

## **From Suffrage to Strategy: The Journey of Kuwaiti Women in Politics Post-2005**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Women's political participation in Kuwait reflects broader debates over gender equality, citizenship, and democratic inclusion in the Gulf region. Despite constitutional guarantees of equality and early progress in education and public employment, Kuwaiti women were excluded from formal political rights until 2005. This article examines the historical context of women's rights in Kuwait, tracing the long struggle for political recognition and the role of women's activism in challenging legal and socio-cultural barriers. It highlights the 2005 milestone, when women gained the right to vote and stand for election, as a transformative moment in Kuwait's political history. The study analyses women's electoral participation and representation since suffrage, assessing both achievements and persistent limitations, while also exploring challenges such as patriarchal norms, electoral structures, and political instability. Beyond elections, the article considers broader forms of political engagement, including civil society activism and public appointments, and evaluates future prospects for achieving substantive gender parity, arguing that while legal inclusion has been realized, meaningful political empowerment remains an ongoing and contested process.

**Key Words :** Kuwaiti women, Politics, Struggle, Suffrage, Elections, Achievements, Challenges, Prospects

### **INTRODUCTION**

Political participation is considered a fundamental pillar of democratic inclusion and an important indicator of gender equality. However, in much of the world, women's access to political power has historically been limited by legal restrictions, socio-cultural traditions, and institutional barriers. These factors have been particularly prominent in the Gulf region, where political systems combine traditional values with deeply entrenched constitutional structures. Kuwait, considered one of the more politically open countries in the Gulf due to its elected national assembly and constitutional rule, provides an important case study for studying the complexities of

women's political participation.<sup>1</sup> Although Kuwaiti women have made significant progress in education, employment, and civil society, their journey to formal political participation has not been straightforward or without resistance.

The struggle for women's political rights in Kuwait reflects a broader tension between constitutional ideals and social practice. The 1962 Kuwaiti Constitution formally affirmed equality before the law and outlined political rights for citizens.<sup>2</sup> However, these guarantees were not immediately extended to women in practice. For decades, women were excluded from voting and standing for election, despite their increasing visibility in public life and their contribution to national development.

1. Middle East Monitor (2021, March 9). *Kuwait leads Gulf countries in political rights and freedoms*. Middle East Monitor. <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210309-kuwait-leads-gulf-countries-in-political-rights-and-freedoms/>
2. The Constitution of the State of Kuwait (1962). ConstitutionNet. <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Kuwait%20Constitution.pdf>

**How to cite this Article:** Ansari, Shahid Jamal and Akhtar, Mohd Ejaz (2023). From Suffrage to Strategy: The Journey of Kuwaiti Women in Politics Post-2005s. *Internat. J. Appl. Soc. Sci.*, **10** (11&12) : 853-860.

In the mid-20th century, women activists and civil society organizations mobilized to challenge these exclusions, using advocacy, public discourse, and legal arguments that emphasized the compatibility of women's political participation with constitutional principles and Islamic values. These efforts intensified from the 1960s to the 1990s, especially after Kuwait's independence and the subsequent social changes triggered by the Gulf War.<sup>3</sup>

A decisive turning point occurred in 2005, when Kuwaiti women were granted the right to vote and run for office, marking a historic milestone in the country's political evolution.<sup>4</sup> This reform represented not only a legal breakthrough but also a symbolic reconfiguration of gender roles within Kuwaiti society. Nevertheless, the transition from formal enfranchisement to substantive political representation has remained fraught with challenges. Persistent patriarchal norms, electoral structures favouring male-dominated networks, and resistance from conservative political actors have continued to limit women's influence within decision-making institutions. As such, women's political participation in Kuwait must be understood as an ongoing process one shaped by historical struggle, incremental achievements, and enduring obstacles. This study seeks to examine that process by situating women's political participation within its historical context, evaluating key achievements since 2005, and analysing the challenges and future prospects for achieving meaningful gender parity in Kuwaiti politics.

