

Perspectives of Five Kuwaiti Women in Leadership Roles

Perspectives of Five Kuwaiti Women in Leadership Roles:

Feminism, Islam, and Politics

By

Souad T. Ali

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*To my beloved daughters Azza and Shiraz;
and my dearest sisters*

*To my beloved husband and son Abdullahi and Ahmed,
and my dearest brothers*

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AALE	International Program Accreditation from the American Academy for Liberal Education
ACBSP	Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs
AH	anno Hegirae (in the year of the Hegira, AD 622)
ASU	Arizona State University
AUK	American University of Kuwait
CAIS	Council of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Arizona State University
CEA	Commission on English Language Programs Accreditation
DAI	Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
KD	Kuwaiti Dinar (currency)
KES	Kuwait Economic Society
KIPCO	Kuwait Projects Company
KFP	Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company
KOC	Kuwait Oil Company
MEI	Middle East Institute
PUC	Private Universities Council (Kuwait)

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: FIVE KUWAITI WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP ROLES, AN OVERVIEW

The advances made in women's issues in the Gulf State of Kuwait during the last sixty years have been widely commented upon, but little academic research has been published on their material effects. Muslim feminists' critique is creating new spaces in Islamic theology even as stridently conservative forms of Islamism are increasingly visible in public space. Recent works by Muslim feminist scholars such as Leila Ahmed, Amina Wadud, Asma Barlas, and many others have raised significant questions about women's rights in the Qur'an. Islamic feminists have thought and rethought their positions, often publicly, adding a religious, even traditional, foundation to the liberal principles of empowerment. Against this background, I conducted several original interviews between 2010 and 2015 with a number of prominent Kuwaiti women in leadership positions, whom I first met while I was a Fulbright Scholar in Kuwait. These interviews—and in some cases, follow-up conversations—spanned the topics of gender, leadership, reform, and religion.

Background

When Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, women stepped up in large numbers to help their society. They were heavily involved as volunteers and in the line of duty. For their work, women demanded reforms that would provide them with the right to vote and the right to hold office. In 1999, Emir Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad al-Jabir al-Sabah issued a decree giving women the right to vote and run for office. Unfortunately, however, the Kuwaiti constitution provides parliament

the ability to overrule a decree made by the emir. Parliament used this power to overrule the emir's 1999 decree.

Women in Kuwait have primarily used peaceful protest to make their voices heard. In 1996, 500 Kuwaiti women went on strike from their jobs to demand women's suffrage. In 2002, women held peaceful demonstrations outside of voter registration centers. In 2003, women took action in three significant ways. They held a demonstration of over one thousand women (at the time, Kuwaiti's population was only two million). Activists in Kuwaiti women's suffrage movements also sued both the minister of the interior and the speaker of parliament. Their actions were unsuccessful, but their voices were still heard. Finally, in the 2003 election, the movement put out mock ballots for women to vote for real candidates. This demonstration showed how much influence women could have over the political process.

By 2005, the women's movement had gained so much momentum that an anti-women's rights movement emerged. However, this did not slow the movement down. In March of 2005, one hundred women protested for suffrage and representation of women in parliament outside of the parliament building. Protesters at this event wore pale blue shirts. Because of this, the women's suffrage movement in Kuwait is also known as the Blue Revolution. The Blue Revolutionaries were finally given what they asked for on May 17, 2005, when parliament, in a 37-21 decision, gave women the constitutional right to vote and hold office.

Studies on Kuwaiti Women

Few other academic works have examined female leaders in Kuwait since the Blue Revolution. One of these is *Gender and Politics in Kuwait: Women and Political Participation in the Gulf* (2013) by Meshal al-Sabah. This book provides a thorough discussion of the women's suffrage movement in Kuwait before 2005. The text analyzes the relationship between the women's rights movement and the media in Kuwait. It also offers an in-depth discussion of the different types of feminism in Kuwait and how they conflict with feminism in the United States. Through this point, he discusses how

Islamic feminism fits into a broad definition of global feminism despite being very different from Western feminism in many ways.

