

## Voices of Change: Dr. Rola Dashti and the Struggle for Women's Leadership in Kuwait

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Dr. Rola Dashti is a distinguished Kuwaiti leader who has occupied prominent positions of influence throughout her career. As one of the first four women elected to the Kuwaiti parliament, she provides a critical perspective on the evolving role of women in public life. In this article, Dr. Dashti reflects on the persistent challenges and significant achievements encountered by women in political and economic spheres.

Her discourse highlights the necessity of advancing women's rights in ways that remain consistent with religious and cultural frameworks. She argues that democratic principles of gender equality, enshrined in the Kuwaiti constitution, are fully compatible with a moderate, inclusive, and pluralistic vision of Islam. This integration of constitutional values with religious identity underpins her political philosophy.

Through her leadership, Dr. Dashti has emerged as a role model for women in Kuwait, exemplifying how female leaders can shape decision-making processes and contribute meaningfully to national development.

### From Social Activism to Political Office

As one of the first four female members elected to Kuwaiti parliament in 2009, Dr. Dashti's background makes her an ideal representative of the women's "suffragist" movement in Kuwait and the Arabian Gulf. She is a central figure of this book. Born in 1964, the civic issues of the era caught Dr. Dashti's early, public-minded interest. As an elementary school student, her teachers nicknamed her "the class lawyer" due to her tendency to argue for the rights of classmates. Later, she volunteered for the Red Cross when refugees from the south of Lebanon began crowding north to her university campus in Beirut. She recalls following the American elections with interest from her university though at that point out of curiosity rather than from any awareness of her own future in politics and particularly remembers the vice-presidential candidacy of the late Geraldine Ferraro. During Dr. Dashti's graduate studies in the US, she became involved in reproductive/pregnancy rights and environmental activism and joined the student union. It appears these early interests, albeit limited, set the stage for her later role as a political activist and active agent in the Kuwaiti suffragist movement.

Invasion by Iraq in 1990 created new awareness of democratic processes and reforms that would permeate Kuwaiti society long after. It was during this time that Dr. Dashti's activism assumed a distinctly political character. Following her graduation from Johns Hopkins University with a PhD in population economics, Dr. Dashti began her political career as a contract manager for the Kuwaiti government's Emergency and Reconstruction Program from 1990-1991 [1].

Even as a student, the status of Kuwaiti prisoners of war in Iraq and women's issues were her primary causes. During my 2010 interview with Dr. Dashti, she addressed her early experiences in moving toward social and political activism in Kuwait, as well as her inspiration to pursue this path despite its hardships.

She Describes the Response of her Family and the Community Overall thus:

Society is another challenge, especially in our region. This is another challenge when you come and you talk about change and you talk about reform how does society accept this and how do they perceive you when you're talking and calling for these types of things? A lot of people in our society start accepting and adapting to the status quo. They're frustrated but they don't [know how] to take the steps [toward progress]. So, there is always the frustration for their rights; their thoughts and their actions [are stymied], and this is why you see a lot of the status quo. It is maintained not because they like it, but because they are so pessimistic when change doesn't come. But things do change, I always believe. I do see a positive future. I build on small gains. I always see how full the cup is, even if it is only a quarter full. I always look at the full parts, halves, quarters and I just build on them This is my perspective, and this is what gives me energy [2].

Dr. Dashti also worked to develop herself professionally. She was elected to the board of the Kuwait Economic Society (KES) through a campaign that demonstrated her networking power and willingness to forge new paths for women in Kuwait's traditional, patriarchal society. It wasn't long before Dr. Dashti began building support for her nomination as chairperson of KES. In contrast to the support she received for her new leadership role, she also recalls the surprise she encountered from fellow KES members and family alike.

She Reflects upon this Surprise and Relays the Comments and Concerns Expressed to her Regarding her Leadership:

I did have support, although it was interesting. It was a big challenge. And there was a good group of people trying to lobby for other board members and there were groups who thought, "How could a woman be there?" They would say, "Rola, you know we value your ideas, we value your contribution, but you know what—do whatever you want within the society, propose anything, work the way you want, reform whatever you want, take any position you want, but not the chairperson [3]".

