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## Comparing Kuwaiti Children's Perceptions of Gender Roles : An Educational Social Perspective

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lthough Kuwait is progressing towards increased women's rights and gender expectations are being challenged in a variety of ways, traditional gender roles still dominate in many Kuwaiti people's minds, including children. In this paper, I used qualitative interview methods to compare the responses of Kuwaiti elementary school boys and school girls towards household gender roles. The findings from these interviews are analyzed within the framework of social constructivism. The results show that elementary children in Kuwait still hold onto certain traditional gender roles, particularly when it comes to domestic roles like cooking, cleaning, and other housework.

**Keywords:** Kuwait; gender roles; children; social constructivism

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### الملخص

على الرغم من أن الكويت تتقدم نحو زيادة حقوق المرأة ويتم تحدي التوقعات الجنوسية بطرق متنوعة ، إلا أن الأدوار التقليدية للجنسين لا تزال مهيمنة في أذهان العديد من الكويتيين ، بما في ذلك الأطفال. في هذا البحث ، استخدمت أساليب المقابلة النوعية لجمع البيانات ومقارنة استجابات الأولاد و البنات في المدارس الابتدائية الكويتية تجاه أدوار الجنسين في الأسرة. تم تحليل نتائج هذه المقابلات في إطار النظرية البنائية الاجتماعية من منظور تربوي اجتماعي. تظهر النتائج أن أطفال المدارس الابتدائية في الكويت لا يزالون متمسكين ببعض الأدوار التقليدية للجنسين ، لا سيما عندما يتعلق الأمر بالأدوار المنزلية مثل الطهي والتنظيف والأعمال المنزلية الأخرى.

# Comparing Kuwaiti Children's Perceptions of Gender Roles : An Educational Social Perspective

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## Introduction

Children learn gender roles through exposure to gender representations in their lives, including from their family, media, and schools. Multiple studies have investigated the social influences in the development of children's perceptions of gender roles in countries around the world, such as Norway (Ofori, 2018), Turkey (Deniz & Güven, 2019), the United States (Goldberg et al., 2012), and even in hunter-gatherer tribes in various nations (Lew-Levy et al., 2018); however, to date, no studies in English have been published that examine how Kuwaiti children perceive gender roles, and one of the only studies investigating the perceived gender roles among Kuwaiti children was published in Korean (Lee, 2013).

## *Purpose and Research Question*

The present study conducted interviews with 10 children, five girls and five boys from each of the five primary school grade levels in the Kuwaiti public school system (Grades 1-5). Focusing on primary school can provide information on how perceived gender roles emerge in childhood. Although women's rights and opportunities in Kuwait have improved drastically over time since the modern state of Kuwait emerged (Tétreault et al., 2012), traditional gender roles still appear to play a major role in Kuwaiti society. Studying the perspectives of children towards family gender roles may help highlight just how far Kuwait has come—and how much more room there is to grow. To this end, the research questions addressed in this study are as follows:

1. Which family members do Kuwaiti children perceive as fulfilling certain household gender roles?

2. What themes about household gender roles emerge from interviews with Kuwaiti children?

The aim of this study was to get a better understanding of how Kuwaiti children perceive household gender roles and to gain some insight into the ways in which their social environments may be informing their perceptions.

### **Literature Review**

#### ***Social Constructivism and Children's Attitudes Towards Gender Roles***

The question of how children acquire, internalize, and actively help construct perceptions of gender roles in their social context is one that has received a great deal of attention in the research, although less so in the Kuwaiti context in particular. One influential theory that helps explain how this process occurs is social constructivism.

As Amineh and Asl (2015) have explained, there are two central assumptions of social constructivism: (1) that learners construct new understandings using their prior knowledge and experience and (2) that learning is an active process, not a passive process. Thus, learners are not only strongly influenced by their social surroundings, but they also actively negotiate their understanding in light of both their prior knowledge and the new information they encounter. Moreover, learners can also influence socially constructed knowledge over time.

In writing about the topic of gender and psychology in childhood, Whyte (1998) argues that children actively develop and negotiate their understanding of, relation to, and expression of gender roles through experiences, observations, and direct instruction from others in their social environment. Empirical research provides support for this theory as well. For instance, Kambouri-Danos and Evans (2019) conducted a case study of 20 children, their parents, and their teachers in an early education class in England. They claimed that while some aspects of gender roles may be rooted in biological determinism, much of how those roles

manifest occurs through socialization processes like those described in social constructivism. Interestingly, the authors found evidence that shows that children internalize stereotypical gender roles even when they are not congruent with the perceptions of gender roles that parents reported having (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019). However, parents' actual behaviors tend to differ from their stated beliefs about gender, showing that children are learning about gender roles not only based on what they hear from their parents—or others in their social environment such as siblings, teachers, or friends—but also from their lived experiences and their observations of the behaviors of others (Kambouri-Danos & Evans, 2019). These findings reinforce how actively, experience-based learning processes described in social constructivism affect how children adopt or adapt certain gender roles.

Research from around the world shows similar patterns regarding how social environments can influence how gender roles are learned. For instance, in a study of adolescents' attitudes towards gender roles in 36 countries, Sani and Quaranta (2017) found a strong correlation between young people's attitudes towards gender roles and the country's score on a Gender Inequality Index. Adolescents in countries with low gender equality tend to have more negative attitudes towards equality gender roles. These findings suggest that adolescents' attitudes are broadly influenced by their social environment, although it does not reveal much about how those environments shape such attitudes. While this study did not include Kuwait or any other Middle Eastern country, it did find that the lowest attitudes among the countries that were included were found among Indonesian youth, which was the only Muslim country included in the sample, and also found that the effect was strongest among young women.