Al-Sabah's chapter on "Women in Kuwaiti Politics 1991-2009" provides details of the elections leading up to women gaining the right to vote. He stresses that women are held to a much higher standard than men and that they must be careful not to become involved in the corruption of politics because opposition groups could use this against them. This chapter also provides details about the four women who were nominated to the national assembly and how different they are. However, although the author closely examines the history of women's suffrage in Kuwait and effectively analyzes the role that religion has played in the women's rights movement, he does not provide an in-depth look at any individual female leaders in Kuwait or provide insight into their personal experiences, as my study does. For example, of the four women elected to the national assembly, my study provides a whole chapter focusing in great detail on Dr. Rola Dashti.

One of the earlier books in this area is Haya al-Mughni's *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (2001). In this revised edition, al-Mughni discusses the relationship between women and the state and the influence such interaction has had on Kuwaiti national politics and society. Al-Mughni also discusses the major social, cultural, and political changes that occurred in the aftermath of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the Gulf War. Other issues discussed include but are not limited to the diversity and dynamism of Kuwaiti women; post-war feminist activism; women's resistance and active roles during the Iraqi occupation; the role of gender in Islamism and cultural politics; as well as contemporary women's organizations. All of these issues relate in several ways to the five women who compose the core of this study.

Another study is Omaymah E. al-Suwaihel's "Kuwaiti Female Leaders' Perspectives: The Influence of Culture on Their Leadership," a peer-reviewed article published in *Contemporary Issues in Education Research*. This article examines the perspectives of five women in Kuwait who detail their personal and professional experiences, granting the author insights into the relationship between culture, gender, and leadership in Kuwait. This research asks: How do Kuwaiti female leaders experience the impact of

culture on their leadership? This study found that women's personal lives heavily influence their professional lives. As al-Suwaihel noticed, some of the participants had the support and understanding from their spouses to pursue their ambitions to complete their education and work in job situations that were male-dominated. In addition, some of the participants' fathers and husbands were open-minded in how they facilitated resolution of the life and work issues that the women faced. The study also found that women in Kuwait have developed their own leadership styles based on their private lives and Kuwaiti culture. Finally, the study showed that some of the women interviewed believe that attitudes toward women in leadership are becoming more positive as women's progress gains recognition. Despite revealing many positive attitudes about women in leadership in Kuwait, the study found that some negative attitudes toward female leaders in Kuwait still exist, in that the stereotype remains in place that women are fit for positions such as teaching but not for leadership positions in either governmental or nongovernmental organizations. While the article does examine some individual female leaders in Kuwait, it does not name the women interviewed, detail their backgrounds, or tell their individual stories. My approach in *Perspectives of Five Kuwait Women in Leadership Roles* is different: it is precisely through identifying the women I interviewed and detailing their backgrounds that I am able to tell their individual stories.

Amira el-Azhary Sonbol's edited volume, *Gulf Women* (2012), explores the history and social standing of women in the Gulf region through a collection of essays by several scholars. Three essays were of particular significance to this study. The first is "Women and Education in the Gulf: Between the Modern and the Traditional," by Ramadan al-Khouli. This text, primarily relating to the chapter on Sheikha Dana Nasser al-Sabah, explores the history of education in the region. It describes traditional education, known as *kuttab*, as more egalitarian than modern education in the Gulf. Traditional education focused on teaching and memorizing the Qur'an. Al-Khouli believes that traditional education was coeducational or mixed, meaning that both boys and girls received education together. The essay further explains that, in Kuwait, government schools were established in 1950 following increased commercial exchange and

oil development in the region, and that modern education was solidified in the Gulf region in 1972. In that year, there were no girls in the modern education system. Within five years, however, there were 1,942. This made clear to al-Khouli that the idea of female education was not a foreign concept in the Gulf, as girls were quickly integrated into the education system. However, a significant discrepancy remains: modern education in Kuwait is segregated, whereas traditional education was not. This is relevant to the challenges Sheikha Dana Nasser al-Sabah currently faces at the American University in Kuwait; the government's requirement that male and female students are segregated makes it difficult to offer a wide range of classes to both sexes.

