



# **KUWAIT: CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN POLITICS**

**Findings from focus group research conducted in  
February 2007**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In February 2007, the National Democratic Institute (NDI), in partnership with the People's Mirror and Focus Marketing Consultancy, conducted qualitative research on Kuwaiti citizens' attitudes toward women's political participation. The primary focus of this research is to explore the perceptions of: women as political actors and leaders in the country; women's participation in the June 2006 elections; and the factors which influence voters' choices in elections. The research consisted of a set of seven focus groups with male and female voters aged 25-45 years, from urban and Bedouin areas in Kuwait. In-depth interviews were also held with eight Kuwaiti opinion leaders involved in the areas of media, education, law, business and politics. With minor exceptions, men and women focus group participants and interviewees voiced similar opinions regarding issues of national import and the role of women in politics.

Key findings from the research include:

- **Rising concerns about domestic and national challenges** such as housing, healthcare, education, citizenship laws, family laws, the economic development of Kuwait and political corruption;
- **Negative perceptions of the performance of members of parliament (MPs)**, namely a perception that MPs are more focused on personal interests and the advancement of tribal and family interests than on the development of the country and the strengthening of the legislative institution;
- **Ambivalent attitudes towards women as political leaders**, ranging from positive views on women's constructive contribution to the country's development to negative assumptions of women's inability to perform as legislators, socio-cultural gender stereotypes and competition amongst Kuwaiti women; and
- **Unsympathetic assessment of women's performance during the June 2006 elections**, with criticism leveled at women candidates' limited campaign experience and lack of strong political agendas, but recognizing the cultural and contextual challenges that candidates faced and an overall expectation that women would be more successful in the future elections.

Recommendations based on participant expectations from female candidates in future elections include:

- **Reaching out to constituents** immediately and in accordance with Kuwaiti cultural specificities;
- **Advocating the list system**, as the most secure process to ensure women's access to the National Assembly;
- **Cultivating political support** from political groups and blocs;
- **Raising public awareness** on women's positive input in the policymaking process, as they tend to perform better in domestic policy-related issues.

# GENERAL MOOD AND LEADING CONCERNS

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A starting point for examining focus group participants' perceptions of women as political leaders is an overview of participants' primary concerns related to Kuwaiti politics and governance. Throughout the research, participants consistently voiced anxiety over issues related to housing, healthcare, education, citizenship laws, the economic development of Kuwait and rampant corruption. While participants in aggregate mutually expressed concern about and proclaimed the need for government action on the above mentioned areas, on a least some level, female participants mostly called for reforms in the areas of entitlements to citizenship, education, family and marital matters, while male participants focused on issues regarding corruption, the lack of governmental transparency, and national security.

## Housing

In aggregate, focus group and in-depth interview (IDI) participants expressed deep concerns related to housing rights and allowances. The grievances focused on prolonged delays (10 to 20 years) for obtaining a house from the government, and the rise in prices of land, especially in the central part of Kuwait, including Kuwait City and surrounding areas. Most middle-aged participants from the urban middle-class felt that the failure of the housing allowance<sup>1</sup> to cover the minimum cost of renting a house was a crucial issue. Participants also complained that the government was building new houses in remote areas of the country, thus making it difficult to visit family and friends and disrupting relationships.

"The government is unable to provide housing areas for the people. So each Kuwaiti citizen has to wait for 13 or 14 years to get his own house for his family." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"Even the people, who don't want to wait [for a government house] and would rather buy, have a hard time, because real estate prices have risen too." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

"What can KD150 housing allowance do when the minimum rent is KD300 to KD400?" (Women Shaab, urban)

"One person might get a house in the north of the country, while his brother might get a house in the south of the country. This will create a kind of family disintegration." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

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<sup>1</sup> The Government of Kuwait subsidizes the cost of housing to eligible Kuwaiti citizens through the provision of a monthly housing allowance; non-eligible citizens include single women and women married to non-Kuwaiti men. The average allowance is KD 150 (\$522.00)/month.

## **Healthcare**

Nearly all participants raised the state of the public healthcare system as a serious concern. Both men and women, urban and Bedouin, complained of the poor quality of healthcare services, especially when considering the country's wealth. Participants were particularly critical of the inadequate number of hospitals; poor equipment maintenance; unqualified doctors; shortages in medicines and the necessity to purchase them from private pharmacies; and the approval of overseas treatment trips based on connections rather than a fair selection of patients. For most participants, it has become common practice to resort to expensive private clinics and hospitals. Several participants were also noticeably resentful that the government was building hospitals in other countries while there was a perceived lack of public healthcare facilities in Kuwait.

"Look at the population of Kuwait and look at the hospitals. Kuwait is very rich and hospitals are few." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

"I really feel that the UAE and Saudi Arabia are better than us now." (Women Shaab, urban)

"There should be high standard doctors chosen according to their experience and the universities from which they have graduated. Now we have average doctors and some of them even come with forged certificates." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"The health services are poor and medicines are not available; and the market prices are very expensive. The doctor gives a prescription to be purchased from the market. It can cost about KD30. People with poor [low] income cannot manage." (Men Shaab, urban)

"There is a need to restructure the overseas medical treatment." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"We as people working in the health field have seen a lot of terrible things, such as the high rates of contamination in hospitals. The cause of this is that the Ministry of Health doesn't contract with respectable maintenance companies." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"All Kuwaitis stopped going to government hospitals as they lack care and efficient medicines." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"We all go to the private clinics. We don't go to government hospitals." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

## **Education**

Focus group participants raised the educational system in Kuwait as a primary concern facing all Kuwaitis. Specifically, participants stated that school curriculums were out of date, with recent changes having been implemented universally without adequate pre-implementation trials. Participants agreed on the urgency for thorough reforms of the public educational system.