### **Historical Context:**

#### ***Constitutional Guarantees and Early Limitations:***

Historically, women's political activism in Kuwait emerged in the early twentieth century, when women began organizing and advocating for broader rights within a deeply patriarchal social structure. It gained momentum during the 1950s and 1960s, influenced by global feminist ideas and the growing recognition of women's contributions to national development, particularly during the early years of Kuwait's independence and the drafting

of the 1962 constitution. Despite this growing awareness and engagement, women's political aspirations were constrained by dominant cultural norms that emphasized domestic roles and women's limited presence in public and political life, thereby limiting their ability to meaningfully participate in the political process.

Although the Kuwaiti Constitution of 1962 formally enshrined the principle of equality before the law and outlined political rights for citizens, these guarantees were not immediately realized for women.<sup>5</sup> Conservative social attitudes and restrictive interpretations of political eligibility delayed women's access to formal political participation, effectively excluding them from voting and standing for office for decades. Consequently, early demands for women's political inclusion were often marginalized and subordinated to wider debates over democratic reform, governance, and state-society relations, reinforcing the gap between constitutional ideals and lived political realities for Kuwaiti women.

#### ***Struggles for Women's political rights and participation:***

The struggle for women's political rights in Kuwait represents one of the longest and most complex movements for gender justice in the Gulf region. Despite constitutional assurances of equality, Kuwaiti women were systematically excluded from political participation for more than four decades after independence. This exclusion was not accidental but institutionalized through electoral legislation, patriarchal political structures, and conservative socio-religious interpretations that collectively excluded women from formal political life. The women's movement in Kuwait thus developed as a constant response to the contradiction between constitutional principles and political practice, shifting political alliances, ideological conflicts, and regional upheaval.

Although the Kuwaiti Constitution of 1962 declared equality before the law and guaranteed political rights to citizens, women were denied these rights in practice by

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3. Julio/ Alicea, "Kuwaiti women struggle for suffrage (Blue Revolution), 2002–2005," *Global Nonviolent Action Database*, Swarthmore College, February/ 16/ 2011, <https://nvdatabase.swarthmore.edu/content/kuwaiti-women-struggle-suffrage-blue-revolution-2002-2005>
4. Olimat, M.S. (2009). *Women and politics in Kuwait*. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 11(2), p.5, Article 13. Retrieved from <https://vc.bridge.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1179&context=jiws>
5. The Constitution of the State of Kuwait (1962). *ConstitutionNet*. <https://constitutionnet.org/sites/default/files/Kuwait%20Constitution.pdf>

Electoral Law No. 35/1962, which explicitly restricted women's suffrage.<sup>6</sup> Article (1) of the law states that voting rights are reserved for every Kuwaiti male over the age of 21.<sup>7</sup> Thus formally excluding women from both voting and standing as candidates. This legal framework institutionalized gender discrimination and confined women to the private sector, despite their increasing presence in education, employment, and social development.

The roots of organized resistance to this exclusion can be traced back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, when women's organizations began to articulate political demands more clearly. The establishment of the Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) in 1963 marked a turning point, as it became the first organized platform through which Kuwaiti women collectively addressed issues of rights, education, and political participation.<sup>8</sup> Along with the Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS) and later the Girls' Club, these organizations sought to challenge women's political marginalization by raising public awareness, lobbying parliament, and aligning women's rights with national development and Islamic values.<sup>9</sup>

The 1970s witnessed the first direct legislative efforts to grant women the right to vote. In 1973, a bill calling for equal rights in all social spheres, especially political participation, was introduced in parliament through the efforts of WCSS leaders and AWDS activists.<sup>10</sup> The proposal sparked intense parliamentary debate but was ultimately rejected under pressure from conservative factions who saw women's suffrage as a threat to family structure, moral order, and cultural authenticity. This rejection set a pattern that persisted for years: repeated legislative initiatives met with organized resistance from the male-dominated legislature.

Despite these setbacks, women's activism intensified rather than diminished. In the late 1970s and 1980s,

women activists employed a wide range of strategies, including public demonstrations, petitions, media engagement, and alliance-building with reformist male parliamentarians and members of the ruling Al-Sabah family. However, this period was also marked by internal fragmentation within the women's movement itself.<sup>11</sup> Rivalry between the CSS and the AWDS, stemming from differences in class representation, ideological orientation, and strategic priorities, undermined the coherence of women's advocacy. While the CSS emphasized charitable work and social activism, the AWDS adopted a more explicitly feminist and reformist agenda, calling for political equality and restrictions on polygamy.<sup>12</sup> The continued lack of coordination weakened the movement's ability to present a united front.

