

Kuwaiti Women and Work: Old Boundaries and New Frontiers

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Abstract

The object of this study is to review the role of Kuwaiti women in the development process as an example of the Gulf Region. Using longitudinal data for three decades, the statistics show that Kuwaiti women have not only improved their educational qualifications but have also entered new fields of occupation. With labour force data derived from population censuses on variables such as age, education and occupation, it provides information not only on the entry of Kuwaiti women into the labour market, but also on their distribution within the various economic sectors. Some negative aspects of Kuwaiti female participation is also studied, such as their early retirement, as a source of 'brain drain' of skills in our society. This study also tries to see if some of these retirees then move to areas of social development in voluntary social work activities, and continue to offer essential services to the development of their country. It attempts to see if Kuwaiti women are working within old boundaries or moving to new frontiers of development, i.e. to the same occupations that they did in the past or to some other professions in this rapidly changing society.

Most economists and sociologists would probably agree that it is the human resources of a nation, not its capital or its material resources, that ultimately determine the character and pace of its economic and social development. For example, according to Harbison:

Human resources... constitute the ultimate basis for the wealth of nations. Capital and natural resources are passive factors of production; human beings are the active agents who accumulate capital, exploit natural resources, build social, economic and political organization, and carry forward national development. Clearly, a country which is unable to develop the skills and knowledge of its people and utilize them effectively in the national economy will be unable to develop anything else¹.

Kuwait, as an oil rich Gulf State, discerned early in its development process that oil reserves could be depleted but the human capital could always be tapped to keep the development of the country functioning. Women were seen as equally important participants in the newly emerging economy. Moving from the pre-oil to the oil era, we can visualize the changing role of Kuwaiti women in society.

Before the dawn of the oil era, Kuwaiti society lived on mercantile trade, as well as pearling and fishing. The pearling season lasted from May to September. During these months, the majority of the able-bodied men were at sea, either as mariners or as divers. After their return with the pearl haul, they sold it to the merchants, who, then began their journey to other parts of the world. Pearls and dates were exchanged for tea, spices, wood, rice and other goods at the different ports in Asia and Africa. This trading season led to the absence of men from their homes for several months. During this period, it was often the women who supplied their families with economic support. Many worked from within their homes through sewing clothes, baking, teaching the Koran and basic reading skills. Some women, even worked as midwives, delivering babies in their neighborhood or treated minor ailments using herbs and primitive methods. Some women from merchant families, sold cloth and goods that their men had brought from abroad. Thus, it is obvious that women, in the past, played an active role in supplying some of the basic needs of their community. However, they interacted with the rest of society from within the informal boundaries of their homes. This arrangement of service from within the household helped sustain the traditional attitudes on female segregation.

The advent of a modern labour market in Kuwait changed the lifestyle of every strata in society. The State established schools and educational institutions to train the younger generations. Health centers and hospitals were opened in different residential areas, banks facilitated monetary

transactions within the society and with most of the world. Thus, earlier occupations performed by women were now replaced by formal organizations. The work place was transferred from the home to the formal work place. This transition to a new working arrangement was not compatible with the prescribed role of women. It entailed venturing out of the home and working side by side with men. Furthermore, modern occupations required skills and education for which many women were not trained. It is necessary to illustrate that the lack of adequate skills needed to actively participate in the sudden development was also a handicap for the male. However, job opportunities for uneducated or lesser educated men were more numerous than those considered appropriate for Kuwaiti women. National women had less freedom of choice in deciding their occupation and were channeled to stereotyped areas.

A survey of literature on the role of Gulf women in the labour force has shown that though their numbers have increased, some constraints will prevent their movement within the labour market boundaries. There are studies that show that this discrimination towards female employment exists in Arab and non-Arab societies. Al-Jardawi, 1984; Al-Torki, 1988, Al-Zabin, 1988 have shown that women encounter discrimination, not formally, as employment opportunities are equally available to both sexes in the government sector, but informally, in the attitudes towards them.² The ideology of gender portrays women as emotional, mentally inferior, irrational, whose primary role is to be a wife, daughter and mother. Men, on the other hand, are projected as strong, responsible and rational and charged with the tasks of maintaining the family and upholding the social order.³ The scope of choice for women in Kuwait is also limited as they cannot hold judiciary positions, enter the armed forces or the police as well as certain occupations requiring mechanical skills or physical exertion, such as foremen, engineers, etc., in the construction sector. Paul Shaw pointed out the similarity of attitudes by comparing Arab with non-Arab predominantly non-Muslim African countries that "almost identical proportions of employed females in non-agricultural industries are found in services and industry",⁴ channeling women to occupations that are an outgrowth of informal work carried out earlier by them in their homes, such as teaching, nursing and other service related jobs. Al-Rumaihi, 1981, Abdel Jawad, 1982, Abdel Muti, 1982 have also reiterated on the limited participation of Gulf women in the development process of their countries in numerous studies.⁵ Demetriades, 1988 and O'Connell, 1989 have stated that countries in Latin American, the Mediterranean and some African countries also preserve segregational barriers in the labour market.⁶

Strong occupational segregation has led to the seclusion of women from certain occupations and reinforced male dominated profession as unsuitable for their wives and daughters. To preserve her honour, a woman must conform to the social norms that dictate acceptable female behavior, which minimizes her interaction with men and in effect segregates the sexes, thus controlling her freedom in society. Yusef's study on Middle Eastern societies demonstrated the effectiveness of these cultural values, that are erroneously assumed to be supported by religious dictates, in limiting the participation of women in the economy.⁷

Studies on the Gulf oil rich states have been taking a growing interest, since the mid-seventies, in the role of women in the development process. They support what was said earlier, that structural and cultural constraints prevent the optimal participation of women nationals in the economic progress of their countries. There have been many regional conferences held in the Gulf States towards improving the status of women and their role in the development process. Papers presented here pointed out that though the educational advancement of women and the free availability of employment in the government sector has led to an increase of nationals in the labour force, yet women tend to gravitate to the same conventional occupations.⁸ They are largely still employed in non-productive service related areas such as teaching, clerical occupations and social work. Attitudes tend to further limit women's choices due to the false opinion men still hold of women as employees. Two studies stated that employers view women as less productive due to their tendency to take maternity leave, child care leave during the first two years, and sometimes accompany husbands on work leave abroad.⁹ Even though society expects her to fulfill her social role as mother and wife putting her family interests first, yet it, ironically, labels the same woman as shirking her economic duty. The dilemma for educated women continues, as they cannot resolve the dialectic position that they are thrown into, of moving forward in their career but also trying to succeed on the home front, as critics often blame them for social problems such as juvenile delinquency, divorce, etc. that can arise in any society.