The second essay is “Women in the Gulf During the First Half of the Twentieth Century: A Comparative Study of American Missionary Archives and Local Memory,” by Fatma al-Sayegh. This essay is significant to my own work as it provides insight into the history of women’s progress in the region. Western missionaries went to the Gulf region with the aim of proselytizing to Muslims in the hopes of spreading Christianity. They called this the “Arabian Mission.” One of the major stations set up during this “mission” was in Kuwait. Female missionaries were the most successful in that they were able to form intimate relationships with local women and enter their homes, whereas the male missionaries were not able to do so. Female missionaries attempted to evangelize using three methods: education, medical care, and social work. Though ultimately unsuccessful in converting many Arabs to Christianity due to Islam’s stronghold in the region as both a religion and a way of life, al-Sayegh argues that the missionaries did, in fact, create positive change through education and medical advancements.

Another essay, “Gender Rights and Islamic Legal Tradition: An Exploration” by Ziba Mir-Hosseini, examines the history of the Islamic legal tradition. In the essay, Mir-Hosseini argues that the Islamic legal tradition is based on an interpretation of the Qur'an that was influenced by social, cultural, and political conditions. Because of these conditions, many legal traditions are discriminatory against women despite the fact that the Qur'an does not endorse such discrimination. Mir-Hosseini describes Classical Jurists, who base many of their arguments on pre-Islamic Arabian practices and

believe that women's bodies are inherently sexual and therefore dangerous to the progress of society. For the Classical Jurist, women are commodities and objects of exchange. They are, in effect, the property of their husbands. The Neo-Traditional mindset differs in that it views men and women as separate but equal in marriage. By this, it means that they have the same value but are made to fulfill different roles. This mindset still, however, emphasizes the need for segregation and the idea that hijabs are a necessity. These two mindsets still exist in Islamic Jurisprudence despite the fact that the Qur'an and Hadiths condemn women's subjugation and call for a movement toward justice. It is essential to understand these mindsets, especially regarding women in Kuwaiti politics such as Dr. Rola Dashti and Safa al-Hashem (as well as Aseel al-Awadhi, not profiled in this book), and the challenges they have faced while in office and as members of parliament.

A study by Helen M. Rizzo, *Islam, Democracy and the Status of Women: The Case of Kuwait*, appeared in 2005. Rizzo focuses on Kuwaiti women's organizations and examines whether they work to achieve political rights for women within the broader context of religion and democracy. Moving away from negative literature on Islam, democracy, and women's rights, the author attempts to look at how some Kuwaiti women's discourses deconstruct stereotypical images of the religion and employ Islam to justify women's rights to public appearance and activism, to recognize their contributions, and demand equal rights.

And yet another book is *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait: The Politics and Paradoxes* by Alessandra Gonzalez (2013). Like other studies by Muslim-American female scholars, she addresses such questions as: Is Islam oppressive to women? What do the majority of Muslim women in Muslim countries think about these issues? Do they consider themselves oppressed? By presenting a case study of college students and elites, Gonzalez illustrates paradoxes at the cutting edge of the women's suffragist movement in Kuwait. One of the book's goals is to serve as a model for understanding social reform for women's rights and to explore the subject of women's civic participation in Kuwait within the context of understanding larger social reform issues. The book presents examples of a reconciliation between Islam and feminism coming out of an in-

depth look at the evolving political roles for women in Kuwait. Gonzalez argues that her book defines Islamic feminism as a movement that seeks to further a progressive agenda for women's rights within an Islamic framework, including men and women, elites and non-elites.¹ She emphasizes that Kuwaiti elites are reconciling feminism with Islam. Negotiating between traditional values and modern realities is a contextual process that illustrates possibilities for an indigenous resolution to global problems of gender inequality and economic disparity in the Middle East.² Her conclusion is that the actors most successful in pushing forward progressive rights for the previously marginalized are those who balance the appeal to community, politics, and religious authorities.³