"The curriculum has been the same since the '70s. The newly adopted courses, the unified one [was implemented] without any trial and error, they could have tried it on a single school to see." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

Participants also blamed the state of the public education on the low quality of teachers themselves, pointing out that most of the teachers in Kuwait's public school system were expatriates from other countries of the region. For others, the prohibition against male teachers educating primary-school children in Kuwait has an adverse effect on the school system as well. According to Bedouin participants, female teachers were not strong-willed enough to control boy pupils and were therefore "spoiling the children". In addition, the low income<sup>2</sup> of teachers was perceived as having a negative impact on their motivation, and consequently on the quality of their teaching performance.

"My son is just in elementary school yet I have to teach him everything myself. School children in European countries or USA are well aware of all the mathematical processes such as addition or multiplication, but our children know nothing. They do not even know how to write or read." (Women Shaab, urban)

"How can you expect someone pressured and uncomfortable and underpaid to work on a daily basis and do a good job?" (Women Odailiyah, urban)

"They [Palestinian teachers] used to work in Kuwait as if they were working in their own country. They used to discipline us. Whereas the Egyptians teach in a stupid way so that we pay for private lessons." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Teachers recruited from abroad are of poor standard. They are only concerned with collecting their pay. They do not care for the children, whether they are learning or not. They only seek to work as private tutors." (Men Shaab, urban)

"The boys today are becoming soft. They are not raised in a manly manner in class" (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Children need stronger personalities to emulate and learn from, right from the elementary level. And women lack these strong personalities" (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

### **Economic crisis**

Participants felt that their standards of living are low compared to the wealth of the State of Kuwait., due in part to stagnant salaries and inflation. Some participants felt that it would be better to control prices rather than increasing salaries, which they asserted induces inflation. According to participants, the problem of inflation was also due to the fall in the value of the US dollar, to which the Kuwaiti Dinar (KD) is pegged.

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<sup>2</sup> The National Assembly of Kuwait has recently passed a bill aimed at increasing teacher salaries in public schools.

“Compared to Kuwait’s level, its gross income and huge exports of oil, we see that what the average Kuwaiti earning is low.” (Women Odailiyah, urban)

“I am not looking for increase in my income but what I am looking for is a kind of cutting costs and regulating prices and the economy.” (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

“It is enough that it [the Kuwaiti Dinar] is linked with the US Dollar. It brings down the currency.” (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

Participants were also concerned about monopolies, monetary fraud, personal debt<sup>3</sup> and lack of transparency in the economic sector. According to participants, monopolies are still a problem in Kuwait, especially in major sectors such as construction materials and food. Participants claim that the unreasonable volatility in the stock market is due to fraud, which is made possible by a lack of transparency in financial transactions.

“Some people take enormous loans and pay them back by something called debt-scheduling, which means they pay these debts in installments of not more than KD100! They take millions so it means that they will pay them back in not less than 600 years.” (Men Odailiyah, urban)

“The situation we have seen in relation with the shares and how in a blink of an eye, some companies went up into the air and others fell down to earth and closed down. These things need a lot to be done about them.” (Men Odailiyah, urban)

## **Women’s rights**

The majority of female participants voiced concerns regarding marriage allowances<sup>4</sup>. They were adamant that the government’s marriage allowance should be paid to the wife, especially considering the traditional role of women as the manager of household finances. Additionally, participants thought that divorced women should receive a housing allowance just as single, married and divorced men are entitled to a housing allowance. All female participants, urban and Bedouin, wanted the housing allowance to be paid to divorced women even when they do not have children.

“The government pays this [marriage] allowance to men only, instead of paying women who are in charge of purchasing for the family. It should be noted that some men do not take good care of the household, which leaves the burden on their wives, without any compensation from the government.” (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

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<sup>3</sup> Personal debt has become an increasing problem for many Kuwaiti families. The National Assembly of Kuwait recently debated a bill that would have required the government to pay off the debts of all Kuwaiti citizens. It was not passed, on the grounds that the State should not be responsible for the financial choices of individuals.

<sup>4</sup> The Government of Kuwait provides a one-time payment of KD 2000 (\$6,953) to Kuwaiti couples upon marriage. This marriage allowance is paid to the man, rather than the woman, and is paid even if he marries a non-Kuwaiti woman; women who marry non-Kuwaiti men are not eligible for the marriage allowance.

Regarding citizenship, female participants explained that the children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men are not entitled to Kuwaiti citizenship, but are expected to inherit the citizenship of their fathers. All female participants, both urban and Bedouin, were of the opinion that the children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis should be given the rights of citizens. Female participants also decried the fact that there has not been any resolution to the legal residency status of Kuwait's *bedoon* population; *bedoons* are stateless residents who reside in-country but have no rights as legal residents or citizens. These participants were of the opinion that this problem needed urgent attention for both humanitarian and Islamic reasons.

Female participants also raised several issues concerning divorce. Participants expressed alarm at Kuwait's high divorce rate and suggested that pre-marital counseling should be mandatory. Notwithstanding, all female participants condemned the unfair treatment of women during divorce. According to them, Kuwaiti women must initiate court proceedings to obtain a divorce which, besides being lengthy and tedious, can be opposed by the husband. In contrast, female participants explained, a Kuwaiti man can get a divorce by a simple declaration that cannot be opposed by a woman. Female participants found this disparity to be a travesty of justice which should be remedied by the government. Further, female participants insisted that a divorced woman should retain her rights to housing and other government services when she remarries, whether to a Kuwaiti, a foreigner or a *bedoon*.

