



For activists and academics — and everyone in between

Who Said This?

“Writing made me go back to the cries of women revolting in silence to my true origin. Writing does not kill the voice; on the contrary, it awakens it and revives the voices of many lost women.”¹



Assia Djebar
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Opportunities

Call for Papers

The Women and Memory Forum in cooperation with the Supreme Council for Culture and UN Women is organizing an international conference on **Oral History in Times of Change: Gender, Documentation and the Making of Archives. Cairo, 13-15 September 2015.**

Submission deadline: April 1, 2015. Click [here](#) for more information about the conference.

Call for Papers

Isis Center for Women and Development is organizing the 7th Mediterranean Women International conference on the theme **“The escalation of gender-based violence against women and girls in the MENA region. Morocco, May 29-31, 2015.** Click [here](#) for more information.

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The Parliamentary Roller Coaster: Kuwaiti Women in Politics since 2005

After decades of struggle, Kuwaiti women finally gained the right to vote and run for political office in May 2005. While the tale of this struggle has been told and analyzed by several scholars (e.g. Haya al-Mughni, Mary Ann Tétreault, Katherine Meyer, Doron Shultziner and myself), the story of what has been happening with Kuwaiti women politically since 2005 has just started to unfold.

Since 2005, there have been parliamentary elections in 2006, 2008, 2009, twice in 2012

(February and December) and the last one on July 27, 2013, this being the third parliament elected in a year and a half period. Normally parliamentary terms are four years in Kuwait but in the last decade or so conflicts between the executive and legislative branches over corruption, development plans, foreign investment and privatization have been so severe that no parliament has served its full term since 2003 (Kinninmont, 2012). The roots of the problem began in the late 1960s/early 1970s and over time the relationship between parliament and the executive branch has become extremely

adversarial with no mechanisms currently to resolve issues through negotiation and compromise. The parliament does

...have the power to propose legislation as well as consider and vote on legislation introduced by the Emir. They may scrutinise the cabinet ministers' activities, oppose policy proposals from the ruling family, and express their lack of confidence in the prime minister and cabinet. However, the parliament lacks independent legislative powers and cannot establish new policies without the executive branch's approval (Sabrie and Hakala 2013: 5).

Because the parliament does not have the rights nor the responsibilities of governing, elected MPs see themselves as the opposition to the royally appointed cabinet. Parliament can veto cabinet proposals, but has limited options to propose solutions to problems. Because of the power imbalance between the elected parliament and the executive branch (which is not elected, power rests solely within the royal family) and currently no mechanism to resolve conflicts through compromise, when conflicts come to a head the recent pattern is for the emir to use his constitutional power to dissolve the parliament and call for early elections (Sabrie and Hakala, 2013, Kinninmont, 2012). Given that Kuwait has the oldest and strongest parliament in the Arab Gulf, it makes it an interesting case to examine how women have navigated the political turmoil since achieving formal political rights.

The outcome of the first elections in 2006 in which women ran as parliamentary candidates was

generally seen negatively because no female candidates won. Yet, the number of votes cast for women rose from 2006 to 2008. Female candidates ran respectable campaigns in 2006 and 2008 with one female candidate coming close to winning a seat in 2008. Perhaps the most significant aspect of both elections relating to women's rights is that Kuwaiti women were eager to become active political agents, and they managed to organize for this purpose on short notice. The early national election in 2006 was precipitated by citizen action in which young women and men had led a series of demonstrations against government corruption demanding that the number of voting districts for parliament be decreased from 25 to 5 in order to make voting buying and bribery more difficult with larger districts. Women voters throughout the campaign were active, and had plenty of questions and comments for all the candidates they visited (Tétreault, Rizzo and Shultziner, 2012). The 2006 parliament was then able to successfully pass legislation decreasing the number of parliamentary districts to five and allowing each voter to vote for four candidates running for parliament in that district. The top ten candidates with the most votes in each district would become members of parliament in subsequent elections.

Women were even more active during the 2008 campaign. The competence of female ministers had been demonstrated, along with their ability both to absorb sexist heckling with composure and

be just as hard-nosed as their opponents when it came to protecting their interests. But the most important quality of women voters was that they forced all candidates, even the most conservative, to address issues seen as important to the “female voter” (Brown, 2008). This power came from their sheer numbers: of the approximately 342,000 eligible voters in Kuwait, 195,000 of them were women in 2008 (57% of eligible voters) (Tétreault, Rizzo and Shultziner, 2012).

With the growing recognition of women’s power as voters, the 2009 parliamentary elections was even more receptive to female candidates and women’s issues were among the top concerns on many candidates’ platforms. According to Olimat (2012: 183) when comparing the 2009 and the February 2012 elections:

In the 2009 elections, women’s issues occupied center stage, while combating corruption and economic development were the main themes of the February 2, 2012 elections. The most recent elections were organized in the shadow of Arab Spring, brought about by a wave of protests in Kuwait, escalating demands for rooting out corruption, and efforts to develop a parliamentary democracy. In 2009, women became viable candidates for office on their own for the first time, and male candidates competed as never before for women’s vote. This process prompted male candidates to give substantial support and concessions to women in the areas of social services, employment opportunities, family law and custody, and citizenship rights to children of Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti citizens. In the 2012 elections, women’s issues were marginal and hardly discussed on candidates’ platforms. Kuwait was preoccupied with the corruption scandal that ended the 2009 assembly,

development projects, and demands for a constitutional monarchy, in addition to regional issues associated with Arab Spring.

The 2009 parliamentary elections thus became historic with four women, Aseel al-Awadhi, Rola Dashti, Massouma al-Mubarak and Salwa al-Jassar, winning seats for the first time, only four short years after women had gained the right to vote and run for political office. “In parliament, the women MPs were the driving force behind the drafting and passage of a new labor law, which stipulated regulations surrounding working conditions and workers’ rights, especially those for women. During this period, Kuwaiti women also won the right to acquire their own passports and travel freely without their husbands’ consent (<https://www.ndi.org/kuwait>).”

Moreover, the Parliament set up a committee for women’s affairs in 2005, after women gained formal political rights. During the 2009 parliament, all four female MPs were on this committee. This committee met several times with members of women’s NGOs and women’s committees of political movements to get their feedback on issues related to housing, social security, health and residency of foreigners before submitting the law on women’s civil rights amendments to Parliament for approval in May 2010. The Parliament approved that divorced or widowed women with children and Kuwaiti women married to foreign men will have access to government housing and rent subsidies (Al-Kazi, 2011).

In June 2011, Kuwaiti women were given the right to sponsor foreign husbands for residency in Kuwait. While this is not equivalent to the rights foreign women who are married to Kuwaiti men have (they have the right to apply for Kuwaiti citizenship), it is an achievement that would not have been possible before Kuwaiti women had achieved formal political rights (Stephenson, 2011).

However by February 2012, the concern with “women’s issues” and excitement about women in parliament had died down. Even with their legislative contributions, none of the four female MPs won reelection. Instead a huge corruption scandal erupted involving nearly half of the 2009 parliamentary assembly being accused of bribery. The 2009 parliament was perceived by many as the most corrupt in the history of Kuwait. The scandal was the impetus for large anti-regime Arab spring protests in late 2011 demanding a constitutional monarchy which resulted in the National Assembly being occupied that led to the dismissal of the parliament and early elections in early 2012. The four female MPs were among the losers as 54% of incumbents lost their seats under the shadow of scandal and opposition Islamists swept the elections, winning over half of the seats, in the hopes that they would be less corrupt than their predecessors. This was a similar pattern seen in other Arab spring elections during this time period (Wills, 2013, Olimat, 2012).