Chapter outline

The second chapter of this book examines Dr. Rola Dashti. Dr. Dashti received her PhD in population dynamics from Johns Hopkins University. Before running for parliament, she served as a board member and then as chairperson of the Kuwait Economic Society (KES). Under her leadership, KES doubled both its membership and its funds. This allowed Dr. Dashti to become an economic leader in Kuwaiti society. After successfully serving as the chairperson of KES, she went on to run for office. Though she did not win the first election women were allowed to enter, she was successful in the 2009 election. The chapter on Dr. Dashti details our conversation about her struggles and victories while in office. One such battle occurred when she was taken to court because she did not wear a hijab in parliament. However, she emerged victorious when she won the lawsuit and was allowed to present herself as she wished in parliament, setting a precedent that women have the right to independently choose how they present themselves. In my interview with Dr. Dashti, she discusses what she believes to be the main struggles within the current women's rights movement, as well as what needs to happen in the future. The chapter also outlines how she fought for laws that promote social security benefits, housing, education, health, economic stability, and family law. During her time in office, Dr. Dashti was appointed minister of state and won

numerous awards. However, as I detail in her chapter, none of this was without conflict.

In 2009, four years after women received the right to vote, Kuwait made history when it elected four women to parliament. These women were Aseel al-Awadhi, Salwa al-Jassar, Masouma al-Mubarak, and Rola Dashti. All four of these women have PhDs. Dr. Aseel al-Awadhi holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of Texas, Austin. She is an assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Kuwait and has recently been appointed cultural attaché at the Kuwaiti Embassy in Washington, DC. Dr. Salwa al-Jassar, who holds a PhD from the University of Pittsburgh, was prominent in parliament for advocating for the rights of children born to Kuwaiti mothers and foreign fathers. While in office, she was also highly critical of Kuwait's education system. Dr. Masouma al-Mubarak received two master's degrees and a PhD from the University of Denver. She was the first female minister of Kuwait. She served first as minister of planning, next as minister of administrative development affairs, then as minister of transportation, and, finally, as minister of health. Before serving in government, Dr. Masouma al-Mubarak was the head of the political science department at the University of Kuwait. Throughout her career, she has been a prominent advocate for human rights and women's issues. Dr. Rola Dashti is featured in much detail as one of the women who graciously and generously gave me an interview for this book. It is worth noting that I tried to interview all of the first four women MPs; an arrangement was kindly made for me through the Gulf Center at the American University of Kuwait, my Fulbright Host, to visit the national assembly twice to try to arrange for my interviews with the four women MPs. Only Dr. Dashti, always present in her office, graciously and generously obliged.

The third chapter explores the work of Sheikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah. Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah is the general director of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) in Kuwait, a museum that is a hub for Kuwaiti art and culture. As director, she focuses on serving the Kuwaiti community through professional education, cultural awareness, and a long-running lecture series that she developed. She also places significant emphasis on integrating women into the workforce through her support and preservation of art. She believes

art to be a beautiful way to bridge cultural barriers. Her dream is to present Kuwait in a way that is unique to the outside world, in contrast to how the news media portray the Middle East. As a female leader in Kuwait, Sheikha Hussah al-Sabah is intensely aware of the gender inequality present both in Kuwait and in the Middle East as a whole. She believes that this disparity is not a result of the Qur'an but rather its interpretation by men. To combat this, she believes that women and each new generation must work to create modern interpretations of the Qur'an that are more inclusive. It is up to each successive generation, she argues, to generate interpretations that are suited to their needs while also rooted in the religious texts. In my interview with her, she describes why she thinks this is necessary for creating a more equal Kuwait.

The fourth chapter of this book examines the work of Sara Akbar, a female engineer and leader in the oil industry. Akbar is the founder and CEO of Kuwait Energy, making her one of the few female oil CEOs worldwide. She received her degree in chemical engineering from Kuwait University at a time when few women did. Ms. Akbar rose to prominence during the Iraqi invasion of 1991. After the occupation of Kuwait, she stayed in the country and worked to help the resistance by distributing funds and weapons and writing reports of the occupation. At this time, the Iraqi forces set fire to 735 wells in Kuwait. Due to her immense love for her country, she helped organize a firefighting crew dedicated to saving the wells. Her actions during this time made her a national hero. As described in her chapter, this work became the focal point of an Academy Award-nominated documentary produced about this period. Before becoming the CEO of Kuwait Energy, Ms. Akbar worked as the head of Kuwait Oil Company's (KOC) Petroleum Department. She was then named the manager of new business development for KOC's international branch. Her successful work experience and international acclaim allowed her to start Kuwait Energy. A core value for both Ms. Akbar and Kuwait Energy is to have strong ethical policies and to follow the moral interests of the people. This business model has allowed Kuwait Energy to become an internationally-known business which works in many areas of the world, including Ukraine, Russia, Latvia, Egypt, Yemen, Oman, Iraq, Pakistan, Libya, and Somalia. Though not a member of parliament or a politician, Ms.