"I mean why should only the man have the right to claim the house, the woman should also have the right to claim the house." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

## **Corruption**

Although all participants recognized the widespread use of *wasta*<sup>5</sup> and, in fact, factored it as a necessary component to being elected to the National Assembly, male participants focused on the necessity of removing the 'corruption' associated with *wasta* from the government and demanding that such corruption be punished. According to male participants, corruption is present in the granting of public sector contracts and is also present in the relationships between business and government. Corruption is extended even to the organization of sports, which are very important to Kuwaitis, say male participants.

"We should say that the Assembly should monitor corruption in all ministries." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"If someone belongs to a certain family, he might be included in the national team, although there maybe other, better players. *Wasta* is pulling down sports." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

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<sup>5</sup> Connections.

# GENERAL PERCEPTION OF MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

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The focus groups and IDIs reveal that participants have a negative perception of the role, prerogatives and performance of members of parliament (MPs). Most agree that MPs advance their constituents' and relatives' individual interests instead of legislating or developing the country as a whole. In this context, participants asserted that voters base their choice on the tribal, familial and religious affiliations of and on the benefits offered by candidates, rather than on a specific political agenda.

## Perception of Members of Parliament

At the outset, participants made clear that in Kuwait there were two kinds of MPs: MPs who serve the country and MPs who provide services to constituents (also known as “service MPs”). The majority of participants felt that most voters vote for an MP in the expectation of services, although some participants felt that service MPs were more common in tribal areas than in urban areas. In urban areas, these services relate primarily to the advancement of business interests, e.g. obtaining commercial permits; whereas in Bedouin areas, the services relate more to personal matters such as employment and healthcare. The majority of the participants stated that *wasta* from an MP was required to get things done in Kuwait and that this service role diverted MPs from their legislative and oversight functions.

Although legislative functions were important to many participants, they felt that the MPs' services role comes before their legislative and supervisory roles. Notwithstanding, participants thought that MPs should defend women's rights, promote the development of youth, ensure the latest technology is used in citizen services, represent the views of the public to the government and supervise the government's performance; in addition to extending services needed to the people in their respective constituencies.

“[MPs should] make sure that we have good roads and a clean environment, effective co-operative societies and beautiful public parks.” (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

“What is the National Assembly? It is for processing papers. They do little.” (Men Shaab, urban)

## Voting Factors

Both urban and Bedouin participants stated that tribalism and religious affiliations were very important influences on voting choices for both men and women voters. Participants also stated that most people vote for someone of their own sect, although some would vote across sect lines, i.e. a Sunni would vote for a Shia candidate and vice versa, if they found the candidate worthy. Both

urban and Bedouin participants thought that religious movements, such as the Salafists, have little influence in tribal areas, where the basic influence is the tribe, and that religious movements had more influence in urban areas.

Both men and women participants also agreed that Kuwaiti women's lack of political awareness translates into women voters being heavily influenced by their husbands, fathers or brothers. According to participants, fathers traditionally decide how the voters in the family will cast their ballot, basing his decision on his family's interests. The participants noted, however, that although most women vote as recommended by their fathers, more women would vote according to their own choices if they were more aware of where their own interests in the election lay, even if it contravened their husband's opinion. One participant added that with more than one vote per voter, women voters could satisfy both their own interest and their family's interest.<sup>6</sup>

"Actually, I have two votes; so I will vote for both my husbands' and my candidate."  
(Women Shaab, urban)

### **Campaigning**

Apart from playing upon tribal, familial and religious affiliations, candidates use a variety of campaign tactics ranging from blatant vote-buying to the use of information technology. During the June 29, 2006 snap parliamentary elections, participants noted that men were receiving KD350 (\$1,217.00) per head, on average, for the votes they could deliver; women were reportedly offered cash as well as expensive accessories such as handbags. Such rampant corruption during the elections fuelled public support for the National Assembly of Kuwait to pass a bill reducing the number of electoral constituencies from 25 to five in future elections<sup>7</sup>.

According to participants, candidates use all types of media to get their messages across effectively. Most participants agreed that posters were the most effectively used media, followed by newspapers and television; participants stated that radio and internet were not very effective. However, televised public debates, say participants, are likely to become more important in the future, especially as the number of constituencies has been reduced, forcing a candidate to cover a much wider area to reach his audience.

According to participants, a lot of candidates also used SMS messaging to reach potential voters during the last election. Although it can only act as a reminder, SMS messaging was considered a nice personal touch for candidates to communicate with voters. Moreover, participants pointed out that door-to-door campaigning was being heavily used to make contact with voters.

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<sup>6</sup> Kuwait is divided into 25 constituencies, in which each voter casts his/her vote for two candidates; thus, a woman voter could vote for the candidate preferred by her male relatives as well as one of her own choosing.

<sup>7</sup> It was the disagreement between parliament and the government over the constituency reduction bill that prompted the dissolution of parliament in May 2006 and a call for snap elections in June; public support in favor of five constituencies was already high. Shortly after the June 2006 elections, the National Assembly of Kuwait passed a bill to reduce the constituencies from 25 to five. The reduction had widespread public support and is aimed at preventing rampant corruption in the electoral process and promoting constituent accountability from MPs. The new constituencies are expected to be in effect in the 2010 parliamentary elections.