### ***Gender Socialization Among Kuwait Children***

Several studies have found gender differences in the socialization of violence among Kuwaiti children. For example, Al-Dughaim's (2001) found that depictions of enemies of Kuwait in media (e.g., films, television shows, and news reports) influenced

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how Kuwaiti children perceived such so-called enemies, with Kuwaiti girls being especially susceptible to holding stereotypically negative perceptions of the enemy based on media representations. Alsaleh (2020) also found that cultural influences can affect how acceptable Kuwaitis find violence against Kuwaiti women. He found that both Kuwaiti men and women perceive violence against women (such as wife beating) to be acceptable in some cases, which shows how wives internalize cultural beliefs that may justify violence against women. Similarly, Al-Ma'seb, Alsejari, and Al-Qaoud (2013) found that Kuwaiti boys exhibit more aggressive behaviors than Kuwaiti girls in all three types of aggression addressed in the study: physical aggression, verbal aggression, and indirect aggression. They explained their findings by saying that the attitudes, values, and sex discrimination of parents in Kuwait mostly favor sons over daughters, which they believe affects how children learn gender roles. Thus, the way parents raise and treat their children may shape and affect the development of children's attitudes. Alsaleh (2018) made a similar observation, stating that

In many parts of the country [Kuwait], girls are still expected to prefer nurturing others to pursuing personal accomplishments, and these different expectations play out in the ways that children behave in school as well. (p. 57)

These studies suggest that, in congruence with social constructivist theory, Kuwaiti children learn that violence is more acceptable for boys than girls based on their observations and experiences from their social environment.

Another study on gender socialization among young Kuwaitis by Alqashan and Alkandari (2010) addressed how the marital status of parents of young adults affected how they perceive divorce. They found that young adults from divorced families have less positive attitudes toward marriage and more positive attitudes towards divorce compared to those from non-divorced families. These findings were especially strong for women, suggesting that observing the potentially bad aspects of marriage and the

acceptability of divorce made young female adults in Kuwait more open to the idea of divorce in some cases. These findings reinforce how parents' behaviors can affect how Kuwaitis learn what is socially acceptable for men and women in terms of marriage and divorce (Alqashan & Alkandari, 2010).

In addition to the role of parents in influencing how gender roles are learned, other research in Kuwaiti has shown how books and media can influence gender roles, values, and patterns of behavior and attitudes (Al-Shehab, 2008). In his analysis of Kuwaiti media, Al-Shehab (2008) found that Kuwait television tends to under-represent women and tends to portray gender in highly traditional and stereotypical ways, particularly depicting more traditional and stereotypical portrayals of female characters. Similarly, in a study of the relationship between Arab television portrayals on viewers' attitudes towards gender roles, Kharroub (2014) found their attitudes correlated with the portrayals of women in the media they tended to watch. Arab viewers who watched more stereotypical portrayals of women (e.g., female characters having traditional female occupations, being dependent on male characters, and performing domestic duties) expressed more stereotypical views about gender roles, while viewers who watched less stereotypical portrayals expressed less stereotypical views of gender roles.

Some researchers have posited that socialization processes can be influenced by conformity. For instance, Claidière and Whiten (2012) studied this relationship and concluded that once an individual learns what behavior is considered appropriate, he or she is unwilling to diverge from these actions. In 1984, a researcher at Kuwait University replicated Solomon Asch's famous conformity study among Kuwaiti undergraduates and found that, while many other studies had found little conformity, the Kuwaitis in the study had a propensity toward conformity (Amir, 1984). Based on findings like these, subsequent scholars proposed that Kuwait's cultural environment encourages conformity to group norms and avoidance of behaviors that diverge from such norms, suggesting

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that the influence of the social environment might be especially strong in Kuwaiti culture (Dinkha et al., 2012).

A dissertation by Ahmad (2020) studied the role of play in how parental values can be transferred to their children in Kuwait. Ahmad found some extreme gender differences in what types of play and toys are and are not allowed for Kuwaiti boys and girls. Specifically, Ahmad found that Kuwait boys were often encouraged to play sports and use stereotypically male-oriented toys while being discouraged from dancing and toys with domestic elements like cooking and cleaning, whereas girls were encouraged to play with cooking and cleaning toys and other stereotypically female toys. Interestingly, Ahmad noted that although “When boys played, they spent most of their time with masculine toys, and some parents were strict about the type of play,... girls had greater flexibility in the categories of toys with which they played” (pp. 70–71).

### ***Social Context of Kuwait***

To understand the social context of gender roles in Kuwait, it is necessary to understand the religious beliefs and legal constructs that undergird the society. Kuwait is an Islamic country in the Middle East, bordering Iraq to the north, Saudi Arabia to south, and the Arabian Gulf to the east. In contrast to the individualistic culture of the U.S. and Northern Europe, Kuwait is typically considered a collectivist society that emphasizes family, religion, and tradition (Dinkha et al., 2012). It is a constitutional emirate that is heavily influenced by Islamic tenets and values. Women's rights are protected in the Kuwaiti Constitution, although women's political rights have been severely limited until recently. Kuwaiti women did not gain the right to vote and serve in the Kuwait National Assembly until 2005.

