**Commission on the Status of Women**

Kuwait

**Introduction:**

As an Islamic religion based country, the government of Kuwait conforms to the restrictions and beliefs set by the faith. Kuwait is led by an Emir, a Muslim ruler, named Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah since the year of 2006. The population is composed of 0.855 million Kuwaitis while 1.387 million are non-Kuwaitis. Kuwaiti constitution provides for freedom of belief and practice of other religions as long as it is not conflicting with the public policy and morals. Kuwait’s legal system is based on the Sharia law, the Islamic legal system. The law regulates the society’s behaviour and its social stances. It is mostly referred to in the cases of conflicts within families and gender equality. In the Islamic faith, gender roles are largely emphasized. It is the norm and the tradition which citizens of Kuwait abide by.

The Commission of the Status of Women Committee representing Kuwait are concerned of many gender inequality issues facing Kuwait. However, the proposed solutions must also consider the religious practices, in this case the Islamic faith that limits the rights and privileges of women in the country.

Many of the faith’s restrictions affect the livelihood of women in Kuwait. The law specifically limits their privileges and rights, and their role in the society is often seen disregarded. Men are often considered as the dominating gender and are given better privileges than women. However, from the past 50 years, the status of Kuwaiti women has been improved and is an ongoing process. In order to aid for women’s rights, the government have provided them with essential privileges and roles in the society, including in the politics, education, employment, and economy. They are given the rights that men possess in most cases, but certain restrictions remain in effect, determined by the religious belief that woman is to be sustained and protected by men. Their role is to provide for their children and to be a dutiful wife.  Women are encouraged to carry out all the duties she takes up with devotion and enthusiasm. Thus, the status of women in Kuwait is fairly determined by the government with the conformity on the Sharia law.

**Topic 1: Women and sustainability:**

Women in Kuwait have the freedom to contribute to the society with respect to the Islamic laws. As the caring and responsible figure of the society, women are expected to provide for their family with any means of financial support and food. They are also the most affected gender in terms of water supply and sanitation.

Kuwait has the highest level of food security among Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) member states. Export revenues from oil and gas allow for a system of trade-based food security. However, due to the geographical location of Kuwait, natural water is scarce, leaving groundwater as the only water resource. In August 2015, the World Resources Institute reported Kuwait as ninth of the highest-ranked countries that face an ‘extremely high water risk’ by 2040.

Global warming has been an issue directed to the environment’s sustainability. Kuwait has reached the hottest temperature ever recorded in the world which 54 degrees Celsius in the summer of 2016. This could cause the lack of water access, ultimately resulting in the dehydration of the community. Due to the limitation of water and the result of drylands, agriculture in Kuwait is a challenge. It is difficult to provide for food at low cost because families are unable to plant vegetables and other food sources. Kuwaiti women in families are expected to sustain and provide for their children and husband. They are largely affected by climate change because of their role in the society. Other concerns also include the dehydration of the community. Women in Kuwait could highly be affected by the increase of temperature due to their likelihood of risks such as dehydration. Dress code for women in Kuwait is not strictly stated but women should dress conservatively, behave discreetly, and respect religious and social traditions to avoid offending local sensitivities. Women who abide by the Islamic laws and practice have to wear traditional dresses, full length with long sleeves and a hijab that covers their head. This could cause suffocation on hot days especially with the limitation of water.

Given the increasing demand and scarcity of freshwater, in 2013, Kuwait has made efforts to promote sanitation by initiating water sanitation programs. The Kuwaiti Ministry of Public Works has announced plans to build $306 million USD worth of sanitation projects. It includes sewage treatment plants, mains and pumping stations. Kuwait has a combined municipal water and wastewater capital expenditure budget of $4.4 billion USD for the period of 2013 to 2016. The improvement of water and sanitation facilities would largely be beneficial to the state of women in Kuwait. Sanitation is an important necessity for hygiene. Women need proper hygiene for privacy purposes and to prevent diseases and infections.

Menstruation is a natural part of women’s daily life. It is a huge factor to why proper sanitation is needed. They need to be able to dispose napkins and have access to privacy when menstruating. Hepatitis B and C are known to survive in blood. If napkins are not disposed in the right place, these diseases are more likely to spread in the community. Women also need clean water to aid for proper hygiene. Dirty water may cause several health problems due to poor hygiene. The sanitation facilities are also crucial for women for privacy purposes. Kuwaiti women have to dress and behave conservatively to avoid local sensitivities. Inaccessible toilets and bathrooms may cause public disturbances and impose disobedience of the religion and norms and make them more vulnerable to sexual harassment such as rape. Violence like rape in Kuwait is largely prevalent. “Women and girls disproportionate face risks of sexual violence when they have to walk long distances to sanitation facilities, especially at night,” argues Catarina de Albuquerque, UN expert on the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation.

In addition, women in Islamic communities are exempted to Islamic practices during their menstrual cycle. Many women misunderstand this fact and assume that they are prohibited from Islamic practices. Due to these rules, stigma against menstruation is present. Women feel shameful of disposing their menstrual waste because they are judged for being on their menstrual cycle and are unable to practice Islam. In this case, privacy is largely needed in order to protect women’s dignity concerning their natural necessities. Therefore, having improved sanitation facilities is a big contribution to women and sustainability.