Upper echelon and higher management positions are often male dominated. The rationale offered to justify these positions is that women are emotional and incapable of resolving conflicts. Also, travel and late meetings are better suited to men. Both the social identification of certain prestigious jobs as "male" and the absence or paucity of female role models in these occupations discourage females from applying for these positions. In eastern societies the socialization of males and females play an important role in their self perceptions - men are expected to support themselves and their families

and therefore, are motivated towards careers from infancy; females are projected as a housewives and mothers and career takes a subordinate role in their lives.

Theoretical Perspectives

The economic development that has been witnessed in Kuwait and the neighboring oil rich gulf states of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Qatar are unique in comparison with other developing countries. The political and economic elites of the pre-oil era smoothly transformed the four societies into the present economically self reliant states. The development process was initiated by each state through the utilization of oil revenues for the creation of welfare systems and a diversified economic base. The earliest perspective in the sociology of development is the modernization theory. Proponents of this theoretical approach viewed "modernization as a type of social change which is both transformatinal in its impact and progressive in its effects."¹⁰ One approach of the modernization theorists was to study the differentiation taking place in the various social spheres of society. Smebler distinguished the kinds of differentiation that could occur in each social sphere.¹¹ In the realm of economic activities, market systems would develop, household industry would be replaced by cottage industry or factories. A money system and wage labour would become dominant thus differentiating economic transactions from earlier modes. In Kuwait, such a transformation took place in the sixties. Some sociologists have argued that changes in some social spheres may occur without producing similar changes in other attributes. Thus, Bendix (1967) argued that many attributes of modernization, like widespread literacy and modern medicine may gain prominence along with the continuation of other traditional aspects like social attitudes, norms and mores that are more resistant to change.¹² In Kuwait, school enrollment dramatically increased and technology improved the quality of life in various spheres, shen as medical services, electricity and water. But traditional social attitudes and norms towards interpersonal relations persisted. However, over time, members of society re-evaluate their goals and needs, and cultural and social equilibrium is established.

When economic change is gradual, the discrepancies between social attitudes and societal reality is less obvious. But, in Kuwait economic development was rapid and encompassed the total population, not merely the urban areas. The sudden changes in the labour market system, education system and monetary system had to be accommodated by other social institutions such as the family, religion and the legal order. Changes in women's roles are slower to occur than changes in the position of men in society. Social norms and attitudes are more rigidly applied to restrict the progress of women

as these attitudes are not viewed as detrimental to the general good of the society.

Hijab has described the change in Gulf societies and the role of women. She explained that this region had witnessed 'modernization' rapidly in a short span of two decades, whereas other Arab countries such as Syria, Jordan, Egypt and the Magreb countries of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria underwent gradual change from the nineteenth century to the present. The people in these societies slowly adjusted to change. But formal schooling, industries, urban facilities such as medical centers, electricity and telephone exchanges, the establishment of the State and the Legal system, were all achieved in a short period in the Gulf Societies.¹³ Social norms and mores could not change as rapidly and the people had to adapt modernization within the old boundaries so as not to disrupt the social system. The Gulf people consciously wished to sustain the old values as they were the only stabilizing factors in a continually changing society.

From a 'Functionalist' point of view, occupation segregation of women served both 'manifest' and 'latent' functions. Merton distinguished between manifest and latent functions. Manifest function are those known to and intended by the participants in any social activity. Latent Functions are consequences of that activity of which participants are unaware.¹⁴ Thus, the manifest function of female occupation a segregation could be to conform to existing social norms even while venturing into the formal labour market. The latent function could be to promote the cohesion of the society by not creating conflict between the family and the work place, thus presenting stability within change. Using modernization theory or functionalism, one can perceive that Kuwait, though moving towards change on the economic and social spheres, is attempting to do so with the least disruption of its social system.

Purpose of the Study:

The object of this study is to review the role of Kuwaiti women in the development was as an example of the Gulf Region. Using longitudinal data for three decades, we investigate whether Kuwaiti women have not only improved their educational qualifications but also entered new fields of occupations to utilize their skills. With labour force data on variables such as age, education and occupation, it provides information not only on the entry of Kuwaiti women into the labour market, but also their distribution within the various sectors. Some negative aspects of Kuwaiti female participation is also studied such as their early retirement as a source of 'brain drain' of skills in our society. It also tries to see if some of these retirees then move to other areas of social development. It attempts to see if Kuwaiti women are working within old boundaries or moving to new frontiers of development.

Educational Status of Kuwaiti Females:

Few topics are more central to the question of human resource development and labour market strategy than educational planning. As oil revenues are being depleted, the newer generations are rapidly trying to create an alternative economic base with business and industry. Foundations for future self sufficiency will require a vastly improved network of academic and technical training. Kuwait met this challenge with its program to eradicate adult illiteracy and began to diversify with its Institutes of Applied Education to meet the varying needs of a rapidly changing society. Here, a brief description will be given on the progress made at different levels of education by Kuwaiti women, as they are the scope of this study.