### ***Gender Roles in Kuwait***

Despite some recent legal improvements in women's rights in Kuwait, traditional culture influences still tend to limit women's participation in a *de facto* sense if not a *de jure* sense. The interaction between family, tradition, and religion defines gender



roles in Kuwait, with Kuwaiti males and females behaving in certain ways in order to conform with societal expectations. Gender roles in Kuwait do not “only indicate specific roles for men and women to adopt, but also shape cultural and religious beliefs that structure men’s and women’s rights, access to resources, and mobility in society” (Torstrick & Faier, 2009, p. 112).

In Kuwait, the man’s space tends to be in the public sphere, while women’s space is in the private sphere (Alsuwailan, 2006). Thus, the space of work and politics tends to be male-dominated, while the domestic space of the home, and especially the kitchen, tends to be female-dominated. Even the spaces in the home that are male-spaces are still very social and public in nature, such as the *diwaniyah*, a male-only part of the house separate from the main house where men tend to gather with each other and discuss life, religion, society, and politics (Almatrouk, 2016; Al-Mughni, 2000; Alsuwailan, 2006). For instance, according to Dinkha et al. (2012), differences in gender roles and expectations in Kuwait affect how altruistic behaviors are adopted differently among men and women in Kuwait through socialization and pressures to conform. These differences include the expectation that Kuwaiti men are expected to provide financial help for relatives in need as well as to give charity and other help to strangers in need, while Kuwaiti women are expected to “display altruistic behavior to family members or in indoor situations,” rather than towards outsiders, “Thus the differences in the ways males and females are raised and treated within society” shapes the behaviors that each gender will display within Kuwaiti society (Dinkha et al., 2012, p. 100).

### ***Educational Context of Kuwait***

Other than the home, the space that Kuwaiti children spend most of their time in is the school. Kuwaiti public schools are segregated by gender both in the student population and in the staff and faculty. In secondary schools, the girls’ schools are entirely run by female administrators, teachers, staff members, and maintenance workers, and boys’ schools are males (Alsuwailan, 2006). In primary schools, students are segregated by gender in all grades

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with the exception of kindergarten, which is mixed. However, both boys' and girls' primary schools fall under the purview of girls' education, so that all the faculty, staff, and administrators are female in both boys' and girls' primary schools. This is actually a recent development; prior to 2002, boys' primary schools were run entirely by males. Since then, primary schools have been gradually transitioning to all-female staff and faculty.

Historically, Kuwaiti female schools concentrated heavily on home economics, which illustrates the traditional way in which the role of women was defined as exclusively domestic. However, today, Kuwaiti schools for boys and girls strive to be equal, teaching almost the same subjects to both girls and boys, although there still are home economics classes only for girls, but it is not as emphasized as it was before. As Alsuwailan (2006) notes, "Despite changes in education, schools remain one of the primary guardians of established societal values" (p. 160).

A study by Almatrouk (2016) found that whether a Kuwaiti school integrated boys and girls or segregated them was a significant predictor of differences in gender relations, with students in integrated schools having a more open-minded attitude towards gender roles. However, these differences were weaker when controlling for other factors such as self-esteem, religiosity, and income level. With most Kuwaiti schools being gender segregated, it greatly limits children's exposure to different roles that males and females can have, so that the vast majority of experiences they have with the opposite gender is from their family. As a result, Kuwaiti children may be prone to generalizing gender roles based on their limited experiences with their families and stereotypical depictions in the media.

### ***Family Context of Kuwait***

The family dynamics of Kuwait, although similar to many Gulf countries, are quite different from most Western countries. Whereas the nuclear family is the standard family dynamic in most Western countries—that is, single-generation households comprised

of two parents in a monogamous marriage and average of two-and-a-half children (Allendorf et al., 2021)—the traditional Kuwaiti family unit is often much larger, multigenerational, often arranged (but not usually forced marriage), and sometimes polygamous. However, marriage and family dynamics are shifting all over the world such that traditional dynamics—whether small nuclear families in the West or larger polygamous families in the Middle East—are no longer the norm in many cases. In Kuwait, the most recent marriage statistics indicate that monogamy has increased from 80% of Kuwaiti marriages to over 90% (with the other 10% being polygamous), while divorce rates have increased from around 34%-47% (Anser, 2013). Since the 1970s, the Kuwaiti typical household has increasingly resembled the nuclear family of one husband, one spouse, and two or three children (“Society,” 2012). As data from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in the early 1970s, women had an average of 6.9 children, but by the early 2000s, that number had fallen to between 2.3-2.9 children (depending on the source). Although family dynamics are shifting in different ways, most Kuwaiti children today are growing up in monogamous two-parent nuclear-type households.

## **Methods**

### ***Research Design***

To address the research question, this gender comparative study employed qualitative research methods, specifically a phenomenological approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2017), both social constructivism, as the theoretical lens, and phenomenological approaches, as the research design, focus on the “lived experience” of individuals as they are both influenced by and have some influence on society at large. Because the research question is open-ended, exploratory, and revolves around a phenomenon (Creswell, 2012), a phenomenological research design was determined to be most appropriate. Within this research design, an online interview-based method was used to collect data on Kuwaiti children’s perspectives and qualitative coding methods were used to analyze the data.