She further reflected upon this resistance with a frank perspective on the prevalent mindset of Arabian Gulf society as it relates to women holding leadership roles: "This reflects what women faced throughout not only Kuwait, but our entire region. People would think, 'We count on her, we believe in her capabilities, we believe in her commitment to perform and in her ability but this is where she has to stop. She can lead only behind the scenes.'" While many of her more senior peers were hesitant to accept a woman as the public head of a civil organization such as KES, she was successful in her bid to be elected chairperson of the KES board in. She credits this breakthrough achievement being the first woman to be elected to this role in large part to the youth of her fellow board members, the so-called "new guard".

There were many concerns about this new guard. Some of these concerns included institutional apprehensions about their fiscal responsibility and ability to preserve a credible membership indeed, about the credibility of the organization itself in society. In reality however, KES went on to double its membership and available funds in six years. Confidence in Dr. Dashti's leadership was so strong that when she was later elected to parliament and attempted to resign from the chairmanship, the KES board refused to accept her resignation.

Dr. Dashti's experience at KES reflects many of her opinions on the nature of government, the civil sphere, and democracy. During her chairmanship, she pushed for greater institutionalization of KES. Drawing colleagues into committees and meetings to enlarge the decision-making process, she facilitated the vision for an official building to house KES. Through a renewed focus on lobbying and advocacy in parliament, and by engaging with the media to generate public discussion of economic issues and proposed laws, the new guard engaged KES with policy makers in government and the public utilities like never before. For example, in 2008, to stave off inflation and what many opposition MPs call a housing crisis, Dr. Dashti called for deregulation of the oil and industries sector, and for the government to sell off a significant portion of its landholdings which in 2013, still amounted to about 95% of Kuwait's national territory [4,5]. By the time of our interview in 2010, Dr. Dashti felt that she had led KES to the extent that she could into a position of effective decentralization and reported being able to actively moderate her time between her parliamentary and KES roles.

The notion of women's right to vote arose in 1982, and gained momentum through the involvement and support of women's groups. In 2002, Kuwaiti women finally received the right to vote, and four years later the right to stand for parliament. Dr. Dashti was the first woman to submit her application to run for office, but no women were elected for the first session. Three years later, in 2009, she was successful in her campaign and became one of the first four women ever elected to Kuwait's parliament. Despite this success in the political sphere, she attests to the additional

difficulties related to her gender and the higher standard to which she and her female counterparts had to perform to legitimize the role of women in politics in general:

No question it's an uphill battle. It's more pressure and stress. The future, I personally think the future of girls who are interested in entering politics, their entrance into parliament rests on all of us and our performance. It is because society is going to judge you, and society gave us the chance to be in parliament. Now, if we don't perform properly and we need to exceed expectations, not just meet them then the number of women in parliament could regress. And to preserve the chance for our future girls, who could be much better than we are, and to protect their opportunities that is a great pressure [6].

As one can see from her above comments, Dr. Dashti feels the burden of responsibility to the next generation of Kuwaiti girls to ensure that women distinguish themselves in leadership positions. She expresses confidence that this excellence will determine their future. While she acknowledges that some elements of society still call for women to return to the private sphere, as long as women excel and perform to a high standard, she believes that public leadership opportunities for women will expand.

### **In Parliament**

Dr. Dashti viewed her position in parliament as an important step in securing future opportunities for women in Kuwait's government. Her work in fostering women's rights and opportunities started immediately after she was elected. Going into parliament, she was confronted with the issue of men attempting to force her to wear a hijab. Some claimed women must wear a hijab as part of the stipulation put in place when women received full political rights in 2005 that "females abide by Islamic law".<sup>ii</sup> Sticking to her convictions regarding the appropriate upholding of the constitution and the separation of religion from actual law, she stated, "There's a group of people who know they cannot Islamize the constitution, so they try to Islamize every issue when it comes up. I'm going to examine anything that violates the constitution, taking it law by law."<sup>iii</sup> Taken to court, Dr. Dashti won an early victory when the constitutional court ruled that she was not required to veil herself in order to participate in parliament, and that each Muslim has the right to independently choose her mode of dress. Dr. Dashti's win is a perfect example of the union between Islamic feminists and political liberals.

This union between the two schools of thought has great influence in Kuwait, with roots in Western-style secular democratic process and separation of private religious preferences and political activism. However, fieldwork has revealed that even this group of feminists negotiates political and social goals within a traditional and conservative Islamic framework (Gonzalez, 14) and against the added backdrop of the tension between women's role in the success of Islamic revivalism and the disapproval within that same movement of giving political rights to women [7].

At the time of our interview, Dr. Dashti had initiated eight amendments to existing laws. Two of these amendments successfully passed. The first law addressed the residency rights and legal status of the children of Kuwaiti women and non-Kuwaiti fathers. The second addressed "civil commission employment issues." Other amendments addressed social security, housing, and the economic stability of women. Dr. Dashti anticipated her next gender-related project would address the 1985 family laws. During our interview, Dr. Dashti listed what she sees as the

main issues of importance for women in Kuwait: “we have in the pipeline issues regarding social security and issues regarding poor housing for women, to make sure there is family stability for her. We talk about education and health for the Kuwaiti woman [8].”

Of course, she also credits policymakers' longstanding support for increasing women's literacy rates, lifespan, and workforce participation:

Society in Kuwait has evolved and developed throughout the last fifty years. So has the role of women. We are very pleased when we look into the statistics of women's educational attainment.

Illiteracy has dropped dramatically; we are now talking about less than ten or eleven percent. Life expectancy is on the rise; the life expectancy for women is now around seventy-seven to seventy-eight years. Female labor force participation is on the rise; we are reaching around forty percent now.

These types of accomplishments that women have made, no question about it, were possible because of women leaders in the past, as well as government policies and men's support. So, we start building on these. Building on the gains we have made in obtaining women's political rights, we are now working on social rights by trying to eliminate discrimination as much as possible within our laws. Women in parliament are doing this by making it a priority agenda item. We sit on the priority board between the government and the parliament. So, eliminating discrimination against women in various laws becomes a priority. We always keep it a priority. We're pushing it forward, no question about it [9].

Dr. Dashti has also observed intentional progress in incorporating women into Kuwait's judicial system, an issue she believes is essential to deepening the democratic and political maturity of the nation.

Despite the upward momentum that the women's social movement and fight for rights has gained in Kuwait, Dr. Dashti notes with disappointment the rejection of committee proposals to set a minimum quota of 30% female representation in governmental decisionmaking roles. Though she recognizes that an ideal solution would be a gender-neutral policy that merely mandates equal gender representation, Dr. Dashti and lobbyists know it becomes difficult for women to gain traction in decision-making roles without antagonizing main (male) members of parliament [10].

A representation quota would help many women elevate their voice within society. Alessandra Gonzalez speaks to this issue in her book entitled *Islamic Feminism in Kuwait: The Politics and Paradoxes*. She states that many Islamic feminists “argue for women's rights in the public sphere by appealing to sacred texts, theological arguments based on the life of the Prophet, rulings of the contemporary religious leaders, and a nonreligious source of political authority: the national constitution (p. 3) [1]. Through this multipronged approach, women have the opportunity to work with both secular and Islamist sources and interpretations, thereby elevating their own legitimacy and amplifying their voice.

It is worth noting that from 2005-2009, Dr. Dashti was a member of the advisory council for the United Nations Development Programme's [note: after googling around, I changed this from “UNHDR's”] Arab Human Development Reports (AHDR). The reports, widely unpopular in the Arab world for their political expropriation by foreign governments, were nevertheless a benchmark in developing the Arabian Gulf and the larger Middle

East and North Africa (MENA) region [11]. In 2005, Queen Noor of Jordan awarded Dr. Dashti one of the five King Hussein Leadership Prizes for the year; one of the other recipients was the AHDR committee itself.

### Not Settled Yet

Looking over her own experiences, Dr. Dashti believes the question of women's position in Kuwaiti society is not yet settled, but she is hopeful:

I believe that we haven't settled the role of women in Kuwait yet. So, you still have these voices, contradicting voices one that calls for bringing women back to the home and one saying, “no, we want to move women into becoming active participants in the development of the country by engaging in public life and decision making.” And this still has not been put to rest. This is why anytime you find any issue that deals with women, you'll always see society will be polarized. But we are moving and engaging [12].

Contemporary women's rights in Kuwait, as Gonzalez argues, should be fluid with regards to each historical and political change. She states that “political players should be able to reconsider interpretation of Islam to meet current challenges” (p. 11). This belief largely encompasses the progressive and pragmatic framework underlying modern feminist activism in Kuwait, while at the same time fueling paradoxes associated with it.