Table 1
Percentage Distribution of Kuwaiti by Sex and Education Status
(10 years and over) 1965 - 1994

Education Level	Male			Female		
	1965	1985	1994	1965	1985	1994]
Illiterate	41.4	10.8	5.1	72	3.8	16.5
Read & Write	39.0	11.5	7.9	17	10.6	7.6
Primary	10.4	26.3	26.5	7.2	20.4	22.3
Intermediate	6.3	27.2	32.8	2.6	17.4	26.8
Secondary	2.5	17.6	20.1	2.5	14.0	20.1
University & Post Graduate	0.5	6.6	7.6	-	3.4	7.4
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100
Total No. %	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source:

1965 - Calculated from *Annual Statistical Abstract*, 1978. Page 39, Table 36, Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

1985 - *Annual Statistical Abstract*, 1995, p. 33. Ministry of Planning Kuwait.

1994 - *The Essential Features of the Population and the Labour Force*. p.23. Ministry of Planning, Kuwait, 1994.

School education is not evenly distributed in most societies. Rather access to school varies with many factors, such as sex, socioeconomic status, race, etc. Thus formal education introduces and strengthens differences between

subgroups. Boys have greater access to schools than girls in most developing countries, and adults who did not have an opportunity earlier, are left out of the system as age becomes another barrier and skills a necessity. In Kuwait, the welfare state has made education freely available to all the population irrespective of sex or age. Eradicating adult illiteracy has also been a major goal of the government. Educational centers after working hours, in the evening, have been established; and paid leave is given to those employees who wish to enter universities and obtain higher degrees. This policy of free education through the university level encouraged nationals to delay their entry into the labor market in order to upgrade their skills. Thus, 36% of Kuwaiti females who are 15 years and above, are students and currently out of the labour force. Unlike other developing countries, in Kuwait a minority of the students work simultaneously while completing their studies, as education is free and economic considerations such as fees do not deter them. Studying Table 1, we can see that great gains have been made by the people in bettering their education. Between 1965 and 1994, female illiteracy dropped from 72% to 16.5%. Moving up the educational ladder, it is noticed that in 1994 the differences between the two sexes has narrowed down, so that nearly similar proportions of males and females are progressing to higher levels of formal education through University and Postgraduate levels. By 1994, 20% of Kuwaiti women had university degrees proving that education is an important goal in their lives.

Table 2, gives an overview of Kuwaiti graduates for a span of twenty years. Though Kuwaiti women tend to prefer the colleges of Arts and Education, they also began to outnumber their male counterparts in other colleges such as Science, Engineering, Law and Medicine. It is worth noting here that in some colleges such as Medicine and Engineering there is discrimination in the admission criteria, i.e. female students are required to have higher grades in the school leaving certificate than male students as there is more competition among them for admission, and they score higher than Kuwaiti male students in the school leaving exams. In studying table 2, it is seen that Kuwaiti female graduates have been completing their studies in comparative if not larger numbers. Besides, Kuwait University, there are other colleges that offer diplomas in areas ranging from teaching, nursing, secretarial, technological, nutritional sciences to communication, etc. Kuwaiti females, as expected, are concentrated in the colleges of basic education and commerce. However, a trend toward increasing enrolment in the Health Sciences and even in technological studies is noted since the last ten years (See Table 3). Thus illustrating that young Kuwaiti women are venturing beyond the old boundaries of educational specializations to new frontiers of skills.

Table 2
Kuwait Graduates from Kuwait University, 1974 - 1994

Colleges in Kuwait University	1973 - 1974			1983 - 1984			1993 - 1994		
	M	F	Total	M	F	Total	M	F	Total
Commerce, Economics and Political Science	61	56	117	147	116	263	83	185	268
Law	20	10	30	43	30	73	60	73	133
'Arts' and 'Education'	21	107	128	108	400	508	49	499	548
Science	9	26	35	21	85	106	37	127	164
Medicine	-	-	-	13	20	33	42	36	78
Engineering and Petroleum	-	-	-	19	27	46	62	60	122
Allied Health	-	-	-	-	12	12	3	28	31
Total	111	199	310	351	690	1041	336	1009	1345

Source: Data obtained from the Statistical office of Kuwait University, 1996.

Table 3
Kuwait Graduates in the Colleges in Applied Education (1983 - 1996)

Colleges	1982 - 1983			1989 - 1990			1995 - 1996		
	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total	Male	Female	Total
College of Basic Education	292	481	773	77	317	394	312	779	1091
College of Commerce	154	374	528	294	503	797	602	828	1430
College of Health Sciences	14	70	84	43	175	218	34	135	169
College of Technology	213	-	213	440	86	526	539	96	635

Source: Data obtained from statistical office of Authority of Applied Education, Kuwait, 1996.

Note: Graduates in these Colleges receive diplomas.

Characteristics of the Kuwaiti Female Labour Force:

Various variables will be examined here, such as their educational attainment, their occupational groups, labour force participation of various age groups and marital status and their distribution in the different economic sectors.

Educational Attainment of the Kuwait Female Labour Force:

In 1965, in the early years of independence, women entered the labour force but with little education. 65% of Kuwaiti women, who were employed had no qualification, amongst them 49% were illiterate. At present, employed Kuwaiti women are well trained, only 3% have no qualification and illiteracy is nearly nil among them. These statistics compare favourably even with industrialized countries (North America and Europe) whose labour force has 2.5% illiteracy.¹⁵ Another notable fact that shows positive correlation between education and labour force participation is the increasing number of Kuwaiti women with university degrees in the labour market. At present, 41.5% of Kuwaiti women who are employed have formal school certificates and diplomas, while 31% of them are university graduates. Among employed Kuwait males only 14.5% have university degrees, (Table 4).

Table 4
Percentage Distribution of Kuwaiti Labour Force (15 years and over) by
Educational Status & Sex 1965 - 1985, 1995.