### *Participants*

The participants in this study were 10 children, which, according to Creswell and Poth (2017), is within the typical range of sample sizes for most studies that follow a phenomenological approach. Included among the children were five boys and five girls from each primary school grade in Kuwait: 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, and 5th. Five boys and five girls from five primary school grades were purposefully chosen as the sample for this qualitative study in order to approximate some degree of representativeness through maximum variation. As Patton (2014) explained, all sampling methods in qualitative research are purposeful, in contrast to quantitative methods that tend towards randomness. One of the common purposes of qualitative sampling is maximum variation, also known as heterogeneity, which Patton defined as aiming for “capturing and describing the central themes or principal outcomes that cut across a great deal of participant . . . variation” (p. 428).

The sample in this study was purposefully chosen so that it could be determined whether there might be any differences in perceptions of gender roles depending on gender or age. If the responses would be similar regardless of gender or age, then the results would suggest that perceptions of gender roles are fairly consistent among Kuwaiti children. If they varied, then it would suggest something else, such as different gender socialization processes for boys versus girls or developmental differences by age. Regardless of the outcome, the purpose was to draw from a wide range of Kuwaiti children to get a broader picture of how consistent gender socialization might be. As Patton noted, “For small samples a great deal of heterogeneity can be a problem because individual cases are so different from each other. The maximum variation sampling strategy turns that apparent weakness into a strength by applying the following logic: Any common patterns that emerge from great variation are of particular interest and value in capturing the core experiences and central, shared aspects or impacts of a program” (p. 428).

In order to recruit participants, a snowball method was used in which the researchers asked their education students at Kuwait University who were in a fieldwork course to distribute the invitation via email to parents of children in primary school. Interested parents were asked to contact the researcher by email or phone indicating their interest and basic information about the grade and gender of their school-aged child. The basic form they were asked to respond with was as follows:

Dear [Researcher], I am the parent of a child (boy/girl) in (#) grade, and I am interested in participating in your study and having my child be interviewed.

In addition to this, the initial recruitment email included a few pieces of background information for the parents to fill out regarding the parents' marital status, family size, and employment status (full-time, part-time, or not employed), and religiosity (not very religious, moderately religious, or very religious). The names were anonymized by using a letter for their gender (G for girls, B for boys) and a number for their grade level (e.g., B1 is a first-grade boy, G3 is a third-grade girl).

A total of 32 emails of interest with attached consent forms and background information were received, which included 21 from parents of girls and 11 from parents of boys. They were divided by grade and given a timeframe to conduct the interview online on Microsoft Teams. If no one showed up for a certain gender and grade level, follow-up emails were sent to the parents who indicated their interest to set up a new time. Participants who showed up but were not very engaged, attentive, or responsive were excluded. This process took three weeks total to get a successful interview from a boy and a girl from each grade level, and in the end, there were 20 no shows and 2 unsuccessful interviews out of the original 32 interested participants, resulting in 10 interviews in the end.

### *Data Collection*

Data was primarily collected via semi-structured interviews conducted online with 10 Kuwaiti schoolchildren that lasted 40-60

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minutes. Only one of the authors of this article conducted the interviews for data collection purposes, referred to herein as “the researcher.” Initially, interviews were to be conducted in person during the spring of 2020, but due to Covid, data collection was initially delayed and then moved online in fall 2020. The online interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams, which was the platform already used by the Kuwaiti school system for online education during the early stages of the COVID pandemic, so both parents and their children were familiar with using the technology.

After setting up the interview, asking the parents a few introductory questions, and getting their verbal consent to reconfirm that they were allowing their child to participate, the researcher then asked the parents to bring their child to the screen. At that point, the parents were asked to leave the general vicinity so as not to have an influential presence that might affect the child's responses (i.e., parents were asked to go to another room or at least far enough away to be out of immediate eyesight and earshot). At that point, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to the child in simple terms and then asked the child if he or she understood what was said and if he or she gave his or her assent to participate. For the next 40-60 minutes, the children were interviewed alone without the presence of their parents so as to limit the potential influence of the parents' presence on the childrens' responses.

The researcher discussed the following 15 main topics with the 10 children, which included various open-ended follow-up questions depending on the initial responses:

1. Who does the most work in your family? Why do you think that?
2. Who makes the most money in your family? Why do you think that?
3. Who is the leader in your family? Why do you think that?
4. Who protects you in your family? Why do you think that?
5. Who takes care of you in your family? Why do you think that?

6. Who takes care of the kitchen in your family? Why do you think that?
7. Who stays home more in your family? Why do you think that?
  - o What do they mostly do at home?
8. Who goes out more in your family? Why do you think that?
  - o Where do they go/what do they do when they are out?
9. Who is the nicest one in your family? Why do you think that?
10. Who is the strictest one in your family? Why do you think that?
11. When you do something wrong, who are you most afraid of punishing you in your family? Why do you think that?
12. Describe a good mom? Why do you think those qualities make her a good mom?
13. Describe a bad mom? Why do you think those qualities make her a bad mom?
14. Describe a good dad? Why do you think those qualities make her a good dad?
15. Describe a bad dad? Why do you think those qualities make her a bad dad?

Each of the 15 items started with a fairly simple and straightforward question about the child's perspective of different household roles their household family members perform. Then, each child was asked to explain why they think certain family members do perform certain roles, and whether they think that makes sense and should be the case. Various other follow-up questions were asked depending on the child's response in order to clarify their response or get additional insight into his or her reasoning.

