As Kuwait and other gulf economies seek strategies to move from natural resource dependency to a “knowledge-based society” and the development of a skilled labor force, the gap between Kuwaiti women’s high educational status and low labor force participation (LFP) must be explored.

Kuwaiti women are among the most highly educated women in the world, and boast significantly higher levels of academic achievement than Kuwaiti males. However, in spite of their high educational attainment, international organizations report female labor force participation (FLFP) in Kuwait as lower than other high-income countries, world averages, many non-Arab Islamic countries, and some gulf countries such as Qatar and the U.A.E. These statistics suggest a lack of female agency and participation in the Kuwaiti economy, creating obstacles to both the wellbeing of women and Kuwait’s future sustainable development.

This research uses in-depth statistical analysis and ethnographic methods of observation and interview with over 56 participants to identify the main social and economic forces shaping the demand and supply of Kuwaiti female labor. To inform the foundation of the study,
interviews and observations seek a deeper understanding of the Kuwaiti woman’s experiences, as well as her own definitions and perceptions of economic agency.

Interestingly, this study finds that two Kuwaiti administrations credibly report female LFP as 15% to 18% higher than international estimates—a discovery supported by interviews and observations, and historical social perceptions of a strong and participative Kuwaiti woman. These numbers include not only the high proportion of migrant labor in Kuwait, but also Kuwaiti female citizens in public and private markets.

Even so, major social and economic obstacles hinder Kuwaiti female (and male) agency to fully and freely participate in the labor market. Obstacles include extreme structural challenges within the public and private sectors, as well as constrictive social perceptions of job roles. Some Kuwaitis believe these obstacles stem from the rapid modernization brought on by oil wealth in the 1950s or by the Islamic movement in the 1980s.

In spite of economic and social obstacles to labor force participation, this research discusses how Kuwaiti women are creating their own paths of economic agency through increased private sector participation and small, informal home-based businesses. In fact, the number of female entrepreneurs running home-based businesses is economically significant but remains largely undocumented, suggesting female LFP may even be higher than Kuwaiti administrations report.
As a whole, this research suggests significantly greater female participation in the labor market than reported by international organizations, contradicting the stereotypical view of a disempowered Middle Eastern woman—a view perhaps too often accepted without question by western research and society.

**Keywords:** Economic development, Economic Sustainability, Arab Gulf, Gulf Cooperation Council countries, Oil-based Economies, Women’s Economic Empowerment, Female Agency, Labor Market