Education Status	Sex	1965 %	1985 %	1995 %
Illiterate	M	51.6	17.0	
	F	48.9	2.4	
Read & Write	M	39.5	12.5	7.6
	F	16.6	2.0	3.0
Primary	M	3.4	15.2	26.5
	F	7.7	4.3	
Intermediate	M	3.0	25.9	45.2 ⁽²⁾
	F	10.0	20.6	24.3 ⁽²⁾
Secondary & Below University ⁽¹⁾	M	1.1	19.5	32.5
	F	11.6	43.4	41.5
University & Post Graduate	M	1.1	9.7	14.5
	F	5.0	23.8	31.2
Total	M	100	100	100
	F	100	100	100

1965 - Calculated from Tables 106 and 107, Page 114, *Annual Statistical Abstract*, 1984. Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

1985 - Calculated from Table 123, unpublished results of *1985 Census*, Obtained from the Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

1994 - *Essentials Features of the Population and the Labour Force*, 1996; p.41. Central Statistical Office, Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

(1) Diplomas of Health, Technological, Teaching and Commercial Institutes are included in this category.

(2) Includes Primary Level.

As Kuwait developed into a complex society, training and education was required in order to have access to employment opportunities. In other developing societies, there is an informal sector in the labour market. But, in Kuwait, as stated earlier, market transformation led to the supplanting of a formal economic structure. Expansion of occupations requiring little or no education has been slow. Furthermore, there is no agricultural sector to absorb lesser educated workers as in other developing societies. Thus, education is a barrier to be surmounted in order to enter the labour force. It is known that women have to overcome more obstacles than men in order to move into the formal labour market. Other barriers, besides qualifications, are social attitudes and expected social roles prevalent in their societies. Moreover, those socially approved activities previously occupied by national women such as librarians, cashiers, supervisors, etc., have now become overstaffed and new recruitment drastically curtailed, and some occupations have been largely automated like telephone operators, receptionists offering information, and tellers in the banking sector. Additional barriers to employment exist in certain areas that require no education such as personal services of sales and catering. Non-national women work in these areas as they are not expected to comply to Kuwait: social norms. Thus, as former occupations that required minimal education are now overstaffed and new opportunities no created, it has been more difficult for uneducated women to gain employment.

Another interpretation of the increase in higher educated Kuwaiti females would be the obvious impact of education on their goals and ambitions. Schultz (1974) argued that as individuals invested years and finances in acquiring an education, they also gain knowledge on the means of maximizing their profits through utilizing their education. Their goals and ambitions are better formulated and channels towards realizing them are rationally planned.¹⁶

Occupational Distribution of Kuwaiti Females:

In analyzing data in Table 5, we see that in 1965 Kuwaiti women were concentrated in service occupations (41%) and these workers were usually in

schools, where free meals at all levels were provided and catering and related service were managed by women. By 1985, these occupations were made redundant and meals in schools stopped. Service work such as cleaning and janitorial is now done by foreign contractual workers, further reducing opportunities for uneducated nationals. By 1996, service workers among Kuwaiti women were less than 1%. The second largest group in 1965 were those doing clerical jobs (22%) and then the professional (21%) of whom, teachers were the largest occupational group. By 1985, the professionals outnumbered clerical workers as the largest occupational group (52% of the total Kuwait female labour force). Understandably, teachers were 35% of this group. With high fertility among nationals and Arab non-nationals, in the seventies the demand for teachers kept increasing. "In most countries, two-thirds or more of all women in the professions are teachers and a large proportion of the remaining one-third are nurses or perform other medical services".¹⁷ Data for Kuwait in 1996, shows that the same pattern continues with professionals accounting for 44.6% of the total and clerical jobs 37%. Though, teachers have increased numerically and are 31% of the total, future demand for teachers may decline as non-national dependents are a minority in government schools. After the Gulf War, many migrant workers came without families. Demand for private schools with English medium education is also on the rise among Kuwaitis.

We see a shift to new occupations, in 1996 as figures show a rise in employment in occupations such as engineering, medical and engineering technicians, lawyers and accountants. These occupation were male domains and women in the past refrained from joining these positions. Job aspirations have changed and tables discussed earlier showed that Kuwaiti girls were joining the medical and engineering faculties in large numbers, showing that future graduates may further increase in these occupations. Just as schools are sex segregated, medical practice has also been adapted to suit conventions. So that those not desiring to treat the opposite sex, can still work in Health centers and offer medical services to women and children. In other words, in countries where women are not encouraged to work with men, the seclusion offered to professional women in these specializations does not violate the social norms but indeed is a result of them. The second occupation which is considered women's priority, in the labour market, is the clerical profession. In fact the 'Feminization' of clerical jobs is present, even in industrialized countries such as the United States, where women account for 68% of all clerical staff.¹⁸ However, in some developing countries, the case is the reverse, with men outnumbering women (e.g.: Latin America, Hongkong, and India). Kuwait differs from other developing countries in that it does not have alternatives in

Table 5
Kuwaiti Women by Occupation Groups, 1965, 1985, 1996

	Physical Scientist + Physicians	Technicians (Medical Engineering)	Engineers and Architects	Economist, Lawyers, Accountants	Teachers	Managers, Executive and Supervisors	Artist, Writers, Other, Social Sciences	Sales & Business	Clerical	Production and Skilled	Service	Unskilled	Total
(1965) Number	1	88	-	N.K.	143	35	N.K.	12	239	7	436	106	1067
%	0.1	8.2	-	-	13.4	3.3	N.K.	1.1	22.4	0.6	40.9	10	100.0
(1985) Number	1647	2380	198	N.K.	8550	676	N.K.	115	9489	53	1738	136	24522
%	6.7	9.7	0.8	-	34.7	2.7	N.K.	0.5	38.7	0.2	7.0	0.5	100.0
(1996)*	718	3075	507	2035	14911	2039	4175	62	17958	1577	222	579	47859
%	1.5	6.4	1.0	4.2	31.5	4.2	8.7	-	37.5	3.3	0.5	1.2	100

Sources:

1965 - Annual Statistical Abstract, 1980, Table 100; Ministry of Planning, Kuwait

1985 - Annual Statistical Abstract, 1990, Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

1996 - Labour force in the government, Banks and companies, 1997, Ministry of Planning, Kuwait.