Finally, the parents were called back and the researcher talked to them with their child in order to further clarify any points, debrief the participants, and address any remaining questions or concerns. This final part of the interview process also lasted around 30 to 40 minutes.

Interviews were conducted in the childrens' native language, which was Arabic, so the interview questions included above are an English translation of the types of Arabic questions asked.

### **Recording & Transcribing**

All interviews were audio-recorded and saved on the researcher's computer using the built-in recording features of Microsoft Teams. The audio recordings were transcribed by the researcher.

### **Researcher Notes**

In addition to recording and transcribing the actual interview dialogue, the researcher also took notes on the interview process based on observations. These researcher notes included observations about body language, responses, and any apparent contradictions between the responses of the parents and their child or even self-contradictions or variations in responses made by the same parent or child. All of these observations were noted and clarified as needed.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using qualitative coding methods. The specific coding method followed the type described by Creswell and Poth (2017), which follows the following sequence of steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. In this method, the coding process starts with the researchers looking at the data (interview transcripts and researcher notes) to identify common ideas and experiences that arise throughout the interviews, which leads to categories. Then, the categories are analyzed to determine any apparent relationships between them, which is called axial coding. Finally, in the selective coding step, the researchers look for themes that emerge from the various categories and relationships between them.

These codes were analyzed in two ways: first by tabulating totals and frequencies of responses by code and second by generating themes that emerged from the codes. The qualitative codes involved simplifying their response to a certain term or short phrase that best characterized their explanations and descriptions.

For the more closed-ended questions that basically asked "who" performs certain roles, the codes were simplified to "Mom," "Dad," "Both," "Brother," "Sister," "Grandmother," "Grandfather,"



or “Other,” which included housekeepers or other household servants and workers. For the more open-ended questions that asked children to explain “why” they believed certain household members perform certain roles and to what extent they agree that those people should be performing those roles, various codes were developed that encapsulated the “why” and “to what extent” in a word or short phrase, such as “woman’s job,” “breadwinner,” “men do not belong in kitchen,” “dad is not a servant,” etc.

Based on the frequency of and connections between these codes, common themes emerged that are reported and discussed in the following two sections. Supporting quotes are included based on English translations of Arabic responses.

To ensure the validity and accuracy of the translations from Arabic to English, all translations were reviewed by the authors of this study in addition to a colleague in the US who is bilingual in English and Arabic and has a bachelor’s degree in Arabic-to-English translation.

### ***Ethical Considerations***

This research was reviewed and approved by the Ministry of Education in Kuwait. The researcher ensured that all children had returned approved informed consent forms from their parents or legal guardians before they could participate in the interviews. The informed consent forms included information about the research purposes and methods, a statement of the voluntary nature of participation, the risks and benefits of participation, and the ways in which the data would be anonymized and confidentiality would be maintained. Children whose parents had not signed consent forms were excluded from the interviews. Even after signed consent forms had been received, the researcher also verbally confirmed the parents’ consent and asked the children whether they gave their assent to be interviewed, explaining that they could withdraw from the interview at any time. Throughout the research process, the researcher honored the dignity and freewill of all participating children.

### **Results**

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***Summary of Participants' Demographics***

Table 1 below provides a summary of the demographics of the participants' families. Marital status, salary, family size, time spent living abroad, father's employment status, mother's employment status, and religiosity are shown in the table below.

Table 1

***Summary of Participants' Demographics***

Demographic Variable	Summary of Participants
Marital status	All 10 participants were children of married mother and father
Salary	1 low income, 6 middle income, 3 high income
Family Size	Smallest size – family of 5 (three kids); Biggest size – family of 12 (10 kids)
Lived outside Kuwait	None of the participants lived outside of Kuwait except 1 for a short period in Paris for a medical reason
Father's employment	All dads employed, government jobs – six police or military officers, three ministry jobs (Ministry of Communication, Ministry of Islamic Affairs, Ministry of Social Affairs), 1 teacher
Mother's employment	Three students, three stay-at-home moms, 1 teacher, three ministry jobs (two Ministry of Ed and one Ministry of Islamic Affairs)
Religiosity	1 not very religious, 7 moderately religious, 2 very religious

***Kuwaiti Children's Perceptions of Household Gender Roles***

Based on the coding of the interview responses, a table summarizing the children's responses to questions about gender

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roles was created (Table 2). As this data shows, both boys and girls believe their mother does the most work, stays home more, and takes care of the kitchen. In contrast, both boys and girls agree that their father makes the most money, is the leader, goes out more, and is the one they are most afraid of punishing them. Results were mixed regarding who takes care of them, who protects them, who is the nicest one, and who is the strictest one.

Table 2

*Qualities Kuwaiti Children Attributed to Their Moms, Dads, Both, or Other Household Members*

Question	Mom			Dad			Both			Other
	G	B	All	G	B	All	G	B	All	
...Does the most work?	5	3	8	0	0	0	0	1	1	Housekeeper - 3 (G-2, B- 1); Grandmother -1 (B)
...Makes the most money?	0	1	1	5	4	9	0	0	0	
...Is the leader?	0	0	0	5	5	10	0	0	0	Grandfather - 1 (B)
...Protects you?	3	2	5	1	1	2	0	1	1	Brother - 2 (G-1, B-1)
...Takes care of you?	1	3	4	0	0	0	3	2	5	Sister - 1 (G)
...Takes care of the kitchen?	5	5	10	0	0	0	0	0	0	Housekeeper - 4 (G-2, B-2); Sister - 1 (G)
...Stays home more?	4	3	7	0	1	1	0	0	0	Brother - 1(G); Sister - 1(G); Grandmother - 1 (B)
...Goes out more?	0	1	1	5	4	9	0	0	0	My brother(s) (& dad) - 2 (G)