"[Candidates used] money and bribery. That's what they used and that's what made them win. They offered large sums of money, which sometimes reached KD1,500. Some of them even offered cars. Others offered women famous brand name handbags, rings or watches. In Omariya, they offered mobile phones with lines already installed." (Women Shaab, urban)

"SMS messages can tell about the venues of election sites or the subjects of seminars. That's all." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"The text-message is a personal note sent to a specific person." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

"Newspapers are the strongest media, then TV ads, then the mobiles that played a very minor role." (Women Shaab, urban)

"Posters are there in front of you 24 hours a day. You might not notice TV or newspapers ads but posters are always there." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"[In 2006] there was a special TV channel dedicated for the elections." (Women Shaab, urban)

"TV might have an advantage which is not used so far. They started debates between candidates in the last elections. Each one of them spoke about his own program." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"They embark on house-to-house campaigning, where they knock on the doors and approach the voters directly." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

Election tents and election *diwaniyas*<sup>8</sup> were considered of crucial importance by all participants in the focus groups. According to participants, the seminars and dinners held in election tents were used to reveal political programs and to offer services and money. The tents also allow access to the candidate.

Participants asserted that male candidates visit *diwaniyas* regularly outside election time, making a name for themselves by participating and holding seminars. In fact, some MPs have already begun using *diwaniyas* as campaign venues, in an effort to reach out to a broader audience of voters from which they might need support under the new constituency boundaries, say participants.

"Election tents are a must." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"An election site is a place where a candidate is available for voters." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"They invite people for dinner, where they take photographs, distribute leaflets, ask

<sup>8</sup> *Diwaniyas* are gatherings, often held in one person's home, in which Kuwaitis discuss current issues of social and political import; they are often held on a weekly basis, within a particular neighborhood, professional association and/or political grouping. With the exception of a few *diwaniyas* that accommodate men and women, most are segregated by gender.

people's nationalities, upon which money is doled out to solicit votes." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"An MP [in our area] has started to prepare and make promotions, once he came to know about the new constituencies. He has started his contacts and introductions." (Men Shaab, urban)

# PERCEPTION OF WOMEN AS MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

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When considering the perceived role of women in Kuwaiti politics, participants displayed conflicting attitudes regarding women's political participation. Although conceptually many participants expressed positive feelings regarding the inclusion of women in the political arena, that approval was peppered by negative comments about the perceived capabilities and the appropriateness of women in the legislature. Participants' negative reactions were strongly linked to cultural norms regarding the role, status and prerogatives of women in Kuwaiti culture. Positive attitudes were based on an overall appreciation of women's performance in the workplace and in the government, as well as on the perception of women as being less corrupt and more concerned with domestic affairs. Thus, most participants expect women to access the National Assembly in the future, given sufficient time to overcome cultural resistance and improve their political acumen and campaign tactics.

## **Positive Perceptions**

When asked to speculate about the eventual presence of women in the National Assembly, a significant number of male and female participants thought that, in theory, women MPs would strengthen the legislature. Women were depicted in most groups as highly capable, noting that female employees in the ministries tend to be tougher than men, more practical and more mindful of what they are doing. Kuwait's first female minister, Dr. Massouma Saleh Al-Mubarak, currently the Minister of Health, was cited as a positive example of women in government leadership positions<sup>9</sup>. Participants also said that they believed that women MPs would have a better understanding of the real issues that concern the country, such as healthcare and education and would understand women's needs better than their male counterparts.

A number of male participants and opinion leaders asserted that Kuwaiti women have historically been involved in the decision-making process, especially before the oil era. In addition, participants asserted that women were better problem-solvers because of their experience as mothers; were more enlightened and open-minded than men; would follow through on their promises, unlike men; would provide more services for citizens; and their intrinsic nature would lead to a better organization of the Assembly and its business. Interestingly, some young male participants expressed the view that the inclusion of women as elected MPs in the Assembly would reduce male domination in society, which would overall be positive. These participants felt that an efficient female MP would be preferable to an incompetent male MP.

"Let us go back to before oil when the man would be absent for months, the mother would take care of the children and manage their requirements." (Men Shaab, urban)

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<sup>9</sup> Although a second woman minister, Nouriya Subeeh Barrak Al-Subeeh, was appointed to the Ministry of Education and Higher Education after the June 2006 elections, she was not well known by participants.

"Women are concerned with teaching children, taking them to the clinic, to the school, buying and preparing food. Men do not know about these things." (Men Shaab, urban)

"I wish women were everywhere because they are human beings and not just females. The Kuwaiti woman is educated and has the same ability and common sense as men and is able to work in all fields." (IDI participant)

"Female MPs will provide more services for citizens – to prove a point." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Women are already successful in several areas such as education and medicine and have been accepted by men. Here we have to remind men that there is no difference between a successful female doctor and a successful female MP." (IDI participant)

"We have tried men and we have found out that things are getting worse, so why don't we try women? We will lose nothing. I don't think that things would be worse." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

"Women in Kuwait have always been active and they have always been involved in the decision-making process. In the old days, when the fishermen would go to the sea for weeks, the women would manage the whole village by themselves." (IDI participant)

"Why don't we appoint an efficient woman in a position where she can do well, better than having an inefficient man who doesn't know what to do?" (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

### **Negative Perceptions**

In contrast, pessimistic feedback regarding the presence of women MPs in the National Assembly ranged from the assumption that women in parliament would not make any difference to the belief that women in the National Assembly would weaken the institution. Participants asserted that the cultural roles and obligations of women in Kuwait were factors which must be considered when determining the viability of women MPs and may not be compatible with a position of political leadership.

The perception that women were "weaker than men" surfaced in different ways throughout the focus groups. In the view of many participants, the "emotional nature of women" would go poorly with legislative responsibilities, implying that women MPs might be less than logical when considering matters of legislation. Although participants were divided as to whether a woman MP would be as effective as a male MP, many felt that a woman MP would be unable to influence the Assembly, regardless of her capabilities, because her fellow legislators would not have trust in her judgment. In fact, some male participants from the Bedouin group expressed disapproval for allowing women to contribute to legislation as they believed it is not allowed under Islam; their perception was that in Islam, women cannot make laws because it would give them control over men.

