housing benefits.”72

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69 Author interviews with professor in law Dr. Badria al-Awadhi 15 March 2015, and practicing lawyers Nivine Ma’rifi 16 March 2015 and Nour Bin Haidar, 17 March 2015.
70 Law proposal 28 April 2010.
71 Author interview with Dr. Ma’souma al-Moubarak, 22 April 2012.
72 Proposal raised on 5 May 2010 by Jum’an Thaher al-Harbash (Salafi), Mohammad Hayef al-Mutairi (Salafi), Walid al-Tabtabai’i (Salafi) Faisal al-Muslim (Hadas), Falah Mutliq al-Sawwagh (Hadas), – who proposed a “mahfatha maliyya litawfir ar-n’aya as-skaniyya lil-kuwaytiyya ghayr al-mustafida min nitham ar-n’aya as-sakaniyya”.

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A week later, on 11 May 2010, five MPs – two of them tribalists who had voted against women’s enfranchisement in 2005, the third a shi’a representative who had voted in favor – raised a similar law proposal where they argued that “housing is a fundamental need for a dignified life”. In the explanatory memorandum they pointed out article 29 of the constitution which stipulates equality between people, and draw a line to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (al-’lan al-’alami lhuquq al-insan), before arguing that the Constitution seeks to safeguard the rights of citizens without distinction or differentiation. The legislators point out that single women number around 100,000 women, “and this number is rising, along with the numbers of divorcees and widows and single women over the age of 45 years whose rights should be recovered (irja’ huquqih al-masluba) […] through two venues: one which is linked with the individual and not gender whether male or female (murtabita bil-fard wa laysa bil-jins thakaran aw untha), and the other linked to the principle of equality (murtabita bi-mabda’ al-musawat)”. The legislators argue that the Constitution refers to a Kuwaiti citizen without taking into account the gender involved.  

Claims and demands for strengthening Kuwaiti women’s access to housing rights gained unprecedented political momentum with the 2011 Arab uprisings. By March 2011, the government issued decrees and laws in response to some of the law proposals raised by MPs which had been pending in parliament for more than twenty years. The most significant reform during this politically volatile period was Law 2 issued by the government on 24 January 2011. It amended the 1993 Housing Law by inferring many categories of Kuwaiti women who were previously incapable of accessing public housing. These categories include i) Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis who had been naturalized and whose housing applications had been accepted in the year 1989; ii) a Kuwaiti mother married to a non-Kuwaiti and has children; iii) a Kuwaiti woman married to a non-Kuwaiti who resides in Kuwait and does not have children provided that the couple have been married for more than five years; iv) divorced Kuwaiti women; and finally, iv) single Kuwaiti women over 40 years. 

This legislative change affects around 68,000 women and their families. In total, it targets most probably between 100,000 – 150,000 persons who – given the small size of the electorate in Kuwait at around 385,000 – 400,000 persons – is a numerically substantial number of claims and demands for strengthening Kuwaiti women’s access to housing rights gained unprecedented political momentum with the 2011 Arab uprisings. By March 2011, the government issued decrees and laws in response to some of the law proposals raised by MPs which had been pending in parliament for more than twenty years. The most significant reform during this politically volatile period was Law 2 issued by the government on 24 January 2011. It amended the 1993 Housing Law by inferring many categories of Kuwaiti women who were previously incapable of accessing public housing. These categories include i) Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis who had been naturalized and whose housing applications had been accepted in the year 1989; ii) a Kuwaiti mother married to a non-Kuwaiti and has children; iii) a Kuwaiti woman married to a non-Kuwaiti who resides in Kuwait and does not have children provided that the couple have been married for more than five years; iv) divorced Kuwaiti women; and finally, iv) single Kuwaiti women over 40 years.

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73 Law proposal raised on 11 May 2010 by two tribalists who voted against women’s enfranchisement in 2005 and members of kitlat al-amal al-sha’bi – Musallam al-Barrak and Ali al-Diqbasi, joined Dr. Hasan Jawhar (shi’a, kitlat al-amal al-sha’bi, voted for women’s enfranchisement), Al-Saifi Moubarak al-Saifi and Khaled al-Tahous (both of al-aghlabiya al-barlaniniyya). Less than a year later, on 16 February 2011, the same five MPs raised another law proposal where they emphasized the plight of particularly divorced women with children, and women who have reached the age of 41 or more. This latter proposal was most probably raised before or simultaneously as the issuing of the government’s reform of the Housing law presented on 24 January 2011.