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...Is the nicest one?	2	3	5		0	0	0		1	2	3	Brother - 1 (G); Sister - 1 (G)
...Is the strictest one?	2	1	3		3	3	5		0	1	1	Grandmother (& dad) - 1 (B); Brother (& dad) - 1 (B)
...Are you most afraid of punishing you?	0	0	0		4	5	9		0	0	0	Brother - 1 (G)

When asked to describe a good and bad example of a mom and a dad, some patterns emerged as highlighted in Table 3. Only mom was mentioned in relation to good qualities like taking care of children, cooking, and cleaning, while only dad was mentioned in relation to good qualities like “taking us out” or “buying stuff.” As for examples of bad moms and dads, words like “makes trouble” and “doesn’t clean” were used for moms, while “doesn’t take us out,” “doesn’t buy stuff” and “is angry” were used to describe bad dads.

Table 3

*Kuwaiti Children's Descriptions of Good and Bad Moms and Dads*

	Mom	Dad	Summary
<b>Description</b>	<b>GOOD</b>		
Takes care of children	3	0	Only Mom
Cooks	3	0	
Cleans	3	0	
Teaches me	2	0	
Never leaves	2	0	

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Doesn't cause trouble	1	0	
Doesn't hit	1	1	Mixed
Nice/Happy	1	2	
Doesn't yell	0	1	Only Dad
Protects me	0	1	
Takes us out	0	3	
Buys stuff/Give money	0	5	
	<b>BAD</b>		
Causes trouble	2	0	Only Mom
Doesn't clean	2	0	
Doesn't let me use iPad	1	0	
Is Always Out	1	1	Mixed
Doesn't care/love	4	4	
Yells	3	4	
Hits	3	6	
Is Angry	0	1	Only Dad

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Doesn't take them out/Makes kids stay home	0	1	
Doesn't buy stuff	0	2	

### Discussion & Conclusion

#### *A Woman's Space is Private, a Man's Space is Public*

One theme that emerged from this research is that, from the perspective of the children in this study, the women of the house tend to stay in the private spaces of the home while the men tend to go out into the public. All but one of the children in this study reported that their father goes out the most while their mother stays at home. One girl explained, "My mom and my sisters stay home the most because they cook clean and take care of the house" while "my dad and my brothers go out the most because they go to work and bring stuff from the supermarket to the house."

The idea that women stay home and men go out has a strong sociocultural basis in Kuwait, with multiple previous studies reporting on the prevalence of this phenomenon. In Kuwait, traditionally speaking, the woman's space is the private space, while the public space is for men. As Alsuwailan (2006) wrote,

In the era preceding the discovery of oil, women's tasks were limited to and defined by the domestic sphere; after the discovery of oil, they were able to leave that isolated private world and emerge into the public sphere. However, they are still confined to restricted public positions and occupations. (p. iv)

Despite Alsuwailan's emphasis that these pre-oil traditional roles are changing, the findings from this study show that Kuwaiti children's observations of the world and socialization reinforces the idea that men go out while women stay at home.

Even the physical space of the Kuwaiti home is traditionally arranged so that men's spaces in the home are the more public-facing parts of the home near the main entrance while women's spaces are the more private areas tucked away from the outside

world. For instance, most Kuwaiti homes have a room called the *diwaniya*, which is a sort of salon where men gather and discuss politics and public matters among male friends, family, and neighbors. This room is strictly off limits for Kuwaiti women.

In discussing how the very architecture and design of space in Arab Gulf homes reinforces a strict distinction between public and private spaces, Sobh and Belk (2011) wrote that “The home that is the interior private sphere used by inhabitants and their visitors is separated from the public sphere by high boundary walls, window screens, and inward facing courtyards, visually encoding sharp distinction between public and private space” adding that “[i]n most ... homes, the interior sphere is further differentiated into a family/female domain and a male domain” (pp. 129-130).

The one boy who said his dad stays home more than his mom explained “My dad goes down to the *diwaniya* to smoke and drink coffee and play PUBG [a popular video game]. Then when he is done, he goes to work.” This quote shows that even though the way the *diwaniya* is used might be changing in modern times, for gaming or hanging out rather than or in addition to discussing community issues, the space is still for men only, perhaps comparable to the concept of a “man cave” in modern Western society.

### ***Labor Divisions are Gendered***

Another theme that emerged is that certain types of labor are clearly divided on a gendered basis for the Kuwaiti children interviewed in this study. For instance, when explaining who stays home more, one 5th grade boy said “My mom stays home the most. She does not have much work, so she cleans the house and makes us food just like the housekeeper.” Likewise, one girl said, “My mom and my sisters stay home the most because they cook clean and take care of the house.”

In the Kuwaiti division of labor, men work the most and are the providers of the family while women take care of domestic duties. As Torstrick and Faier (2009) noted, in Kuwait, “Men are expected to provide for the family and make major household

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decisions as well as those pertaining to children” while women are perceived as “weak...and that women’s virtue must be protected” (p. 112).