* Does not include Private Sector

the traditional sector to employ women. In administrative positions, Kuwaiti women have made slow progress (4%), and it is still a male monopoly. It is pertinent to point out that industrialized countries also favour men in upper management positions. In the Soviet Union (before its dissolution), women accounted for more than half the non-manual labour but their percentage in top administrative jobs was as low as 12%.¹⁹

Employment in various sectors by nationality:

In Kuwait, the state is the major employer. It not only established welfare services and government organizations, but also has shares in most industrial and investment projects. Due to its central role in the development of the government sector and labour market, the growth of migrant and majorities and the concentration of nationals both males and females in certain areas, was the result of government policies. In order to encourage nationals to actively participate, the State proclaimed a policy of 'Kuwaitization' where every qualified Kuwaiti is guaranteed a job in the government sector. The criteria for employment was skill or education, regardless of sex. Both Kuwaiti men and women with the same qualification begin at the same grade level and receive similar wages. However, the state apparatus did not establish channels by which these national could be rationally employed according to the country's needs and their qualifications. Thus, many nationals were under employed in white-collar occupations by their free choice, as other incentives were present such as hours of work, social allowances, etc. Among national women, it was not merely a personal decision but also a covert maneuvering of them into 'appropriate' occupations.

Census data for 1985 showed that in 1985 among nationals, 96.5% of the female labour force were in the government sector, and 85% of the males as well. Among non-Kuwaitis, there was a marked difference in the distribution, with only 25% of the male and female labour force in the government sector compared to over 70% in the private sector. In 1996, 94.5% of Kuwaiti females and 91.5% of Kuwaiti males were still in the government sector. One reason for this trend is that many incentives in the government sector apply only to nationals.

One can see that these incentives encourage both male and female nationals to move toward the government sector leading to hidden unemployment (or disguised underemployment) as those employed exceed the demand or them in most jobs in this sector. Also, non-national are not influenced by social attitudes and economic profit is their prime motive. Not many options are available to uneducated national women outside the government sector, as personal services and occupations such as sales persons are still not acceptable by Kuwaiti family structure. Uneducated Kuwaiti

men can begin small scale business ventures or work in some public services such as transport. Later, the means for assimilation of uneducated Kuwaiti women in the future will be examined. The foregoing discussion illustrates that the state is the main source of employment, recruiting Kuwaitis who apply regardless of the lack of demand in certain areas.

Though Kuwaiti women are a minority in the private sector, they have been increasing in the last decade and are now 5.5% of their total employment. They have entered new areas such as engineering in private companies, middle management in the banking sector, and a significant number of professionals have begun their own practices. For example, 106 Kuwaiti women lawyers now have their own legal offices and take their clients' cases to court and this is a great advance in the emancipation of women from attitudinal obstacles in society. Kuwaiti women physicians have also opened clinics for their individual medical practice and some of them also work for the government in the morning. This dual participation in the public and private sectors is allowed to professionals in the medical practice, so as to stop the exit of nationals from government hospitals and clinics. In private practices, Kuwaiti female doctors are 25% of the total number. In the banking sector, the representation of Kuwaiti women has increased to account for 4.6% of the total female staff in the banking sector. Among Kuwaiti female bank employees, 32% are in middle management and the remaining in junior management. It is worth noting here, that though it is always proclaimed that women prefer to work shorter hours and take less risk by being employees, an increasing number of Kuwaiti women are now self-employed compared to the past.

Even during the early months of the liberation there was a Kuwaiti woman in the team of Kuwaiti engineers who were involved in putting out the fires. There is a Kuwaiti woman qualified in aviation engineering at present. Kuwaiti women have also begun to practice psychological counseling in the private sector. These indicators show that national women are venturing into new occupations, paving the way for others. In reality the number of Kuwaiti women may be even higher than that given in the census. Many women practice business, but the license is in the husband or brother's name to avoid her going to bureaucratic offices to do the paper work involved. Others do business from within the home, such as tailoring, catering for parties, day-care centers, etc. As taxation is absent in Kuwait these women can work without registering their economic ventures.

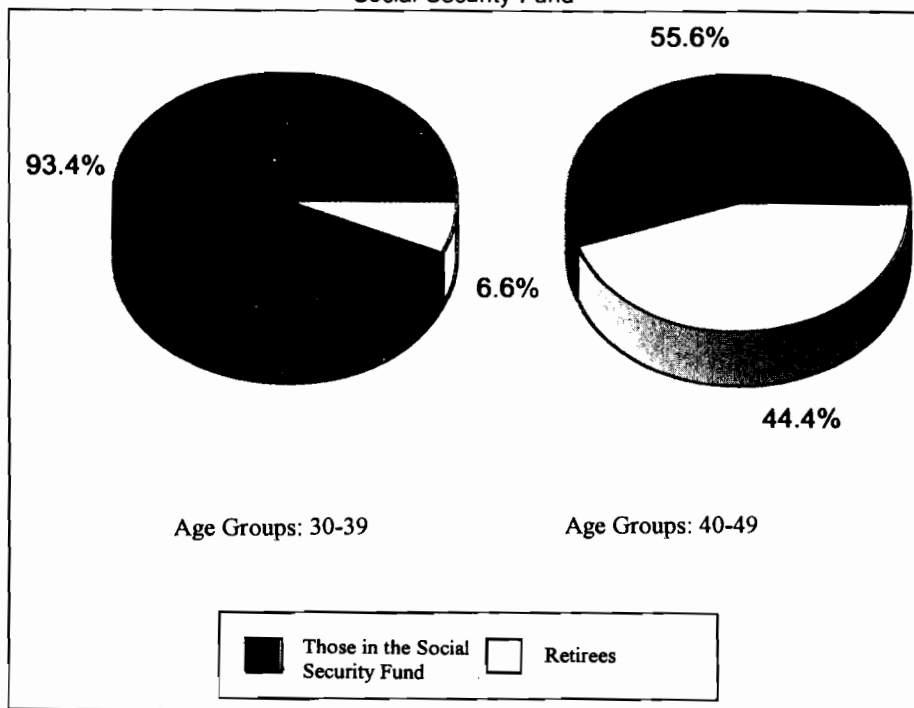
Labour Force Participation of Kuwaitis in the Economy by Age:

Kuwaitis are a minority in the population (35.7%) and in the labour market (16%). This dilemma of being a minority in their own land has been a result of rapid development and has led to migrant labour influx in the last three

decades. As stated earlier, larger numbers of Kuwaiti are delaying entry into the labour force, in order to pursue higher studies. This factor has been responsible for a low rate of active participation by the nationals and especially by women.

