KUWAIT PROGRAMME

YOUTH CITIZENSHIP IDENTITIES IN KUWAIT

THE ROLE OF CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION AND THE KUWAITI *DIWANIYA*

Sam Mejias, Rania Al-Nakib, Abdullah al-Khonaini and Rana Khazbak

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Youth Citizenship Identities in Kuwait: The Role of Citizenship Education and the Kuwaiti *Diwaniya*

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Abstract

Kuwait's nationality and citizenship rules have been contentious since the country's independence in 1961. The rightful claim to full citizenship rights in the oil-rich Gulf state is highly restricted and divided along lines of kinship, religion, gender, ethnicity and nationality, leaving the majority of Kuwait's population excluded from many social privileges. Shaping youth civic identities through education and media messaging is thus an important part of the state's construction of nationalist narratives of Kuwaiti citizenship, and yet there exists no empirical understanding of how young people receive and interpret citizenship education and information, nor how youth activate their citizenship outside of school contexts. This paper shares findings from a study exploring the citizenship education and activism experiences of young people in Kuwait. Findings are based on in-person focus group discussions and interviews with more than 100 secondary school students in Kuwait, and an ethnographic study of three youth-led grassroots groups organising public debates known in Kuwait as *diwaniyas*. The study's findings highlight tensions between young people's perspectives and Kuwaiti official discourses around citizenship identities, rights and participation.

Introduction

Kuwait has often been hailed as the most democratic of the Gulf states – a constitutional emirate with an elected, 50-seat parliament, as well as a mostly-appointed cabinet of ministers and a hereditary *amir*. However, recent years have seen this hybrid model of democracy stalling, as stalemates between elected and appointed officials hinder political, economic or social reform. Educational reform, for example, has been strictly controlled by the more conservative elected officials, leaving Kuwait consistently very low on the leaderboard of international standards despite the country's significant wealth and expenditure on education.[1]

Kuwaiti youth are often cited in official reports and in the media as the drivers of Kuwait's planned shift to a knowledge-based economy. However, their school system appears to be failing to equip them with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that would support such aspirations, with Kuwait's public schools often coming well below average in international standardised tests[2] such as TIMMS and PIRLS, which measure student achievement in maths, science and reading.[3] Kuwaiti social discourse also positions Kuwaiti youth as citizens-in-waiting, rather than agentic citizens capable of participating in democratic processes as youth.[4] This categorisation facilitates the exclusion of young people from decision-making processes in their schools, communities and the state. Alongside such prevailing discourses, the national curriculum and school ethos – ostensibly intended to help youth develop civic competencies to participate in Kuwaiti democracy – are built on a combination of passive learning, and religious infiltration of the curriculum and segregated schools, leaving Kuwaiti students with little or no space to practise any form of democratic citizenship.[5] Yet Kuwait is the one of the first countries in the Arab region to implement a dedicated citizenship education module in public schools based on human rights. While this evidences a commitment to a cosmopolitan, rights-based pedagogical framework for teaching youth what it means to be a Kuwaiti citizen in a globalised world, it clashes with the implicit and explicit civic pedagogy reinforced by religion and educational traditions. While the citizenship education module encourages the formation of an inclusive civic identity, traditions and practices that are in conflict with many rights-based perspectives (for example, gender equality), and which encourage a more context-specific civic identity, are simultaneously reinforced in schools.

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[1] 'Human Capital Country Brief: Kuwait', *World Bank*. Available at: https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/7c9b64c34a8833378194a026ebe4e247-0140022022/related/HCI-AM22-KWT.pdf (accessed 23 September 2024). According to the World Bank's Human Capital Project's 2022 Kuwait Brief, it is estimated that Kuwaiti students attend 12 years of public school; however, once adjusted for what students actually learn, the number of years drops to 7.

[2] 'TIMSS 2019 International Results in Mathematics and Science', *Boston College*. Available at: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/timss2019/international-results (accessed 13 September 2023).

[3] 'PIRLS 2016 International Results in Reading', *Boston College*. Available at: https://timssandpirls.bc.edu/pirls2016/international-results/ (accessed 13 September 2023).

[4] Rania Al-Nakib, 'Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting', *Chatham House Research Paper* (March 2015). Available at: https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/20150408Kuwait.pdf (accessed 13 September 2023).

[5] ibid.

Given this landscape and the tensions between citizenship discourses and civic realities, our study asked how young people understand and experience their civic identities. In schools, we explored tensions of citizenship education and practice by asking students to discuss their civic identity, perceived rights, and spaces where they felt heard. Outside of schools we examined spaces youth created for themselves to fill self-identified gaps in their civic engagement, regarding both their ability to participate in civic life, and in terms of the state's overall engagement in the issues young people find most significant.

Through analysis of student workshops, activist interviews, social media platforms and attendance and participation at civic events, we investigated the range of identities, understandings, and perspectives of Kuwaiti youth regarding their citizenship possibilities and realities. We found that while public institutions such as schools promote conceptions of citizenship tethered to national allegiance and religious obedience, young people in both school and grassroots-activist contexts tend to have a more expansive and nuanced understanding of citizenship, particularly the benefits of cosmopolitan, rights-based forms of citizenship and their potential to confer rights to marginalised groups in Kuwait. The report also found that youth-created discussion platforms offered significant potential to provide counter-spaces for developing broader perspectives on citizenship.

Expressions and Experiences of Citizenship in Kuwait

Ideas and imaginaries of citizenship vary significantly depending on culture, geography, and history, amongst many determinative factors. This is especially evident when comparing so-called 'Western' values of rights-based democratic citizenship emerging from European and North American democratic societies to citizenship traditions and imaginaries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.[6] Using empirical data from Kuwait, Anh Nga Longva identified two characteristics that differentiate the region's conceptualisation of citizenship.[7] First is the discovery and development of vast oil reserves, which coincided with post-independence nation-building efforts by the state in most of these Gulf countries; from the outset, citizenship in oil-rich countries came with access to generous state-provided welfare rights. Second is the perception among citizens in the Gulf and many other Arab countries of being members of the wider Arab and Muslim communities, which play a role in shaping their citizenship identities.

The post-oil rentier economies that developed in Arab Gulf countries have influenced citizenship access, rights and hierarchies in society; scholars have argued that rentierism contributed to authoritarianism and a lack of political participation and civic rights.[8] Since Kuwaiti independence in 1961, the ruling family has been responsible for developing a generous welfare state where all citizens have access to free education, housing, healthcare

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[6] Gianluca Paolo Parolin identifies three levels of citizenship membership in the Arab world: kin-group, religious community and nation-state. Each level comes with its own ideas about individual rights and duties, and the extent to which they are expected to exercise the former and adhere to the latter. See Gianluca P. Parolin, *Citizenship in the Arab World: Kin, Religion and Nation-state* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009).

[7] Anh Nga Longva, *Built on Sand: Migration, Exclusion, and Society in Kuwait* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2001).