For instance, a 1st grade girl in the study said her dad makes the most money “because he has a lot of money and he buys a lot of stuff” and also defined a Good Dad as one who “buys me candy and chocolate and toys.” Similarly, a 3rd grade girl said her dad makes the most money, “because he buys stuff for us” and a 2nd grade girl said her dad makes the most money “because he is the man of the house.”

Some of the responses from the children in this study illustrate how they sometimes actively resist changing their stated perceptions of gender roles even when there is evidence to the contrary. For example, a 2nd grade boy said his dad is the one who “always has money” despite the fact that his mom and dad have similar government jobs. Likewise, a 4th grade boy said, “Of course dad” makes the most money, “because he works,” even though his mom works, too. When the interviewer pointed out that his mom works too, he replied “yeah, but my dad makes the most money.” These types of responses highlight the central notions of social constructivism that hold that new information is understood in relation to prior knowledge and experience and that learning is an active process. When presented with something that challenges current knowledge, learners actively negotiate their understanding in a variety of ways, such as accommodating, assimilating, or dismissing the new information.

In her analysis of Kuwaiti gender roles, Alsuwailan (2006) previously argued that both family traditions and economic circumstances contribute to the sharp division of gender roles that place men in patriarchal positions. As she stated, “In Kuwaiti society, there were certain tasks performed by men, and others performed by women: men performed outside tasks, and women carried out domestic tasks” (p. 71). She stated further that,



Generally, Kuwaiti women were economically dependent first on their fathers and, after marriage, on their husbands. This led to the distinction in roles between men and women—men as breadwinners and women as housewives—that became a powerful element in strengthening the patriarchal social system. (p. 76)

In their analysis of gender differences between types of altruistic and charitable behaviors among Kuwaitis, Dinkha et al. (2012) explained that “Kuwait is a patriarchal society where men are expected to be the breadwinners and to be the ones who have to help extended family members ... a woman’s duty may include helping in the home but it’s not generally expected that she aid outside the home as her husband would” (p. 102). “Men are expected to provide for the family and make major household decisions as well as those pertaining to children” (Torstrick & Faier 2009, p. 112). Al-Kazi (2011) mentioned that the culture in Kuwait and other Islamic societies, “has ingrained in people’s consciousness that man is the provider and protector of the family and a woman’s most important role is as a homemaker and mother” (p. 168).

### ***The Kitchen Is a Kuwaiti Woman’s ‘Room of Her Own’***

The famous 20th-century British novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf once wrote that “A woman must have money and a room of her own” if she is to assert her free will (p. 304). In an episode of the long-running television cartoon *The Simpsons*, Marge Simpson once remarked that “When Virginia Woolf wrote, ‘Every woman needs a room of one’s own,’ She must have been talking about the kitchen.” Although *The Simpsons* writers were joking when they wrote that, this belief is no joke in Kuwait. The kitchen is seen as strictly a woman’s space and a Kuwaiti man would never be seen in the kitchen. As a 2nd grade boy interviewed in study bluntly put it, “Mom [takes care of the kitchen] if there is no servant. She needs to cook because my dad is a man; he is not a girl or a servant to work in the kitchen.” Although this boy’s words might come across as harsh, it reflects a common belief among Kuwaitis. As Abdulhadi (2017) noted, despite improvements in

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women's economic and social status in Kuwait, strong gender-role identities continue to dominate in Kuwaiti culture. Even among women in the workforce, their gendered domestic jobs remained their burden. For instance, even a Kuwaiti woman who does not physically do the housework is still responsible for that work getting done by housekeepers, and any problem with cleaning the house or preparing the food are seen as the result of her poorly managing the housekeepers. Similarly, Dinkha et al. (2012) noted, "if a woman doesn't help with the household, this is considered disrespectful to the family and she will be criticized" (p. 100).

### *Men are Protectors, Women are Caretakers*

While the responses of the children regarding the division of labor in the household were clearly gendered across the board, their responses to questions about who cares for them and who protects them were more mixed. Despite the greater variation in responses, the children still tended to name male figures as protectors and female figures as caretakers. A few children mentioned an older brother as their protector. For example, one 1st grade girl mentioned that the one who protects her is her "older brother, and I think because he loves me." Likewise, a 5th grade boy mentioned his older brothers, all of whom protect him.

Some of the children gave conditional responses to the questions about protectors and caretakers that seemed to depend on who is physically present the most. For example, a 5th grade girl mentioned her sister as her caretaker "because we share the same room." Likewise, a 4th grade boy said both his mom and his dad protect him, but "if dad is here, he protects us all." That same boy said both parents take care of him, but then specified different roles for each that show in what way they care: "mom cooks for me and dad buys me clothes." Three other children also mentioned both mom and dad for these questions.

Tétreault (2001) described how in many depictions of Kuwaiti culture in stories and popular media, "The family patriarch is cast as the generous provider and protector of his family" (p.

208). Alfadhalah (2015) noted how the protector role of the Kuwaiti patriarch could be both a good and a bad thing, on one hand by maintaining the safety and survival of the family, but on the other hand by the potential use of physical violence to enforce rules in the household when a violation might threaten “to tarnish family honor” (p. 6).