74 The Kuwaiti government issued several one-time financial handouts in 2011 of which Law 3 of 2011 granted the largest sum – a 1000 KD Emiri grant (makrama amiriyya) to each Kuwaiti (likull fard kuwaiti). (Official Gazette, 20 February 2011).

75 Kuwait Official Gazette, 30 January 2011.

76 The reformed law affects an estimated number of 27,500 divorcees, 21,200 widows, 11,000 women married to non-citizens, and 8,600 unmarried women over the age of 41. The World Bank, Opening Doors: Gender Equality and Development in the Middle East and North Africa, Mena Development Report (United States: World Bank Publications, 2013), 79.
segment of the population. These numbers reflect the magnitude of challenges pertaining to housing of families and homes that fall short of administrative measures and housings schemes where male headed households is norm.

To sum up, demands raised by Islamist MPs before the new Housing law was issued concerned not only housing issues per se, but concerted efforts at articulating female agency and autonomy in pressures to amend gendered state laws where the prerogatives of male Kuwaitis prevail. Islamists and MPs with traditional and conservative views on gender relations referred to Qur’anic verses as well as international human rights conventions in underlining a Kuwaiti woman’s need for a “house of her own” unmediated by male kin. In their law proposals pertaining to reforms in the 1993 Housing Law, Islamist MPs emphasized thus gender relations in ways where Kuwaiti women, particularly those married to non-Kuwaitis and stateless Bidun, were seen as capacitated citizens.

The segment of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis figured explicitly in six out of eleven proposals raised by MPs between 2009 and 2011, i.e. in nearly half of all issues and suggestions related to housing. This segment was also specified explicitly in the reformed Law 2 of 2011: two of the five categories identified were Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis.

Islamist and tribal MPs paid special attention to this segment of Kuwaiti women, and their attention towards strengthening their civil rights extended to other dimensions than housing, as pointed out in the next section.

iii) Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis
The legal, social and political malaise of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis is part of a larger societal and politically potent problem related to the disputed and unresolved issue of the legal status of the Bidun population. It touches also on the widespread and shared experiences of marriage between Gulf citizens who share transnational kinship and tribal bonds.77

The election of the four female MPs in 2009 led to the articulation of personal experiences of intermarriage through two MPs, Masouma al-Moubarak and Rola Dashti. The two women brought into parliament significant life experiences of inter-marriages which were articulated into law proposals that aimed at strengthening the civil rights of Kuwaiti women married to noncitizens as well as for their children born of mixed marriages.78 Notwithstanding the housing proposal which all the female MPs raised in April 2010, only al-Moubarak and Dashti addressed the situation of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis in six additional proposals raising claims that the husband and children of Kuwaiti women

77 The subject was discussed in a regional seminar entitled “The female citizen married to the noncitizen in the Gulf Cooperation Council: Rights and solutions” arranged by the Women’s Research and Study Center at Kuwait University on 22 May 2013.
78 Al-Moubarak is married to a Bahraini and has four children all of whom are non-Kuwaitis because citizenship laws in Kuwait confer citizenship through the father and not through the mother. MP Dashti, is the offspring of a Lebanese mother and a Kuwaiti father who conferred Kuwaiti citizenship to her.
married to non-Kuwaitis get access to health services, education, and the right to residency, when the law proposals of all the women are categorized.\footnote{Al-Moubarak raised four proposals alone, and an additional two proposals with Dashti. For more details, see table 1 and 2 in my “Female citizenship and the franchise in Kuwait”, forthcoming.} Only one of these proposals was channeled through the WFC when Masouma al-Moubarak suggested that a Kuwaiti woman married to a person whose citizenship is unidentified (implying a Bidun), be able to register her children in public schools through a birth notification.\footnote{Expression of support raised 10 February 2011.} All other proposals that targeted Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis through the WFC were raised by either Islamists or independent MPS with tribal backgrounds.