In 1996, 36% of Kuwaiti females, (15 years of age and above) were studying and an additional 36% were housewives not actively employed in the economy. This underutilization of human resources is a burden on the economy of a country that is importing labour and investing in human capital development through training and education. Figure 1 P.22 illustrate the pattern of participation of Kuwaiti women in the labour force in different age groups. The pattern for the eighties and the nineties is similar in the entry of the younger female (i.e. 12-13% of those in 20-24 age are actively employed). This low labour force participation rate is because the majority were continuing their education. The peak participation of Kuwait females has always been in their thirties. Data for the past twenty years show an increase in the participation of this age group, while it was only 15% of those in this group in 1975, it increased

Figure 2 Percent Distribution of Female Retirées in Age Groups of 30-39 and 40-49
1996
Social Security Fund



to 32% of this age cohort in 1985 and by 1996, 55% of those in their thirties were actively participating in the economy. Unlike many developing societies where two peaks appear, with a rise in the early twenties and declining in the late twenties and early thirties and rising again in the late thirties, we find Kuwaiti women continue to increase participation in the years of fecundity (childbearing) and the drop or decline occurs after family size has been achieved, i.e., in the forties. The dropout rate from the labour force is still high and at ages where they can be productively employed as they have gained experience. The decline in participation rate among national woman in their mid-forties is a direct result of the lack of foresight among the state planners when voluntary early retirement was allowed for women. This policy will be discussed later in the paper. As can be seen from these three diagrams, the relationship between age and labour participation showed that up to approximately 40 years of age, participation level increased with age; beyond 40, the relationship turns negative i.e. declining with each older group. In the United States also 44 years of age was the turning point when women's participation rates began to fall.²⁰

Marital Status and Employment:

Data for 1985 showed that among Kuwaiti women, there was no significant difference between single and married women employment. Whilst 14% of the single women were in the labour force, 15% of the married women were also actively employed.²¹ However, one explanation for the low participation rate of single Kuwaiti women was that 63% of the them were full time students. Higher education is free and students do not need to work part time as in other societies. Among the married Kuwaiti women only 2.3% were full time students. Continuing education was the delaying factor. In 1996, it is noticed that married women, who are also better educated, have increased in the labour force, so that while only 15% of single Kuwaiti women are employed, 35% of married women, and, 40% of divorcees are currently working.²²

Premature Retirement:

In most countries in the world, premature retirement is becoming increasingly evident, especially in the civil services. But in many countries, retirement ages are falling at the same time that longevity is increasing, but primarily as a means of creating promotion opportunities for some of the large numbers pressing up from below. In Kuwait, this problem of the supply of labour exceeding the demand does not exist as nationals are a minority in the labour market and a major goal is to substitute nationals in the occupations that non-Kuwaitis monopolize. However, non-Kuwaitis continue working beyond their late fifties, as 60 years of age is the retirement age, and it is the nationals who

take advantage of the voluntary retirement policy in the civil service or government sector.

Analyzing data obtained from the Public Authority of Social Security (Pension Funds), Table 6 shows that Kuwaiti women have been availing of this policy and leaving the labour market at the average age of 40, when knowledge and experience should be leading to the peak of their productivity. The average years of service completed by this strata of retirees is only 16.8 years. Figure 2, shows that of those Kuwaiti women registered in the Social Security Program in the age group of 30 - 39, 6.6% have retired early and in analyzing the figure for women in their forties, we find that 44.4% of them are not actively employed and have retired voluntarily. It has become obvious since 1986, that national women have tended to retire early, in numbers greater than the past. One possible reason could be the new policy of the Social Security, which allowed women, who have children, to retire if they have been actively employed for 15 years, receiving full pension with no deductions. This choice is offered them regardless of their age at retirement; i.e. if they began to work at the age of 20, they can retire at 35 years of age.

Table 6
The Mean Age of Retirement for Kuwait Women by years of
Service, in different years, 1986-1995.

Year	Mean age of Retirement	Mean age of Service
1986	40.66	16.53
1987	40.77	16.33
1988	40.17	16.46
1989	40.76	16.76
1990	40.45	16.51
1991	41.29	17.32
1992	40.91	17.25
1993	41.36	17.29
1994	40.72	16.85
1995	40.46	16.88

Source: The Public Institution for Social Security, Annual Yearbook, 1996, Kuwait.

Mean = average.

Social Security = Pension.