[8] Bi Puranen and Olof Widenfalk, 'The Rentier State: Does Rentierism Hinder Democracy?', in Mansoor Moaddel (ed.), *Values and Perceptions of the Islamic and Middle Eastern Publics* (New York: Palgrave Macmilla, 2007), pp. 160–78.

and many additional entitlements.[9] This in turn, has historically propelled the ruling family's political power through ideas of loyalty and gratitude.[10]

Consequently, access to citizenship in Kuwait and many Gulf countries has been extremely restricted, based on a claim to the land and its resources. Gulf ruling regimes have perpetuated historical narratives around an 'imagined community',[11] leading to the exclusion of certain groups who, according to the state, are not members of the community – most prominently the large foreign worker and smaller *bidūn* (stateless) populations.[12]

Arab Gulf societies are not only divided along lines of legal citizenship status but are also characterised by social hierarchies amongst their citizens, or 'de facto tiers of citizenship.'[13] While economic privileges are formally granted to all citizens, they have mainly benefited the ruling family's historically close supporters, namely the *hadhar* (urban merchant families) as opposed to the *badu* (or nomadic tribes).[14] Gender is another dividing line in terms of de facto citizenship rights in Kuwait.[15] Kuwait's adoption of a conservative interpretation of Family Law based on Islamic *sharīʿa* means that women's rights and benefits are derived from their status within a traditional male-breadwinner family model.[16] Accordingly, women are seen as dependent on their male guardians, and their autonomy and citizenship rights (including civic, social and political) are restricted.[17] It was only in 2005 that Kuwaiti women were granted voting rights, after years of women's groups' mobilisation. Furthermore, citizenship is passed through the father, meaning that the children of Kuwaiti women who marry foreigners are denied access to nationality and welfare state benefits.

Finally, religion has a significant influence on citizenship identities and rights in Muslim Arab countries, creating inequalities between their Muslim and non-Muslim populations as well as between different Muslim sects. Besides restricting their naturalisation in Kuwait, non-Muslims in the Arab world in general are largely excluded from the political and public sphere.[18]

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[9] Solomon A. Isiorho, *Kuwait* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002).

[10] Nadia Eldemerdash, 'Being and Belonging in Kuwait: Expatriates, Stateless Peoples and the Politics of Citizenship', *Anthropology of the Middle East* 10/2 (2015), pp. 83–100.

[11] The imagined community represents an idea of a cohesive society that shares a common indigenous culture linked to kinship lineages within the geographical boundaries of a given country. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections On the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983). See also miriam cooke, *Tribal Modern: Branding New Nations in the Arab Gulf* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

[12] Eldemerdash, *Being and Belonging in Kuwait*.

[13] Jane Kinninmont, 'Citizenship in the Gulf', in Ana Echagüe (ed.), *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings* (Dubai: Gulf Research Center, 2013).

[14] Claire Beaugrand, 'Torn Citizenship in Kuwait: Commodification versus Rights-Based Approaches', in Middle East Centre Collected Papers (ed.), *Challenges to Citizenship in the Middle East and North Africa Region* (2015), pp. 19–35.

[15] Mary Ann Tétreault and Haya Al-Mughni, 'Gender, Citizenship and Nationalism in Kuwait', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 22/1-2 (1995), pp. 64–80.

[16] Rania Maktabi, 'Female Citizenship and Family Law in Kuwait and Qatar: Globalization and Pressures for Reform in Two Rentier States', *NIDABA* 1/1 (2016), pp. 20–34.

[17] Haya Al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi Books, 1993).

[18] Parolin, *Citizenship in the Arab World: Kin, Religion and Nation-state*.

Political Participation and the *Diwaniya*

Commenting on research conducted in the Kuwaiti context, Mary Ann Tétreault argues that democracy is a 'moving' concept that takes different shapes in different contexts, whether it is in the form of merchants, government bureaucrats, politicians, tribal leaders, women or youth in contexts such as mosques, civic associations, parliament, the government or the *diwaniya*.[19]

Tétreault defines the *diwaniya* as, 'a room in a house, a campaign tent headquarters, and the meetings that go on in both.'[20] The Kuwaiti *diwaniya* is also often described as a democratic space, where government and opposition members garner support. A male-only space in its inception, it additionally provides networking opportunities for economic elites. As an extension of the home, this private space is protected by constitution and law, making it a significant locus of political participation in Kuwait as, unlike public spaces, it is not as susceptible to government interference or closure.[21]

While the *diwaniya* has undergone changes over time,[22] it has not adapted much to societal changes. Women, though marginally included in *diwaniyas* during elections,[23] have still not been integrated into the traditional patriarchal institution, and this has been mirrored in their inability to achieve meaningful representation within the National Assembly despite political enfranchisement in 2005. The implicit invitational aspect of the *diwaniya* also contributes to its exclusion of 'others', often resulting in echo-chambers rather than spaces for genuine debate.

This exclusionary aspect of the *diwaniya* replicates existing political, economic and social structures and policies that marginalise groups like migrants, women and youth. While young people are expected to attend the *diwaniya* of their kinship group, their involvement has been described as increasingly informal, and it has been questioned whether this more leisurely participation will support the political action that traditional *diwaniyas* have in the past.[24] It has been argued that social media has also negatively impacted attendance in *diwaniyas*, and that youth would rather use the Internet to interact.[25] Fatma Alsalem, however, describes this shift online as an extension of the *diwaniya*, rather than a replacement, offering the potential to be more inclusive of different communities within Kuwait.[26]

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[19] Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2000).

[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Clemens Chay, 'The Dīwāniyya Tradition in Modern Kuwait: An Interlinked Space and Practice', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 6/1 (2016), pp. 1–28.

[23] See Lindsey Stephenson, 'Women and the Malleability of the Kuwaiti Dīwāniyya', *Journal of Arabian Studies* 1/2 (2011), pp. 183–99.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Deborah Wheeler, 'The Internet and Youth Subcultures in Kuwait', *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 8/2,1 (2003).

[26] Fatma Alsalem, 'Kuwait: From "Hollywood of the Gulf" to Social Media *Diwaniyas*', in Carola Richer

Schools Spaces and National Curricula

Kuwaiti schools are homogenous in their compositions and all public schools are segregated by gender.[27] Like the *diwaniya*, the separation of females from males in schools often hinders their ability to develop and sustain networks or connections with those in power, who are almost always males. Public schools in Kuwait are also only open to Kuwaiti citizens. With schools further divided across district lines, they often end up homogenous in their cultural and economic compositions, mimicking the exclusionary aspects of the *diwaniyas*. With citizenship policies, practices and spaces marred by exclusion and inflexibility, the role of education in teaching for more democratic forms of citizenship takes on greater urgency.