Akbar has lived through tumultuous times in Kuwait and has seen the development of the Kuwaiti feminist movement. In my interview with her, she describes what she has witnessed in regard to women's rights in Kuwait and what she thinks the future will hold. Ms. Akbar, a fervent believer in Islam, also details what she believes religion's role in politics to be.

Chapter five focuses on Sheikha Dana Nasser Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah. She is the founder and chair of the Board of Trustees of the American University in Kuwait (AUK), the first private liberal arts university in Kuwait. Sheikha Dana al-Sabah is a prominent private sector leader who has changed the status of higher education in Kuwait. Her chapter highlights the struggles facing women in education and elaborates on how Kuwaiti men and women are segregated in college classrooms. This has had adverse effects on all students in higher education, as schools may not have the funds to hold multiple sections of each class for men and women. Despite challenges, AUK and Sheikha Dana al-Sabah have risen to prominence in part due to the university's collaboration with Dartmouth College, an Ivy League college in the United States. This partnership gives AUK students the opportunity to expand their learning horizons and also gives AUK the opportunity to learn from Dartmouth and advance the young university's collection of best practices.⁴

Finally, the sixth chapter of this book examines Safa al-Hashem, a Kuwaiti entrepreneur and powerful politician. Ms. al-Hashem was initially elected to parliament in 2012. In 2013, she was elected again, making history as the first woman to be elected to parliament two consecutive times. In 2016, she was elected for a third time to parliament. In that election, she was the only woman to win a seat. While in office, Ms. al-Hashem has become most well-known for her anti-expatriate position. She has advocated for higher taxation of expatriates, caps on foreigners' stays, and higher prices for expatriates' medical fees. For these reasons, Ms. al-Hashem decided to grill Dr. Rola Dashti in 2013 when both women were in office, as detailed in her chapter. However, the allegation against Dr. Dashti was not proven. Ms. Safa al-Hashem is currently (2018) the only elected female member of the *Majlis al-Umma* (Kuwait's National Assembly). This status gives her a vantage point from which to

highlight the visibility of female politicians as well as their impact in the state of Kuwait. She is arguably the most widely-followed member as well as the most controversial and one of the most outspoken members of the assembly.

With greater time and resources, this book could contain tens of chapters on powerful women in Kuwait. Many other women who have risen to power in business in Kuwait are not mentioned in this book but deserve recognition. In Forbes's "The Top 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen 2017," ten Kuwaiti women were recognized.⁵ These women are Sheikha al-Bahar, Henadi al-Saleh, Eaman al-Roudhan, Hosnia Hashem, Suad Hamad al-Saleh al-Homaizy, Ghada Y. al-Amer, May al-Mudhaf, Ghosson al-Khaled, and Nawal Mulla-Hussain. Sara Akbar was also on this list. Sheikha al-Bahar is the CEO of the National Bank of Kuwait, the largest bank in Kuwait. Hendai al-Saleh is the chair of the board at Agility, an international supply chain developer. Eaman al-Roudhan is the CEO of Zain Kuwait, an innovative telecom company that operates across the Middle East and in Africa. Hosnia Hashem is the deputy CEO of Olefins & Aromatics of Petrochemicals Industry Company, a prominent Middle Eastern oil producer that is quickly gaining international acclaim. Suad Hamad al-Saleh al-Homaizy is a board member for Bank Audi and a private real estate investor.⁶ Ghada Y. al-Amer is the Vice President of Finance and Administration for Kuwait Foreign Petroleum Exploration Company, an international oil production company. May al-Mudhaf is the CEO of the Kuwaiti branch of the National Bank of Abu Dhabi, the largest bank in the United Arab Emirates. Ghosson al-Khaled is the deputy CEO of ACICO, a construction and real estate development firm;⁷ Ms. al-Khaled holds an MBA from Arizona State University's Thunderbird School of Global Management. Finally, Nawal Mulla-Hussain is the CEO of Global Investment House in Kuwait, an asset management and investment banking firm. All of these women represent the increased prominence and power of Kuwaiti businesswomen.