For instance, three Islamist and one independent MP with tribal background raised four separate, but identical expressions of support.\footnote{Independent with tribal background Sadoun al-Utaibi on 12 June 2009; Hadas-affiliated Faisal al-Muslim on 15 June 2009; Hadas-affiliated Mikhlid al-Azimi on 1 July 2009; and Salafist Daifallah Abu Ramieh on 17 September 2009.} In these proposals, they argued that “God’s grace has represented justice in Islam in the Kuwaiti constitution”, citing articles 7 and 8 where the welfare and social security of citizens is guaranteed, and article 9 which underlines that the family is the fundament of society \textit{(al-usra asas al-mujtama’)}, adding that

Kuwaiti society is not represented only by Kuwaitis, but all who reside on its earth, and therefore the Kuwaiti woman is a foundational part of that society, and everything that has to do with her has a direct effect [...] on her children without distinguishing whether they are [born of ] a Kuwaiti or foreign father. [...] It has become necessary to look at her problems as a woman, a mother and a wife married to a foreigner, for as these [problems] continue, they represent an injustice with regards to what the constitution has safeguarded in terms of equality \textit{(musawat)}, justice \textit{(‘adl)} and security \textit{(tama’nina)} as is alluded to by international human rights’ organizations and the conscience of society at large, [in pursuit of] the greatest effort to attain equality and justice within society.

The MPs propose five steps to amend the situation of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis: i) give the Kuwaiti mother the right to guarantee [the residence] \textit{(haqq kafalat)} of her children; ii) give a Kuwaiti employed woman the right to receive child grants \textit{('alawat awlad)};\footnote{The child’s grant \textit{('alawat awlad)} is a financial direct transfer of 150 KD (around 900 USD) which is allotted to the Kuwaiti father by the state. Upon divorce, this sum continues to be paid to the father as \textit{mu’il}, i.e. head of the family and thereby financially responsible, although the (divorced) mother has custody and daily care over children.} iii) give the husband whose citizenship is not identified a passport that enables him to accompany his wife for health or educational reasons abroad; iv) give the children of a Kuwaiti woman married to a person whose citizenship is not identified the right to issue a driver’s license and get access to health services and higher education in Kuwait; v) give precedent to the children of Kuwaiti mothers over foreigners with regards to employment.

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In other law proposals, Islamists and tribalists raised proposals suggesting that a Kuwaiti woman be able to act as legal guardians (kafil) of her husband and children. Three Islamists who had voted against female enfranchisement in 2005 – tribalist Musallam al-Barrak, Hadas-affiliated Mikhail Rashid al-‘Azimi, and Salafist Daifallah Abou Ramieh – proposed that Kuwaiti women be able to obtain the right to guarantee (the residence) of their children (haqq kafalat abna‘a min al-zawj ghayr al-kuwaiti); enable Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis to receive child grants (‘alawat awlad) provided they are employed; enable the non-Kuwaiti husband of a Kuwaiti woman the right to issue a passport, a driving license and access health services without fees; grant her children the right to enroll in higher education in Kuwait; and give the children priority in employment opportunities.

Another two proposals arguing along the same lines were raised by two tribalists – Sa‘doun Hamad al-‘Utaiibi on 12 July 2009 and ‘Askar ‘Uweid al-Enezi on 8 October 2009.

Some of these pressures were addressed politically: in June 2011, Kuwaiti women were enabled to grant residency rights to their children and non-Kuwaiti husband, and the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Social Affairs issued administrative measures allowing the children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis to receive free of charge public education up to 18 years, and health services.

In short, Islamists pressured that Kuwaiti women be able to access social welfare and economic rights such as housing. But, they also pressured for strengthening the civil rights of Kuwaiti women by arguing that they should be legally capacitated to ensure rights of residence for their non-Kuwaiti husbands and children.

**iv) Women’s civil and social rights & Centers for research and consultation**

A significant amount of issues raised through the WFC related to two issues: the formation of a Law on women’s civil and social rights (qanun al-huquq al-madaniyya wal-ijtima‘iyya), and the establishment of women’s research center, conferences, and awareness programs.

The latter kind of proposals is exemplified by MP al-Jiran who suggests introduction programs that help newlywed to trespass the first phases of marriage successfully through “Health Marriage Initiative” which, he points out, have been initiated and developed

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83 The child’s grant (‘alawat awlad) is paid directly to the Kuwaiti father. The children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis are therefore not eligible to obtain this grant.