Researchers have criticised the lack of credible democratic citizenship education programmes in most Arab and Muslim countries, arguing that their citizenship education curricula – and more so in Gulf countries, including Kuwait – perpetuate an uncritical nationalist citizenship identity marked by notions of patriotism and loyalty to one's nation and leaders.[28] In Kuwait specifically, a static cultural identity is perpetrated, with notions of protecting it from 'deviant' influences of globalisation.[29] While citizenship education in Kuwait does include international perceptions of citizenship and human rights, these usually co-exist with and are undermined by nationalist and conservative values, as well as a reality of exclusion of women and minorities.[30]

The influence of religion is another feature of citizenship education in many Muslim Arab countries.[31] In Kuwait, a singular 'correct' Sunni Islamic identity is endorsed by the national curriculum, leaving no room for critical thinking and standing in tension with the numerous international human rights treaties to which Kuwait is part.[32]

While many would agree that the goal of citizenship education is the development of 'good democratic citizens', in practice it lies on a continuum gravitating towards either conservative or progressive orientations.[33] A more conservative approach to citizenship education works to reproduce existing socio-economic structures and to inculcate national loyalty and political obedience. This can render the diversity of experiences within multicultural societies invisible, with curriculum focusing instead on communicating knowledge about the political system, laws, and rights and responsibilities, with little space for alternative

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and Carola Kozman, *Arab Media Systems* (Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2022), pp. 163–80.

[27] Rania Al-Nakib, 'Citizenship, Nationalism, Human Rights and Democracy: A Tangling of Terms in the Kuwaiti Curriculum', *Educational Research* 53/2 (2011), pp. 165–78.

[28] Muhammad Faour, *A Review of Citizenship Education in the Arab Nations* (Beirut: Carnegie, 2011).

[29] Al-Nakib, 'Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting'.

[30] Ibid.

[31] Religious influence – specifically different ways of interpreting religions – can limit the realisation of democratic, critical and inclusive ideals. See Bradley James Cook, 'Egypt's National Education Debate', *Comparative Education* 36/4 (2000), pp. 477–90.

[32] Al-Nakib, 'Education and Democratic Development in Kuwait: Citizens in Waiting'.

[33] Daniel Schugurensky and John P. Myers, 'Citizenship Education: Theory, Research, and Practice', *Encounters on Education* 4/1-10 (2003).

viewpoints or criticality.[34] Such approaches have been criticised as superficial,[35] marginalising and homogenising,[36] and promote an imagined national narrative that often excludes various groups.

On the other hand, more progressive approaches to citizenship education promote a dynamic citizenship identity, social justice, critical analysis and cosmopolitanism, as well as active, inclusive and broad forms of participation.[37] This involves active reflection on the multiple communities that an individual identifies with on various levels – local, national, regional and global[38] – and the consequent development of a consciousness of being part of shared human and democratic cultures or communities.[39] In what is also referred to as a 'maximal' conception of citizenship, citizens are responsible for actively questioning and extending their immediate realities.[40] In such an approach, transformative (rather than simply legal) citizens act to promote ideals such as justice and equality, even if it violates existing laws; the aim of education is to help students become such transformative citizens.[41]

Methodology

The main objectives of the study were to build a picture of the current state of citizenship education in Kuwaiti schools, as well as the state of youth civic activism in Kuwait as it relates to youth civic identity formation; and to explore citizenship discourses and practices to better understand the lived experiences of Kuwaiti students.

The study's research question asked: How do young people conceptualise their civic identities in relation to what they are taught about citizenship in school, and in relationship to their lived experiences in Kuwaiti society?

The study adopts an interpretivist social constructionist approach, which emphasises understanding the social world as it is directly experienced and understood by actors themselves.[42] Given the dearth of research about Kuwaiti youth, the study prioritises the understanding of young people's perceptions and collective constructions of meaning about their citizenship status and identities.[43] These methods help to accurately depict

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34 Joan G. DeJaeghere, 'Critical Citizenship Education for Multicultural Societies', *Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy* 2/2 (2009), pp. 223–36.

35 James A. Banks, 'Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age', *Educational Researcher* 37/3 (2008), pp. 129–39.

36 Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey, 'Learning for Cosmopolitan Citizenship: Theoretical Debates and Young People's Experiences', *Educational Review* 55/3 (2003), pp. 243–54.

37 DeJaeghere, 'Critical Citizenship Education for Multicultural Societies', pp. 223–36.

38 James A. Banks, 'Human Rights, Diversity, and Citizenship Education', *The Educational Forum* 73/2 (2009), pp. 100–10.

39 Audrey Osler and Hugh Starkey, *Changing Citizenship* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005).

40 Terence H. McLaughlin, 'Citizenship, Diversity and Education: A Philosophical Perspective', *Journal of Moral Education* 21/3 (1992), pp. 235–50.

41 Banks, 'Diversity, Group Identity, and Citizenship Education in a Global Age'.

42 Kenneth Gergen, *An Invitation to Social Construction* (London: Sage Publications, 2015).

43 Thomaes A. Schwandt, 'Constructivist, Interpretivist Approaches to Human Inquiry', in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

the discursive environment framing the delivery of citizenship education, while simultaneously assessing how students and young people outside of a school context understand both discourses and learning experiences of citizenship education.

We selected a small sample of three schools in Kuwait and conducted participatory citizenship workshops with 11th and 12th grade students. We intended to visit 9 schools across three visits, but the COVID-19 pandemic limited fieldwork to only one visit, to 1 public boys' school, 1 public girls' school and 1 private international co-ed school. Conducting a purposive sampling, we also sought to identify spaces within social media and non-school physical spaces where citizenship was being deliberated. We identified what we have termed 'democratic *diwaniyas*' as examples of youth-led citizenship initiatives that reveal how citizenship is understood, constructed and enacted in Kuwaiti society. Highlighting three particular civic participation groups who engaged in staging *diwaniya*-style events, we first conducted content analysis of their public activity on Instagram, Twitter and YouTube, before attending their events and interviewing activists from these three groups.

We employed ethnographic methods that sought to characterise the discursive environment framing citizenship in both schools and the 'democratic *diwaniyas*'. In schools, we employed a social constructionism[44] approach in our workshops with students to uncover their own views on their identities and the spaces where they felt their voices were heard. To analyse the *diwaniya* online and at in-person events we incorporated ethnographic approaches to examining youth citizenship, which have been shown to be a particularly effective means to gauge the views and perspectives of young people while offering more autonomy and agency to youth to articulate their own stories than surveys or close-ended interviews might.[45] We spent two years following our selected three groups on social media, attending events, and communicating with group members multiple times. For both the schools and *diwaniyas* data, we undertook a thematic analysis that sought to uncover different themes and patterns regarding how young people interpret and construct their citizenship realities and experiences within their socio-cultural contexts.[46]

School Workshops

A sample size of 109 school students participated in the study,[46] 66 of whom identified themselves as female and 43 as male (Appendix 1). The majority were Kuwaiti nationals (n=90), while the rest of the sample consisted of Arab (n=7) and non-Arab (n=3) nationalities. Students of mixed backgrounds were also included (n=4), as well as *bidūn* (n=1). Out of the 109 student participants, 72 were public school students and 37 were private school students.