As political turmoil continued, in June 2012, four months after the 2009 Assembly was dismissed, the Constitutional Court ruled that the emir’s decision to dissolve the 2009 Assembly was unconstitutional (Kinninmont, 2012, Olimat, 2012). The court reinstated the previous (2009–11) parliament which was seen as more pro-regime than the parliament elected in February 2012. However, most of the 2009 MPs refused to return because of the controversy surrounding the court decision (Sabrie and Hakala 2013, Kinninmont 2012). Due to the lack of public support for reinstating the previous parliament, the emir once again dismissed parliament in October 2012 and called for new elections to be held in December 2012 (Sabrie and Hakala, 2013).

Six weeks before the December 2012 elections, the emir issued a decree unilaterally changing the electoral system from allowing voters to vote for four candidates in their districts to being restricted to voting for one candidate. The decree ignored the court’s previous decision not to revisit the 2006 five-district system electoral law as well as the opposition’s demands to comply with the law. As a result, mass protests once again took to the streets and the opposition called for a boycott of the elections. In retaliation, the regime limited freedom of expression including increased internet surveillance and arrested individuals who critiqued the government. Despite the unrest, elections forged ahead with an official voter

turnout of 40% and many pro-government candidates winning seats. This was much lower than the 60% turnout in the February 2012 elections. The opposition continued its protests demanding a return to the four vote electoral laws and new parliamentary elections (Sabrie and Hakala 2013). On the bright side, three female candidates won seats in the parliament this time.

Then once again parliament was dismissed and early elections were held on 27 July 2013. This time the Constitutional Court dissolved Parliament and ruled the results of the December 2012 elections void, necessitating the early election. Voter turnout was officially estimated at 52.5%, which was higher than expected despite an opposition boycott, and only 7% lower than the February 2012 elections that had not been boycotted. Two women were elected and are currently serving in the parliament.

In conclusion, while it is difficult at this time to determine the long term effects of the ongoing conflict between the legislative and executive branches on women's political influence and participation, I would like to summarize the effects of women obtaining formal political rights on women's political status thus far. Even though women's NGOs, women's committees of political movements and female parliamentarians have not been able to sustain keeping "women's

NGO Highlight

We will Stop Women Homicides Platform

The platform was founded in 2010 in Turkey. The platform includes representatives of political parties, labor unions, associations and democratic mass organizations. It aims to protect and defend women's rights, particularly their "right to life", and to prevent women homicides.

Click [here](#) to know more about the platform

issues" at the top of the legislative agendas consistently in the post 2005 period, there have been some major successes in the period between 2005-2011 that should be noted. Women's power as voters was first recognized in 2005 when parliament established a committee for women's affairs as well in the 2008 and 2009 parliamentary elections when "women's issues" were major components of many candidates' platforms. Women achieved several legislative victories during the 2009 parliament in part due to the influence and hard work of the first four female MPs ever elected to parliament and the women's movement. Finally, obtaining women formal political rights has changed what had previously been an all-male institution and space

in Kuwait, the *dīwāniyya*. Traditionally the *dīwāniyya* has been a space and a key social institution in Kuwait for men to sit and talk with family and friends on a regular basis. In addition to providing a place to socialize, it has been a vehicle for men to do business and talk politics as well as to strengthen their kin and non-kin networks. As Stephenson (2011: 183) has argued:

Because of the support that *dīwāniyyas* traditionally provide to elections, women's suffrage in Kuwait has challenged the once essential 'masculinity' of this institution. In the past decade it has been necessary for the *dīwāniyya* to include women in order to remain politically and socially relevant. And like any good 'traditional' fixture of society, it has accommodated to remain relevant.

The *dīwāniyyas* have not only opened up to women voters and candidates during parliamentary campaign season but many female candidates and politicians have started their own *dīwāniyyas* in order to build on their kin networks as well as expand their non-kin networks (see Stephenson 2011 for more details). Thus it will be interesting to see how women's entrance into what had been previously been all male institutions and spaces, such as the *dīwāniyya* and parliament, will change the nature of these political institutions and Kuwaiti politics in the future.