84 Separate proposals raised by each of them on 15 June 2009, 1 July 2009 and 17 September 2009 respectively. The text of all four proposals is identical, although the proposals are raised individually and separately.

85 Interview with Masouma al-Moubarak, 22 April 2012. Al-Moubarak pointed out that access to free of charge public education and health services came about as administrative measures, and not through legislation, weakening thereby the strength of these rights. See also “Kuwaiti women allowed to sponsor foreign husbands”, 4 June 2011. [http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-women-allowed-to-sponsor-foreign-husbands-1.817223](http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwaiti-women-allowed-to-sponsor-foreign-husbands-1.817223)

86 The law was presented on several occasions to the WFC, for instance, 17 February 2007, 5 February 2009, and on three separate occasions dated 13 April, 20 April and 20 April 2010.

87 Proposal raised on 3 June 2010.
successfully in the USA, Malaysia and Singapore as means to reduce the high rate of divorce.\textsuperscript{88}

This proposal reflects a turn towards psychological and therapeutic consultative work in the WFC which occurred after 2013 when issues such as divorce, violence and drug addiction were highlighted along with what is portrayed as the negative societal impact following the dissolution of the family.\textsuperscript{89}

However, immediately after its establishment, the political focus in the WFC was broader. MPs at the WFC and allies addressed collective social and civil rights at an aggregated societal level through working on the formation of a comprehensive law which had the working title Law on women’s civil and social rights (\textit{qanun huqug al-mar’a al-madaniyya wal-jitima’iyya}). Among the most active groups involved in that process was the Muslim Brotherhood’s women’s branch – \textit{lajnat al-mar’a} – under the leadership of Suad al-Jarallah.\textsuperscript{90} According to her, one of the aims that spurred pressures to form a law which safeguarded women’s civil and social rights was to integrate Kuwaiti women’s participation in the state’s developmental schemes, including employment and entrepreneur opportunities at home, as means to address women’s responsibilities as caretakers in the family. “Existing laws do not sufficiently take into consideration that women want to work, they want to help their families economically, but they need a variety of job opportunities, including the ability to work in and from their homes.”\textsuperscript{91}

Between 2008 and 2009, several draft laws were discussed internally in meetings held under the auspices of the WFC. Law proposals were raised occasionally in parliament, but were turned down. The last proposal was raised by MP Saleh Ashour after the four female MPs entered parliament.\textsuperscript{92} The suggestion was rejected by the female MPs on the grounds that “Kuwaiti women do not need a special law for what is perceived as ‘their affairs’. Women are citizens and existing laws should apply to them as citizens where they get equal rights within the law as male citizens.”\textsuperscript{93}

\textsuperscript{88} “Health Marriage Initiative” is rendered in English, and translated as “\textit{al-zawaj al-sihhi}”. Expression of support raised by by Dr. Abdelrahman Saleh al-Jiran (Salafist, 2\textsuperscript{nd} circle) on 11 March 2015.

\textsuperscript{89} Divorce rates between 1982 and 2007 have varied between 30 to 36 percent. In 1982 there were 1,609 divorces out of 5,262 marriages, and in 2007 there were 4,147 divorces out of 11,336 marriages. Mariam al-‘Abid and Fatima al-Ramizi, “\textit{mushkilat al-talaq fil-mujtama’ al-kuwaiti}”, parliamentary research study, June 2010. \url{http://www.kna.kw/clt/run.asp?id=1587#sthash.kb8k9Jnr.dpbs}

\textsuperscript{90} Al-Jarallah has been central in the Muslim Brotherhood’s Islah charity organization, \textit{jam’iyat al-islah} since the mid-1980s. She participated in the 1995 Beijing conference, and recounts her experience and how this influenced her way of thinking, and the organization’s long-term strategic perspectives. See the discussion between the leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait marking the 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary of the organization in \textit{Al-Mujtama’}, March 2014, p. 8-13.


\textsuperscript{92} Expression of support raised in the WFC 17 September 2009.