The results revealed some clearly gendered trends in terms of the perceptions the Kuwaiti children in this study had towards different household roles as well as their perceptions of typical good and bad moms and dads. Based on the results of the interviews, the children reported that their mom does the most work, stays home more, and takes care of the kitchen. These results show that the roles of moms, as well as other women around the house such as sisters, grandmothers, and housekeepers, revolved around the house, particularly the kitchen. The idea of a man in the kitchen seemed especially preposterous to the children, with one boy saying his dad is not like a girl or servant to work in the kitchen. This finding aligns with prior research on gender roles in Kuwaiti families and media representations. Culturally speaking, the man’s space tends to be in the public sphere, while women’s space is in the private sphere (Asuwailan, 2006; Dinkha et al., 2012).

Another notable finding was that good moms tend to be caring and nurturing, while good dads tend to be financially supportive. This finding is similar to Alsaleh’s (2018) analysis of Kuwaiti children’s gendered behaviors, which indicated that girls are expected to prefer nurturing others while boys are expected to pursue their own self-interests. In contrast, for the children interviewed in this study, bad moms were seen as causing trouble or not cleaning, while bad dads were seen as angry and even violent. Alsaleh came to a similar conclusion that Kuwaiti boys are expected to take out their aggressions in more violent ways, such as through fighting.

In short, the results of these interviews reveal that Kuwaiti children have some strict ideas of acceptable gender roles. Dads are expected to be the breadwinners of the family while moms are

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expected to be the homemakers. The child of one Kuwaiti working mom still shared the belief that she should take care of the house as well. This belief is deeply rooted in Kuwaiti society. As Langworthy and Warnecke (2020) wrote about in relation to women's entrepreneurship in Kuwait, there are "prevailing cultural norms around male breadwinners and female homemakers in Kuwait" (p. 409). They go on to assert that these roles "are supported by a legal framework that inhibits women's agency," specifically Article 89 of the Family and Personal Law No. 51, which states that husbands are obligated to support their families and that, while he should not forbid his wife from working outside the home, he can limit it in some cases if it negatively affects family interests (p. 409). Al-Mughni (2009) noted that while it is uncommon for this law to be invoked to restrict Kuwaiti women's ability to work outside of the home, it does reinforce the gender roles and allows men to reserve the right to restrict women's freedom to work in some cases.

Finally, when the responses of Kuwaiti school boys and school girls were compared based on gender, marital status of parents, parents' income level and employment status, and religiosity, there were no clear differences. The children responded in similar ways regardless of these factors. However, some slight differences between the genders were noted in response to the following two questions: "Who does the most work?" and "Who takes care of you the most?" More girls than boys said their mothers did the most work while more boys than girls said their mothers are the ones who take care of them the most. Perhaps Kuwaiti girls are more aware of the work their mothers do because they observe their mothers doing that work and sometimes have to help them out with the work, while the boys take more notice of how their mothers care for them since they receive that nurturing attention from their mothers. Although the differences between boys and girls in these items were not drastic, they do align with previous findings that show fathers exhibit more nurturing behaviors and are more

emotionally open towards their daughters than their sons (Mascaro et al., 2017).

### ***Implications***

While this study showed that Kuwaiti children hold some stereotypical beliefs about appropriate gender roles for the male and female members of their household, it was not able to show what aspects of culture may be influencing these beliefs. Still, social constructivism may help explain why Kuwaiti children harbor such beliefs, which is reinforced by prior studies about gender roles in Kuwaiti culture. For example, Kharroub (2014) found that Arab viewers who watched more stereotypical portrayals of women expressed more stereotypical views about gender roles. Moreover, as Langworthy and Warnecke (2020) and Al-Mughni (2009) reported, some of these gender roles are even codified into law and are also reinforced by religious traditions and teachings.

In addition to media, legal, and religious sources of gender roles and direct ways in which children are exposed to cultural values. School might be one of the most influential sources of cultural values because of the standardized, nationalized system in Kuwait. Regardless of the region of Kuwait, the marital status, the income level, or the religiosity of the family as reported by the parents, the children's responses were essentially the same. That might point to a more common experience among the children's socialization process, which would be the classroom setting with its nationally prescribed lessons, textbooks, curriculum, and texts (Alabdulhadi, 2019; Alkandari & Alsuwailan, 2019). As Alsuwailan (2006) noted, public education in Kuwait is "one of primary transmitters of societal concepts," and her research revealed "a relationship between societal values and a relational epistemology in that women construct their own gender identity in relation to the world in which they live" (p. 181).

### ***Recommendations***

Future research should focus on aspects of the classroom that might be influencing the gender socialization of children. For instance, research on how gender is represented in Kuwaiti

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educational materials, such as state-issued textbooks or multimedia materials, would help reveal some of the ways in which perspectives of gender roles are mediated through different representations. Furthermore, future research should focus more on Kuwaiti women's stories and experiences to show the diversity of perspectives, capabilities, and achievements that often go ignored and can help break down stereotypes and misconceptions.

In addition to challenging the narrow views of what women can and should do in terms of their gender roles and expectations, it is also important to find ways to show men in different roles. One of the strongest reactions among the children was the rejection of the idea that a man can help out in the kitchen; however, that is a role that Kuwaiti men can take on, and some in fact do. Thus, it is important to show how men can also help out around the house in different ways that are not always stereotypical.

Lastly, educators should spend time addressing men's and women's rights, even during the early years of school, so that children grow up learning how men and women can fulfill different roles in the family. This may help get children out of the mindset that this is a man's job or that is a woman's job in the house. Doing so would open young children's minds to the idea that, for example, a man can cook a meal without being seen as "not a man," or a woman can be the leader of the household without being seen as "not a woman."

### **Declaration of interest statement**

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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