"Women rely on their passions more than their minds." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Men always accuse women of lack of knowledge and understanding and of being emotional, and not logical. Such frequent insults frustrate women and they lose their self-confidence to such an extent that they believe what men say about them. They are convinced that men are always right." (IDI participant)

"In Islam, women cannot be judges as they can not make laws. When you let women become MPs, this means that you are enabling women to control people. When you go against religion, you will have a big problem." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Women in Kuwait are still ignorant when it comes to political matters." (IDI participant)

On a more pragmatic level, several participants felt that social norms and obligations on women would restrict the range of services she could offer as an MP. Participants believe would be difficult, culturally, for a man to approach a female MP for *wasta*, or for a Kuwaiti woman to offer or accept services from another Kuwaiti woman. Additionally, though with some dissent, participants said that cultural mores would make it difficult for a woman MP to travel abroad without her husband and that it was inappropriate for a woman to sit with men in *diwanis*, a practice deemed essential to obtaining office in Kuwait.

"How can I call a woman at any time and ask her to come?" (Men Shaab, urban)

"When our children see a woman sitting with men in *diwanis*, without having the least amount of shyness, it is something very bad." (Women Shaab, urban)

Other obstacles which participants noted were family obligations. For instance, several women participants felt that a woman MP would not be able to reconcile her household responsibilities with her duties as an MP. Participants noted that, in Kuwaiti society, until the day she passes away, a woman's children and husband would need her. Accordingly, these participants stated that the life of an MP was not suited for a woman and that her duties lay in her home. Some participants disagreed, noting that women were capable of engaging in both activities, yet asserted that it was a question of personality; those women who fail to fulfill their domestic obligations had unsound personalities.

"I think that woman's best place is in her home with her family. MPs stay at the assembly for a very long time especially on Tuesdays and Thursdays. So when can this woman be with her husband and children? When can she teach her children or meet her husband's desires?" (Women Shaab, urban)

"She can handle more than one responsibility, depending on her character. Those who fail to honor their domestic responsibilities are flawed in their character, not in their capabilities." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

Interestingly, the attitudes of several of the female participants towards women MPs were disproportionately negative. In fact, many male participants were vastly more likely to express positive feedback regarding the abilities of women and to demonstrate support, at least ideologically, for the

prospect of women in the National Assembly. A few female participants went so far as to say that a woman MP would be a failure in the political arena as women have been failures in all the positions they have undertaken. Some female participants expressed a wholly negative attitude towards female MPs by stating bluntly that Kuwaiti women do not trust other Kuwaiti women and that Kuwaiti women tend to oppress each other.

"We have a Kuwaiti proverb that says 'May God never enable a woman to control another'. It would be a great problem for us if our responsibility was in the hand of a woman." (Women Shaab, urban)

"No good comes to a country governed by a woman." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

It is, however, interesting to note that most negative attitudes stemmed from older middle class and Bedouin participants, while younger participants, both from urban and rural areas, tended to be more supportive of women MPs and had more positive views on women's abilities to hold public office and represent Kuwaiti citizens.

### **Opportunities**

Although participants from focus groups and in-depth interviews acknowledged the cultural and structural difficulties facing would-be women MPs, most concluded that women would eventually make it to the National Assembly. Interestingly, participants stated that women would need the support of specific political groups to run for office and that a list system would need to be introduced to enable women to win in future elections.

Every participant in the focus groups agreed that, to be successful in getting elected, a candidate had to have a political affiliation. This requirement applied to women candidates as much as it had always applied to male candidates, say participants. Therefore, the overall opinion was that women would be more successful in the future if they aligned themselves with specific political movements. Indeed, participants felt that the new five constituencies system would make it necessary for women to join a political movement. Although all participants were aware of religious and Islamist groups' negative stances towards women's political participation, most considered the possibility that such groups would include women candidates on their internal lists. Accordingly, participants indicated that self-interest may well push some of these political groupings to welcome women as affiliates.

"If one of the Islamist groups endorses a woman candidate, all the others will follow suit. They, after all, have to be competitive." (IDI participant)

"The Constitutional Movement, just as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, has a political aim to rule. If you tell them to include a Jew in their list so they will win, they would not object." (Men Odailiyah, urban)

Establishing a list system was also considered by most participants as the best way for women to

succeed. Participants stated that in elections where lists were allowed, such as student organization and cooperative elections, women were regularly elected. Indeed, virtually all interviewed opinion leaders asserted that women would not be able to win seats in the National Assembly without the support of the list system.

“At KU [Kuwait University], a whole list including boys and girls wins.” (Men Odailiyah, urban)

“Unless there is a full commitment to lists, women won’t win. Only men will help women win. But winning alone is too difficult for women. She should be included in powerful lists.” (Men Odailiyah, urban)

“For example, the co-ops are a microcosm of the assembly; you have several lists which will have 6, 7 or 8 names, in which women can be included. If lists are established, women can win.” (Women Odailiyah, urban)

## **Obstacles**

Though several participants were quite sure that female candidates would eventually gain seats in the National Assembly, they felt that women’s electoral chances were threatened by women’s lack of political expertise and by men’s skillfulness in campaigning. Society may be ready, they said, but the candidates are not. In addition, while many participants expressed a general acceptance of the proposition, i.e. conceptually agree with the idea that women should be involved in politics and decision making, that provisional acceptance does not necessary translate into confidence in the ability of women to govern; moreover, such ideals dissipate quickly in the face of male ambition.