\textsuperscript{93} Interview with ex-MP and current professor in political science at Kuwait University Masuma al-Moubarak, 22 April 2012. Al-Moubarak repeated this point in a panel discussion “Women’s political rights” marking the International Women’s Day in Kuwait on 9 March 2015 where the author was present. The panel discussion was between current leader of the WFC Saleh Ashour, professor in sociology at Kuwait University Lubna al-Kazi,
In sum, there is an evident divide in approaches pertaining on what “women’s rights” are and should be between two main segments within Kuwaiti society. Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood’s charity-based women’s branch, and traditionalist MP Saleh Ashour share a common understanding of religious as well as societal conservativism whereby women’s carework at home is prioritized, coupled with a concern on strengthening the economic rights of non-employed mothers. On the other hand, we find the four female MPs along with other women with higher education credentials who insist on citizenship based on equal rights between male and female citizens, and the importance of participating in the labor market as means of safeguarding women’s economic interests.

A decade after enfranchisement, and as of 2015, this division appears to have widened considerably. Before women were enfranchised in 2005, al-Jarallah defied explicitly the leadership of the Muslim Brotherhood and supported pressures to give Kuwaiti women political rights. Her organization worked closely with liberal groups and the women’s movement in Kuwait, such as the Women’s Cultural and Social Society (WCSS, est. 1963). Since 2011, political paths have diverged. In addition to different views pertaining to a distinct law on civil and social rights, neither the Muslim Brotherhood, nor its women’s branch are in favor of reforming the current citizenship law in order to enable Kuwaiti women to pass over their citizenship to children if married to noncitizens. The latter case constitutes today a main objective as defined by the WCSS, and its supporter organizations. ⁹⁴

Exit the female MPs from parliament 2011 – 2015: women’s issues eclipsed?

After the exit of female MPs from parliament in December 2011, Islamist MPs stopped arguing along lines which focused on Kuwaiti women per se. In fact, they stopped raising proposals altogether through the WFC, and their demands on behalf of women dropped sharply.

By 11 March 2014 only one expression of support was sent to the WFC by independent with tribal background Muhammad Hadi al-Huweila who requested the establishment of an advisory center in order to “help families to unify” (khidmat tamasuk al-usra) and maintain familial spirits (muḥafatha 'ala kayan al-usra) due to the rising numbers of negative appearances (thawāher salbiyya) in Kuwaiti society, such as problems between family members, domestic violence and psychological strain. In addition, one law proposal – a Law on the Child – was raised by Saleh Ashour and four other MPs on 4 June 2014 which passed unanimously in parliament on 11 March 2015.

As such, the woman-centered focus that characterized the profile of most issues and cases raised in the WFC between 2006 and 2011 changed focus towards two main trends:
one focused on the family at large, judging by the proposals on establishing family consultancy centers; the other focused on the rights of the child. Whereas women’s rights were profiled in the latter, this was done primarily through the prism of women seen through their roles as mothers.

The unanimous approval of The law on the Child in the Kuwaiti parliament in March 2015 can be seen as a response towards the global transnationalization of the legal sphere that signals Kuwait’s adherence towards the 1989 UN Convention on the Law of the Child which Kuwait signed with reservations in 1991. To a lesser degree can this law be seen as a result from particular national pressures that focus mainly on expanding the citizenship of minors at the domestic level with the proliferation of, for instance, children within the Bidun population, or the children of Kuwaiti mothers married to non-Kuwaitis.

What is interesting about the propensity of Islamists, Salafists and tribalists who raised proposals through the WFC between 2009 and 2011 is that female MPs made a difference simply by being present in parliament. They simply acted as watchdogs. At times, they saw the need to bark, as in the case of the monthly grant proposal for unemployed women. Most times, they did not need to pressure for women-friendly reforms through the WFC because Islamist and tribal MPs were diligent protagonists of Kuwaiti women’s civil and social rights.

Simply assuming that the presence of women in representative institutions, such as parliaments, is a good thing for women’s interests in politics is a problematic standpoint. Researchers on the impact of women in representative bodies have different views on whether it is women’s presence in parliament, or whether it is acts that support women’s issues – irrespective of women’s presence in decision-making bodies – that impact on reforms that strengthen female citizenship. Recent research suggests that acts, not numbers, are critical for such change.