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International women's day: "Look Where We Are, Still"



For the second year in a row, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) at the Lebanese American University (LAU) collaborated with the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW) to celebrate International Women's day. The event entailed the launch of the "Look Where We Are, Still" national campaign, on March 6, 2015 at the Lebanese American University. The campaign aims to shed light on the current status of the Lebanese woman in relation to her legal rights at the economic and social level.

Lawyer Fadi Karam, secretary general of the National Commission for Lebanese Women, presented the achievements NCLW made throughout the years and that finally resulted in the amendment of laws related to women's rights. The presentation also highlighted the laws that still need to be changed in order to achieve gender equality at all levels.

Former First lady Wafaa Sleiman, Ms. Lama Salam,

as well as members of Parliament, ministers, activists, and heads of NGOs attended the event. The ceremony embraced short talks by Dr. Nashaat Mansour, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences, representing President Joseph G. Jabbara, Dr. Samira Aghacy, Director of IWSAW, Ms. Jamal Hermes Gabriel, President of the Women's Council, representing civil society, MP Gilberte Zouein, Chair of the women and children parliamentary committee, MP Robert Ghanem, Chair of the Parliament's Administration and Justice Committee, and Ms. Randa Berri, Vice-President of the National Commission for Lebanese Women.



From left: Dr. Samira Aghacy, Ms. Jamal Hermes Gabriel, Lawyer Fadi Karam, MP Gilberte Zouein, and MP Robert Ghanem



Activists and NGOs in support of the campaign

Who is She?



According to Ismael Mehnana,² “Algerian writer and novelist Assia Djébar (1936-2015) represents in the Algerian culture what Jamila bu-Hayrid (Algerian free-fighter) represents in the Algerian revolution. She is a great symbol of history and the icon of Algerian woman in her long struggle for emancipation, freedom and presence in the realm of the human and universal.”

Assia Djébar is one of the most famous francophone novelists in Algeria, North Africa, and France. She published more than twenty works in French and in June 26, 2005, she became a member of “*Académie française*”, which is considered the most prestigious academic establishment in France. She was the first woman in the Maghreb and the Arab world and the fifth women in France to enter this Academy.

In 2002, she was granted the Peace Prize by the society of German Publishers and Bookstores. Djébar chose her characters from the lives of Algerian women, and the drama of the Algerian war for independence, thus interweaving history and memory. Among the subjects she believed in and successfully wrote about are identity, colonization, and women.

Assia Djébar, the pen name of Fatima-Zohra Imalaya, was born in Cherchell, Algeria. The majority of her work deals with the challenges and difficulties facing women. She grew up in a traditional, middle class family, attended a French Lycee in Blida, and later studied history at the Sorbonne in Paris. In 1955, in the midst of the Algerian revolution (1954-1962) she returned to Algeria for a while but soon left for Tunisia and Morocco where she taught and worked as a correspondent for the Algerian paper *al-Mujahid*. It was during the war that she began writing novels and published *La Soif (al-Atash, 1957)*, translated into English as *The Mischief (1958)*.

Her other novels are *Les Impatients (1958)*, *Les Enfants du Nouveau Monde (1962)* [children of the new world, 2005], *Les Alouette Naive (1967)*, *Femmes d’Alger dans leur Appartement (1980)* [Women of Algiers in their apartment, 1992], *L’Amour, La Fantasia (1985)* [Fantasia, an Algerian cavalcade, 1993], and *Ombre Sultane (1987)* [A sister to Sheherazade, 1993]. She has also published a collection of poems entitled *Poèmes pour l’Algérie Heureuse*.

She also directed two films: *La Zerda et Les Chants de l’Oubli*, and *La Nouba des Femmes du Mont Chenoua*, which won the international Critics Prize at the Biennale in Venice in 1979. In 1986, she translated and introduced Nawal al-Sa’dawi’s novel *Woman at Point Zero* under the title *Ferdaous: Une Voix à l’Enfer* [Ferdaous: A Voice from Hell].³

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Who is She?

Assia Djebar died in Paris on February 6, 2015 and was buried, according to her will, in Cherchell Algeria.