**Topic 2: Elimination of Gender-Based Violence:**

    The government have set various laws that reduce gender inequality in Kuwait. In comparison to the Western society, Kuwaiti women are seen oppressed due to the limited rights given to them. However, these legislations are set and must be accepted in the Kuwaiti society because it conforms and bounds to the Sharia law of the Islamic faith. Kuwait is a democratic society, but under special circumstances, the culture and religious beliefs are prioritized and must be respected and followed. The Islamic legal system restricts women’s rights because it is directly connected to what they have to follow as Muslim citizens. Improvements, however, are currently an ongoing process to further eliminate gender bias, with the consideration of Islamic laws

Many women have reported various kinds of violence ranging from domestic to marital assault. Marital rape has been an ongoing issue in Kuwait. Although, this is seen as an unacceptable act stressing male dominance, the government of Kuwait currently do not have a proposed legislation against such violence because under the Sharia law, these actions are acceptable given that the people involved are married couples. The term “rape” is originally defined as taking something forcefully without having a right to it in the first place. With a marriage contract, a man has the right to have sexual relations with his wife. It is also stated in the Quran that under a marriage contract, men must have more authority than women: "Wives have the same rights as the husbands have on them in accordance with the generally known principles. Of course, men are a degree above them in status" (Sayyid Abul A’La Maududi, *the Meaning of the Qur’an*, vol. 1, p. 165). Therefore, according to the Islamic faith, men are given the right to overpower women.

Honour killings are also prevalent in Kuwait as a part of the Islamic tradition. Thousands of women have been killed by their male relatives each year in the name of family honour or crimes of passion or dowry deaths. The Muslim culture finds this ritual acceptable as a punishment for members of family who bring shame into their name. Muslim families believe that disobedience, specifically in forced marriage; in the family is a violation in the principles of the Islamic faith. However, the Quran states that "whoever kills a believer intentionally, their reward will be Hell, to abide therein forever, and the wrath and the curse of Allah are upon them, and a dreadful penalty is prepared for them"  (Holy Quran, Chapter 4, Verse 93) The religion does not tolerate intentional killings. This has been decided by the government through illegalizing honour killings and making it punishable with a 3 year term in jail, thus, protecting women from extreme violent acts.

**Topic 3: Employment and education**

Kuwait’s government have made exceptional efforts in improving the inclusion of women in the employment and educational system. Statistics present that women are approximately equal in literacy rate between the ages 15-24. With the country’s exponentially developing economy as to the large contribution from the oil industry, many citizens are encouraged to seek employment. The foundation of employment comes from good education experience. Gender equality is achieved in these aspects in order to aid for Kuwait’s growing economy. Educational rights are equal between men and women. In fact, more females in the education sector are attending than men. Equality is achieved in the education and employment system, thus, minimizes potential gender biased issues.

    Education in Kuwait is funded by the government is free for all children, from kindergarten to secondary school, regardless of gender, social class, and special needs. The country’s high economic standards contribute to the education system giving all citizens the right and access to learning. Statistics show that 98.7% of Kuwaiti women aged 15-24 are literate. This shows that majority of women in Kuwait are provided with the education they need and gender diversion is not apparent in the case of education. The lack of gender inequality through inclusivity in the education system contributes largely to the country’s economy. Having most of the population educated, citizens of Kuwait are able to contribute to its developing economy.

    The employment of women in Kuwait has improved largely over the years. Women have been allowed to participate in the service sector. The religious conservative system of Kuwait was a major factor to gender inequality in the employment section. However, improvements were put forth by the determined leaders and pro-women activist who believe that women could contribute largely to the country’s economy. The latest official figures released in March 2016 indicate that of the 342,417 Kuwaitis who have jobs, women with 188,141 outnumber men at 154,276 in a clear indication of the vast progress the government of Kuwait have made in the last few years.

    Women in Kuwait are given the right to participate in in the police force. Allowing women to join the Ministry of Interior launched by the Emir, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al- Sabah, help them gain full rights in the Kuwaiti society. In addition, the move has been regarded as a shift that positively affects security performance. Women have proven eligibility and merit in all missions they were assigned, field and administrative assignments. The first batch of women police graduated from the Institute in 2008-2009. They were 27 members, among them 16 officers with university degrees. Those who are willing to join the security work are arising, which shows a strong desire to serve the country. Women in the police sector opens different prospects that prove women are able to work with men, thus, preventing gender inequalities.

    Not only women are given the right in the workforce, they are also given rights in the political systems. Women were given the right to vote in May 2015 and have won seats in the parliament in 2009, which include Massouma al-Mubarak, who was appointed Kuwait's first female cabinet minister in 2005, two US-educated professors, Salwa al-Jassar and Aseel al-Awadhi, and an economist, Rola Dashti. However, women have not gained a seat in the parliament this year. Kuwait is further improving the status of women by taking part on international women-derived organizations such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

**Conclusion:**

    Kuwaiti women are faced with limitations and various inequalities due to the Islamic restrictions and the legislation laws that conform to the religion. They are the first concerns to sanitation and environmental sustainability because they are the most vulnerable to these issues. Stigma against the menstrual cycle of women is also an issue that is common in Kuwait. Many of these limitations promote gender inequalities such as violence. Gender-based violence is widespread in Kuwait, ranging from rape to honour killings. Although there have been improvements in the education and employment of women, gender inequalities are still prevalent mainly because of the Sharia law and the Islamic faith.

    The Commission on the Status of Women in Kuwait are pleased to discuss issues concerning gender inequalities in Kuwait and provide solutions that could minimize the restrictions on women in terms of the religious rules and their role in the society.