“Women haven’t been in politics for as long as men, so they don’t know all the ways. They need training and they need street knowledge.” (IDI participant)

“Woman is still lacking political experience.” (Men Odailiyah, urban)

“Male candidates have at least 20 to 30 years of electoral experience; they have a solid base built over the years.” (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

“Since all are vying for positions, and each wanted access; nobody wants a woman in a position for which he considers himself a priority.” (IDI participant)

# WOMEN'S PERFORMANCE DURING THE JUNE 2006 ELECTIONS

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Women's participation as candidates during the 2006 elections left a negative impact on focus group participants and interviewed opinion leaders. While the number of votes which women received during their first parliamentary elections was encouraging and most participants expect female candidates to gain more votes in the future, very few participants think that the women who ran for office in 2006 would be elected to the National Assembly in the next elections.

An analysis of all participants' views suggests that the failure of any woman to succeed in their first parliamentary elections was due, in part, to overlapping political and social factors including:

- the suddenness of the election, which gave women no time to prepare;
- the lack of experience and a solid base of support for women candidates as compared to male candidates;
- low voter awareness of women candidates;
- the absence of the list system of voting;
- the electorate's lack of confidence in perceived abilities of women MPs;
- a lack of backing by political groups;
- the pervasive influence of tribalism;
- opposition by religious movements; and
- media bias.

"Well, we are a tribal area, where it is hard to accept female candidates. Even those who launched their campaigns were forced to withdraw." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Religion was another factor that had an effect against women. The Islamists campaigned against women by declaring such aspirations as un-Islamic." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"The media was a bit biased against women. It sort of played a disfavoured role against women. The media role did not encourage women. It didn't promote the image of woman as an MP." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

However, participants also felt that the candidates themselves bear some of the responsibility for their failure. In general, participants felt that the programs of most women candidates were not well-known; that some women candidates did not have well-defined political programs; and that women focused on women's issues while ignoring issues relating to Kuwait as a whole.

Some participants said that women candidates failed to obtain a majority of women's votes because they did not represent the views of the majority of women. Participants criticized individual candidates, taking care to say that their observations did not apply to all candidates; much of the individual criticism could arguably be influenced by the cultural bias regarding the character and nature of women generally. Individual criticism included at least one candidate who is said to have "crossed a red line" of Kuwaiti religious values by proposing legislation that was perceived as being contrary to the *Sharia*<sup>10</sup> and that the looks, accent and manner of dressing of some female candidates were not representative of the values of the majority of Kuwaiti women.

"They had ideologies and topics that were not publicly known. I personally still have not seen a woman qualified enough to make it to the assembly, for lack of a winning program." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

"Female candidates focused so much on women's issues that they forgot the bigger picture and the issues that relate to Kuwait as a whole, like corruption. She's going to focus on women's issues anyway because it would be hard for men to vote for her." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

Nonetheless, many participants said that the women who ran for election were courageous but simply lacked political experience and solid political agendas with which to gain support from voters. As indicated in previous sections, participants highlighted the use of election tents, posters, *diwaniya* appearances, SMS text messaging and door-to-door canvassing as effective campaign tactics.

"It was the first time for women. Nevertheless, I think that the voting percentage was good for the first time. Women might succeed in the future because the percentage was very good." (Women Shaab, urban)

"These women were brave. It takes courage to run for elections the first time." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

While men and women participants expressed a general presumption that women would at some point be elected to the National Assembly, public opinion leaders and older participants appear to be more pessimistic about prospects for women candidates' to be elected in future elections; it will take time for women to gain a level of political experience that would engender a positive change in socio-cultural acceptance of women as political leaders. In contrast, young male and female participants are more optimistic, having a more positive view on the prospects of women candidates from the June 2006 elections and considering women's participation in itself a measure of success that indicates an initial shift in social attitudes. Many of the younger participants expect to see women reach the National Assembly in the near future.

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<sup>10</sup> Sharia (Arabic: شريعة transliteration: Šarī'ah) is the body of Islamic law. The term means "way" or "path" in Arabic; and, it is the legal framework from within which the public and some private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Muslim principles of jurisprudence.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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With minor exceptions, men and women focus group participants and interviewees voiced similar opinions regarding issues of national import and the role of women in politics. In summary, participants expressed:

- **Rising concerns about domestic and national challenges** such as housing, healthcare, education, citizenship laws, family laws, the economic development of Kuwait and political corruption;
- **Negative perceptions of the performance of members of parliament (MPs)**, namely a perception that MPs are more focused on personal interests and the advancement of tribal and family interests than on the development of the country and the strengthening of the legislative institution;
- **Ambivalent attitudes towards women as political leaders**, ranging from positive views on women's constructive contribution to the country's development to negative assumptions of women's inability to perform as legislators, socio-cultural gender stereotypes and competition amongst Kuwaiti women; and
- **Unsympathetic assessments of women's performance during the June 2006 elections**, with criticism leveled at women candidates' limited campaign experience, lack of strong political agendas and personal affectations, but recognizing the cultural and contextual challenges that candidates faced and an overall expectation that women would be more successful in the future elections.