Publication, 2015), pp. 221–59.

[44] Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin, 1966).

[45] Shakuntala Banaji, Sam Mejias and Benjamin De La Pava Velez, 'The Significance of Ethnography in Youth Participation Research: Active Citizenship in the UK after the Brexit Vote', *Social Studies* 15/2 (2018), pp. 97–115.

[46] Richard Boyatzis, *Transforming Qualitative Information: Thematic Analysis and Code Development* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998).

In each school, we visited one classroom for a 45-minute session. During the session, students were asked to take part in two individual activities and one group exercise. In the first activity, students were given a worksheet and asked to describe their identities using five separate words. The second activity asked students to rank spaces where they felt heard: their school, community, family and the internet. For the final activity, students worked in groups on a large two-sided poster, where they debated and wrote down the rights and freedoms they have in Kuwait and those they believe are restricted.

Youth-led Democratic *Diwaniyas*

The study identified three youth-led groups – Cross Cultural *Diwaniya*, *Niqashna*, and *Hewar* – that have adapted a *diwaniya* style in creating a space to express different opinions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted bilingually in Arabic and English with the founders of each *diwaniya* over a period of two years between 2020 and 2022, with one in-depth interview conducted per *diwaniya* group. The two Kuwait-based researchers also employed ethnographic participant-observation both in-person and virtually to better understand how each *diwaniya* operated, whom they attract and how attendees responded to discussed topics both in-person and online.

Initial interview questions, while open-ended and flexible, focused on the formation and evolution of these *diwaniyas*, and how young people in particular have responded to their formation. Further questions also sought to gain insight on where and how *diwaniya* youth organisers had gained their perspectives on Kuwaiti citizenship.

The Narrative of Kuwaiti Youth: In Their Own Voices[47]

School Workshops

This section presents findings from the three workshops in Kuwaiti secondary schools before linking the data to the spaces youth have created for themselves through *diwaniyas*.

Identity: Who they are (and who they are not)

In each workshop, students were presented with a template that provided five blank spaces to fill in with words they felt expressed their identity, in order of importance (Appendix 1). While our sample size was relatively small (109 students across three schools), there were some striking similarities and differences that, even without generalising to the larger Kuwaiti youth population, warrant discussion and further investigation. The figures below categorise and summarise the participants' responses to the activity.

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[47] Student responses either appear in their original English in the case of the private school responses or have been translated from Arabic by the writers of this report in the case of the public school responses.

Figure 1: References to Character Traits/Interests, Religion, Nationality and Arab/
Khaleeji – as Identity
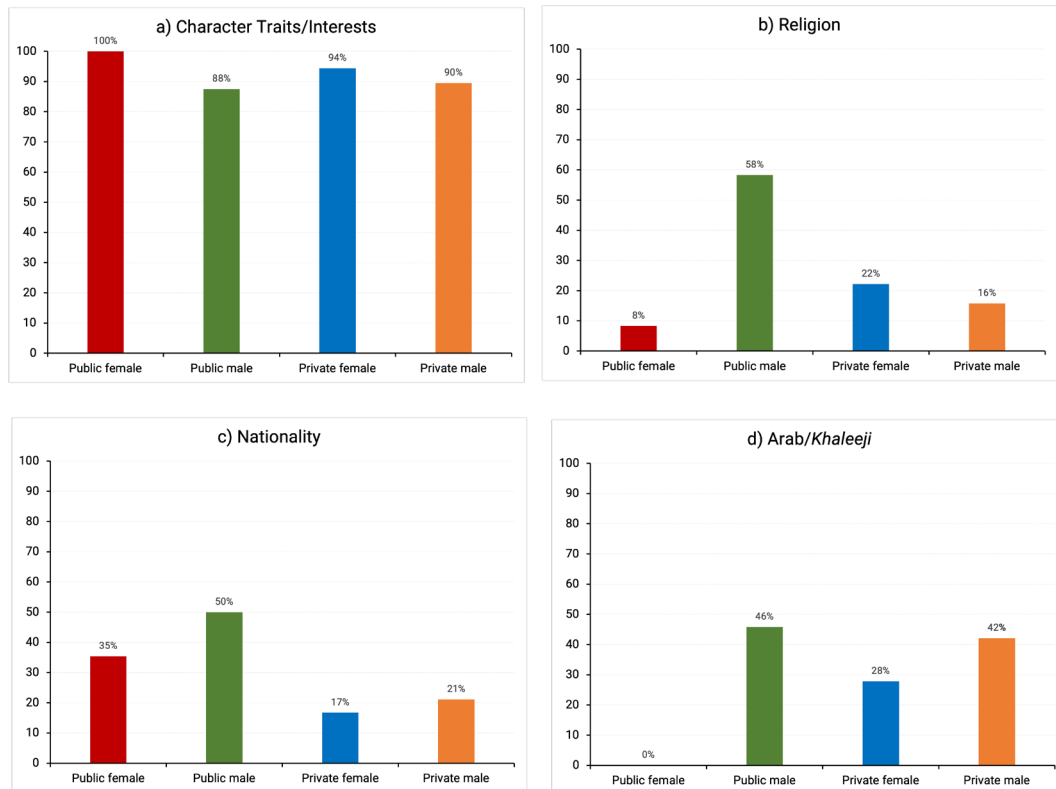
Nationality as well as an Arab/Gulf affiliation was mentioned more frequently by males, both in public and private schools (Figures 1c and 1d). Not a single female out of 48 in the public schools mentioned being Arab or from the Gulf (Figure 1d). Moreover, private school students mentioned nationality much less frequently than public school students. Possibilities that could account for this include the more multicultural make-up of private school populations, the fact that they do not follow the state curriculum, and their socio-economic privilege.

Another, even more striking difference arose with religion (Figure 1b). Being Muslim was mentioned by 75% of public school males, while approximately 6% of females in the public school listed religion as an element of their identity. Most of the males mentioned religion in the top two spaces, while the females allocated it to the last space. In the private school, just under 25% of students mentioned Islam, with an almost equal split across males and females. Considering the patriarchal approach to religious content in the national curricula, the results are less surprising. If girls are made to feel subjugated by their religion, they may not identify with it. As mentioned, the Islamic Studies curriculum in Kuwait also favours a Sunni interpretation. The public schools visited in the study are in predominantly Sunni districts; none of the students mentioned their religious sect in the public schools; the only student to mention his Islamic sect was a Shiʿa male in the private school.

In terms of gender, below are two tables of personality traits and interests mentioned by the females and males in the workshops.