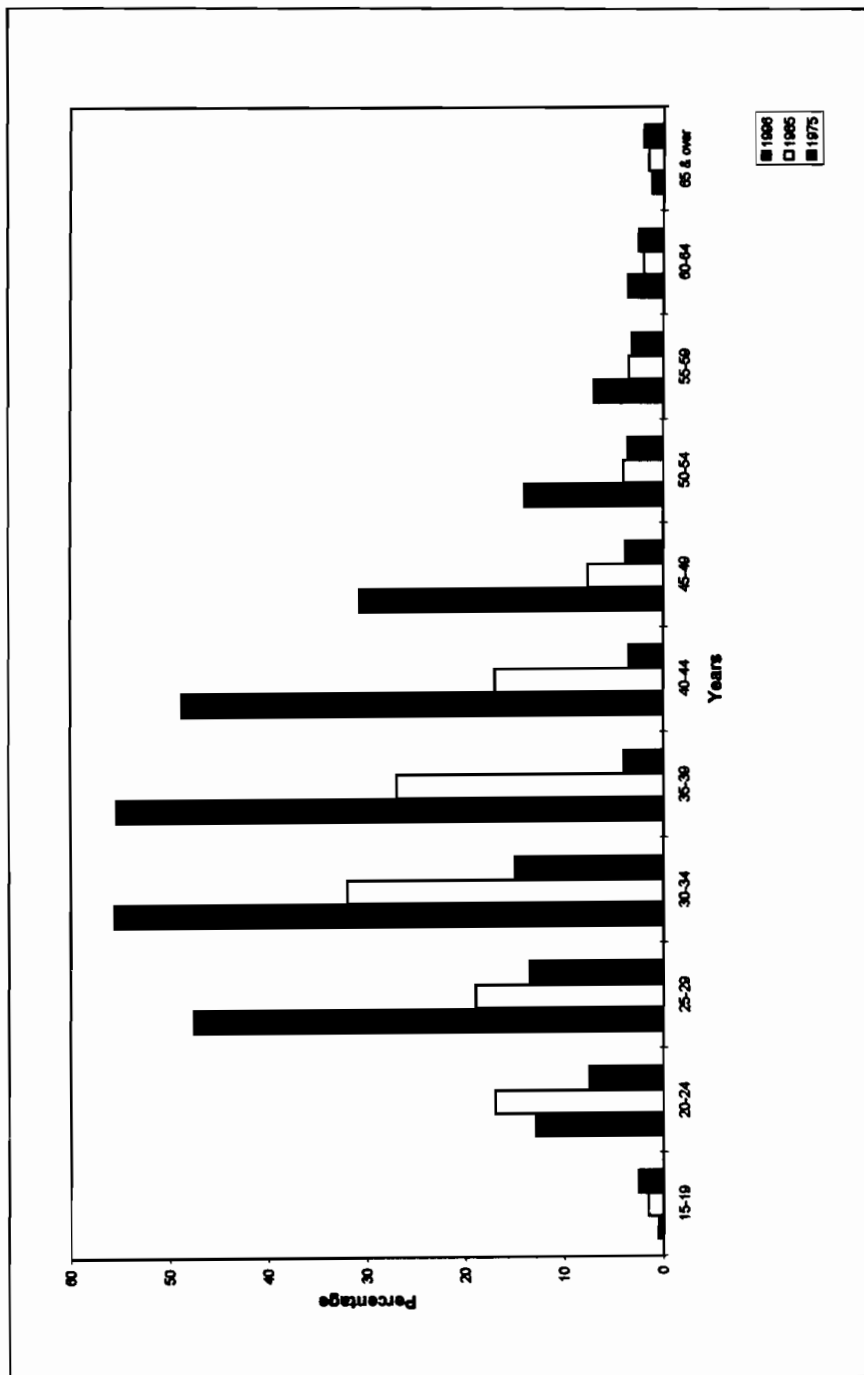


Fig 1. Kuwait Female Labour Force Participation Rate in each Age Group

This trend of early exit from the economy has many negative repercussions on the economic and social aspects of our society, where we account for a smaller minority of the population in each consecutive census. Thus, authorities concerned with planning formulated a policy in 1992 for raising the voluntary age of retirement to 45 years of age for men (beginning 1996) and slowly raising it to 55 years for voluntary retirement by the 2020. In this manner, the age and not years of service would be the criteria, reducing the negative consequences. But, social pressures outweighed the economic rationale behind the implementation of this policy of extending years of service for Kuwait women, and Law no: 56 in 1995 reversed this policy, as far as women were concerned to the earlier policy of fifteen years of service regardless of age for married women.²³

There are two recent studies on early retirement based on field surveys that shed light on the reasons that led these individuals to leave active employment. One study found that work conditions was the main cause and family members never encouraged or discouraged them to retire. Psychological and economic causes were secondary and less important. However, it is significant to note that 42% of the survey sample were involved in the public and private sector simultaneously before retirement and a further 40% said they later began some business in the private sector. Thus, we can see that many retirees haven't been idle but have begun other activities.²⁴ In the other study, job satisfaction was shown to be negatively related to early retirement, i.e. those satisfied with their wages and work environment were less likely to retire.²⁵

In interviews with a random sample of 45 retirees, I found that more than two thirds of them had begun to engage in business or in voluntary work in social organizations. As the retirement benefits are substantial, national women volunteers are increasing in social work activities.

The Amalgamation of Old Boundaries and New Frontiers: Policy & Recommendation

a) Social Work Organization:-

Rapidly changing societies can cause social and psychological pressures on its members if they cannot accommodate the changing norms and attitudes to conform to new ways of life. In Kuwait, many social organizations were formed to help individuals to cope with these problems. Some organizations like the Social Reform Society offered counseling to those with marital problem,

others like *Mesabih Alhuda* (Lanterns of Peace) offer lecture on marital roles and familial harmony. Classes to teach housewives creative skills and time management are also offered. Some social organizations help families that have drug addicts through counseling and group sessions. Narcotics anonymous (NA) has female and male members to help others to rehabilitate and to raise a consciousness of how drug addiction is curable through human support. Voluntary societies helping disabled children was formed by Kuwaiti women as early as the sixties. Dedicated women have helped scores of handicapped children to grow into confident adults. This study cannot elaborate on social work activities but some social work communities were mentioned as a reference to the growing awareness and active roles played by Kuwaiti women in voluntary social work from religious and psychological counseling to daycare centers managed by retired mothers.

(b) Incentives to Move to New Occupational Spheres:

As free education is offered to all nationals through the university level, the State can also motivate the entrants to new areas of training. The Public Authority for Applied Education offers incentives to encourage nationals to areas where there is a scarcity of supply. For example the Institute of Nursing gives its female students a monthly stipend of 200 Kuwaiti Dinars (K.D.) and males students get 100 K.D., the College of Health Science gives 50/- K.D. per month to its student. This policy has led to positive results in increasing the number of Kuwaiti nurses and Health technicians.

(c) Substituting Redundant Skills With New Aptitudes:-

As modern technology transformed the skills needed in telecommunications and navigation, an Institute was established to adapt the work force in these areas to the new skills required. The Institute for Tele-Communication and Navigation has attracted Kuwaiti males and females to enroll in its training courses. The ratio of Kuwaiti women to Kuwaiti men who graduated in 1982 were 1 to 5, but by 1996 their ratio was 1 to 2 Kuwaiti males graduating in these programs. Special training programs by the Public Authority has channelled women not desiring university degrees to other fields where specialized skills are needed such as microfilm technicians, hotel services supervision, blood sample technicians, protection technicians, librarians, etc. Kuwaiti women have availed of these programs as much as their male counterparts, thus moving to acquiring new skills and functioning effectively in the evolving market.

(d) Recruiting Retired Personnel:

The majority of nationals are employed by the government and early retirement has led to a scarcity of personnel in some areas of education, as well as in some ministries. The State has been considering offering part time work to those women who wish to have more time for their families. This recruitment policy, if put to practice, would help in filling the gaps in some areas of the labor market. Kuwait, national are a minority and unemployment is minimal to justify or support early retirement.

(e) Revival of Arts and Crafts:

With modernization changing various spheres of society, the new generations of Kuwaitis are moving further away from their traditions. Women could help in the revival of the in culture through arts and crafts. It would serve a dual purpose of giving these women economic independence and igniting an interest in our cultural heritage. There are many Kuwaiti (bedouin) women who are literate but uneducated. They have learnt weaving skills that are now dying as the younger generations move to formal education. Pottery, is another area that could be revived, so that these handicrafts and artifacts could slowly be developed into an Industry similar to the Cottage industries of India, or the handicrafts associations of Morocco and Egypt. At present, there is a "Sadu House" Where Bedouin woven goods are exhibited and sold. The State could initiate such a handicraft industry on a large scale, leading to trade with other societies.

(f) Child Care Centers:

Studies have claimed that young children (pre-schoolers) have been negatively affected by foreign maid servants. Firms and organizations, with more than 25 married female employee, could establish child care centers, where the mothers on a rotation basis would for one day a week. This would not involve recruiting new employees for the child care center and at the same time, the mothers would feel a greater bond with their institution. Many European countries have begun such ventures.

(g) Dispelling Myths:

Myths are only disproven by facts and realities. Working women have often borne the psychological guilt of being responsible for rising divorce rates and spread of juvenile delinquency in society. In Kuwait, the media has often implied that the woman's only role should be in the home. We do not deny that women embrace the primary role of mother and wife, but work does not necessarily negate the other. Studies have shown that there are other factors that have an impact on delinquency, such as the education of the parent, their socio-economic status, etc.

One study conducted in Kuwait (Al-Khalid, 1981) has indicated that there is no positive relationship between juvenile delinquency and working mothers, but instead there is a relationship between juvenile delinquency and uneducated mothers.²⁶ Similarly, divorce rates among working and non-working wives could be compared in order to prove if women's employment is a major factor leading to marital disintegration. These myths propagated in the media lead to psychological pressures on women and affect the productivity of women at home and at work, making them take a defensive stance when talking about job satisfaction.

(h) Seminars by Pioneers in New Occupations:

Kuwaiti women who have ventured into new spheres of work had to overcome barriers in order to achieve job satisfaction. They should present their experiences to other women, so that others may follow in their footsteps. Their success can encourage others to break free of job stereotyping.

Summary

Adam Smith emphasized that the differences in skills between workers arise as a consequence of the division of labor, "The difference of natural talents in different persons is, in reality, much less than we are aware of; and the very different genius which appears to distinguish men of different professions, when grown up to maturity, is not upon occasions so much the cause, as the effect of the division of labor. The difference between the most dissimilar characters, between a philosopher and a common street porter for example, seems to arise not so much from nature, as from habit, custom and education".²⁷ Therefore, the social environment in which we live, can facilitate the rational socialization of our children to match their talents and aptitudes to the areas suitable for them. As women have been found to show the same skill-aptitudes and abilities as men, they should be encouraged to train in and enter non-traditional fields as well as the traditional ones. Kuwait cannot afford occupational segregation if it plans to displace non-nationals with its own people in the management of its economy. Plans are being implemented to expand women's opportunities in trade, technical and industrial occupations with apprenticeship programs in the Institute of Applied Education so as to facilitate the passage of women into these higher-paying job opportunities.

Statistics in Table 1 earlier showed that Kuwaiti women in the labor force are well educated (31% have university degrees and 41% have high School certificates or Diplomas) and marriage and child bearing has not deterred them from participating in the labor force as their peak of participation is in the age

groups of the thirties. Married and divorced women in the labor force in 1996 had higher participation rates of 35% and 39% respectively than in the past. The joint family system where married sons lived with their parents, has declined with newly weds moving to form their own nuclear family. Thus the rise in the cost of living has necessitated dual bread winners, where women share the living expenses with their husbands. Moreover, divorced women are more independent than before and often raise children on their own, leading to more female headed households than in the past, as the government now provides housing for divorcees with children.

Kuwaiti women have not been idle in the last two decades. They have entered various occupations and been successfully productive in their fields. And as Shaw (1983) states "As the dramatic rise in female enrollments 'today' replaces intolerable levels of illiteracy 'tomorrow', preparations should be made for a tidal wave of relatively educated women that may be demanding meaningful jobs".²⁸

The pace of economic development has slackened in the nineties and job opportunities will not be in the abundance witnessed in the last two decades. On the other hand, the children from the baby boom of the sixties and seventies in Kuwait will now be entering their nation's labor market. Soon, national labor supply may exceed the labor demand in the post-oil era. Here, quality and both quantity of manpower will be in demand. If Kuwaiti women do not avail of the job opportunities, at present and gain a foothold in their labour market, their prospects in the future will be more competitive and difficult.

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