My investigation of Kuwaiti parliamentary documents related primarily to the WFC over a decade supports both standpoints. Acts, understood here as the amount of law proposals raised that touched women’s issues, increased dramatically with numbers, i.e. the presence of four female parliamentarians, as evidenced in table 1. Indirectly, the presence of women in parliament and in the WFC, led to a significant increase in law proposals pertaining to women raised particularly by MPs with tribal and Islamist orientations. As such, the acts of Islamists through their proposals spoke louder than their ideological words which

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96 The issue of the rights of children falls outside the framework of this article, but it is significant in as much as the rights of women as mothers and the rights of their children are intimately related. A point may, however, here be made that the economic and social rights of Bidun children as well as the children of Kuwaiti mothers married to non-Kuwaitis were to a large degree safeguarded in 2011 through administrative amendments.

revolve around the importance of maintaining male headed households and the principle of guardianship within state legislation.

The eclipse of the WFC as a political arena where MPs forwarded law proposals addressing women’s issues was not accompanied by the absence of proposals addressing policies that targeted women’s welfare altogether. Arguably, MPs approached other committees such as the Housing Committee, the Legislation and Legal Committee, and the Health, Social and Labor Committee instead of using the WFC as avenue for addressing the position of Kuwaiti women after 2011. In other words, after the exit of women from parliament, male MPs retrieved to the parliamentary practice that was common prior to women’s enfranchisement: proposals and suggestions pertaining to women were, once again, split, dispersed and presented to different parliamentarian committees, rather than being addressed to the WFC.

For instance, as of March 2015, MPS raised 16 law proposals to the Housing Committee in the current 14th parliamentary session of which five – i.e. nearly a third – regarded a Kuwaiti woman’s legal capacity to be registered as owner of a house. All five law proposals concerned amending Law 47 in order to legally capacitate Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis, divorced women, single women over 40 years, and widows to have their names rendered on registration forms in order to show joint ownership of the house with the husband. All five proposals were raised by MPs with tribal backgrounds: Mohammed Naser al-Jabri specifies the different categories of Kuwaiti women who should be allowed to own their own housing98; Sa’ud Nashmi al-Hureiji proposes that Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis should be able to get access to housing loans99, and that both husband and wife be able to register as owners of a house, provided that the marriage can be proved to be five years or more100; ‘Askar ‘Uweid al-‘Enesi proposes that both a man and a woman be able to register as owners of a house in order to safeguard the economic interests of a male or a female widow in case the husband or the wife dies.101

In short, Kuwaiti women, Islamists argued, should be able to act as legal guardians (kafil) of their husbands and children; be brokers of material welfare services such as free education, health services and jobs in the public sector; and get equal access to financial commodities such as public housing schemes. Particularly articulated were issues pertaining to housing and the welfare rights of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis.

**Kuwaiti Salafists as reluctant feminists?**

Notwithstanding the pro-natal policy of monthly grants to unemployed women, proposals raised by Islamist MPs through the WFC between 2006 and 2015 reveal other trends, namely suggestions in support of Kuwaiti women’s autonomy and legal capacity. Through their proposals, Islamists portrayed Kuwaiti women as mediators of welfare to their families. They saw the WFC as means to address central issues of concern among marginalized

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98 Raised on 1 December 2013.
99 Raised on 6 April 2014.
100 Raised on 24 April 2014.
101 Two proposals raised on 6 July 2014 and 7 December 2014.

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constituencies, including tribal electoral areas where significant segments of the population does not have access to higher educational nor job opportunities, and where many of their supporters are themselves part of the stateless Bidun population, or related to the Bidun, through tribal kinship marriage.

Can Islamist MPs, with and without tribal backgrounds, be seen as pushing for wider female civil and social rights by default? To a certain extent this appears to be the case. A review of parliamentary documents after Kuwaiti women got the franchise reveals that whilst Islamists profess patriarchal family ideals, proponents of Islamist ideologies nevertheless – indirectly, but explicitly – argued together with liberal and traditionalist MPs across political divisions for strengthened female autonomy within state laws, although styles of argumentation differed.

Another evident observation is that MPs with tribal background, both those with explicit membership or affiliation with Salafist groups and those without, have a more pronounced and articulated interest in pressuring for wider civil rights in terms of strengthening the legal autonomy of women. Evidently, bolstering a Kuwaiti woman’s civil rights empowers her to become a mediator of social welfare rights to the rest of the family. By extension, strengthening female autonomy challenges and puts into question that current Kuwaiti legislation premises Kuwaiti men as primal providers and heads of household.