Table 1: Examples of the Personality Traits and Interests Mentioned by Females

• responsible	• patient	• cold	• I love to draw
• forgiving	• passionate	• adventurous	• I love to debate
• cooperative	• peaceful	• independent	• I have a hobby: riding horses
• tolerant	• positive	• funny	
• hot-blooded	• leader	• charismatic	• I love to read
• moody	• strong	• open-minded	• my level at school is bad though I am smart because I don't like school
• humane	• sociable	• down-to-earth	
• stubborn	• introvert	• humanity	
• ambitious	• smart	• excellence	
• shy	• I am proud of and I love my mother	• Spendthrift	
• mysterious		• I like wasting time	

Table 2: Examples of the Personality Traits and Interests Mentioned by Males

• achievement	• espect	• resolute
• norms and traditions	• knowledge	• moody
• manners	• good reputation	• athletic
• contentment	• self confidence	• sociable
• generosity	• leader	• smart
• reader	• law-abiding	• defending the nation
• principles	• purposeful	• securing my future
• ambitions	• responsible	• preserving Islam
• courage	• optimistic	• a strength for the country

The students identified themselves as (imperfect) individuals, with traits that make them uniquely human. There were some variations that reflected broad cultural ideas of gender (e.g. males as 'athletic' and females as 'passionate') but also many shared traits ('leader,' 'ambitious,' and 'sociable'). They did not define themselves by their career interests or as future citizens like many official reports do. Some defined themselves as Kuwaitis, despite being under 18 and yet to receive their official citizenship documents. This illustrates that they see themselves as citizens now, although as the next section details, they are acutely aware of limitations on their ability to participate.

Rights they have and do not have

For the second research activity, students were divided into small groups, and given a large poster that was mostly blank. On the front of the poster, students wrote about the rights they feel are recognised in Kuwait. On the back, students wrote about the rights they feel are being violated. Across all classes and schools, the fronts of the posters – which indicated rights they believed they possessed – had very little writing on them. Moreover, the rights on the front were largely limited to short, basic human needs, such as 'shelter,' 'food,' and 'healthcare.' In contrast, the backs of the posters – the rights they feel are violated – were covered with writing.

By far, the most frequently mentioned violation was gender inequality. A number of issues were noted:

- Girls/women do not have the freedom to live the life they want and aspire to; they cannot be and do the things they value in life.

- There are double standards in treatment and in granting of freedoms to boys/men compared to girls/women.

- Men have more personal freedom and choice in terms of education, work, marriage, travel, hairstyle, clothes, friends, etc; conversely, females do not have the freedom to express themselves and their opinions freely, study abroad, or marry someone outside their religion or their social class.

The students blamed these inequalities on 'conservative', 'dogmatic' and 'backward' societal norms and traditions. A related issue only mentioned by private school participants were LGBTQ rights and the lack of freedom of gender or sexuality. At least one participant highlighted this as a 'sensitive topic' on their poster.

The second most frequently mentioned issue was lack of freedom of expression/speech. Here students also mentioned 'taboos' and intolerance towards opinions challenging traditional norms and religious beliefs. Also cited were regulation of media and the press, and lack of freedom to critique the government.

Inequality and social injustice were also frequent topics. Private school students focused more on inequalities between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis (migrant workers) in terms of benefits, opportunities, equal pay, healthcare and land/property ownership. Public school students also highlighted the lack of equal education and healthcare rights for children of migrants and the *bidūn*. Private school participants mentioned non-Kuwaitis not having the right to be in positions of power and that, even among Kuwaitis, only people who belong to powerful families get political positions. Public school students also mentioned nepotism as a form of inequality of opportunity. Most students across public and private schools felt they personally do not enjoy the right to political equality, inclusion and participation.

While the right to education and healthcare were mentioned in the rights they enjoy, public school students mentioned the poor quality of state education and school facilities, contrasting them with private schools. They also talked about the violation of their rights and freedoms in school – e.g. their right to participate and have their voices heard.

Spaces in which they feel heard and not heard[48]

Students were asked to rank the spaces (family, school, community and online) where they feel most heard, and overwhelmingly selected their families. Figures 2 to 5 below summarise how students ranked where they feel least and most heard.

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[48] Please note that percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Figure 2: Girls' Public School Rankings of Spaces in Which They Feel Heard
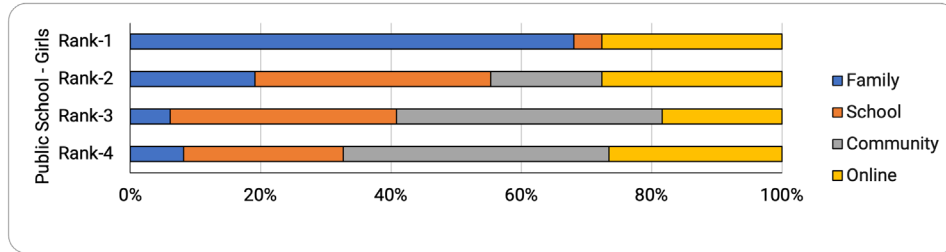

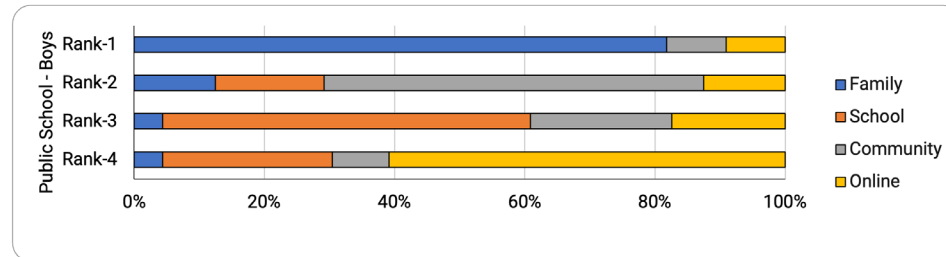Figure 3: Boys' Public School Rankings of Spaces in Which They Feel Heard

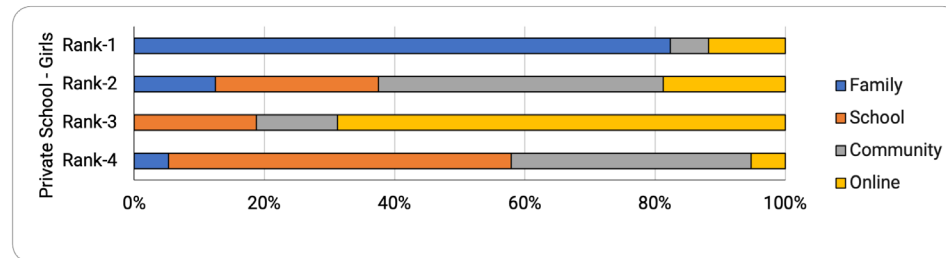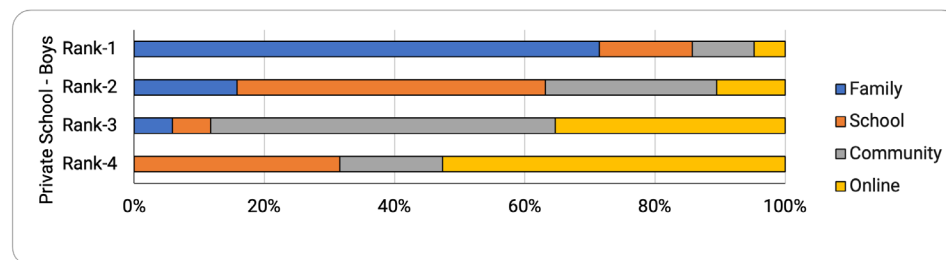Figure 4: Girls' Private School Rankings of Spaces in Which They Feel Heard