Dr. Dashti clarifies how women can strive harder to foster their success. For instance, women often enter the workforce determined to succeed, but tend to neglect the necessity of professional networking; when coming up for promotions, they fail to have made the connections necessary to securing an open position. Some post-war women's groups used their efforts from the war to advocate for increased women's rights. (EDIT END NOTE) Dr. Dashti herself has taken steps to promote more women in leadership positions by fostering these “networking skills” that help men get the promotions that she would like to see more women have. For instance, she describes how she and other women in leadership attempt to promote female peers:

We push names. We do it not to antagonize our main members, but discreetly, by seeing where [there] are open positions. We lobby behind the scenes in pushing names. I personally pushed for various [women], not knowing them personally but knowing of their CV by knowing of them, and getting recommendations by others of how they are, I'll just push them. So, we are trying to break the notion that you need to be networked because we know women are not part of this networking process. And sometimes a woman will lose opportunities because she is not networked. They [women] need to become more visible [13].

Dr. Dashti further acknowledges that the support for growing women's public participation requires careful cultivation. Gonzalez's discussion of the Prophet taking the advice of his wife in a matter regarding the activity of men going on Umrah (a smaller form of Pilgrimage to Mecca) supports this idea: “The power of textual tradition as a legitimating source is a key characteristic of Islamic feminism. Referring to a story of how the Prophet Mohammed consulted a wise woman to make a decision in a matter of state shows these women that their religion esteems and values women's opinions on political matters” (Gonzalez, 48). Despite broad support for women's enfranchisement, there is somewhat less support for women running for public office and less still for achieving parity of numbers between women and men in public office. Not everyone who believes that women

should have political rights believes that there should be an equal number of women and men in public positions. As Gonzalez explains, "The real Islamists of today are well-read Salafists and young intelligent working moms who voted against their right to vote. Some wear the veil, abaya, or long beard, while some wear a Western suit" (Gonzalez, 53). She goes on to argue that Islamists ironically incorporated women more effectively than the liberals in a practical way that helped them win parliamentary seats in elections.

There are several reasons why Islamists are winning elections in Kuwait

- Islamists are not a monolithic group,
- Islamist women are educated, articulate, and driven, and
- Islamists are in it to win it and are highly organized (Gonzalez, 52).

Dr. Dashti believes that this generation of female parliamentarians can grow support for women in leadership positions in two ways: by performing admirably in highly visible roles and by continuing to discreetly encourage policymakers to appoint qualified women and pass legislation favorable to improving women's chances of public employment.

### Constitutionalism and Religion

Dr. Dashti is an observant Muslim who believes that constitutionalism is the bedrock of Kuwait's stability and its best path forward. She sees Kuwait's parliamentary system (with its electoral and non-partisan features) and its constitution (which ensures the preservation of a civil society for all individuals regardless of religious beliefs) as the key balance against Islamic influences in Kuwait's society and impact on government policy. However, she still recognizes the significance of Islam and religion for the community and for the role of women's rights in Kuwait. As she stated in our 2010 interview, I do believe and adhere to the notion [that] Islam is a religion of moderation and rights, as a religion and as Qur'an. Our problem, as Fatima said, is the interpretation of it and the practices it is a male interpretation luckily, we and more women [are] going into the area of theology studies, of Islamic theology, so we can argue on the same premises. This is very important. Now we need women's voices to be heard more, and we need to see them much more in media, we need to see them much more not only in closed conference and seminars, but people need to see them in various types of media, whether it is print, TV, or radio, so that we hear the right interpretation of things and the moderation of Islam. Culture and traditions [have] overridden the religion, and we practiced things [that] because of culture and tradition we label religion [14].

For Dr. Dashti, then, civil society and the rules and regulations of constitutional government prevent policy decisions from being taken on the basis of belief alone. This also ensures that the constitution is the social pact Kuwaitis share and that government policy reflects the spectrum of religious opinions which Kuwaitis embrace. In Kuwait's parliament, there are religious extremists, moderates, and liberals however, Dr. Dashti points out that the media tend to only publicize debates between the extremes, between the very conservative and the very liberal. The moderates do not sufficiently assert themselves in the public eye to show the balance between extreme points of view. For Dr. Dashti, the moderate point of view acknowledges religious sentiments but refuses to engage these on issues of government policy. For moderates like her, the constitution is the common social pact which bonds extremists, moderates, and liberals and which makes Kuwait's civil society healthy. She believes that can all have

their own vision or sect of Islam while promoting an egalitarian framework in politics via the constitution of Kuwait.