Nonetheless, throughout the focus group and IDI discussions participants indicated that women candidates could improve their performance in future elections by taking steps to enhance social acceptance of women as political leaders and by becoming more politically savvy. The following recommendations are based on participant opinions and ideas for improving prospects of women being elected to the National Assembly:

## **1. Reach out to constituents immediately and in accordance with Kuwaiti cultural specificities.**

All participants, male and female, urban and Bedouin, were adamant that if a female candidate is to have a chance of being elected in 2010, she needs to start establishing herself as a public figure and campaigning now. They noted that successful candidates in the June 2006 elections had already begun making themselves known before the snap elections were called and unsuccessful male candidates have already begun to campaign for 2010; the woman candidates from June 2006 are said to have "closed their election sites." Women candidates need to take measures to ensure they are more visible in their constituency and gain credibility from being involved in issues and activities particular to that constituency, by championing particular causes and meeting with voters.. Participants indicated such voter outreach will be even more important in future elections, with the

number of constituencies having been reduced to five.

As focus group participants indicated, Kuwaiti women do not commonly trust or support each other in politics. A women candidate will have to work to overcome the divisions between Kuwaiti women by demonstrating that she can appeal to and represent the interests of a broad range of women voters. Participants recommended that prospective women candidates make use of the *diwaniya* tradition by organizing and/or visiting all-women *diwaniyas*, in which candidates expound on their ideologies and programs. It was also recommended that women candidates organize events at women's centers and organizations.

However, while these strategies are a good way to reach out to women voters, women candidates also need to develop outreach strategies to engage male voters as well, or risk the likelihood that their candidate platform will trend towards "women's" issues and not appeal to male voters; a criticism of women candidates by research participants. Male focus group participants, in particular, said that female candidates need to make men conscious of them as candidates rather than women and to capitalize on the feeling among many male MPs are no longer working for the good of the country.

Holding weekly meetings with constituents in a public venue or election office are strategies to consider. During meetings with women and men, the prospective candidate can discuss public issues, her working program, and perceptions of government mistakes.

"Only during the elections or a short time before that [did we see the female candidates]. But where are they now?" (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

"I would do it [hold a two-hour meeting over tea in the evenings] if I aspire to make it to the Parliament." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

"If she is interested in that, she can do it. So that when it is time for the elections, we already have an idea of what she is selling, what are her views and what is she planning to do." (Women Bayan/Mishref, urban)

"Naturally, women who intend to contest elections should start reacting with the society right from now." (Men Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Women are invited to separate *diwaniyas* for women." (Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

"Female candidates must start early and explain their programs and have a media presence." (Women Odailiyah, urban)

## **2. Advocate a candidate list system that would ensure women's access to the National Assembly.**

Participants strongly advocate the use of an electoral list system to enable women to overcome cultural resistance to women as political leaders. While Kuwaiti men and women are reluctant to express support for an outright electoral quota system, they expressed openness to exploring

possibilities for introducing a quota of women in the national lists; participants argued that women have reached decision-making positions in the Kuwaiti community, government and educational institutions through being included in similar systems. They also felt that a successful quota or list system would help reshape social attitudes towards women in politics in a similar way that the reduction of constituencies is expected to eventually undermine the tribal and sectarian influences in politics and voter choices.

“The only way women can make it here in Kuwait is through a list and a quota. Otherwise, they’ll never make it to the National Assembly.” (IDI participant)

### **3. Cultivate support from political groups and blocs.**

All participants agreed that women candidates need support from political and religious groups in order to be elected. While common for male candidates, women typically run as individual or independent candidates; either because they have been sidelined by a male-dominated political group or are hesitant to be seen as aligned with any one group.

The support of a political group strengthens and legitimizes candidates’ outreach efforts and ensures the buy-in of local opinion leaders. It also provides broader access to voters from different social and cultural groups. In the event that a quota or lists system is implemented in future elections, endorsement from a political group may be required to get on the list. Kuwaiti women need to take steps to engage with political groups that share social and political ideologies that complement their political perspectives.

“Women have to run within a group. If I present myself as an individual, I won’t win. Men candidates are usually endorsed by some group.” (Women Odailiyah, urban)

### **4. Raise public awareness on the positive input of women in the political arena.**

In conjunction with voter outreach activities, research participants recommended that women candidates undertake awareness-raising activities aimed at undermining the negative perception of women as political leaders. Such awareness activities can focus on improving the image of women as political actors, highlighting the achievements of women in positions of leadership and educating women on their voting rights; activities could take place in public venues, such as schools so that men and women from a diverse range of Kuwaiti society feel free to attend.

As part of their awareness raising methods, women candidates should emphasize the capabilities of women to perform in positions of leadership. Using specific examples of women in leadership roles in their communities, including during the pre-oil era, will help reshape public perception of women running for office.

With regard to physical appearances, participants agreed that a women MP should be perceived as a true Muslim woman in her actions and appearance. Though most female participants did not think

that a female MP needed to wear a *hijab*, they were unanimous in stating that a demure, polite and conservative appearance, one that projects a good example to youth, was necessary.

“We are advocating that such issues should begin at schools and during meetings of the women’s councils. It is possible to include discussions on a burning issue that will interest everybody, from where they will be adequately enlightened. With this kind of an awareness campaign method, it will be gradually difficult for men to stand in their way.”  
(Women Suleibikhat, Bedouin)

“When man will feel that these present candidates are working better for the benefit of the country, then there might be some type of change, a simple change.” (Men Shaab, urban)

# METHODOLOGY

This report is based on seven focus groups and eight in-depth interviews conducted with Kuwaiti citizens and public opinion leaders in February 2007. The target profile for this project was male and female Kuwaiti citizens, aged 25-45 years, from urban and Bedouin areas, respectively. Table I details the demographic characteristics of participants and research method in which they participated.