Not all Islamists can be labelled as feminist in the sense that they opt for bolstered female autonomy and target equality standards as stipulated in the 1979 UN Women’s Convention (Cedaw), for instance. However, some of them certainly alluded to international conventions on human rights. By doing so, they opened up room for political maneuvering in terms of addressing the unequal distribution of rights among Kuwaiti men and women. Islamists thus contributed to democratic practice in gendered political spaces such as the legal and social position of women as citizens within semi-authoritarian settings. Several of them did so reluctantly, judging from these MPs’ opposition towards granting Kuwaiti women political rights in 2005.

**Conclusion**

Since the reopening of the Kuwaiti parliament after the liberation of Kuwait in 1992, Islamists did not champion female suffrage. After women in Kuwait were enfranchised in 2005, Islamists did not lose the opportunity to address women’s issues in new and innovative ways. Kuwaiti parliamentary documents, particularly between 2009 and 2011, shed light on how the paradox of reluctant feminists came to be.

An analysis of proposals raised through the WFC after women gained political rights provides evidence that Kuwaiti MPs who voted against women’s enfranchisement in 2005 were among the first to articulate demands on behalf of women, and to reformulate proposals in line with a new electoral environment. MPs affiliated with tribalist and Salafist, to a lesser extent Muslim Brotherhood groups, were particularly active. They presented law proposals and suggested changes that sought to strengthen the legal and economic position
of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis, as well as Kuwaitis who have tribal kinship relations with *Biduns*. By doing so, they made existing socio-legal divisions among Kuwaiti citizens, the stateless Bidun population, and other segments of non-Kuwaitis who are kin with Kuwaitis blurred and less distinct.

Ideologically in favor of males as heads of households, and supportive of patriarchal family ideals, Islamists sought thus to bolster female autonomy in law proposals raised in parliament. They reframed a Kuwaiti woman’s agency, and argued that a Kuwaiti woman should have equal civil rights and enjoy the same social welfare rights as a Kuwaiti male citizen.

Two traits are noticeable when looking at parliamentary documents raised by MPs through the WFC over the past decade: issues related to housing, and issues related to kinship with non-Kuwaitis. The two sets of issues entwine, and are not clearly separable. This point relates to the complex issue of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis, and the exclusionary practices pertaining to the stateless *Bidun* population that have been in force since 1985, particularly articulated after the liberation of Kuwait in 1991.

In the past two decades, Kuwaiti women have pressurized the government to be included in the housing scheme without the mediation of male kin. With women’s enfranchisement in 2005, and the entry of female MPs in parliament in 2009, these pressures were articulated in new ways.

Parliamentary documents reveal how pressures at strengthening women’s right to housing received unfettered support from Islamists over the past decade. Male MPs, many of them Islamists, sent claims through the WFC between 2006 and 2011, and then to other parliamentary committees, substantiating the legal capacity of Kuwaiti women as mediators of welfare. Having voted against granting Kuwaiti women political rights in 2005, they argued for strengthening a Kuwaiti woman’s social and economic rights by focusing on Kuwaiti women as mothers, widows and caretakers. They promoted the autonomy and legal capacity of women by default, i.e. by substantiating women’s social welfare rights. By doing that, they endorsed indirectly a Kuwaiti woman’s civil right as autonomous legal subject who can act as mediator and provider of welfare to a household. As such, Islamists highlighted the anomalies inherent in their idealized projections of families and homes as constituted by males as heads of households and primal financial providers for the family.

In conclusion, we may dwell on whether political voting rights for women matter in a state characterized by semi-authoritarianism muddled with “sticky transitions”?

Among the sticky features of authoritarianism is that female citizenship in Kuwait is still primarily based on male kin as primal mediators. As such, the principle of male guardianship prevails. It is nevertheless weakened, though not threatened, judging from the support towards, for instance, handouts that buttress domesticated womanhood.

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102 Andrzej Kapiszewski, Gwenn Okruhlik, and Mary Ann Tétreault, eds., *Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 10. The authors explain that authoritarianism in the GCC states “should be considered in the context of stickiness rather than outright failures” explain further that “[e]ven cosmetic reforms may have unintended consequences.”.
Nevertheless, this paper shows how citizenship status, gender, political rights and social economic rights are intertwined and broadly conceived in a Gulf setting.


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