In Support are some additional comments she made During our Interview:

This issue is here where we need to look and stop so we don't drift. As long as you say that we are building a society as a civil society, then you say to everyone, "I'm not debating what you believe or I believe because civil society by its roots, constitutions, will govern the system." So, then your beliefs and thoughts are maintained, but society will be managed by rules and regulations and its constitution, which is the social pact.

Now when we start engaging in this and making it the premise that will govern our way of life, then it becomes a problem. People read, and everyone interprets what she or he reads differently. And then you will get people who will read from a very radical extremist thinking. And there are people who read with very open-minded moderate thinking. They get into the interim party. So, once you [are] reading and perceiving and interpreting what you're reading you get a spectrum. Because we live in Islamic societies, because we're very emotionally religious what's happened is that people who are very knowledgeable about religion and have a deep understanding of it don't argue against each other. So, you will get a moderate interpreter [who] will not sit next to an extremist, or radical, or Islamist on a show to debate issues controversial issues [15].

This issue of conflating culture with religion is at the core of Dr. Dashti's emphasis on a Kuwaiti constitution that appears to be secularist in nature and key to the success of equal rights for women in Kuwait as equal political actors.

She States:

And we live in a region, an emotional region, very attached to its religion. People don't question what they have been told from childhood, [it is] distorted. So, when you take practices the environments around you the culture and traditional practices you've been raised around that say that this is the religion but this is tradition and culture, not religion but you've been told that this is religion. And you keep believing, you build upon this belief, and you grow up. Then, discerning what is culture and what is not becomes hard, because they become very much intertwined and this is why I keep saying whenever you pick up an issue of women, you polarize society. Society is polarized because of this. The intertwining of women, culture, tradition, and religion makes it harder in a society that is very emotionally religious. We do have a long way to go, yes, we do have a long way to go. The only way to move faster is by having many more women theologians and to have them be vocal [on the correct and undistorted interpretation of the Qur'an and Islam] [16].

Although Dr. Dashti supports women's reading and interpreting the Qur'an correctly and having more of those dialogs accessible to the general public in Kuwait, she doesn't feel the need to incorporate a religious rhetoric into her role as a politician. While she agreed that those who use verses of the Qur'an in their political messages tend to receive more support or sympathy from the public, she doesn't want to give in to that type of framework. Rather, when she is debating Islamists in the political arena, she tries to redirect the debate to a "civil" one. As she continued during our conversation, "When I get into an argument, discussions with radicalists, Islamists, or extremists, I always try to not engage with his statements [on whether his] interpretation is right or not. I always go back to civil society [17]." In our interview,

she adamantly refuted the significance of whether the audience will perceive that she is uneducated on what Islam says about a particular topic under debate.

Rather, she retorts, this is fatwa, which people can interpret how they want it's up to them and I respect [that choice] but there is nothing in the constitution and I go back to the constitution [because] it's our social pact that forces [allows?] me to enter this room, the parliament room. The argument becomes, "it's the constitution, once you give me the constitution, it tells me this and this becomes the binding system." We need to tell people, "Listen, what drives us is not a person's interpretation depending on whatever his [religious] sect is [18]."

Furthermore, Dr. Dashti observes that legislation can encourage tolerance in society. Before women established themselves as parliamentary equals, a woman who wished to enter a public leadership position faced character assassination not only from men, but from women, as well. Public ambition encouraged aspersions on a woman's morality but Dr. Dashti notes this is no longer the norm, pointing to the increase in respect for women across the spectrum of society. In our interview, Dr. Dashti provided candid comments on the subject of character assassination, asserting that the radical extremists, Islamists, believe that, from a religious perspective, women should not be part of parliament or politics because it is a sin. And she should not be engaged in this. And the thinking is women should not be part of the wilayah [state of province], and practically every type of accusation is placed on us. Especially you are in society it's a peaceful society so you know how small Kuwait is so these types of accusations, I call it terrorism, because you couldn't terrorize me any other way you terrorize me psychologically within the system [19].

Considering the negative impact that character assassination can have in such a small community like Kuwait, Dr. Dashti emphasizes women's success in changing mindsets about their political participation and how women's right to vote has turned into actual political change.

Prior to getting our rights, male candidates never had campaigns targeted toward women. Women came to their tents and they were speaking to them at the same level. These women represented 50% of the population, and these women have issues. But they didn't have the vote, so their concerns weren't taken seriously. Having the vote became essential to addressing women and their concerns and issues [20].