Figure 5: Boys' Private School Rankings of Spaces in Which They Feel Heard

In ranking four, where students feel least heard, school, community and online each received a third of the votes: online (35%), school (32%), and the community (29%). 42% of the female respondents ranked community as the space where they feel least heard, compared to 12% of males. One girl commented that the home and community are sexist and ranked online as her top space where she feels heard. Three of the males added '*diwaniya*' next to their ranking of the community as a space they feel heard (ranked second by each).

While *diwaniyas* are held in homes, these students viewed this space as distinct. Males ranked online last more frequently than females (56% compared with 22%). One could ask: do females turn to online platforms because they have more social restrictions? Does the anonymity of online spaces make it easier for females to express themselves without fear of judgement? Are young Kuwaiti females more tech-savvy, and if so, why?

Although online received the most votes as the lowest ranking at 35%, it also came second after family as the number one spot (with about 17% of the votes). This dichotomy can be partially explained by the gender discrepancy mentioned above, but there may also be issues surrounding access and computer literacy. However, as it had the most votes after family, many youth see online as an important space where they can be heard. Overall, the findings suggest that students do not feel heard in most spaces they occupy outside of their homes. The following section explores spaces Kuwaiti youth have created for themselves to discuss civic issues.

Kuwaiti Youth and the Democratic *Diwaniyas*

Across Kuwait, imaginaries of youth citizenship appear in mainstream media and in academic studies, conceptualising youth as 'a tech savvy, technology driven generation, both influencing and being influenced by social media', who leverage the internet to facilitate 'cross-gender interaction in a gender-segregated society, interrupt traditional social rituals, and [achieve] youth autonomy and freedom across cyberspace.'[49] While this description paints an optimistic and dynamic picture of how Kuwaiti youth are building new frameworks and practices for youth civic identity, it belies the role of traditions and religion in shaping such a reality. As such, our research team was committed to understanding how youth activate their civic identities outside of a formal education context.

As we explored youth-created spaces in Kuwait, three stood out for their innovation and engagement: Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya* (CCD), *Niqashna*, and *Hewar*. These were online and hybrid *diwaniyas* created by Kuwaiti youth. Described by the founders as 'the evolution of the *diwaniya*', 'more democratic *diwaniyas*' and 'modernised *diwaniyas*', each retains crucial features of the traditional institution described above, while throwing off more constraining elements.

Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya* (CCD) was founded by two college friends – a male and a female in their 20s. Both began civic work as teenagers and attended private schools, with English being their more dominant language. They started CCD as a non-segregated *diwaniya* in one of the founder's homes, before moving to public spaces like cafes and shared workspaces. The format was a small, informal discussion, often led by an invited moderator and conducted in English. The founders' goal was to build constructive dialogue on topics of concern in society – something they felt was lacking in the *diwaniyas* of their elders.

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[49] Radhika Lakshminarayanan, 'Youth Development in Kuwait: Dimensions of Civic Participation and Community Engagement Towards Nation Building', *Digest of Middle East Studies* 29/2 (2020), pp. 230–50.

Niqashna (Arabic for 'our discussion') was founded by two males – relatives in their 20s. After living in the US and being influenced by debates during US President Barack Obama's presidential campaign, one decided that the level of conversation in Kuwait's *diwaniyas* was not conducive to good debate. The other shared that they wanted to introduce something like London's Speaker's Corner. And so *Niqashna* was born – part formal, structured debate and part informal dialogue. It was important to the founders that people commit to hearing what the other side has to say and to discussing matters respectfully. For each topic, the founders invited nominations for speakers on both sides of the issue. Their events – usually attended by over 100 people – were held in diverse public spaces with video recordings posted online, where the debate would often continue.

Hewar (Arabic for 'dialogue') was founded by four college students – by their own admission, rivals in very volatile university student elections. They collaborated precisely because of their differing views. During the pandemic, political discourse gave way to health issues in most traditional media. And social media, they felt, did not cover tough issues that matter to citizens and residents. This, coupled with the fact that they noticed people were missing their traditional *diwaniyas* – now closed because of the social distancing laws – led the founders to launch an online platform that became politically influential during the 2020 elections, inviting audience members to listen and respond to speakers discussing a wide range of issues.

A common complaint across the three groups was that the topics being discussed in old-school *diwaniyas* were not ones that concerned young people. Below are some of the topics covered by the three groups.

Table 3: Cross-Cultural *Diwaniya* Topics

- Human rights and transformative citizenship
- A conversation about the future of GCC women
- Censorship in the age of technology
- The legal pitfalls of starting a business
- Donating material vs. donating time: Which is more effective?
- Preserving identity within clashing cultures
- The Kuwaiti environment and how to improve it
- Introduction to digital currency
- Benefits of cultural exchange
- The role of domestic workers within the Kuwaiti society
- 'Ramadrama'
- Taboo: Living alone in Kuwait
- Drugs: Distribution, addiction, and impact on mental health and society
- China: Kuwait's new comrade
- Sound for a new generation (Media consumption in Kuwait: What's missing and what needs to go)
- Kuwait's new urban infrastructure: Benefit or inconvenience?
- The landscape of entrepreneurship in Kuwait
- Sports are back, now what?
- The quality of education in Kuwait
- The importance of women in politics
- Moving: Why nationals are living abroad
- How are you influenced?
- The importance of gender relations education
- The Kuwaiti coffee movement
- Social integration as a national security tool
- Citizenship for children of Kuwaiti women
- The meaning of passion: What does it really mean to 'do what you love'?
- Plastic: Purpose, impact, innovation, recycling and reusing
- Anti-corruption in Kuwait
- Artificial intelligence: Human's fate in the hands of machines
- Covid-19 in Kuwait: Analysing the pandemic from a health, economic and social perspective
- Evaluating the democratic climate and the 2020 Kuwait National Assembly elections