The 1980s introduced new ideological challenges with the rise of Islamic revival movements across the region. In Kuwait, Islamism gained increasing political influence, reshaping public discourse and pushing women's rights issues to the margins. New Islamic women's organizations such as Bayader al-Salam and the Islamic Care Society emerged, prioritizing charity, morality, and participation in broader Islamic causes rather than explicitly advocating women's political rights. While these organizations mobilized women in public life, they did not initially align themselves with feminist demands for suffrage, contributing to the fragmentation of women's activism.

Legislative efforts during this period continued to face resistance. In 1981 and 1982, modest bills proposing voting rights for women—without granting eligibility to hold office—were introduced in parliament. These initiatives were defeated by wide margins, and in 1985 the Ministry of Islamic Endowments issued a religious edict declaring women's participation in elections impermissible. This ruling reinforced conservative opposition and further delayed reform, despite protests

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6. (Olimat, 2009, p.2)
7. *The Constitution of the State of Kuwait*, Art. I/25/1962, as modified (n.d.), GLIN, <http://www.glin.gov/view.action?glinID=176017>.
8. (Olimat, 2009, p.3)
9. (Olimat, 2009, p.3)
10. Al-Mughni, H. (2001). *Women in Kuwait: The politics of gender* (p. 77). London: Saqi Books.
11. Kaya, Z./ N. (2021). *Women's electoral participation in Kuwait* (pp./ 8–9). LSE Middle East Centre Kuwait Programme Paper Series No./ 11. London School of Economics and Political Science. [https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women\\_s\\_Electoral\\_Participation\\_in\\_Kuwait.pdf](https://eprints.lse.ac.uk/110877/2/Women_s_Electoral_Participation_in_Kuwait.pdf)

from liberals, nationalists, feminists, and segments of the Islamist movement itself. The subsequent suspension of parliament and regional instability further stalled political momentum.

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 marked a critical turning point in the trajectory of women's political struggle. During the occupation, Kuwaiti women played indispensable roles as hospital volunteers, resistance organizers, and international advocates for Kuwait's liberation. Their visible sacrifices challenged entrenched stereotypes about women's incapacity and political irrelevance. In the post-war period, women's contributions were widely acknowledged, and women's rights emerged as a prominent issue on the national agenda. The government publicly recognized women's role in national survival and pledged greater political inclusion, appointing Nabila al-Mulla as the first female ambassador in the Gulf in 1993.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, promises of suffrage were repeatedly deferred throughout the 1990s. The decade was marked by intense political polarization between liberals, Islamists, and tribal blocs, with women's rights becoming a symbolic battleground within broader ideological struggles. Conservative parliamentarians, often supported by tribal alliances, continued to reject suffrage proposals, while introducing gender-segregation legislation that further entrenched patriarchal norms. Despite this hostile environment, women's activism became increasingly assertive. In 1996, 500 women staged a coordinated work stoppage to demand voting rights, marking one of the first large-scale nonviolent protests led by women in Kuwait.<sup>14</sup>

The late 1990s and early 2000s witnessed a convergence of favorable factors. Growing educational attainment among women, increased youth political engagement, international pressure through Kuwait's

ratification of conventions such as CEDAW and ICCPR, and shifting positions among some Islamist groups collectively altered the political landscape.<sup>15</sup> In 1999, Emir Sheikh Jaber dissolved parliament amid legislative paralysis and issued a decree granting women suffrage; although parliament overturned the decree, it signalled a decisive shift at the executive level.<sup>16</sup>

Between 2000 and 2004, women's organizations, liberals, Shi'a leaders, and emerging Islamist allies coordinated nationwide campaigns advocating women's political rights. Mass demonstrations, symbolic voting, legal challenges, and sustained media engagement kept suffrage at the forefront of public debate. The movement reached its peak in 2005, when over 1,000 demonstrators gathered outside parliament, and the Islamist Ummah Party publicly endorsed women's suffrage the first Sunni Islamist group in the Gulf to do so.<sup>17</sup> On 17 May 2005, after more than fifty years of struggle, the Kuwaiti parliament passed the suffrage bill, granting women the right to vote and run for office.<sup>18</sup> The reform doubled the electorate, with women constituting approximately 57 percent of registered voters.<sup>19</sup> This achievement represented not only a legal victory but also the culmination of decades of resilience, sacrifice, and strategic adaptation by Kuwaiti women.

Yet, the long struggle for suffrage also revealed the structural depth of gender inequality in Kuwait. Despite high levels of education, labor force participation, and literacy, women's political representation remained limited, underscoring the gap between formal rights and substantive power. The history of women's political struggle in Kuwait thus illustrates that enfranchisement was neither inevitable nor purely benevolent; it was the product of sustained activism, political negotiation, and societal transformation. This legacy continues to shape

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12. (Kaya, 2021, pp./8–10)
13. (Alicea, 2011)
14. (Alicea, 2011)
15. (Kaya, 2021, pp./8–10)
16. (Olimat, 2009, p./5-6)
17. (Alicea, 2011)
18. Al Jou'an, K. (2005). *Kuwaiti women and the right to vote*. Al Raida Journal. <https://alraidajournal.lau.edu.lb/images/Kuwaiti%20Women%20and%20the%20Right%20to%20Vote.pdf> (alraidajournal.lau.edu.lb)
19. Kuwait Times. (2016, November 14). *Kuwaiti women: A tale of adversity, triumph*. <https://kuwaittimes.com/kuwaiti-women-tale-adversity-triumph> (kuwaittimes.com)

contemporary debates over gender equality, representation, and democratic inclusion in Kuwait.

Women participated as voters and candidates, but early results were disappointing. In both the Eleventh and Twelfth National Assembly elections (2006 and 2008), several women contested the elections, yet none succeeded in winning a seat.<sup>20</sup> Even though women were actively participating as candidates, electoral success remained out of reach during this period. The appointment of Massouma Al-Mubarak in 2005 as Kuwait's first female cabinet minister was an important milestone and helped encourage women to take part in the 2006 elections.<sup>21</sup> However, Kuwaiti women continued to face many obstacles in gaining real influence at the legislative level. Until 2015, about seven women have served as ministers and collectively held 18 cabinet posts. Despite this progress, women are still underrepresented in leadership roles, making up only about 12 percent of such positions as per 2015.<sup>22</sup>

### **Electoral Participation and Representation:**

In May 2009, Kuwaiti women reached a historic turning point when four female candidates were elected to the National Assembly for the first time in the country's history. These were Massouma al-Mubarak, Salwa al-Jassar, Aseel al-Awadhi, and Rola Dashti.<sup>23</sup> This achievement was especially significant given the smaller number of female candidates and the limited preparation time following the sudden dissolution of the previous assembly. However, this momentum was not sustained, as no women won seats in the February 2012 elections despite strong female participation.

Later in December 2012, women regained a modest presence in parliament by winning three seats, even amid

low voter turnout and an opposition boycott. Subsequent elections, however, again reflected instability in women's representation. In the July 2013 elections, only Safa al-Hashem secured a seat, while other female victories were overturned or lost.<sup>24</sup> Her resignation in 2014, along with the defeat of all female candidates in the subsequent by-elections, underscored the ongoing challenges women faced in maintaining consistent representation in Kuwait's legislature.

During 2016 elections, only one woman succeeded in winning a seat in the National Assembly, reflecting a sharp decline from earlier gains. By 2020, the legislature reverted to an entirely male composition, as no women were elected to parliament. Similarly, women have not been able to secure victories in municipal elections as of 2021; instead, their presence at the local level has relied on appointments, with the government recently nominating only four women to the municipal council.<sup>25</sup> In the 2022 National Assembly elections, women achieved a modest but notable breakthrough, with two female candidates successfully winning parliamentary seats.<sup>26</sup> This outcome marked a departure from the all-male legislature seen in previous elections and signalled a limited revival of women's representation in Kuwait's parliament.

Despite early successes, women's representation in Kuwait's parliament has been uneven and fragile over time. Election results have varied significantly in successive election cycles, with limited gains followed by instances in which women's parliamentary seats have fallen sharply. This fluctuation highlights the persistent structural barriers faced by women candidates, including unequal access to campaign finance, limited political networks, and sociocultural attitudes that continue to

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20. Shalaby, M. (2015). *Women's political representation in Kuwait: An untold story*. Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. <https://www.bakerinstitute.org/research/womens-political-representation-kuwait> (bakerinstitute.org)

21. (Kuwait Times, 2021)

22. (Shalaby, 2015)

23. National Democratic Institute. (2009, May 22). *Four Kuwaiti women become first to win seats in parliament*. <https://www.ndi.org>

24. (Shalaby, 2015, p.15)

25. S. Fatima, "For the first time, 4 women appointed to Kuwaiti municipal council," *Siasat Daily*, June 2, 2022, <https://www.siasat.com/for-the-first-time-four-women-appointed-to-the-kuwaiti-municipal-council-2340152/>.

26. Reuters, "Kuwaiti opposition wins big in election as standoff with government endures," *Reuters*, September 30, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/kuwaiti-opposition-wins-big-election-standoff-with-government-endure-2022-09-30/>

privilege male leadership in the political arena.

### **Challenges:**

Women's political participation in Kuwait is shaped by deeply embedded socio-cultural norms that frame politics as a predominantly male domain. Despite formal recognition of political rights, traditional gender roles and patriarchal attitudes continue to undermine women's legitimacy as political actors. Studies highlight a widespread perception shared by both men and women that questions women's ability to lead and influence political change. This trust deficit has proven particularly damaging, to the point where female voters, who make up more than half of the electorate, often refrain from supporting female candidates. Reliance on male family members and the imposition of patriarchal authority within households further influence women's voting behavior, reinforcing male dominance in electoral outcomes.<sup>27</sup>

In addition to socio-cultural barriers, women face significant structural and institutional barriers that limit their electoral competitiveness. Limited access to campaign finance, weak political networks, and difficulties in coalition building limit women's ability to campaign effectively. These challenges are compounded by the absence of organized political parties with clear ideological platforms, which could otherwise provide women with institutional support. Furthermore, women are largely excluded from male-dominated spaces such as civil society, which play a key role in shaping public opinion and mobilizing electoral support, thereby depriving women candidates of important informal political processes.<sup>28</sup>

Electoral system reforms introduced in 2012 have further reduced women's chances of success. The shift from a four-vote system to a one-vote-per-person model significantly reduced the opportunities for voters to support preferred male candidates as well as female candidates. Under the previous system, voters could cast at least one vote for women as a symbolic or strategic gesture. The new system encourages voters to support only those candidates who are perceived to be most likely to win, which disadvantages women. This change has made it difficult for women candidates to form coalitions and

electoral alliances, especially in competitive and conservative districts.<sup>29</sup>

Finally, the tribal politics and the lack affirmative action mechanisms presents additional obstacles to women's political empowerment. Illegal but influential tribal primaries often predetermine election outcomes, creating hierarchical structures that marginalize women, especially in tribal-dominated districts. The lack of gender quotas, persistent clientelism, corruption, and political polarization further limit women's access to decision-making roles. Collectively, these socio-cultural, institutional, and structural barriers explain the fluctuating and limited nature of women's political representation in Kuwait, emphasizing the need for comprehensive reforms that address both the formal system and embedded societal norms.

### **Achievements and impacts:**

Kuwaiti women have achieved several important political milestones despite facing persistent structural and social barriers. A major breakthrough came in 2005 with the granting of political rights, allowing women to vote and run for office. This was followed by the historic 2009 elections, when four women were elected to the National Assembly for the first time, marking a turning point in women's formal entry into parliamentary politics. Women have also made progress within the executive branch, with several serving as cabinet ministers across key portfolios, demonstrating their growing presence in national governance.

Beyond parliament, women have expanded their influence through appointments to leadership and advisory positions. Kuwaiti women have been appointed as ministers, senior civil servants, and members of municipal councils, including the historic appointment of women to the municipal council in recent years. Additionally, women's active engagement in civil society, advocacy movements, and professional sectors has strengthened their role in shaping public discourse and policy debates, contributing to the gradual normalization of women's political participation in Kuwait. Women have played prominent roles in civil society organizations, legal advocacy, professional associations, and public policy

27. (Shalaby, 2015, p.16-18)

28. (Kaya, 2021, p.18-19)

29. (Kaya, 2021, p.18-19)

debates, contributing to national development and governance discourse. These forms of informal political participation illustrate a broadening of the political space for women, even as formal representation remains limited.