This new trend of reaching out to women in various communities is something Dr. Dashti points out as a positive indicator of the increasing success of women in Kuwaiti politics. Bridging the gap between the tribal areas and the modern elite strata of society is another feat that Kuwaiti female politicians have taken up, and which has helped to limit the incidence of character assassination against female politicians:

Now we are getting women not in the elite neighborhoods we are getting women in the tribal areas who are running and this is a big social change. In the beginning when a woman ran, people in the tribal areas couldn't comprehend [her] running and accused her of various things also another character assassination. The next time around, they call her to come to their diwaniyyas (women's groups meetings), a huge social transformation [21].

In the first election in which women could vote, women who stood for parliament faced stiff social strictures. In the second

election, women, such as Thikra Rashidi, carried the vote even in tribal areas. As a result, women are now called to participate as representatives in tribal meetings. This, says Dr. Dashti, is a remarkable social transformation. In the future, she is eager to discuss improving Kuwaiti society in gender-neutral terms. In 2008, she argued to an American congressional panel that the conception of individual freedoms and civil liberties should be nurtured for men as well as women, and that Kuwaitis do not fully associate democracy with development or recognize that issues such as income inequality and corruption can be addressed by an emphasis on democracy [22].

### In the Kuwaiti Cabinet

In 2012, Dr. Dashti was appointed Minister of State for the National Assembly Affairs and Minister of State for Planning and Affairs and Development. She oversaw a period of increased collaboration with the United Nations' Millennium development goals during Kuwait's fiftieth anniversary of United Nations membership. Through this collaboration, the UN's country representative lauded Dr. Dashti's initiation of a partnership with the [United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs] to develop Kuwait's future leaders through experience in international development via the United Nations Junior Professional Officer Programme, which "offers young professionals the unique opportunity to obtain training and exposure either on assignment or at headquarters [23]."

In late December 2013, Dr. Dashti resigned from her cabinet position along with all fourteen of her fellow cabinet members, having been interpellated on matters of incompetency, inefficient planning, and her comments about the Kuwaiti people [24-26]. One of her colleagues accused her of accepting bribes, and was also blamed for the reduction of the official Eid holidays from three days to two [27]. Dr. Dashti was also alleged to have circulated a document encouraging government retaliation against opposition activists [28]. None of the allegations were ever proved.

It is equally important to mention one other significant amendment that Dr. Dashti tried to implement during her time as cabinet member in the Kuwaiti parliament, aimed at changing the government policy related to gender segregation in Kuwaiti universities. She was clear in her support to leave the choice of attending segregated or non-segregated schools to the students. When discussed in our interview in 2010, she stated: The first law that I submitted, or the second law that I submitted in parliament, was to amend the university law of segregation, to make it co-ed, to make it a choice. You can have segregated universities for the people who chose, or you can have co-ed. And we are working; this becomes our next agenda in upcoming years [29].

Although Dr. Dashti's time in parliament didn't see success for this particular amendment, a group of lawmakers finally agreed in 2013 to no longer enforce the rule of gender segregation within universities [30]. There is no doubt that the seeds of change planted by Dr. Dashti and her colleagues on this subject helped policymakers' recent turnaround on gender segregation. It should be noted that although classes are now allowed to be mixed, the seating arrangement is still separated, with sections for men and sections for women.

In early 2014, *Le Monde* recorded that Dr. Dashti criticized the rapid expansion of the national budget and advocated for a "rebalancing" of the government-citizen relationship, including a possible VAT and cuts to subsidies for private citizens; subsidies,

such as of electricity and education, represent about 28% of the Kuwaiti national budget [31]. As a cabinet minister, she supported a plan to cut housing subsidies for Kuwaitis who do not work and was outspoken against proposed legislation to cut the repayment requirements for Kuwaiti citizens' loans [32]. However, in the days leading up to her resignation, she assured members of parliament that there were no plans to begin taxing Kuwaiti citizens [33].

### Other Awards

Dr. Dashti has received many awards for her service. Since 2006, she has frequently been named in such lists as the Financial Times' "Top 20 Businesswomen in the Arab World" and Arabian Business' "World's 100 Most Powerful Arabs." In 2009, the Clinton Foundation honored her with the Global Citizens Award, stating that "victories for Kuwaiti women and for Kuwaiti democracy have proven that deliberate persistence and tenacity can lead to historic change [34]." In 2010, the Council of Europe awarded the South-North Prize for outstanding contributions to democracy and human rights to Dr. Dashti and Mikhail Gorbachev [35].