Table 4: *Niqashna* Topics

- Arranged marriage vs. love marriage
- Should the children of Kuwaiti women be granted citizenship?
- Kuwait's demographics: An imminent crisis or a potential opportunity?
- The use of social media today in Kuwait – beneficial or toxic?
- Do you support the separation of religion and state?
- Are cryptocurrencies here to stay?
- Freedom of speech in Kuwait: Is more needed?
- Does the parliament support or hinder Kuwait's advancement?
- Domestic workers in Kuwait: Are we modern-day slave owners?
- Do you support censorship of books?
- Should fresh graduates work in the public or private sector?
- Merry Christmas: Are foreign holidays endangering our identity?
- Should the government purchase loans owed by citizens?
- Would you support allowing alcoholic drinks?
- Do you support the parliamentary proposal to pay women a salary to stay at home?
- Should sex ed be compulsory in the high school curriculum?
- Our experiences with the coronavirus pandemic – medical sector
- Our experiences with the coronavirus pandemic – food and beverages sector
- Which is more dangerous: Coronavirus or economic shutdown?
- Government support for small enterprises: A political compliment or an economic benefit?
- COVID-19 vaccination

Table 5: *Hewar* Topics

- Was the Kuwait National Assembly absent from the political scene during the pandemic?
- The demographic crisis: Is it too late?
- E-Learning at Kuwait University: To where?
- COVID-19 pandemic: From a health crisis to an economic one
- The political and social implications of racist discourse in Kuwait
- Small businesses in Kuwait: Are they an added value or a cost?
- Kuwait: Between hopes of integrity and the reality of corruption
- COVID-19 pandemic: From a health crisis to an educational one
- Defending public funds in Kuwait: Is it fighting corruption or settling other issues?

Data analysis of our interviews and the *diwaniyas*' online platforms uncovered three major themes: adoption of strategies to stay private and avoid official attention; an emphasis on inclusivity; and facilitation of active listening practices.

Strategies of Visibility and Invisibility

All three diwaniyas retained the 'private' designation of the traditional diwaniya, despite holding in-person meetings in public spaces and online. By using this tactic, the founders were able to avoid registering as NGOs or other public entities, which means their events often flew under the radar. One founder explained, 'Our topics can be very controversial, and we do not want to be censored [...] There is always that grey line, where if we are registered, how far can we really go?' Another founder similarly stated, '[W]hen you are not known much, nobody cares [...] When you start making noise, you have to be careful [...] how you are framing things.' While all three groups covered very controversial and polarising topics, none faced any issues with the law. Only once was an event on a controversial issue cancelled twice at two different venues, before the founders decided to let it go.[50]

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[50] Note that this topic title was left off the list above to preserve confidentiality.

Prioritising Inclusivity

The democratic *diwaniyas* were considerably more inclusive than traditional *diwaniyas*. Taking the *diwaniya* out of the home, organisers used public venues, encouraged female and inter-generational participation, and foregrounded inclusion as a means to discuss sensitive topics normally only debated by men in society. CCD, which conducted their *diwaniyas* in English as led by their founders, included English-speaking residents into their discussions. However, for Kuwaitis attending, using English excluded most who did not attend Western schools. *Niqashna*'s founders, though bilingual, held debates in Arabic to include all Kuwaitis. *Hewar*'s founders are first language Arabic speakers, and, because their topics were largely centred around politics and campaigns, Arabic was their only option. Using Arabic, while more inclusive of all citizens, excludes non-Arabic-speaking residents, as is the case with traditional *diwaniyas*.

In the interviews, all three groups described their spaces as being more inclusive of women. Many invited speakers and audience in all three groups' events were women.[51] However, one group felt that not having female founders was a hindrance to their inclusivity. They blamed this failure to include women on cultures of gender segregation in Kuwait. When women are isolated from men in schools and excluded from *diwaniyas*, they cannot form the networks needed to penetrate the political arena in Kuwait. One founder described the situation:

> Women will find it hard to work in student unions at university because men make it hard for them or monopolise the leadership positions. [...] When women join the political parties, the parties push forward [...] the people who worked in student unions. Unfortunately, the nature of the work in student unions at universities in Kuwait is very patriarchal and sexist; it is one of Kuwait's defects.

When Kuwait's #metoo movement exploded onto social media in 2020, none of the three groups covered the issue. The mainly male-led groups either missed or chose not to engage with a topic that was hugely important and impactful to women in Kuwait. CCD's female founder shifted gears and co-created Mudhawi's List – an Instagram account to highlight and support women running in the 2020 elections. Women are most certainly present online and in public arenas, but efforts like Mudhawi's List show that women are taking action to create new forms of civic expression, and fighting archaic and unjust laws.[52] Through the civil society group *Gray Area*, they are demanding equal marriage and nationality rights for Kuwaiti women and children. Women are fighting sexual harassment and femicide in *Lan Asket* (Arabic for 'I will not be quiet').[53] Sharing such experiences in Kuwait is considered taboo, and like the females in our student workshops, these groups are frustrated with the injustices faced by women in Kuwait. These developments raise questions: who is listening to Kuwaiti women, as well as to the youth in the democratic *diwaniyas*?

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[51] One founder of CCD is female, while the remaining founders interviewed of all three groups are male.

[52] For example, regarding honour killing in the Abolish 153 campaign.

[53] Lan Asket is a movement and a hashtag born out of frustration with the man-splaining in place of listening that kept happening when women would bring up the sexual harassment and violence they face.

Facilitating Active Listening Practices

The third and final theme was active listening as a key element of the three *diwaniyas*' efforts. Active citizenship is often described with words like agency, freedom of speech, having a voice and the right to be heard. Listening, however, is rarely described as an element of active citizenship.[54]

During interviews, members of the groups seemed more attuned to the notion of using their spaces as sites of active listening, rather than simply a place to give people a voice. One founder from CCD shared:

> In some cases we listen to reply, rather than to understand, and that is one thing I want to accomplish [...] in the *diwaniya*. You are sitting down, one person has the microphone [...] he or she takes his time to speak and you listen to every single word and digest it and properly understand where he or she is coming from – in order to see from a different perspective that you don't normally see.

A similar openness to active listening was seen at *Niqashna*'s debate on sex education in Kuwaiti schools. After the debate, doctors in the audience shared graphic stories of medical issues their patients faced due to a lack of knowledge about safe sex. Women shared personal stories of sexual harassment, attributed to a lack of sex education and subsequent understanding surrounding respect and consent. An older gentleman explained to the audience that he had come to the debate completely against sex education and was prepared to argue for that side. However, after listening to the women and doctors speak, he realised there was much he did not know about this issue, and had completely changed his mind. Would this man have had a similar change of heart had this same topic been discussed in the traditional *diwaniya* setting, where he would likely have only encountered like-minded men? In this context – where new and old perspectives on culture, identity and tradition clash – active listening holds particular promise.

The democratic *diwaniyas* discussed above aim to challenge and extend the modern understanding of what a *diwaniya* can and should be. Although they still face significant barriers to building wider support for the discussion of difficult and controversial topics, they are contributing to the evolution of Kuwait as a democratic state.