Noureya al-Sadani: a pioneering Kuwaiti woman

One of the most pioneering women in the state of Kuwait is Noureya al-Sadani. Ms. al-Sadani, born in 1947, began her career as

a journalist in Kuwait Radio and Kuwait TV, after writing journalistic articles since the 1960s. She continued working for the Ministry of Information in Kuwait until she retired in 1983 to dedicate her time to other initiatives and projects.

Ms. al-Sadani's rich and diversified career is best reflected in the many positions she has held, including head of the Family Committee of the Arab Women's Federation for Family Affairs (1975–1977) and general manager of the Arab Family Organization (1979–1982). She also made genuine efforts to establish the International Arab Women Group in London and was the first president of the first Kuwait Women's Union, established in 1974–1977. Before that, she established and headed the first Women's Association in Kuwait, the Family Renaissance Association (1962–1979). She was the first chair and head of the first Kuwaiti Women's Federation, founded in 1974.

Since the very beginning, Ms. al-Sadani's proposals and concrete ideas were primarily dedicated to expectations for the twenty-first century. She led the first women's conference in Kuwait's history in 1971 and the first campaign for Kuwaiti women's political rights, submitting her plea and multiple proposals to Kuwait's general assembly (Majlis al-Umma, Kuwait's parliament), which the assembly discussed in 1973. More recently, Ms. al-Sadani, with the help of an appointed team, organized the first conference for Kuwaiti Women Engineers, held in March of 2001. A year earlier, she also proposed the first conference for Kuwaiti women working in the medical field. This conference was held in March of 2000.

One of Ms. al-Sadani's important projects was her establishing in 1990, along with many of her female colleagues, the first popular Kuwaiti women's group, Kuwaiti Women of the 21st Century. The first and main outcome of its distinguished national initiatives was proposing the first document in the political history of Kuwait that included eighteen thousand signatures of both men and women supporting the special Emiri Decree on Kuwaiti women's political rights (1999–2000). The document was presented to the emir of Kuwait and archived in the Kuwait National Museum, "so that subsequent generations of Kuwaitis will remember those men and women who pioneered to support this civilized initiative, with which the emir of Kuwait ended the 20th century of the state of Kuwait

among the world countries.”⁸ In 2002, Ms. al-Sadani continued her sustained efforts for Kuwaiti women and launched her initiative, Kuwaiti Female Unification, with the goal of obtaining political rights for Kuwaiti women. She announced this initiative during a news conference with the Kuwaiti Women of the 21st Century, held in December of 2002.

I met with Ms. al-Sadani when she was invited by Sara Akbar to the Kuwaiti Engineers Association headquarters in Kuwait City in 2010.⁹ She related the fact that she is the author of many works dedicated to Arab and Kuwaiti women, society, and several other issues. Her role as historian and author is well recognized in Kuwait. The most important of these publications is her magnum opus, *Noureya al-Saddani A True Story that Opens the Window to a New Middle East: Forty Years of Gulf, Arab, and International History* (2005),¹⁰ of which she gave me a copy in 2010. This is a huge volume of about 856 pages, detailing in Arabic what the author described to me as, a life journey whose papers relate the history of the work of supporting the Arab civil society.

She also shared that when Iraq invaded Kuwait in 1990, she was in London, where she then joined the Kuwaiti Higher Committee and was in charge of its magazine. Upon her return to Kuwait after its liberation in 1991, Ms. al-Sadani volunteered and dedicated her time to the registration of the lives of the martyrs. Between 1991 and 1993, she wrote and produced the story of about eighteen of the martyrs; the work was broadcast as a radio play. Around that time, Ms. al-Sadani was editor-in-chief of the magazine *We Are the Kuwaiti Women*, founded by Kuwaiti women in London to reflect on what was happening in Kuwait during the 1991 occupation and after. More prominently still, Ms. al-Sadani was the editor-in-chief of the magazine *The Arab Spring* in London from 1986–1991. In February of 2000 she also became the general coordinator of the magazine *Kuwaitiat* (Female Kuwaitis), an internet magazine.