### Conclusion

Although Dr. Rola Dashti's early aspirations did not extend to political activism or a political career, she stands out in Kuwaiti society today for her role as a women's rights activist, as a noted suffragist, and as one of the first female Kuwaiti parliament members. Dr. Dashti faced backlash from the community due to Islamist versus modernist interpretations of the Qur'an set against the dynamic of cultural influence that limits women as political actors. Despite this opposition, she was able to make significant changes to the state of women in politics in Kuwait. As one of the first four women elected to the Kuwaiti parliament, she supported amendments promoting social security, housing, education, health, economic stability, family law, and policies that pertain to the residency rights and legal status of the children of Kuwaiti women and non-Kuwaiti fathers. Dr. Dashti also challenged the notion that women must be veiled when entering parliament, winning a constitutional court case that set the precedent that women can independently choose how to present themselves.

Dr. Dashti is aware of how amazing the increase in Kuwaiti women's political participation is. She attributes her success not only to previous feminist activism by other Kuwaiti women, but also to the men in the community who have also been agents of change for women, such as those who supported her chairing the Kuwaiti Economic Society (KES). Throughout Dr. Dashti's political career, she has seen a decrease in the character assassination of female politicians, an increase in the acceptance and integration of Bedouin women in the political arena, and a turn toward using the constitution as a source of moderate and fair thinking amidst conflicting interpretations of the Qur'an. Despite being an avid supporter of a moderate and fair constitution, Dr. Dashti recognizes Islam's powerful hold on society. She too loves and follows Islam. Within her love is the ability to recognize variation in people's understanding of how the religion relates to politics and law making. As a result, as noted earlier, her approach to Kuwaiti politics is to embrace the constitution as a tool toward a democratic vision of equality for both Kuwaiti men and women, while maintaining a pluralist vision of Islam in Kuwait.

Dr. Dashti has always strived for greatness. After receiving her PhD in population dynamics from Johns Hopkins University, she served on the board and then chaired KES. During her tenure as the chairperson of KES, the organization doubled both its membership and its funds, solidifying her position as an economic leader in Kuwait. After successfully serving as the chairperson of KES,

Dr. Dashti went on to run for office. Though she did not win the first election women were allowed to enter, she was successful in the 2009 election. Despite facing many struggles associated with being a woman in political leadership, Dr. Dashti's hard work, activism, and determination won her many awards and allowed her to be appointed as the Minister of State.

While in office, Dr. Dashti faced many struggles associated with being a woman in political leadership. One of the focal events in her career is when she was taken to court for not wearing a hijab in parliament, a sign of the conservative opinions still present in the Kuwaiti parliament. However, Dr. Dashti won her court case, setting the precedent that women have the agency to choose how they present themselves in the public sector. Dr. Dashti's hard work, activism, and determination have won her many awards and allowed her to be appointed as the Minister of State.

Dr. Rola Dashti has long been a trailblazer in Kuwait, breaking barriers and redefining leadership for women in the region. As one of the first four women elected to parliament, she brings a powerful voice to the story of women's struggle and success in politics and business. In this chapter, she speaks with both passion and conviction about the victories achieved and the obstacles that remain. What makes Dr. Dashti's vision unique is her insistence that women's rights and religious values need not be in conflict. For her, the Kuwaiti constitution provides the foundation for advancing equality, while her moderate and inclusive understanding of Islam allows her to uphold tradition without compromising progress. Admired by many as a role model, Dr. Dashti stands as a symbol of resilience and possibility for women in Kuwait, showing how determination and vision can open doors to decision-making at the highest levels.

Dr. Rola Dashti is indeed a prominent Kuwaiti woman who assumed key leadership positions throughout her career. In my interview with her she shared her unique perspective as one of the first four women elected to Kuwaiti parliament. She speaks deeply and heartily about both the struggles and victories of women in leadership roles, particularly in the political and business realms. She highlights the need for both men and women to exercise women's rights with respect for religious rhetoric and emphasizes her vision for upholding religious culture while maintaining her status as a female politician. The two are not incompatible: her approach to politics is to embrace the Kuwaiti constitution as a tool for implementing a democratic vision of gender equality, while maintaining a moderate, open-minded, pluralist vision of Islam. Dr. Dashti is seen by many as a role model to all women in Kuwait who hold powerful, decisionmaking roles.

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