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[54] As Lacey puts it, 'Listening is at the heart of what it means to be in the world, to be active, to be political. Thinking in this way about listening as a political action in and of itself is strangely counterintuitive. Listening tends to be taken for granted, a natural mode of reception that is more passive than active, but listening is [...] a critical category that ought to be right at the heart of any consideration of public life.' See Kate Lacey, *Listening Publics: The Politics and Experience of Listening in the Media Age* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2013).

Conclusions

This study explored Kuwaiti secondary school students' conceptualisations of their citizenship identities, duties and rights, to better understand the gap between young people's view of themselves as citizens, and the formal and informal ways they learn what citizenship in Kuwait is. Simultaneously, we investigated the actions and perspectives of three grassroots, youth-led 'democratic *diwaniyas*' to understand how young people in Kuwaiti society outside of a school context conceptualised and activated their citizenship. In both cases, we found that young people were able to adeptly balance multiple citizenship identities, such as their affinity to Kuwait the nation, alongside expanding ideas about what rights-based citizenship can offer present and future generations of young people and marginalised groups. This section summarises the findings before offering modest recommendations that could underpin an agenda for promoting active youth citizenship in Kuwait.

Schools as spaces of mixed citizenship learning

In schools, despite learning for cosmopolitan, maximal[55] ideas of citizenship and human rights, students also reported citizenship perspectives that could be viewed as nationalistic. Of particular note was a gender difference between boys, who were more likely to identify with their national, regional, religious and familial communities, versus girls, who were less likely to do so. Students demonstrated a strong understanding and agreement with what they are taught in school about citizenship identities and human rights. However, they were simultaneously critical about the contrast between the rights claimed to be protected by the law in their Constitution and Human Rights textbook and the realities they experienced and witnessed daily as citizens. They also reported that traditional norms and religious beliefs are hindrances to acquiring women's rights and freedom of speech. Although viewing citizenship as constituting rights, freedoms, social equality and justice, they felt that they do not fully enjoy these rights and freedoms, noting inequalities between Kuwaitis and non-Kuwaitis. Students' dissections of the gaps between the citizenship 'haves' and 'have-nots' suggests a sophisticated understanding of the differentiated and unequal civic realities in Kuwait. The findings reveal significant tensions and fragmentations in Kuwaiti youth civic identity formation that warrant further study.

Diwaniyas as spaces for the facilitation of progressive citizenship practices

Our study of 'democratic *diwaniyas*' revealed ample evidence of young Kuwaitis activating civic spaces and debates, attempting to push forward discourse on citizenship possibilities in the 21st century. The study also showed that despite the successes of these grassroots efforts, they exist in a fragile context where selected topics might push too far against local conservative norms. The tactics used by these groups to ensure privacy in some ways mirrored the traditional *diwaniya* format, but were aimed to allow discussion of sensitive topics. In attempting to avoid censorship, groups were forced to make decisions to protect

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55 McLaughlin, 'Citizenship, Diversity and Educatio, pp. 235–50.

themselves, often rendering their efforts less visible and more precarious, demonstrating the lack of unchecked freedom that permeated such efforts. One important finding from our study is that women were much more likely to be included in the democratic *diwaniyas* – either as participants or as the subjects of discussion topics, although they were not well represented in the leadership.

Unlike school textbooks and teaching practices, which un-reflexively elevate Islamic law and pedagogy as the primary lens of a citizenship imaginary, 'democratic *diwaniyas*' create desegregated, safe spaces to debate pressing issues absent in textbooks. They cross the censorship boundaries of Kuwaiti social and political discourse to create sanctuaries for free speech. Kuwaiti youth of different backgrounds are questioning and expanding understandings of citizenship in ways schools do not allow. Our study revealed that there is more to learn about how school stakeholders negotiate the gap between official pedagogy and youth spaces in wider society that push firmly against the constricts of national religious interpretations.

Recommendations

This study offers modest recommendations in the recognition that our results do not generalise but reflect a cross-section of youth life in Kuwait. Findings from the study suggest that young people would benefit from more spaces and opportunities to participate in civic life, both inside and outside of school settings. Faced with the challenge of delivering a mandated citizenship education curriculum focused on universal human rights in the context of a nationalistic and religious pedagogical tradition, schools have a clear role to play in facilitating critical learning about the complexities and challenges of citizenship in Kuwait and globally. This is complicated by the strength and intransigence of cultural and religious traditions, which can obscure the voices of women and non-Kuwaitis that remain on the margins of civic society. Where possible, our overall recommendation is that future Kuwaiti citizenship education efforts should endeavour to deepen and contextualise global and cosmopolitan citizenship pedagogies to consider tensions with country- and region-specific national identities.

Desegregation of state schools, while perhaps unrealistic, could offer a means to reimagine the experiences of young men and women in Kuwaiti society, by removing some of the existing cultural barriers that either reinforce or encourage patriarchal traditions. This kind of effort would need to be accompanied by pedagogical strategies to confront and educate young people about gender equality.

For the *diwaniyas*, our recommendations reflect the reality and challenges of youth-led progressive activism in contemporary Kuwait. The 'democratic *diwaniyas*' model holds significant potential for becoming an inclusive and innovative platform for intergenerational dialogue, and for broaching controversial and difficult topics that many Kuwaitis clearly find important to them. Yet the ability to advance such platforms is significantly hindered by three factors: (1) the potential for public censorship by government, and the chilling effect this can have on efforts to push the boundaries of civic and political

discourse in Kuwait; (2) the inability of sustaining ad-hoc, grassroots-driven actions due to burnout or lack of leadership; and (3) the exclusion of women and non-Kuwaitis in the design of such spaces. In all three of the *diwaniya* groups, efforts were heavily driven by the motivation of a few key (usually male) leaders who often ran out of energy or time on these projects. We recommend that the government seize on the potential of the *diwaniya*'s structure, to support increased participation of young people through new civic initiatives that encourage active listening as a first step in becoming transformative citizens.

APPENDIX 1: Sample Characteristics and Participant Data

Table 1: Sample Characteristics

Sex	Female	66
	Male	43
School Type	Girls Public School	48
	Boys Public School	24
	Mixed Private Intl. School	37
Nationality	Kuwaiti	90
	Other Arab Nationality	7
	Mixed (Half Kuwaiti)	3
	Mixed Other	1
	Bidūn	1
	Other Nationality	3
	Not Known	4
Total	**109**	

Table 2: Participants in 2 Gender-Segregated Public Schools

Nationality	Kuwaiti	65
	Mixed (Half Kuwaiti)	2
	Bidūn	1
	Not Known	4
Gender	Female	48
	Male	24
Total	**72**	

Table 3: Participants in Co-Ed Private International School

Nationality	Kuwaiti	25
	Arab Other	7
	Mixed (Half Kuwaiti)	1
	Mixed Other	1
	Other Nationality	3
Gender	Female	18
	Male	19
Total	37	

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