Women's political participation in Kuwait has positively influenced their social and political status and reshaped public discourse on women's leadership. Women's issues are now more openly discussed in parliament, reflecting growing societal acceptance of women's political roles. The efforts of women's rights activists, NGOs, and academic institutions have strengthened advocacy and awareness. Together with international cooperation and national development initiatives, these changes have created hope for increased women's political representation in the future.

KUWA and similar organizations have collaborated with government and non-governmental organizations to facilitate women's participation in the political arena. This collaboration often includes creating platforms for dialogue between female politicians and constituents, expanding networking opportunities for women in political circles, and providing mentoring programs for potential female candidates. Through these programs, women not only gain the skills necessary to navigate the political landscape but also develop a supportive community that can foster trust and collective action.

In recent years, digital activism and the widespread use of social media platforms have significantly reshaped the landscape of political participation among Kuwaiti women, particularly in the pursuit of gender equality and political rights. Some scholars indicate that social media has become a vital tool for mobilizing public opinion, increasing the visibility of women's issues, and fostering a sense of solidarity among activists.<sup>30</sup> Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook, with their speed and wide reach, have enabled younger generations to engage with these issues in new and more accessible ways, thereby amplifying women's voices within Kuwait's political sphere.

It can be said that digital activism and social media have had a profound impact on Kuwaiti women's political

participation, introducing new forms of activism and methods of community organization. The ability to engage younger generations and promote active discourse on gender equality signifies important progress in the political arena. However, issues such as online harassment and access challenges must also be recognized and addressed to create a fair and equitable political environment.

Looking ahead, the role of education emerges as a pivotal element in shaping the future landscape of female political participation.<sup>31</sup> Expanding educational access and empowerment programs for women will be essential in equipping them with the skills necessary for effective governance and leadership. Additionally, alliances between women's organizations and civil society groups can play a crucial role in mobilizing public support for gender equality initiatives and pushing for legislative reforms that dismantle barriers to women's political participation.

### Conclusion:

Kuwaiti women's journey into politics since 2005 reflects a remarkable shift from formal suffrage to active political engagement. The historic approval of voting and candidacy rights marked a legal and symbolic breakthrough, yet translating these rights into meaningful representation has been a complex process. Women have made significant progress through electoral participation, cabinet appointments, and participation in civil society, demonstrating their ability to contribute to governance and public decision-making despite persistent structural and cultural barriers.

Despite these achievements, women's political representation in Kuwait has remained uneven and fragile. Deep-rooted patriarchal norms, electoral system limitations, tribal influences, and weak political networks continue to hinder women's access to leadership positions. Fluctuating election results, coupled with a lack of affirmative action policies, highlight the persistent gap between formal rights and actual political power. Social perceptions and a lack of trust, even among female voters, further complicate women's efforts to gain

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30. Madeline Merrill and Roma Sheth, *Breaking Barriers: Arab Women and Social Media Activism* (University of Maryland, Office of Undergraduate Research, n.d.), <https://api.drum.lib.umd.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/4a231567-43b0-43ca-b711-87ed714189a0/content>.

31. Hidayati, A. (n.d.). *Social transformation of Kuwaiti women and their contribution to Kuwait's economic development*. ResearchGate. [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346832560\\_Social\\_transformation\\_of\\_Kuwaiti\\_women\\_and\\_their\\_contribution\\_to\\_Kuwait's\\_economic\\_development](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/346832560_Social_transformation_of_Kuwaiti_women_and_their_contribution_to_Kuwait's_economic_development)

sustained political influence.

Looking ahead, the future of women's political participation in Kuwait depends on a combination of education, advocacy, and institutional reform. Expanding educational and empowerment programs, promoting mentoring and networking through women's organizations, and leveraging digital activism can help

women confront political challenges and raise their voices. Collaborative efforts between civil society, government initiatives, and international partnerships offer opportunities to progressively advance gender equality, strengthen women's leadership, and consolidate the gains made since the historic reforms of 2005.

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