**Table I: Focus Group and In-depth Interview Specifications**

Constituency	Gender	Age	Methodology	Additional specifications
Odailiyah	Male	25 - 45	FG <sup>11</sup>	N/A
Odailiyah	Female	25 - 45	FG	N/A
Shaab	Male	25 - 45	FG	N/A
Shaab	Female	25 - 45	FG	N/A
Suleibikhat	Male	25 - 45	FG	N/A
Suleibikhat	Female	25 - 45	FG	N/A
Bayan/Mishref	Female	25 - 45	FG	N/A
N/A	Female	N/A	IDI	Lawyer - NGO activist
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	MP- Conservative
N/A	Female	N/A	IDI	University professor
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	Independent media representative
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	Government media representative
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	Government representative
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	MP - Liberal
N/A	Male	N/A	IDI	MP - Business leader

## Focus Group Research

Focus groups are semi-structured group interviews that proceed according to a careful research design. Participants respond to open-ended questions and statements presented by a trained moderator. As a flexible form of research, focus groups allow the moderator to probe into issues important to sponsors, while also permitting participants to raise other issues or concerns that might not have occurred to the researchers.

Focus groups reveal not just what people think, but also why they think that way, how they formulate opinions and how strongly these opinions are held. They also help researchers to better understand the various shades of gray – hesitation, enthusiasm, anger or uncertainty. By listening directly to the voices of participants, focus groups are a valuable tool for understanding the “why” behind the numbers. Focus groups can also highlight the similarities and differences between the views of different categories of people (young and old, men and women, etc.).

<sup>11</sup> Focus group.

Through a targeted and meticulous recruiting process, participants for each focus group are selected based on common demographic characteristics or experiences in order to promote a comfortable environment where they feel at ease to voice their opinions. These homogeneous groups normally comprise six to ten people – large enough to exchange ideas and opinions, but small enough for everyone to participate in the discussion. The group format enables participants to engage in a stimulating exchange of ideas that may not emerge in quantitative surveys that rely on one-on-one questionnaires.

Unlike a survey, whose claim to reliability is based on the “representativeness” of its sample, focus group results are useful because they reflect the views of typical individuals in specific social groups. In other words, the research focuses on understanding attitudes, rather than measuring them. The members are chosen by researchers in similar fashion to conducting a representative survey to ensure there is no bias in selection within the specified group criteria (age, education, etc.).

With members of a professional community such as journalists, lawyers, or elected officials, one-on-one interviews are often used in lieu of focus groups. The rationale is similar to that of a focus group: to encourage frankness and allow the interviewer flexibility to probe into certain areas during the discussion. Professionals tend to speak more freely when they are not surrounded by their peers, particularly concerning sensitive topics.

Because the number of people who participate in a focus-group project is much smaller than those reached by a poll, focus-group results cannot be proportionately extrapolated to the national population. However, the results are particularly useful because they offer far more detail and nuance on the views of particular groups of interest than a poll might.

# ABOUT NDI

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The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) is a non-profit organization working to strengthen and expand democracy worldwide. Calling on a global network of volunteer experts, NDI provides practical assistance to civic and political leaders advancing democratic values, practices and institutions. NDI works with democrats in every region of the world to build political and civic organizations, safeguard elections, and promote citizen participation, openness and accountability in government.

Democracy depends on legislatures that represent citizens and oversee the executive, independent judiciaries that safeguard the rule of law, political parties that are open and accountable, and elections in which voters freely choose their representatives in government. Acting as a catalyst for democratic development, NDI bolsters the institutions and processes that allow democracy to flourish.

§ **Build Political and Civic Organizations:** NDI helps build the stable, broad-based and well-organized institutions that form the foundation of a strong civic culture. Democracy depends on these mediating institutions—the voice of an informed citizenry, which link citizens to their government and to one another by providing avenues for participation in public policy.

§ **Safeguard Elections:** NDI promotes open and democratic elections. Political parties and governments have asked NDI to study electoral codes and to recommend improvements. The Institute also provides technical assistance for political parties and civic groups to conduct voter education campaigns and to organize election monitoring programs. NDI is a world leader in election monitoring, having organized international delegations to monitor elections in dozens of countries, helping to ensure that polling results reflect the will of the people.

§ **Promote Openness and Accountability:** NDI responds to requests from leaders of government, parliament, political parties and civic groups seeking advice on matters from legislative procedures to constituent service to the balance of civil-military relations in a democracy. NDI works to build legislatures and local governments that are professional, accountable, open and responsive to their citizens.

International cooperation is key to promoting democracy effectively and efficiently. It also conveys a deeper message to new and emerging democracies that while autocracies are inherently isolated and fearful of the outside world, democracies can count on international allies and an active support system. Headquartered in Washington D.C., with field offices in every region of the world, NDI complements the skills of its staff by enlisting volunteer experts from around the world, many of whom are veterans of democratic struggles in their own countries and share valuable perspectives on democratic development.

# ABOUT THE PEOPLE'S MIRROR

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The People's Mirror is one of the first centers of its kind in the Arab world, specializing in public opinion research on social and political issues. Located in Rabat, Morocco, the People's Mirror works to establish a link between decision-makers and citizens and to enable clients to run successful, cost-effective projects.

Using qualitative research, the People's Mirror reflects citizens' priorities and perceptions on a variety of important projects that are as diversified as its clients. Its wide-ranging experience includes helping clients to evaluate concepts, policies and messages; develop campaigns; conduct needs assessments; test website concept and usability; and plan for or supplement quantitative research. The People's Mirror works closely with clients to translate research findings into concrete action and cost-saving measures.

The People's Mirror has the capacity and expertise to conduct qualitative research in its fully-equipped center in Rabat and, using state-of-the-art portable equipment, throughout urban and rural regions in the Middle East and Africa. Its services are provided in several languages, including Arabic, Amazighe, French and English.