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¹ See Samira Sleiman, *Rahil al-mutamarrida al-na'ima Assia Djebar..ayqunat al-mar'a al-jazai'riya*, [the death of a sweet rebel Assia Djebar..the icon of an Algerian woman], published in moheet.com on February 7, 2015.

² [Ismael Mehnana is a Professor of Philosophy and a scholar of Algerian literature written in French at the University of Oustantin in Algeria.](#)

³ See the translation by Miriam Cooke in Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, editors, *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Women Writing*. (Indiana, 1990) 385-393.

Addendum to the *Who is She* Profile on Dr. Lihad Al-Gazali published in the issue of January 2015.

Lihadh Al-Gazali, a British-Iraqi clinician and scientist, who works in the Pediatrics Department of the College of Medicine & Health Sciences, United Arab Emirates University in Al-Ain, UAE, is an internationally renowned clinician and a leading figure in the area of clinical genetic and dysmorphology in the Middle East. Al-Gazali was profiled in the Lancet in March 2006 for her contribution to Clinical Genetics and research in the Middle East. She is the 2008 Laureate for Africa and Arab States for the prestigious Women in Science UNESCO-L'OREAL Award, given to her for the identification of new inherited diseases. She is also the recipient of several other awards including Sheikh Hamdan Award for Medical Sciences for her contribution to medicine in the Middle East, and the Middle East Broadcasting Corporation Award for life achievement and contribution to humanity. She was made an honorary member of Alpha-Omega-Alpha Medical Society in USA in 2008 and she was chosen as the 2014 Laureate for Takreem Award in the Scientific and Technological Achievement category.

A website to Empower Women in Sistan, Baluchistan, Afghanistan and Pakistan

A newly found website designed to empower women in Sistan and Baluchistan Province bordering Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan was launched concurrently with International Women's Day. The initiative is focused on income generating activities in order to help women cope with the devastating impact of drug and arm smuggling, environmental degradation and the rise of radical political groups.

Please visit the site and join the Facebook page: <http://en.balouchidouzi.org/>

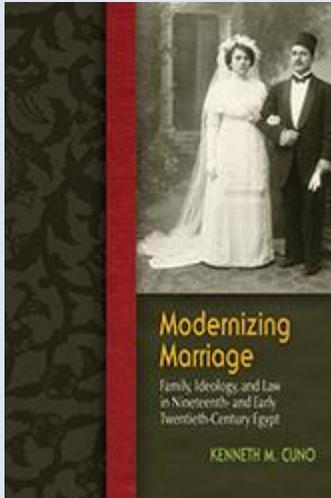
Call for Papers

The Lebanese American University is hosting a conference entitled *IN-flux, IN-stability, IN-sensitivity: The Struggle of Performance in the Arab World*. Byblos, Beirut, 3-5 December, 2015.

Submission deadline: April 1, 2015.

Click [here](#) to learn more about the conference.

Highlights



Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth – and Early Twentieth-Century Egypt

Author: Kenneth M. Cuno

Year of Publication: 2015

Publisher: Syracuse University Press

In 1910, when Khedive Abbas II married a second wife surreptitiously, the contrast with his openly polygamous grandfather, Ismail, whose multiple wives and concubines signified his grandeur and masculinity, could not have been greater. That contrast reflected the spread of new ideals of family life that accompanied the development of Egypt's modern marriage system.

Modernizing Marriage explores the evolution of marriage and marital relations, shedding new light on the social and cultural history of Egypt.

Family is central to modern Egyptian history and in the ruling court did the “political work”. Indeed, the modern state began as a household government in which members of the ruler’s household served in the military and civil service. Cuno discusses political and sociodemographic changes that affected marriage and family life and the production of a family ideology by modernist intellectuals, who identified the family as a site crucial to social improvement, and for whom the reform and codification of Muslim family law was a principal aim. Throughout *Modernizing Marriage*, Cuno examines Egyptian family history in a comparative and transnational context, addressing issues of colonial modernity and colonial knowledge, Islamic law and legal reform, social history, and the history of women and gender.

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