Ms. al-Sadani’s scope of work extends beyond Kuwait’s borders. She has also proposed a project for establishing a Gulf women’s union. In 1970, when Qatar and the United Arab Emirates did not have such an organization, she traveled to Abu Dhabi to begin the work for the union. In 1983, Ms. al-Sadani traveled to the Sultanate of Oman and studied the situation of Omani women. Upon her return

to Kuwait, she wrote a book titled *The History of Omani Women*. She noted her surprise that all of the copies in a London bookstore were sold out, as well as all copies in Kuwait — she no longer has any copies left.¹¹

Regarding her stay in London, Ms. al-Sadani noted that, given the lack of freedom in Arab countries in early times for women's groups to practice their work, she joined forces with a group of Arab women living in London to found an Arab Women's Union focusing on Arab women's rights as a dynamic issue in all international forums. She maintains that at the beginning, they decided for the union to be in the name of Arab women writers. Thus, in their June 22, 1984 meeting, they agreed to establish the International Union of Arab Women Writers in London. The group later expanded the idea and their ambition to plan for a union for Arab women. The main goal of the union was to advance the Arab woman's intellectual growth at both the Arab and international levels, and to cement the relationship between Arab women writers.¹² They held many other meetings subsequently.

Women in Kuwait have come a long way in the last sixty years. Dr. Rola Dashti, Sheikha Hussah Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, Sara Akbar, Sheikha Dana Nasser al-Sabah, and Safa al-Hashem are only a few among many Kuwaiti women who have risen to the top of their fields. Each woman has a different background, different interpretation of Islam, and different outlook on what the future of Kuwait looks like. However, their determination and strength to fulfill their potential is what groups them together along with every other prominent leader in Kuwait.

CHAPTER TWO

DR. ROLA DASHTI: LEADING KUWAITI ECONOMIST, HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVIST, AND FORMER MP

Dr. Rola Dashti is a prominent Kuwaiti woman who assumed key leadership positions throughout her career. In this chapter, she shares her striking perspective as one of the first four women elected to Kuwaiti parliament. Dr. Dashti speaks deeply and heartily about both the struggles and victories of women in leadership roles, particularly in the political and business realms. She highlights the need for both men and women to exercise women's rights with respect for religious rhetoric and emphasizes her vision for upholding religious culture while maintaining her status as a female politician. The two are not incompatible: her approach to politics is to embrace the Kuwaiti constitution as a tool for implementing a democratic vision of gender equality, while maintaining a moderate, open-minded, pluralist vision of Islam. Dr. Dashti is seen by many as a role model to all women in Kuwait who hold powerful, decision-making roles.

From social activism to political office

As one of the first four female members elected to Kuwaiti parliament in 2009, Dr. Dashti's background makes her an ideal representative of the women's "suffragist" movement in Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf. She is a central figure of this book. Born in 1964, the civic issues of the era caught Dr. Dashti's early, public-minded interest. As an elementary school student, her teachers nicknamed her "the class lawyer" due to her tendency to argue for the rights of classmates. Later, she volunteered for the Red Cross when refugees from the south of Lebanon began crowding north to her university

campus in Beirut. She recalls following the American elections with interest from her university (though at that point out of curiosity rather than from any awareness of her own future in politics) and particularly remembers the vice-presidential candidacy of the late Geraldine Ferraro. During Dr. Dashti's graduate studies in the US, she became involved in reproductive/pregnancy rights and environmental activism and joined the student union. It appears these early interests, albeit limited, set the stage for her later role as a political activist and active agent in the Kuwaiti suffragist movement.¹

Invasion by Iraq in 1990 created new awareness of democratic processes and reforms that would permeate Kuwaiti society long after. It was during this time that Dr. Dashti's activism assumed a distinctly political character. Following her graduation from Johns Hopkins University with a PhD in population dynamics, Dr. Dashti began her political career as a contract manager for the Kuwaiti government's Emergency and Reconstruction Program from 1990-1991.²

Even as a student, the status of Kuwaiti prisoners of war in Iraq and women's issues were her primary causes. During my 2010 interview with Dr. Dashti, she addressed her early experiences in moving toward social and political activism in Kuwait, as well as her inspiration to pursue this path despite its hardships. She describes the response of her family and the community overall thus:

Society is another challenge, especially in our region. This is another challenge when you come and you talk about change and you talk about reform—how does society accept this and how do they perceive you when you're talking and calling for these types of things? A lot of people in our society start accepting and adapting to the status quo. They're frustrated but they don't [know how] to take the steps [toward progress] . . . So there is always the frustration for their rights; their thoughts and their actions [are stymied], and this is why you see a lot of the status quo . . . It is maintained not because they like it, but because they are so pessimistic when change doesn't come. But, things do change, I always believe . . . I do see a positive future. I build on small gains. I always see how full the cup is, even if it is only a quarter full. I always look at the full parts, halves,

quarters . . . and I just build on them . . . This is my perspective, and this is what gives me energy.³

Dr. Dashti also worked to develop herself professionally. She was elected to the board of the Kuwait Economic Society (KES) through a campaign that demonstrated her networking power and willingness to forge new paths for women in Kuwait's traditional, patriarchal society. It wasn't long before Dr. Dashti began building support for her nomination as chairperson of KES. In contrast to the support she received for her new leadership role, she also recalls the surprise she encountered from fellow KES members and family alike. She reflects upon this surprise and relays the comments and concerns expressed to her regarding her leadership:

I did have support, although it was interesting. It was a big challenge. And there was a good group of people trying to lobby for other board members and there were groups who thought, 'How could a woman be there?' They would say, 'Rola, you know we value your ideas, we value your contribution, but, you know what—do whatever you want within the society, propose anything, work the way you want, reform whatever you want, take any position you want, but not the chairperson.'⁴

She further reflected upon this resistance with a frank perspective on the prevalent mindset of Arabian Gulf society as it relates to women holding leadership roles: "This reflects what women faced throughout not only Kuwait, but our entire region. People would think, 'We count on her, we believe in her capabilities, we believe in her commitment to perform and in her ability—but this is where she has to stop. She can lead only behind the scenes.'" While many of her more senior peers were hesitant to accept a woman as the public head of a civil organization such as KES, she was successful in her bid to be elected chairperson of the KES board in 2010. She credits this breakthrough achievement—being the first woman to be elected to this role—in large part to the youth of her fellow board members, the so-called "new guard."

There were many concerns about this new guard. Some of these concerns included institutional apprehensions about their fiscal responsibility and ability to preserve a credible membership—

indeed, about the credibility of the organization itself in society. In reality however, KES went on to double its membership and available funds in six years. Confidence in Dr. Dashti's leadership was so strong that when she was later elected to parliament and attempted to resign from the chairmanship, the KES board refused to accept her resignation.

Dr. Dashti's experience at KES reflects many of her opinions on the nature of government, the civil sphere, and democracy. During her chairmanship, she pushed for greater institutionalization of KES. Drawing colleagues into committees and meetings to enlarge the decision-making process, she facilitated the vision for an official building to house KES. Through a renewed focus on lobbying and advocacy in parliament, and by engaging with the media to generate public discussion of economic issues and proposed laws, the new guard engaged KES with policy makers in government and the public utilities like never before. For example, in 2008, to stave off inflation and what many opposition MPs call a housing crisis, Dr. Dashti called for deregulation of the oil and industries sector, and for the government to sell off a significant portion of its landholdings—which in 2013, still amounted to about 95 percent of Kuwait's national territory.⁵ By the time of our interview in 2010, Dr. Dashti felt that she had led KES to the extent that she could—into a position of effective decentralization—and reported being able to actively moderate her time between her parliamentary and KES roles.

The notion of women's right to vote arose in 1982 and gained momentum through the involvement and support of women's groups. In 2005, Kuwaiti women finally received the right to vote, and four years later, the right to stand for parliament. Dr. Dashti was the first woman to submit her application to run for office, but no women were elected for the first session. Three years later, in 2009, she was successful in her campaign and became one of the first four women ever elected to Kuwait's parliament. Despite this success in the political sphere, she attests to the additional difficulties related to her gender and the higher standard to which she and her female counterparts had to perform to legitimize the role of women in politics in general: