Saudi Arabia is among the most gender segregated countries in the world. In Kuwait, on the other hand, women and men generally mix freely in public spaces. This book shows how different historical processes have led to these present-day contrasting situations. Based on intensive fieldwork, 'For Women Only' looks at Saudi and Kuwaiti women's own experiences with gender segregation and mixing in public spaces. It charts whether or not they agree with these practices in their countries, and why. The book shows that women's arguments are connected to ideas about Islam, gender and the nation, and modernity. It explains how Saudi and Kuwaiti women view 'modernity' as different from 'Westernisation', and what this means for the position of women in present-day Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.
‘For Women Only’

Gender Segregation, Islam, and Modernity in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

Annemarie van Geel
This research was funded by the Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS) and co-financed by the Faculty of Philosophy, Theology, and Religious Studies (Radboud University Nijmegen).
‘Alleen Voor Vrouwen’

Gendersegratie, Islam, en Moderniteit in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit

Proefschrift

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor
aan de Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen
op gezag van de rector magnificus prof. dr. J.H.J.M. van Krieken,
volgens besluit van het college van decanen
in het openbaar te verdedigen op donderdag 28 juni 2018
om 14:30 uur precies

door

Anna Catharina Francisca van Geel

geboren op 23 juni 1981

te Breda
Promotoren:
Prof. dr. C. van Nieuwkerk
Prof. dr. C.H.M. Versteegh

Manuscriptcommissie:
Prof. dr. H.L. Murre-Van den Berg
Prof. dr. M.W. Buitelaar (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen)
Dr. L.A. Jakubowska (Universiteit Utrecht)
‘For Women Only’

Gender Segregation, Islam, and Modernity in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

Doctoral Thesis

to obtain the degree of doctor
from Radboud University Nijmegen
on the authority of the Rector Magnificus prof. dr. J.H.J.M. van Krieken,
according to the decision of the Council of Deans
to be defended in public on Thursday, June 28, 2018
at 14:30 hours

by

Anna Catharina Francisca van Geel

Born on June 23, 1981

in Breda, the Netherlands
Supervisors:
Prof. dr. C. van Nieuwkerk
Prof. dr. C.H.M. Versteegh

Doctoral thesis committee:
Prof. dr. H.L. Murre-Van den Berg
Prof. dr. M.W. Buitelaar (University of Groningen)
Dr. L.A. Jakubowska (Utrecht University)
## Contents

**Preface** 11  
**Acknowledgements** 13  
**Note on transliteration** 21  

**Introduction** 23  
- Concepts 25  
- Case studies 30  
- Research scope and field of study 32  
- Research objectives and questions 34  
- Methodology 35  
- Reflective remarks 40  
- Relevance 47  
- Structure of the dissertation 49  

**Chapter 1 On Modernity** 53  
- Introduction 55  
- Tradition and authenticity 55  
- The universal approach to modernity 56  
- The institutional approach to modernity 57  
- The locality of modernity: modernity as a universal process, experienced differently 60  
- The construction of modernity: promissory notes 64  
- An enchanted modern 67  
- Gender and modernity 69  
- Operationalisation: negotiating modernity 72  

**Chapter 2 Saudi Arabia: the historical development of gender-segregated, ‘for women only’ public spaces** 75  
- Introduction 77  
- The pre-oil and pre-unification period (pre-1932) 78  
- Discovery and exploitation of oil (1930s – 1940s) 80  
- Urbanisation (1950s - 1970s) 81  
- Women’s education (1950s - 1970s) 82
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3 Saudi Arabia: women on mixing between men and women in public spaces (ikhtilat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous concepts: segregation, ikhtilat, and khilwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies on ikhtilat and women-only public spaces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For women only’ offices and ikhtilat in the workplace</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For women only’ universities and ikhtilat at university</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For women only’ hospitals and ikhtilat in hospitals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Islam, and the Saudi nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating the modern Saudi nation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding remarks: towards an enchanted modern</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4 Kuwait: the historical development of mixing between men and women in public spaces (ikhtilat)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kuwait’s pre-oil period</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The discovery and exploitation of oil (1938-1945)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab nationalism and the Nahda (1945-1960)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamist groups (1961-1977)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The islamisation of society: renewal (tajdid) and the consolidation of Islamist groups (1978-1989)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Gulf War (1990-1991)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The period after liberation (1990s)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recent developments (2000s-2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inventory of ikhtilat and ‘for women only’ public spaces (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding remarks</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Chapter 5 Kuwait: women on gender-segregated, ‘for women only’ public spaces

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disentangling <em>ikhtilat</em>, <em>man</em>’ <em>al-ikhtilat</em>, and <em>khilwa</em> in Kuwait</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies on <em>ikhtilat</em> and <em>man</em>’ <em>al-ikhtilat</em></td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘For women only’ university education: the Shadadiya campus</td>
<td>219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karamat Watan demonstrations: the <em>mabit</em></td>
<td>229</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restaurants: <em>kaba’in</em> in Jahra’</td>
<td>287</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cases conclusion</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender, Islam, and the Kuwaiti nation</td>
<td>244</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiating the modern Kuwaiti nation</td>
<td>247</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding remarks</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conclusions</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>273</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Bibliography

- **Academic summary**
  - *Wetenschappelijke samenvatting* (Dutch academic summary) 307
- **Popularised summary**
  - *Publiekssamenvatting* (Dutch popularised summary) 339

### About the author

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About the author</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Preface

The first time I set foot in the Middle East I was 18 years old. I was on my gap-year at The King’s School Peterborough in the UK, where I took an A-level in Religious Studies. A spark of curiosity had pulled me towards the course. Having grown up in a Christian environment, I was familiar with the New Testament but knew almost nothing about Islam. I let myself be guided by that spark, took the course, and studied the New Testament and Islam for a year. It was the year 2000, the catholic ‘Great Jubilee’ or ‘Holy Year,’ and for that occasion the teachers of both papers had organised a course study trip visiting the ‘Holy Land’ to learn about the history, geography, culture, and of course religions of the land. The trip consolidated that spark of curiosity into a firm interest in the broader region, and was the beginning of a journey that would not only take me back to Israel many times but also, and more importantly, to live in Palestine as well as in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen, studying Arabic, working, volunteering, doing research, and travelling across the region. Ultimately, this journey brought me to Kuwait and to Saudi Arabia, that other ‘Holy Land.’ The result is my dissertation that you have before you – still guided by that original curiosity.
Acknowledgements

What a journey the creation of this book has been. A journey of great privilege, for which I am very thankful. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to have shared my road with many. The years of working on this dissertation have been rather adventurous – sometimes extremely exciting and rewarding and sometimes, well, perhaps a little too taxing. Therefore it is with great joy, pride, and yes, a fair bit of relief too that I share my findings in this book. But before jumping into that, I would first like to express my gratitude here to all who joined me and stood by me on this voyage.

First of all, while academic conventions do not allow me to thank them here, I’m happy to trespass and would like to say that I am, indeed, very grateful to my supervisors prof. dr. Karin van Nieuwkerk and prof. dr. Kees Versteegh. Karin and Kees, thank you for your support and guidance, for your helpful questions and comments, and for knowing how to strike a balance between supervision and autonomy. Your constant encouragement has been essential to the completion of this project. Furthermore, having your support to continue Faraasha throughout my academic journey has been invaluable. Combining my academic interests with my career outside academia has helped me to continue to develop and grow into more than one direction and helped maintain my enthusiasm for my research.

Prof. dr. Heleen Murre-Van den Berg, prof. dr. Marjo Buitelaar and dr. Lonia Jakubowska, thank you for your willingness to be on the manuscript committee and for your interest in my work. In addition, Marjo, I cherish my memories of our conversations particularly in Istanbul and Rabat. Lonia, it was such a joy being your colleague at University College Utrecht and knowing there was always a warm conversation and hug awaiting me.

Prof. dr. Thijl Sunier, dr. Roel Meijer and dr. Marina de Regt, thank you for being part of the opposition during my defence. Thijl, for your warm interest in my project and wellbeing and our helpful conversations during several NISIS Schools. Roel, for our pleasant cooperation on the IRP project. Marina, for your help and support when I went to Yemen and your encouragement to indeed embark on the PhD path.

Many colleagues have supported me throughout this journey. I would like to thank my colleagues at the Department of Islam Studies at Radboud University Nijmegen, in particular Anneke Schulenberg, Nina ter Laan, Rachida Talal-
Azimi and Sahar Noor, not only for your helpful comments and enthusiastic feedback on early drafts of parts of this dissertation but also for cheering me on when the going got rough and for your warm friendship. Martijn de Koning, thank you for having been such a fun co-teacher, for many stimulating and laughter-filled conversations, and for your insights on popularising research. Gert Borg, thank you for being such a kind office neighbour and for our warm chats in Nijmegen and Riyad.

The Netherlands Interuniversity School for Islamic Studies (NISIS) generously funded my research. I am particularly thankful to prof. dr. Léon Buskens, dr. Petra de Bruijn, and again prof. dr. Thijl Sunier for your flexibility and generosity when it was most needed, for the Schools in Amsterdam, Istanbul, Madrid, Leiden, Rabat and Tunis that helped me sharpen my thoughts and arguments, and for creating such a stimulating international peer group network. Fellow PhD candidates from the NISIS network, especially Ahmad Nuril Huda, Ammeke Kateman, Arjan Post, Claudia Carvalho, Femke Groeneveld, Henda Ghribi, Marloes Hamelink, Maryse Kruithof, Omar Sayfo, Pieter Coppens and Zoltan Pall, thank you for your helpful comments and feedback and our discussions, and – importantly – for lots of fun and laughter in various cities. You are a wonderful group of special individuals.

Many thanks to the King Faisal Institute in Riyad, in particular dr. Yahya bin Junayd, and to the College of Arts at Kuwait University, in particular dr. Abdulhadi Alajmi, for hosting me so generously as a Visiting Scholar. I offer my gratitude for your warm welcome, your hospitality and support, and the assistance of yourselves and your staff members. I benefited a great deal from the scholarly environment and the events at both your institutes.

I feel overwhelmed with gratitude for my friends and family for their support and love, and what follows is an attempt to express my thanks. You have been essential to completing this project and to making sure I always return home – to you, and to myself.

Suzanne van Winden, Fleur de Graaf, Joan van Geel, Nina ter Laan and Olly Akkerman, you were the closest witnesses to the intellectual and emotional trials and tribulations of researching and writing this dissertation. Fortunately you also witnessed and shared in the incredible joys, growth, happiness and gifts that this process brought. Suzanne, ik voel me bijzonder verbonden met je, en het blijft speciaal hoe goed wij elkaar aanvoelen. Hoe hard het ook stormt, met ons aan elkaars zijde kunnen we alles aan. Mijn dankbaarheid voor jouw betrokkenheid,
Acknowledgements

onvoorwaardelijke liefde, en steun en zorg is niet in woorden uit te drukken. Tot de maan en terug, en nog een stukje verder. Lieve Eline, Amber en Micha, jullie onbevangenheid en speelsheid brengen licht en liefde in de wereld. Dat jullie dat altijd bij jullie mogen dragen. Fleur, liefste chica. I am so thankful for our deep heart-connection and the light that shines and flows between us. You always encourage me to follow my heart and dreams and support me in more ways than you can possibly imagine and I can possibly express gratitude for. Thank you for your sense of discernment, humour and courage. Thank you for being my other-other half, today, as ever. Joan, my most important research result is us! We’re more than cousins because we’re friends, and more than friends because we’re cousins. Our shared love, wisdom and joy make my heart sing. Thank you for standing beside me today. Nina, our friendship started as roomies on the 17th floor of the Erasmus building and I’m grateful to say that we’ve grown to beautiful heights together since. Sharing our interests but most importantly our searching and our souls is something I hold very dear. Olly, your quirkiness, energy, intellect and unconventionality show me sides of the world and myself I didn’t know existed. Nothing can stop us, wherever we are: we can and do conquer the world together. I am grateful that whether soaring high or, well... not so high, whether actually in the same room or with hundreds of miles between us, we’re always together.

Pim de Kuijer, voor altijd in mijn hart ❤️. May you always do for others, and may others do for you.

Gerard van der Ree, our many conversations throughout this project have been an important source of guidance and have greatly contributed to this book. Above all, thank you for your depth, openness, un-covering and holding space. Here’s to many more wandeltheetjes to come. Leonard Suransky, mentorship evolved into friendship, and I’m so thankful for both. You’re a role model to me (and many others) as to what a true teacher is like, and it’s been a privilege learning from you at your side. More so than anything else, thank you for your warmth, wisdom, gentleness and loving nature.

Lisa Arts en Daniëlle van de Kemenade, met jullie is het altijd feest. Sprankelend en licht, diepgaand en intiem, ik ben dankbaar voor onze mooie gesprekken en connectie. Inge Janssen and Geerte Heesen, whether defying leeches in the jungle, dancing the night away and lingering on the beach in Malaysia with Pim, who brought us all together that beautiful sweet treasured summer, or champagnig
our way through France, or sharing dinner and laughter in Amsterdam and Utrecht, wherever we go we connect over love, careers, and life’s changes. Thank you. Diana van Loenen and Judith Lekkerkerker, also brought together by Pim I cherish the connection between us. Now that each of our lives are taking new turns, I’m thankful for what we have shared over the last few years and look forward to more of that. Erella Grassiani, whether teaching together, traveling together or eating together, being together is always special. Yi Zhang, our more than 15 years of cross-continental closeness is very dear to me. After Holland, China, Thailand and Germany I wonder where our future adventures will take us. I can’t wait to travel further along the road with you. Annelie de Boer, even though by now we’ve lived in different countries longer than in the same, we always find each other and then everything falls into place. I’m grateful for the continuing bond between us. Borja Martinovic, thank you for our intellectual (and not-so-intellectual) exchanges of thought, cocktails, and laughter and giggles. Anne Dankert, because softness, gentleness and consideration are true gifts.

Tom Kisters, meeting randomly on a bus in north Vietnam turned out to be the start of a dear friendship. Thank you for your light-heartedness, enthusiasm and care. Mpanzu Bamenga, I cherish the gentleness between us and our mutual encouragement and shared ideals. Frank Krikhaar, I am grateful we’ve meandered back into each other’s lives and have reconnected over a shared past and a shiny new horizon. I hope you never lose your sense of wonder. Thomas Romville and Sebastiaan Cassé, thank you for your ability to always put things into perspective in a humorous way, our many cycling adventures, and your friendship all those years. Basti Baroncini, we met on the cusp of me moving out of this project and into my new life. Your jocularity, care, support and encouragement during this transition phase have been so important. Thank you.

Through my work with my own business Faraasha Middle East Training & Advisory I was lucky to meet and work with amazing people and teams. I would like to thank the following in particular.

My students at University College Utrecht and at Webster University Leiden who took my History & Politics of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, Islam Past & Present, and Politics of Peace classes. Your questions, comments and engagement have been such a joy and delight. You have helped shape my thinking and I thank you for your enthusiasm, eagerness and curiosity.

The incredible Pax Ludens team: Anno Bunnik, Cecilia Pellosniemi, Colin
Mellis, Diederik Stolk, Erella Grassiani, Erica Pasini, Ghassan Dahhan, Gideon Shimshon, Gijs Verbossen, Kate Fanning, Leon Emmen, Leonard Suransky, Masooma Yousufzai-van der Kleij, Michael Glod, Sabrina White, Sammy Whenu, Uli Mans and Yossi Mekelberg. Whether with high-level army officers, diplomats or students, it was truly awesome running so many international diplomatic negotiations simulations with all you talented, kind and caring people. Thank you. I did part of the early work for my dissertation at the Zeestraat office, with Diederik, Mike and Sammy offering welcome distraction – thank you for your shenanigans.

The indomitable WO=MEN Dutch Gender Platform team: especially Anne-Sophie Kesselaar, Elisabeth van der Steenhoven, Ghada Zeidan and Stella Ismail, who sadly passed away this year. You’re an inspiring crew of strong women. It’s been such a privilege working with you raising gender awareness and training gender sensitivity in various military contexts and helping to implement UN Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security.

The fabulous Women on the Frontline team: especially Jetteke van der Schatte Olivier, Tiny van Goor, Leonie Grit, Laila al-Zwaini and in particular Petra Stienen. Thank you for your warmth and generosity; it was truly a pleasure working with you on women’s participation in the MENA region.

Starting as an intern in 2002 through to my work as a Fellow and then as a Trainer, I cherish my connection to the Clingendael Institute. Thank you Ron Ton for keeping me on board in various capacities and for allowing me the joy of training groups of diplomats from the Middle East on gender in an international context.

Rob Vreeken at de Volkskrant, I hope we will continue our conversation on Saudi Arabia for a long time to come. I admire your journalism and enjoy our cooperation very much. Thank you. Dirk Jan Coehoorn, thank you for your continuous encouragement, support and interest in all my endeavours.

To all my former colleagues at the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM), and to prof. dr. Asef Bayat and Dennis Janssen in particular, thank you for taking me on all those years ago. ISIM was a special place and I am grateful to have been a part of it. The stimulating international academic environment inspired me significantly and ISIM travelled with me to conferences well into the 2010s.

Moving on from the Netherlands to the UK, I’m grateful to be able to give thanks for a wonderful social life across the Channel. Clare Joyce, Seema Patel, Sobia Ali, and Sophie Chapman, my heart is filled with so many happy memories and with gratitude for all of you. You were all such an important part of what was a
pivotal year in my life and I’m thankful that half a lifetime later we’re still part of each other’s lives, sharing ups and downs, and tears and laughter. I would also like to thank Yossi Mekelberg and Kate Fanning, for uncountable great times in London, Utrecht and the Hague, for the world’s very best sense of humour, and of course for the yummliest shakshuka. Simon Diggins, thank you for your love and light. Julie Tate, I first became interested in the Middle East in your Islam class at the King’s School Peterborough back in 1999. Your teaching and passion for your subject fundamentally changed the course of my life into a direction that up that to that point had not occurred to me as even a remote possibility. I am so thankful. Dr. Andrew Macintosh, I have fond memories of our afternoons spent at St. John’s College with you teaching me Arabic. Thank you for instilling in me a love for the language.

I have been blessed with a wonderful extended family. Thank you all for your love and caring interest. In particular I would like to thank ome Will and tante Hilly, for your warmth and beautiful kitchen-table conversations.

Above all, Pap, Mam, Peter, I could not have done without your love and support. Your encouragement in all my plans, initiatives, dreams and pursuits at every stage of my life has been essential. Thank you for being a home. Thank you for making me feel grounded and rooted. Thank you for your love.

Lastly, I am greatly indebted to my Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors. This dissertation would not have been possible without the trust you placed in me, and my gratitude goes out to all of you. It is impossible to name everyone here, but in Saudi Arabia I am especially thankful to Danya, Hala, Iman, Maha, Nadia, Nailah, Reem and Soraya. In Kuwait my thanks goes out in particular to Aisha, Fatima, Ghada, Hussa, Ibtihal, Iman, Mashael, and Rasha and Ahmed. Thank you for welcoming me into your lives and homes, and for opening up to me not only about your opinions about ikhtilat and gender segregation but also about your dreams, your struggles, your spirituality and so much more. I very much enjoyed talking with you, eating with you, dancing with you, celebrating with you, and sharing with you. I cherish your openness, generosity, and life lessons and hold your stories close to my heart. I hope I have done them justice in this book.

Utrecht, 7 May 2018
Note on transliteration

There are various ways of presenting Arabic in Latin script. For the sake of readability, I have chosen to follow a simplified version of the transliteration system developed by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES). I have dispensed with all diacritical marks. However, I have preserved the ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (‘) in all cases except for the initial hamza, which is dropped. The transliteration also does not differentiate between long and short vowels. Wherever possible I have used anglicised forms of Arabic words rather than following the IJMES system, for example sheikh instead of shaykh (s.) and sheikhs instead of shuyukh (pl.). However, for words that do not have accepted English spellings I have followed the IJMES system, for example *diwaniyyat* as the plural form of *diwaniyya* (instead of the anglicised form *diwaniyyas*). For personal names, however, I follow IJMES, for example Al al-Shaykh and not Al al-Sheikh. The alphabetic order of the glossary does not take into account the article ‘al-’ and noun ‘Al-’ at the beginning of a word or phrase.
Introduction

When people in the Netherlands ask me what my research is all about, I tell them the topic of my PhD dissertation is gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. But when people in Saudi Arabia ask me what my research is all about, I tell them the topic of my research is the mixing of women and men in public spaces (*ikhtilat*) in Saudi Arabia. The discourse about the default in our respective countries - mixing in the Netherlands and segregation in Saudi Arabia - is such that neither of us have a specific word that really captures what our defaults are.

My answer to this question in Kuwait is that my PhD project investigates *man‘ al-ikhtilat* or the ban on mixing. In Kuwait the default mode of interaction in public life between women and men is mixing. The public discussion is not about the default mode of mixing, but rather about its opposite, *man‘ al-ikhtilat*.

Gender segregation, in the shape of public spaces only-for-women and into which men are forbidden to enter, is one of the defining features of public life in Saudi Arabia. Women-only spaces range from government buildings to cafes and from separate opening hours in museums to women-only bank branches. The public separation of women and men is enforced by the Hay‘at al-amr bi-l-ma‘ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar, the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice (CPVPV), which is the country’s religious police and also known in Saudi Arabia as the Hay‘a or the Mutawa‘a.¹ Women-only public spaces such as schools, charities, banks, and government offices have been developed both by the state and by private parties.

In Kuwait, on the other hand, gender mixing (*ikhtilat*) is one of the defining features of public life. While the country does have some only-for-women spaces such as Kuwait University, banks with a man-only and women-only floor, or a beach with a women-only day, these women-only spaces and timings mainly exist in the private sector and are not enforced by a religious police, as Kuwait does not have one.

In both countries, these developments have not gone uncontested. In Saudi Arabia, a strong debate took place over *ikhtilat* and its (im)permissibility. In Kuwait, on the other hand, where *ikhtilat* is the norm, segregation or the ban on *ikhtilat*

---

¹ In Saudi Arabia, they are not known as ‘the religious police’ but rather as the Hay‘at al-amr bi-l-ma‘ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar or ‘the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice’ (CPVPV). The formal short term is Hay‘a which is Arabic for ‘committee,’ colloquially also known as the Mutawa‘a. At the time of research, the Hay‘a had, amongst other things, the power to enforce ‘proper Islamic dress,’ to arrest unrelated males and females caught socialising, and to enforce store closure during prayer time.
(man’ al-ikhtilat) is contested.

In these debates, various views compete with one another. This debate does not centre on the classic distinction home/female and public/male, but rather on the question in which ways women’s participation in public life is acceptable. Forms of gender segregation in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait should not be confused with a distinction between private and public spheres. Gender segregation does not necessarily relegate women’s participation to the realm of domesticity, but rather separates the two sexes in public. As such, it is a development that, at least in Saudi Arabia, has led to the coming about of extensive separate public spaces (Hamdan 2005; Le Renard 2008, 2014a; Abdella Doumato 2009).

Additionally, women are often seen as culture bearers, and hence fundamental to the process of determining the direction into which the nation can, should, or will develop. Thus, debates about the position of women and their participation in society are intimately related to the process of determining what it means to be a Saudi or Kuwaiti man and a Saudi or Kuwaiti woman, and to the process of nation-building. In that process, women have become a symbol of reform, progress and modernisation, as well as a symbol or gate of Westernisation (Hamdan 2005; Göle 1996: 27-56). As such, women and women’s issues have often become an important marker and key in the struggle over modernisation.

I do not approach Saudi and Kuwaiti women as homogeneous groups, nor do I regard them as passive victims of patriarchal oppression. I do not seek to reproduce ‘Western’ discourses of ‘women’s oppression’ and ‘liberation’ either. Rather, I seek to understand the own understandings and experiences of Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors and how they themselves understand and envisage their role in Saudi and Kuwaiti society and position themselves towards gender segregation and ikhtilat. I approach them as active social actors as they participate in, create, and demand that the state or private parties should create women-only spaces in many social fields, including education, the labour market, civil society, leisure and consumption. Others contest and undermine women-only public spaces, while yet others act and argue to maintain the status quo, or to allow for more ikhtilat.

The interplay of historical, societal, political, and economic developments in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and their outcomes with respect to women-only public spaces and gender mixing are an important aspect of my dissertation. This interplay shows how the states’ discourses of modernity in relation to women-only public spaces and gender mixing take shape, and provides the background and contextualisation against which we can understand respondents’ views, arguments, and standpoints. I am primarily interested in women’s own narratives
regarding women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*. My dissertation, then, examines how women’s own discourses about women-only public spaces and gender mixing take shape. As I will demonstrate, these discourses about the position of women in society ultimately relate to ‘modernity’ invoking arguments about Islam, gender, and the nation.

In what follows in this Introduction, I will present the central concepts that I use in my dissertation: gender segregation, public space, and my discursive approach to this study. Then, I will introduce the two case studies of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Subsequently, I explain the research scope and field of study, and explain my research objectives and questions. Then I discuss the methods I employed to carry out this research project. Finally, I explain the academic relevance and valorisation of my PhD dissertation, and outline the structure of this book.

**Concepts**

Here, I explain how I approach and intend to use the concepts of gender segregation, public space, and discourse analysis in my dissertation. I also address the issue of ‘Western’ discourses on gender and their power and how I view these in light of my dissertation.

**Gender segregation**

While segregation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is based on sex, in the sense that women and men are separated into different spaces based on biological differences between them, for the purpose of the present study I refer to ‘gender segregation’ to denote this practice. I do this because it is a type of segregation that goes beyond sex: based on sex it organises the roles of and relations between women and men and their positions in society. Segregation makes spaces gender-charged and shows which spaces are deemed (un)suitable for women or men, labelling certain spaces as (in)appropriate for them. Which spaces these are, is socially constructed, and as a consequence, so is the inclusion or exclusion of women and men from them. The existence of women-only public spaces turns ‘sex’ into ‘gender’ in these spaces. Sex, as the biological differences that are located in the body, are translated into social and cultural constructions and organisation. The lives of women, who negotiate these spaces every day, are partially shaped by the visible and invisible boundaries created by these social

---

2 I will lay out my theoretical framework in Chapter 1.
structures (Arjmand 2016). Space, in this case, becomes gendered. Hence, I employ the term gender segregation and not sex segregation.

Gender segregation can be regulatory in that it determines which spaces are and which are not accessible to women, determining in which spaces they can and cannot participate in public life and develop activities. At the same time, it can be ‘emancipatory’ in that women-only public spaces can give access for women to domains and spheres that would otherwise remain closed to them. For example, women-only workplaces can serve as a facilitating mechanism, enabling women to work who would not have wanted to or be allowed to work, had the workplace been mixed. I do not approach gender segregation as a priori ‘oppressive’ or ‘liberating.’ Rather, I choose to investigate the intricate workings and dynamics of this system of organising public life, as well as how my respondents speak about gender segregation.

Public space
The concept of ‘public space’ carries many different meanings, and therefore clarification is warranted. Habermas (1962) conceived of the public sphere to be a space of debate and exchange in for example cafes or the media. While I do use that idea for my discourse analysis, for the purpose of this dissertation, however, I am primarily interested in physical spaces. From that point of departure, I do not wish to take a legal approach (Le Renard 2014a: 6), which delineates public spaces as spaces that belong to the state, such as streets and squares, and that does not include privately owned and exploited spaces-in-public such as commercial banks or private hospitals.

Two approaches that are relevant to the present study are the topographical approach (Iveson 2007) and the procedural approach (Van Melik 2008). The topographical approach employs ‘public space’ to denote a physical space, a space that is open to people such as a park or a museum. The procedural approach widens this definition to include non-physical public spaces, as well as public space as sites of power and contestation. It includes for example virtual spaces such as chat rooms.

In addition, the spaces we are dealing with in the present study are public in the sense of being accessible and outside the domestic sphere, not in the sense of publicly (as opposed to privately) owned. I approach public space as a physical space where people unknown to each other are able to meet. In the case of women-only public spaces, their accessibility is not universal, but rather particular and based on gender. In these spaces, women - who may or may not know each other - can and do meet, based on one shared identity marker: their gender.
Allowing only the entry of women, women-only public spaces are a mechanism of inclusion (for women) and exclusion (to men). Public spaces, then, are gendered, and as such, function as a site of power and contestation.

Women-only public spaces, as well as mixed (mukhtalat) public spaces do not go unchallenged. In that challenge, they become performative spaces where the category of women is performed (Ammann and Göle 2006: 39) and where through that performance meaning is established as to what it means to be a Saudi or Kuwait woman. Ammann (2006) suggests that, amongst other practices, gender segregation contributes to “the creation of boundaries, limits on public selves, which in turn are in conflict with emancipatory and liberal definitions of the modern self and the principles of “openness (“Öffentlichkeit”) and “stranger sociability” of the Western public sphere. Ammann goes on to argue that it remains to be discovered whether this discrepancy is indeed a shaking-up of what he calls the universalist foundations of modernity. This also brings up the question of whether these segregated spaces in particular denote “a space for the making of the Islamic self and habitus, in counter-distinction to the Westernized self” (Ammann and Göle 2006: 39). These questions will be explored further in this dissertation.

**Discourse analysis**

I am primarily interested in my interlocutors’ ways of relating to these public spaces and their views of them, as expressed in their discourses about gendered spaces. Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors who participated in this study do not deliberate about women-only public spaces and ikhtilat in a vacuum. Rather, their views are situated within the broader, national, discourse about ikhtilat and women-only public spaces and in relation to Western discourses too. I do not set out to carry out a discourse analysis focusing on the structure of the spoken language, nor do I wish to focus on the structure of the written language. Rather, what I intend to achieve is to identify Foucault’s “individualizable group of statements” (Foucault 1972: 80 in Mills 2004: 6), which Mills interprets as “groups of utterances which seem to be regulated in some way and which seem to have coherence and a force to them in common” (Mills 2004: 6).

With ‘discourses,’ here, I mean groupings of statements produced within power relations (Mills 2004: 6). I will be dealing with discourses rather than discourse. By ‘discourse’ Mills means “the set of rules and procedures for the production of a particular discourse” (Mills 2004: 55), while, by ‘discourses’ she refers to “sets of sanctioned statements which have some institutionalised force, which means that they have a profound influence on the way that individuals
act and think” (Mills 2004: 55). While the discourses of my Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors do have power, the workings of that power are different to that of the discourses of the Saudi and Kuwaiti state. The difference lies in that the states’ discourses and the power that flows from them is institutionalised and as a result of this they are, of course, more powerful than the discourses of my interlocutors, which are not institutionalised.

Institutionalised power need not be readily accepted but, within the field of what has been granted as permissible by in this case the Saudi and Kuwaiti government, can be challenged and resisted as well as accepted and modified. It is through this process that modernity is negotiated (see Chapter 1). By doing this, women accumulate power from a seemingly powerless position. Forms of subjectivity and resistance are thus produced within existing power relations. So power is not just simply imposed: rather, it can be challenged, reproduced, and transformed. Within the overall power structure, individuals have agency, to resist, to reproduce, or to change that power structure.

Nevertheless, and as Mills recognises, women and men often do not have equal access to speaking rights in public (Mills 2004: 87). As we shall see in Chapters 3 and 5, interlocutors do position themselves towards women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, some only privately, others also publicly. In public campaigns, such as for a women-only hospital and for female salespeople in lingerie shops (Saudi Arabia, Chapter 3), and against a gender-segregated university and for women’s attendance at a sit-in demonstration (Kuwait, Chapter 5), they make known their views and demands to the government vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and ikhtilat.

Interlocutors’ conversations with me are also a reflection of these demands. Interlocutors use speech styles strategically and “actively work out their subject positions and roles in the process of negotiating discursive constraints” (Mills 2004: 77). In this process, we must not underestimate the importance of the social context in which discourse takes place. As Barad argues,

“Statements are not the mere utterances of the originating consciousness of a unified subject; rather, statements and subjects emerge from a field of possibilities. This field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity” (Barad 2003: 819).

The field of possibilities is proposed in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait by the state. It is the state in both cases that puts forward what the parameters of a public
discussion are, and which red lines cannot be crossed with impunity. Statements
are uttered within and determined by social context and contribute to the way in
which that social context continues to exist (Mills 2004: 10).

What follows from this is what Pecheux (1982) in his work, building on
Foucault, has posited as the dialogical nature of discourse: discourse is always
in dialogue with other positions. State discourses in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait
create a field of legitimacy to which women dialogically relate themselves in their
discourses.

‘Western’ discourses on gender and their power
In the Netherlands, as Le Renard (2014) has noted for France, gender mixing
is considered to be part of modern, progressive society. Gender segregation
is viewed as its opposite. This prevalent conception however is not without its
problems, because “measuring modern-ness by the ‘status of women’ assumes
a universal standard of measure, one that is based upon a particular liberal
Western feminist notion of emancipation and liberation” (Deeb 2006: 30). Gender segregation is positioned as opposed to ‘modernity,’ as is the case in the
Netherlands for example in discussions about separating boys and girls in school
and women-only and men-only timeslots in swimming pools. In the latter case,
Dutch Muslim women in particular are presented as both victims of ‘not being
allowed’ to swim together with men and of ‘having’ to wear a ‘burkini,’ as well as
being presented as threats to ‘contemporary norms and values.’

In Western conceptions, gender segregation is usually viewed as presenting
women with obstacles and impediments to their participation in public life. Yet,
according to the Arab Human Development Report, the phenomenon of gender
segregation could also be understood as epitomising “differences between the
sexes” of which “the most should be made.” While some seem to adhere to the
former stance - that of gender segregation forming an impediment to women’s
participation in public life - others support or wish for women-only public spaces,
because these allow women’s participation in areas of public life that otherwise
would have remained off-limits to them, thereby stimulating women’s participation
and presence in the public arena.

Interlocutors themselves regularly referred directly to ‘the West’ in interviews.
‘The West’ is then supposed to mean ‘Western Europe’ and ‘the USA,’ the presence
of which in their lives – politically, militarily, materially, and also culturally – is
salient. This is what Lara Deeb (2006: 25) has called “western discursive power”
in the Foucauldian sense that “resistances... can only exist in the strategic field
of power relations” (Foucault 1987: 96 as quoted in Deeb 2006: 25). Due to its
permeation, there is no escaping this dominance and one therefore has to relate and position oneself to it.

Western perceptions of Arab women are often criticised for their Western conceptual framework and lack of understanding of the cultural, historical and religious background of the region. Suitability of concepts like “women in development” (Würth 2003), “autonomy” and also “empowerment” has been contested. Whereas the first Arab Human Development Report (2002) used the terminology “women’s empowerment,” in the 2005 Report - entirely devoted to the position of women in the Arab World - the term “the rise of women” is preferred. Empowerment’ is seen as an externally imposed term that did not emerge from and says little about the realities and needs of Arab societies, whereas ‘the rise of women’ is seen as “an essential axis of the Arab project for a human renaissance” (ADHR 2005: 6) and thus as emerging from ‘within.’

The present project takes as its point of departure that one can only understand if one starts from Saudi and Kuwaiti women’s own experiences and self-definitions. I do not approach Saudi and Kuwaiti women as homogeneous groups, nor do I regard them as passive victims of patriarchal oppression. Rather, I seek to understand the self-understanding and the experiences of Saudi and Kuwaiti women and how they themselves understand and envisage their role in Saudi and Kuwaiti society. I thus approach them as active social actors and agents of change.

Case studies

I briefly outline the situation and context in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait with respect to women-only public spaces and ikhtilat. In the section thereafter I address why I chose these two countries and explain why it is interesting to compare them.

Saudi Arabia

The phenomenon of women-only public spaces is most pronounced in Saudi

---

3 In the Arab Human Development Report, ‘the rise of women’ is defined as “Complete equality of opportunity between women and men in the acquisition and employment of human capabilities; Guaranteed rights of citizenship for all women on an equal footing with men; Acknowledgement of, and respect for differences between the sexes. Women are different from men, but that in no way implies they are deficient. Under no conditions is it acceptable to use gender differences to support theories of inequality between the sexes or any form of sexual discrimination” (AHDR 2005: 5).
4 See also Van Geel 2012 and 2016.
Introduction

Arabia. However, while separate, only-for-women public spaces have become increasingly prevalent in Saudi society, an opposite development of attempts at organising more mixed spaces can also be detected. The meaning, extent and level of separation of public spaces that are only-for-women are not static.

In Saudi Arabia, the process of nation-building has contributed to public segregation of women (Le Renard 2008). Cultural concepts of honour and chastity may have played a role in the social embedding and societal institutionalisation of gender segregation. However, more important factors in supporting stricter and new forms of public segregation in the shape of separate women-only public spaces have been the processes of urbanisation and the oil boom, as well as the rise of the Islamic Revival movement (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya), as we shall see in Chapter 2.

The logic of segregation calls for female employees in many fields. The development of women-only labour spaces has taken place mainly with regard to teaching and healthcare, but women-only branches of banks or shops have also been opened (De Long-Bas 2009). Some ministries have established segregated divisions, such as the Ministry of Planning and the Department of Finance (al-Munajjed 1997). In 2010, the Ministry of Education identified several occupations that should provide special opportunities to women, such as receptionists, photographers and nutritionists. Women are still confined to jobs that are seen as feminine and compatible with their ‘nature,’ and usually do not get to occupy decision-making or management positions. The ‘Saudisation policy,’ aiming to replace the large number of foreign workers by national citizens, also encourages the entrance of women in separate labour spaces that are for women only.

Kuwait

In Kuwait, most public spaces are mixed. Nevertheless, there are separate spaces such as women-only gyms. At other times, normally mixed spaces are turned into a temporary women-only space by using for example separate women-only opening hours, such as a ladies’ day at a fun fair park. As we shall see in Chapter 4, in Kuwait, too, the current status quo with respect to women-only public spaces and ikhtilat is the outcome of social, economic, and political processes. The discovery of oil, an increase in wealth, and the rise of Islamism in the 1980s did not lead to the development of women-only public spaces the way it did in Saudi Arabia. The effects of the Gulf War on the position of women in Kuwait was considerable: women’s gender consciousness had increased during the war, and

---

5 See also Van Geel 2014.
after the liberation progressives and liberals called for more women’s rights.

Currently the struggle between Islamists and liberals in Kuwait is one strand of competing interests that is being played out on gender grounds. In Kuwait, *ikhtilat* like women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia, does not go uncontested. The main focus of the discussion is, as we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, *man’ al-ikhtilat* (the ban on ikhtilat) at Kuwait University, which currently is legally required. The desirability of women-only public spaces in other areas in public life is however also discussed.

**Research scope and field of study**

Why did I choose to focus on Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for this study? Let me first address why Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are interesting individual case studies, and then explain why it is interesting to compare the two countries. I also clarify my dissertation’s scope in terms of the period of research and its historical timeline.

Saudi Arabia makes a unique case in the region in general and in the Gulf in particular. It is a Muslim society in which Islam plays an important role, underlined by the presence of the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina and the self-framing by the Saudi king as both the political leader of the country and the protector of the two Holy Places (*khadim al-haramayn*). Religion plays an important role in the country’s domestic and foreign politics, daily life, and national identity. This is apparent from the existence of the Hay’a, among other things. A core aspect of the religious police is religion as a public, national moral guideline and enforcer of public piety. Saudi Arabia is a monarchy without a constitution, and the legitimacy of the royal family is based on and built around its religious authority. Religious and political leadership coalesce through the 1744 pact between Ibn Saud and Ibn Wahhab, a pact that still has a determining impact on the country’s identity. The king’s authority – both politically and religiously – does not go unchallenged, however. I will further explore these and other issues in Chapter 2.

Kuwait too is a Muslim society in which Islam plays an important role. Kuwait’s 1961 constitution stipulates that Islam is the state religion and that the shari’a is one of the main sources of legislation. However, the amir does not claim religious authority and his rule is not based on such. The country’s foundational narrative tells of a bond between the merchant families and the ruling Al Sabah family rather than between a religious and a political force. At the same time, the Al Sabah have positioned themselves towards religious groups in the country – sometimes passively, sometimes much more actively, relating to Islam as heritage
and/or part of national identity, rather than as piety. I will further explore these and other issues in Chapter 4.

Comparing Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is interesting for several reasons. First of all, the developments in Kuwait were, in many ways, similar to the processes in Saudi Arabia. Both countries experienced a period of discovery and exploitation of oil, urbanisation, and the rise of Islamic groups. These historical processes might lead one to think that their outcomes might be quite similar. This however, as I will show, is not the case: the outcomes of these historical processes vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* differ. I examine how and why this is the case.

Secondly, these different realities allow us to scrutinise whether Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors have responded in different ways to these different realities. A comparison of the two countries allows an investigation of how present-day Saudi and Kuwaiti respondents view their public participation and how this is different or similar between the two countries. It also allows an examination of the types of arguments they use to support their views, and whether these differ between the two countries.

Thirdly, this comparison shows that despite Saudi Arabia’s political and military dominance in the Gulf region, Kuwait has managed to carve out and maintain its own social identity, and allows an indepth look into how the own identities of both countries play out in the field of modernity.

With respect to Saudi Arabia I restrict my dissertation to developments up to and including 2011. Much has happened in Saudi Arabia since then, such as the installation of female members of the *majlis al-shura* (2013), several driving protests (2013 and ongoing), women’s right to drive (granted in 2017, to be implemented in 2018), active and passive voting rights for women in the municipal elections (2015), and a loosening of the male guardianship system (2017). However, I did my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 and the discussions in my fieldwork (see Chapter 3) all took place within the historical and societal context of Saudi Arabia until 2011. The historical chapter on Saudi Arabia (Chapter 2) thus lays down the context of respondents’ positions and arguments at that time.

Similarly, in the case of Kuwait, I restrict my dissertation to developments up to 2013. I did my fieldwork in the second half of that year, and the discussions with my respondents thus took place against the historical and societal context of Kuwait up until that time. Therefore, the historical chapter on Kuwait (Chapter 4) will not reach beyond 2013.
Research objectives and questions

The aim of this study is to understand how through gendered public spaces (women-only public spaces and mukhtalat or mixed public spaces) discourses about the modernity of the state take shape. To do this, I look at how gender segregation came about in Saudi Arabia and how in Kuwait gender mixing became the norm, and explore how Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors view these phenomena, and what that might tell us about their conceptions of modernity. I delve into the intertwinedness of political, societal, historical developments with the development of women-only public spaces and gender mixing in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Central to my dissertation however are my interlocutors’ own views of these practices. Through their views and their ideas (alongside those of the state) of what, to them, it means to be modern in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait become apparent.

The following research question is central to this study:

Focusing on Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors’ discourses on women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, to what extent do they view these gendered public spaces as a form of modernity, what does this tell us about understandings of modernity, and to which extent do Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors have different interpretations of modernity from their respective states?

In order to unravel this question I will answer the following sub-questions:

1. What are the different approaches to ‘modernity’ in the modernity debate?
2. How did women-only public spaces and ikhtilat come about in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, and (how) is this a result of state actors’ discourses the state’s issuance of promissory notes of modernity into society?
3. How do Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors view women-only public spaces and ikhtilat as apparent from their discourses about these gendered spaces?
4. Are the conceptions of modernity, as expressed through the negotiation between the states’ and interlocutors’ discourses in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait different in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and if so, how?
In order to understand these sub-questions we need a concept of modernity. In Chapter 1, I will deal with the first question and go into the development of thinking about modernity, and propose the concept of “enchanted modern” (Deeb 2006) as the theoretical framework for my dissertation. I also lay out the concepts of “promissory notes” (Wittrock 2000) and “desiderata” (Wittrock 2000). I will examine the answers to the second question in Chapters 2 and 4, in which I show the social and historical dynamics and developments that have led to the coming about of the status quo in both countries and lay out the Saudi and Kuwaiti state's conceptions of modernity, and how these are projected into both societies. Question 3 explores interlocutors’ perspectives on the phenomena of women-only public spaces and gender mixing. For both countries I do this through examining three cases and the arguments that interlocutors use to position themselves towards these cases. From these arguments, my interlocutors’ conceptions of modernity become apparent (see Chapters 3 and 5). I will answer question 4 by comparing the conceptions of modernity as prevalent in both countries and analyse how they differ (see Conclusions).

Methodology

To arrive at the theoretical framework of my dissertation (Chapter 1) and the historical chapters 2 and 4, I reviewed primary literature (such as laws, development plans) as well as secondary sources (books, articles, media). The central focus of my dissertation however lies on my interlocutors’ own narratives and view of women-only public spaces and gender mixing.

Fieldwork

In order to investigate interlocutors’ narratives, I took a qualitative, fieldwork-based approach to this project. I carried out fieldwork in Saudi Arabia in June 2010, January 2011, and September-November 2011 in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern Province (Dammam, Khobar, and Seyhat). During the period September-December 2013, I spent three months in Kuwait carrying out fieldwork in and around Kuwait City. Thus, all fieldwork took place in urban settings.

During my fieldwork I mainly used the method of interviews to collect data. I also carried out participant observation in both countries and visited women-only public spaces as well as public spaces that were usually mixed but had women-only opening hours that turned them into temporary women-only public spaces, such
as museums, a beach, a fun fair park, primary schools, diwaniyyat, restaurants, universities, hospitals, the Chamber of Commerce, the stock exchange, exhibition openings, and a meeting of female voting rights activists. Of these observations I made fieldnotes, too.

I also made sure to have contextual encounters, sometimes as a formal interview, sometimes as an informal chat or what Driessen and Jansen (2013) have called ‘small talk,’ with for example professors, an architect, artists, a male homosexual student, a grandmother, and a member of the Al Sabah ruling family of Kuwait. These contextual encounters enriched and broadened my knowledge of both countries. Of these ‘small talk’ encounters I made fieldnotes.

During my fieldwork periods as well as before and after, I followed Saudi and Kuwaiti newspapers for discussions about gender mixing, in particular articles related to the cases that I treat in the fieldwork chapters. In the virtual world, I followed some of my Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors on Twitter and/or befriended them on Facebook, in order to remain in contact and to be able to follow-up on their work.

Focused on women’s narratives about women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, I did not interview men for this study. This does not mean that men are wholly absent from my dissertation. They come up mostly in Chapters 2 and 4, where I examine the historical development of women-only public spaces and ikhtilat and where they appear as religious scholars, state actors, politicians, and activists. Of course they are also fathers, uncles, husbands, and brothers to my interlocutors. Some of my context interviews were with men, and so their views and opinions did inform my broader picture of Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Access to the field and selection of interlocutors: Saudi Arabia
I first arrived in Saudi Arabia in June 2010, when I carried out fieldwork in Riyadh and in Jeddah. Riyadh is located on an escarpment in the area of Najd and is the Saudi city where gender segregation in the public space is most present. Jeddah, located in the Hijaz area of the kingdom that also includes Mecca and Medina, also knows gender segregation. Jeddah however is more open due to its character as a port city and entrance point for hajj pilgrims who arrive to the area from all over the world.

During my second fieldwork trip, in January 2011, I remained in Riyadh. When I was in Saudi Arabia for my third field visit from September-November 2011, I also travelled to the Eastern Province, the vast majority of whose inhabitants are Shi‘i;
Introduction

and the area in the kingdom where the country’s oil sources are located.

During all visits, I was a visiting scholar at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in the Faysaliyya area of Riyadh, where I was granted office space, library use, and given a letter of passage that I could use to travel to other cities and to give to interlocutors to show that I had been given permission to do fieldwork. The letter also made it possible for me, despite being a woman and unaccompanied, to stay in hotels in Riyadh, Jeddah, and in the Eastern province.

During my first and second visits, the KFCRIS introduced me to several women whom I could interview. Through them, but also through friends of friends and acquaintances outside of the KFCRIS I found several entry points into the field. From there onwards, I used snowball sampling, asking interlocutors if they knew other possible interlocutors who might be interested in participating in my research. Using this technique allowed me to navigate the quite difficult issue of access. During my third and last fieldwork visit, I merely relied on snowball sampling, which took off so well that it was impossible for me to speak to everyone whom I could have reached.

The focus of my fieldwork were urban women who have a role in public life and experience the workings of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in those cities. Most of my interlocutors were well-educated and well-travelled; either within the kingdom or outside it, but not all of them were proficient in the English language. It may very well be the case that different views might have been found among, for example, rural women. However, access to rural women might have been problematic particularly because of the short fieldwork periods and the amount of time that it would have taken to gain access. Also, I expected rural women’s experience with urban women-only public spaces to be limited. The categories of women that I interviewed during my first, exploratory fieldwork in June 2010 were young working women and female students. During the last two fieldwork periods I interviewed businesswomen, female Islamic preachers and teachers (hereafter called *da‘iyat*) and women who work on women’s issues (hereafter called activists). They all lived in cities: Riyadh, Jeddah, Dammam, Khobar, and Seyhat.

In June 2010, I interviewed 16 female students and 14 young working women about their views and experiences regarding the possibilities and constraints of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*. This first, explorative, fieldwork period gave me a sense of the issues at stake in the discussions about women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* and served as an orientation for the more in-depth interviews I would later carry out with businesswomen, activists, and *da‘iyat*. All respondents during this first fieldwork were young women who had an active
role in the public domain. Three interviews took place in Riyadh, 27 in Jeddah. The majority of the interviews was carried out in Arabic and none of the interviews were voice-recorded. Consultation with Saudi scholars helped refine my research questions and research design for the second and third fieldwork periods.

During the second and third fieldwork periods, I conducted in-depth interviews with women who had reached a settled position in society. The three focus categories were businesswomen, activists, and da‘iyat. I chose these three categories of women because of the expected spread of opinions across these three groups, aiming to cover a wide variety of women’s voices on the topics of women-only public spaces and ikhtilat in the economic, societal, and religious fields and so as to be able to investigate whether each category shares a certain standpoint on women-only public spaces and ikhtilat.

In January 2011, I interviewed 9 women: 3 activists, 3 da‘iyat, and 3 businesswomen. All interviews were voice-recorded, and the majority of interviews were carried out in Arabic. All interviews took place in Riyadh. In the period September-November 2011, I carried out fieldwork in Jeddah and the Eastern Province and interviewed 48 women: 18 activists, 15 businesswomen, 15 da‘iyat. As in January 2011, all interviews were voice-recorded interviews, and the majority of interviews were carried out in Arabic.

For this country study, I thus spoke with a total of 87 women. In addition, I carried out 13 context interviews, for example with a media presenter, a heritage conservationist, and a librarian.

**Access to the field and selection of interlocutors: Kuwait**

From September through December 2013 I carried out fieldwork in Kuwait. Kuwait is 120 times as small as Saudi Arabia (17,818 km² as opposed to 2,149,690 km²). It consists of 6 governorates (muhafazat): al-Ahmadi, al-Farwaniyah, Hawalli, Mubarak al-Kabir, al-‘Asima, and al-Jahra’. Al-‘Asima (Kuwait City) is the capital, which is where the vast majority of interviews took place. The Jahra’ area is known as the most conservative area in Kuwait and we will come across this area too in Chapter 5 when analysing the interviews.

During my fieldwork in Kuwait I was a visiting scholar at Kuwait University’s Kulliyyat al-adab (the Faculty of Arts) on the Kayfan campus, where I was given office space and allowed library use. The Dean of the Arts faculty generously allowed me to call on his assistant, who was very helpful in locating newspaper articles and other sources for me. The Dean himself introduced me to several women whom I could interview. Through them, but also through connections of a colleague who had previously done fieldwork in Kuwait, and through contacts of
some of my Saudi interlocutors, I found several entry points into the field. From there onwards, as in Saudi Arabia I used snowball sampling, asking interlocutors if they knew other possible interlocutors who might be interested in participating in my research.

As in Saudi Arabia, the focus of my fieldwork were urban women who had a role in public life and were familiar with women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in those cities. Again, most of my interlocutors were well-educated, but not all of them were proficient in English. Rural women may have had different views. However, I wanted to be able to make a reasonable comparison to Saudi Arabia and thus decided to maintain my focus on the same categories of interlocutors as in Saudi Arabia.

In Kuwait, I did not interview young working women and female students as I did during my first, exploratory fieldwork in Saudi Arabia in 2010. By the time I started my fieldwork in Kuwait I had already moved on from that first, exploratory phase of my research project. Instead, I only interviewed activists, businesswomen, and *daʻiyat*, categories chosen for the same reason as in Saudi Arabia, so as to allow me to compare the discourses between the two countries.

During the three months that I was in Kuwait, I interviewed 12 activists, 9 business women, and 10 *daʻiyat*, adding up to a total of 31 interviews. On top of that, I carried out 11 context interviews, for example with an artist, and architect, and a homosexual youngster, making for a total of 42 interviews in Kuwait. All interviews (except for the one with the homosexual youngster) were voice-recorded interviews, and the majority of them were carried out in Arabic.

So altogether, I carried out a total of 142 interviews in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait for the purpose of my dissertation. While the amount of interviews in Saudi Arabia exceeds that of Kuwait, due to the different size of the countries both geographically and in terms of population, the difference in volume of interviews between the two countries forms a good basis for comparison between them.

**Set-up and course of interviews: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait**

The majority of interviews were formal interviews that followed an interview protocol and took place in public spaces such as malls and coffee shops. Some interviews took place in private homes or the interlocutors’ business office. Additionally, I had informal chance encounters chatting about *ikhtilat* and segregation in e.g. a clothes shop or during a visit to a theme park. Interviews took place in Arabic or in English, depending on the interlocutors’ preference. In all cases, translations of Arabic interviews into English are mine.

In interviews, I discussed concrete examples of women-only public spaces
and mixed (mukhtalat) spaces with my Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors. Their views on these specific cases and the arguments they used provided me with a wealth of information about their discourses about these topics and how they connect these to overall conceptions of Saudi and Kuwaiti modernity, nation, and gender.

Both in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait interlocutors explained to me that they wanted to participate in my research in order to help correct the negative image in the West of Arab women in general and Saudi and Kuwaiti women in particular. Others were keen to cooperate but also corrected me, saying I should not write about ikhtilat but about ‘more important issues for women,’ such as the male guardianship (mahram)\(^7\) system in Saudi Arabia or the housing situation in Kuwait. Still others, especially Saudi women who had never travelled outside the kingdom themselves and did not speak English, were keen to speak to an Arabic-speaking Western woman, as not many Western women in Saudi Arabia are approachable and speak Arabic.

**Data analysis: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait**
To aid in analysing my interviews, I used the software programme ATLAS.ti. The programme allowed me to code my interviews, helping me to determine the most relevant topics for analysis. The research is based on anthropological, qualitative methods such as interviews and participant observations. The sample size is relatively small, particularly when broken down by category of interlocutor, and does not allow me to draw generalisable conclusions. Similarly, my data analyses do not speak to the monolithic category of ‘Saudi/Kuwaiti women’ but rather show the attitudes of the women I spoke with in several specific categories of women – activists, business women, and da‘iyat. While it is not possible to generalise, of course, I chose these categories in order to gain a broader perspective on different types of attitudes vis-à-vis women-only public space and ikhtilat.

**Reflective remarks**
While doing this research, by being out in the field conducting interviews, observing, and taking field notes, I have predominantly been my own measuring instrument. Had another Dutch non-Muslim unmarried unaccompanied female researcher carried out this project, the results could have been different. Had

\(^7\) In Saudi Arabia (not in Kuwait), every woman has a male guardian (mahram). A guardian is a male family member (father, brother, husband, son, or paternal uncle) whose permission a woman needs to, for example, work, travel, and study.
a Saudi, Muslim, married female researcher carried out this project, again the results might have been different. Or they might not. In what follows I share reflections on the embeddedness of my dissertation in scholarly tradition and on my research set-up, on my own positioning in this PhD project, and ethical considerations.

**Reflection on embeddedness in scholarly tradition**

One can ask the question to what extent the scholarly tradition one is trained in has an influence on one’s research. How do one’s previous knowledge and experience inform or frame one’s research?

I started my academic training at University College Utrecht in the Liberal Arts & Sciences, majoring in Social Science (Law, Anthropology, Political Science) and taking a minor in the Humanities (Religious Studies). Having dived into and having been influenced by the ways of looking at the world of all four of these fields of study, it is difficult to place me in one specific academic field. On top of that, during my BA, I weaved my interest in the Middle East and Islamic Studies throughout much of my coursework. While this might sound like a patchwork-quilt of an education, in its breadth and depth it has rather given me a toolbox of different viewpoints from different academic fields, allowing me to approach a problem or question from different angles and to comfortably combine different fields of study. For my Master’s degree I decided to pursue the Political Science track of my undergraduate work, going on to do my MPhil in International Relations at Cambridge University – focusing on Middle East politics during both my coursework and for my MPhil thesis. It was at Cambridge that I first started studying Arabic; after graduation I eventually moved on to live in Cairo, Ramallah, and Damascus to learn the language.

While I wrote my PhD dissertation at the Faculty of Theology, Philosophy, and Religious Studies and in the Department of Islam Studies, not only the fields of Religious Studies and Islamic Studies – as well as Politics - ring through in my dissertation, but also those of History (Chapters 2 and 4), Anthropology (Chapters 3 and 5) and Sociology (Chapter 1). Without Arabic, my fieldwork (Chapters 3 and 5) would not have been possible. Having the aforementioned toolbox allowed me to comfortably navigate these waters.

My academic background was not the only influence on my research and dissertation. Before embarking on my PhD, I worked outside academia, at the Clingendael Institute, Amnesty International, and the International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM). In 2009 I started my own business, Faraasha Middle East Training & Advisory, providing training, teaching, and consultancy work to clients in the public and private sectors, and appearing in
the media. It was through one of my Faraasha projects that this PhD research came about. In the Spring of 2010 I carried out a research project for the Islam Research Programme of the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The research programme aimed to bring academic researchers and policy makers together for cross-fertilisation. Research teams set up studies in ten different Muslim-majority countries, among them Saudi Arabia. My project dealt with the position of women – and the issue of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in particular (Van Geel 2012). The results were published in the project’s research report entitled ‘Saudi Arabia between Conservatism, Accommodation and Reform,’ edited by Aarts and Meijer and published by the Clingendael Institute in 2012 (Aarts and Meijer 2012). Two months into the project, the opportunity to apply for fully-funded PhD research at NISIS arose and together with prof. dr. Van Nieuwkerk, with whom I collaborated on the IRP project and who would later become one of my PhD advisors, I applied. Fortunately, NISIS saw it fit to fund my proposal, and the final result is this PhD dissertation – which would not have seen the light of day had it not been for my Faraasha work.

Throughout my years of PhD research, I maintained my practice as a consultant, trainer, and university lecturer and continued to operate Faraasha. I disseminated my research findings in countless ways, shapes and forms to a wide array of audiences, for example students, NGO workers, high-level army officers, diplomats, newspaper readers, radio listeners, and theatre makers. I did this through, amongst others, workshops, lectures, books, blogposts, media appearances, strategic advice, training sessions, and simulations. This combination of my broad yet in-depth academic training and groundedness in scholarship, combined with my strong practice outside of academe is what shaped my identity as a researcher.

**Reflection on my own positioning**

During my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, the layers of my identity that played into how I was perceived were my being a non-Muslim, Arabic-speaking, white Western, unaccompanied and unmarried, woman, doing research in Riyadh, Jeddah, and the Eastern Province. Let me reflect on each of these identity markers.

Interlocutors tried to position me in terms of religiosity by asking whether I was Christian, or whether I was Muslim. Some were surprised to hear I was not Muslim, especially since I spoke Arabic and had taught a course about Islam at a university in the Netherlands. As I am not always sure of my own religious identity, most of the time I would answer questions about my religiosity by saying that my family is originally Christian and that I was raised as such. Sometimes I
added that I wasn’t sure about my faith but do not consider myself an atheist either. Some of the female Islamic preachers whom I interviewed tried to convert me, in a passionate and sincere spirit. In some instances I would engage in such conversations, at other times I would just say that religion is something bayni wa bayna rabbi – a phrase some of my interlocutors used to say faith is something personal, ‘between me and my Lord.’

Being a non-Muslim only once led to my being refused an interview. It was the day after crown prince Sultan’s passing away and I had joined Marwa, the mother of one of my interlocutors, to a women-only lecture and prayer meeting in a mosque in Jeddah. As required of women in public, I was wearing my abaya and had covered my hair when we were in the car together, being driven to the mosque by the family’s male driver. The mosque had been reserved for women that evening and the women were gathered in the prayer area, sitting, chatting, reading from the Qur’an, or fiddling with their prayer beads – in short, waiting for Sana, a well-known da’iya who was already sitting in front of the group and greeting some of the women, to start her talk. The women were all covered, and so was I. Marwa wanted me to briefly meet Sana and to ask her if she would be willing to talk to me after her lecture and prayer. We went up to her and I introduced myself and briefly told her about my reason for being in Saudi Arabia, the topic of my doctorate research, and that one of the groups of women I was particularly interested in were da’iyat such as herself. Sana said that of course she would have some time afterwards to talk. Shortly after our chat, she started her lecture, focusing on Sultan’s death and speaking about Paradise.

After she had finished her talk, it was prayer time. In the hustle and bustle of the women getting ready for prayer, Sana came up to me and asked me if I would join in prayer. I thanked her for the invitation, and told her I wasn’t Muslim, and that I wasn’t sure whether it would therefore be appropriate to join the prayer. Sana gave me a look that was a mix of confusion, apprehension, and disappointment. We had not explicitly talked about it, but because I was covered and spoke Arabic, doing research in Saudi Arabia, joining this study session, Sana had apparently taken me for a Muslim. The discrepancy – although totally unintended – was such to her that she changed her mind and after prayer told me she did not have the time to speak with me.

One important personal consideration was whether or not to wear the hijab while in Saudi Arabia. Both the abaya and the hijab are a must, but some women do not always wear the hijab, let it slip off their head, or wear it loosely like a neck scarf so they can wear it if/where they please or when the Mutawa’a enforces it. An argument for not wearing it would be that it could “make life more difficult for
those women who do not want to wear it but whose husbands see this Western woman who covers and they use it to make their women cover too” as one activist put it to me. On the other hand, wearing the hijab might lead people to think you are Muslim, as described above. So either choice has consequences and in that way also for a Western woman the hijab becomes a symbol, whether one wears it or not. I chose to wear it, most of the time but not always. Saudi women wear the hijab (or niqab or burqa) and wearing it is enforced by the religious police, also for non-Saudi women.

In Kuwait, on the other hand, the wearing of the abaya and hijab is not nearly as widespread, and more importantly, it is not enforced. While in the more conservative area of Jahra’ many women do wear both, in most other areas in the capital this is not the case. In Kuwait therefore, while dressing modestly, I did not wear either the abaya or the hijab.

Speaking Arabic was indispensable for my fieldwork –both in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait I could not have carried out this research without knowing the language. However, having studied Arabic in several countries and speaking a mix of Egyptian and Syrian/Palestinian dialect sometimes led to confusion. Whereas Egyptians sometimes ask me, “where did you study Arabic, you sound so Syrian” and Syrians say, “where did you study Arabic, you sound so Egyptian,” Saudis sometimes asked if I was Lebanese – while I have never even been to Lebanon. I always made sure that this linguistic confusion did not lead to confusion about my background, making it clear I did live in several countries in the region but have no roots in the region.

On a few occasions, my having spent considerable time in Egypt and Syria, and also Palestine and Yemen led to some mistrust. Most of the time, however, it led to interested questions about my experiences and to mutual trust and bonding. Nevertheless, expectations and attitudes might – or might not – have been different towards me had I indeed had a familial background in the region. I always gave interlocutors the choice whether they wanted to do the interview in English or in Arabic. Some had studied in the UK or US and preferred to speak English with me. Others chose to speak with me in Arabic.

The issue of ‘Arabish’ (a mix of Arabic and English) was more present in Kuwait than in Saudi Arabia, due to the Kuwaiti educational system that is partially British (e.g. the British School of Kuwait) and American (e.g. the American School of Kuwait and the American University of Kuwait). Kuwaiti interlocutors would sometimes complain to me about the “Arabish” their children now speak rather than the actual Arabic that foreigners still learn. I am, of course, not a native speaker. In Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, no matter how good my Arabic would be, I
would always be an outsider, if only because of my looks.

While it was difficult for interlocutors to ‘read’ my class background, since I come from a different country and cultural background than they do, with my length, fair skin and eyes, and dark blonde hair (of course not always shown), I clearly stood out as a Western foreigner. While Saudi Arabia is known in the West as a closed country, in fact many of Saudi Arabia’s inhabitants are non-nationals. Pakistani men work as taxi drivers, Indonesian women work as domestic helpers, and Indian men as construction workers. In addition, there are Arab migrant workers (for example Egyptians) as well as Western ones. Most Western women in Saudi Arabia do not work, and tend not to connect to Saudi society much, and do not speak Arabic. Some interlocutors thus saw participating in my research as a way of meeting such a Western woman, leading to conversations about being a woman in the Netherlands, a Western woman in Saudi Arabia, but also many other topics such as music, food, dress, and politics.

Another recurrent attempt at positioning me was asking whether I was married or not – it was a topic that occurred in almost every interview. My ‘no’ as a response led to varied reactions, from encouragement to expressing hope that it would happen soon, to pity and offers to find a Saudi man for me. What is more, I was in Saudi Arabia unaccompanied, without a *mahram*. These issues, together with the obvious fact of my being a Western woman, meant I was not categorised in the same gender terms as Saudi women, and thus automatically being positioned outside of that category and some of its consequences. While doing this research as a man would have been difficult if not impossible, falling outside these gender terms allowed me to manoeuvre reaching both Saudi women and men. Also, wearing the hijab and the abaya yet clearly standing out as a non-Saudi, while sometimes making me feel uncomfortable, did allow me to manoeuvre encounters and places that otherwise might not have been accessible.

The fact that all these markers are part of who I am, may have affected the amount and/or the type of information that interlocutors decided to share with me, and what they decided they wanted to share of themselves and their lives with me. How interlocutors related to my age, social class, marital status, religion, and education, as well as my white skin may also have influenced this. It may have led to perceptions of me by interlocutors as to my ideas, values, ideals, and attitudes that may or may not have been correct, but that may (or may not) have had a bearing on how they related to me and talked to me.

I always informed interlocutors about my own, personal story of how I became interested in the region Middle East, why I learnt Arabic and why I came
to Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. I also spoke about how I combine my academic work with being an entrepreneur. Business women would sometimes be very interested in the part of my story about being a female entrepreneur in the Netherlands. Activists would sometimes attach specific value to underlining to me the importance of claiming rights through Islam rather than through the ‘Western way’ of for example (white) feminism. Da’iyat would occasionally link in with the part of my story where I explained that I teach a course on Islam at a university in the Netherlands, reacting in surprise when hearing that nonetheless I am not Muslim, and subsequently attempting to change that. In a way, my personal story explained my presence, built rapport and created trust.

However, the question whether the women I spoke with would speak differently to a Saudi or Kuwaiti female researcher than to me still arises. My being Western and non-Muslim could induce them to give answers that are socially acceptable in the Saudi or Kuwaiti context, attempting to give me a ‘good image’ of their country. On the other hand, my position could also work in the opposite way, with women perhaps feeling more free to speak their mind to a researcher with only a temporary presence in the country than to someone who is part of the societal structure. Throughout my fieldwork in both countries, I have been aware of and sensitive to these dynamics, trusting my instincts as to which of the two dynamics were at play. A Saudi or Kuwaiti researcher would perhaps have asked different questions - and might not have been able to ask some other questions, for example on topics that are presumed known and understood when one is a national. I believe that my own openness and receptivity did pave the way for the women whom I interviewed to speak with me openly, genuinely, and trustingly.

**Ethical considerations**

I informed all interlocutors of my institutional affiliation, the funding of my research, and the aim of the interviews. All interlocutors knew my own personal story as to how I became interested in the region in general and in this research topic in specific.

During interviews, I always proposed anonymity to the woman I was speaking with, so that she would feel free to speak. While many said I was allowed to use their name in my research, *ikhtilat* is a political topic (see Chapters 2 and 4) and the political circumstances in the region have changed dramatically since my fieldwork trips. Especially in light of these regional political developments, the specific consequences of which for women I have spoken with are difficult to foresee, I decided to anonymise, with one or two exceptions due to unavoidable recognisability, the women I have spoken with and use pseudonyms.
I started my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia in June 2010, 6 months (almost exactly to the day) before the Tunisian revolution broke out on December 18 of that year. When I returned to Saudi Arabia in January 2011, I arrived in Jeddah on the same day (the 14th) that Ben ‘Ali, Tunisia’s ousted dictator, did. Eleven days later, and while I was still in Saudi Arabia, the Egyptian revolution started. By September 2011, when I returned to Saudi Arabia for my third fieldwork period, in Syria too a revolution had started, the Egyptian president Mubarak had been deposed, and the Libyan dictator Ghaddafi would be killed a month later. It goes without saying that throughout the course of my fieldwork in Saudi Arabia, therefore, the regional dynamics changed tremendously and this also affected Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait.

By the time I went to Kuwait for fieldwork in September 2013, Libya and Syria had descended into civil war and Egypt was under Muslim Brotherhood rule. In Kuwait, too, demonstrations had taken place. One of those demonstrations serves as a case study in Chapter 5. In Saudi Arabia, protest, whether outrightly political or for example concerning women driving (1990, 2011 and 2013), is immediately suppressed by the government. When on 26 September 2017 the news broke that women would be allowed to drive, the Saudi government did not only play down any role female activists had had in prompting the decision, but some of these activists said that security officials phoned them cowing them into silence about the decision. The Ministry of Information denied any such calls had been made. Human rights activists have been imprisoned and punished with long-term prison sentences and post-prison travel bans. In Kuwait, too, activists taking part in demonstrations have been imprisoned.

Relevance

My dissertation has of course its academic relevance. I also believe in the importance of dissemination of academic research to a wider audience, and therefore also address the valorisation of this work.

Relevance to academia

This project links in with the academic debate on modernity and approaches the topic from an alternative, decentred, or “provincialised” (Chakrabarty 2007) and “enchanted” (Deeb 2006) perspective. It examines how the development of women-only public spaces and the different discourses of various state and non-state actors on that development are an expression of an alternative, perhaps
“enchanted” modernity. It moves away from the “modernism-traditionalism”
dichotomy and examines the emergence of women-only public spaces as an
expression of modernity, while putting the development in the broader historical
and political context (Abu-Lughod 1998).

My fieldwork in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait examined the views of women on
these developments. While much has been written about women of the Arabian
peninsula, particularly in the West, little is known about their own perceptions.
The project approaches the research topic from a bottom-up perspective and its
main focus lies on examining the perspectives of women themselves. No such
comparative research of state discourses and projects, and of women’s own
voices in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait has been carried out before. This research
is not only relevant in light of the heated discussions that are taking place on
the Peninsula itself, but also in light of the strong public interest in this topic in
Western societies.

The current project looks at gendered public spaces in urban settings among
educated women in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in general and the practices of
women-only public spaces and ikhtilat in particular. Various studies have appeared
in the area of gender segregation in the Middle East (see for example Asad 1970;
Barth 1961; Cunnison 1966; Marx 1967; Pehrson 1966). However, these studies
focused on the public-private distinction, labelling the public domain as male and
the private, domestic sphere as female. While the notion that the (social) worlds of
men and women are reducible to respectively the public and the private sphere
has been dislocated (see for example Ahmed 1992; Moghadam 2003; De Koning
2009) only some research has appeared in the area of public gender segregation
of women and men in the shape of women-only public spaces. Recent studies
are for example Le Renard (2008, 2014), Shahrokni and Dokouhaki (2012),
only Le Renard deals specifically with Saudi Arabia (and the others with Iran). In
the context of Kuwait there are none such studies. This dissertation therefore
contributes to filling that gap in the academic literature.

Valorisation
This PhD project aims to contribute to the academic body of knowledge, but is
also of interest and use to other audiences. Importantly, both in Saudi Arabia
and Kuwait, academics and interlocutors have shown interest in reading my
dissertation. Among Kuwaitis, this interest was specifically aimed at finding out
more about the opinions of my Saudi interlocutors on women-only public spaces.

Early in this project, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs showed an interest
in this research. Before embarking on the PhD, the research I had carried out for the MFA resulted in a contribution to a policy research report (Van Geel 2012) and a policy brief that I wrote for the Dutch Embassy in Riyadh on the position of women in Saudi Arabia.

Through my advisory and consultancy work with Faraasha, which I have already laid out in this Introduction, I have disseminated much of the knowledge I have gained by doing this research. Examples are my advisory work on gender issues for NGOs, gender trainings for Arab diplomats at a Dutch think tank, and training NATO military officers on gender issues. I have also taught several university courses that partially draw on this dissertation. All these activities have a clear cross-cultural framework, and deal specifically with gender issues in the Middle East.

It is my hope to be able to transform the present manuscript into a trade edition, so as to make available the knowledge and insights gained through this project to fellow academics, students of the region, and practitioners. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the body of literature that is available on Saudi Arabia and Kuwait as well as to a better understanding of women’s experiences on the Arabian peninsula.

Finally, based on this research I am writing a non-fiction book for a broad audience, making much of the knowledge gained through this research accessible to the general public. Dealing with women’s stories and the position of women in Saudi Arabia in particular, with the book I aim to provide those seeking broader knowledge of Saudi Arabia with accessible, gripping, yet in-depth and multi-faceted stories.

**Structure of the dissertation**

In answering the question in which ways the emergence and development of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are linked to government projects and discourses, and how these are reflected in women’s own narratives, I will first address the modernity debate in Chapter 1. In that chapter, I will lay out the theoretical framework of my dissertation. Chapter 2 traces the historical development of women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia to provide the context for the present-day situation in Saudi Arabia. In Chapter 3, I will go into the present-day by analysing the interviews with Saudi interlocutors,

---

8 See the Reflective remarks section of this dissertation for an explanation of the Dutch MFAs’ interest.
using three cases to examine their discourses on women-only public spaces and \textit{ikhtilat}, and how these are connected to the framework of modernity. Chapter 4 discusses how Kuwait’s history has influenced the present-day situation of \textit{ikhtilat} in the country, to create the context for Chapter 5 in which I analyse, aided again by three cases, the interviews with Kuwaiti interlocutors on \textit{ikhtilat} and \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat}, and how these are related to the theoretical framework of modernity. In the Conclusion I draw a comparison between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and formulate my answer to the central research question.
“Europe was modern; the East was not. How might one become modern when one was not, could not be, or did not want to be Western? Women have had a prominent place in the debates and struggles over this question.”

Introduction

‘Being modern’ has been a dominant self-image of Europeans for centuries (Abu-Lughod 1998: 7; Berman 1982). As sociological theory shows, debates and ideas about modernity, its appearance and its content have changed throughout the decades. Building on notions of tradition, authenticity, and modernity, I analyse in this chapter how different approaches to modernity have evolved.

The classic, universal approach to modernity leaves little room for the idea of a “provincialised” (Chakrabarty 2007), ‘decentred,’ or ‘local’ modernity. Traditionally, modernity is characterised as a distinctly Western (European) phenomenon with characteristics such as capitalism, secularism, industrialisation, rationalism, and democracy. Contesting the universality of the Eurocentric conception of modernity, this chapter poses questions regarding the locality and multiplicity of modernity.

In what follows I outline a theoretical framework by uncovering modernity’s entanglement with the West and ‘localising’ it, in order to lay out the framework within which I will analyse the fieldwork material I collected in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In that light, my particular interest goes to the concepts of multiple, alternative modernities, desiderata, promissory notes, and the “enchanted modern” (Deeb 2006), which leaves space for a spiritual side to modernity.

Tradition and authenticity

In order to understand theories of modernity, I first address the concepts of ‘tradition’ and ‘authenticity.’ As I will show, this helps in a critical (re-)evaluation of modernity. The supposedly binary opposition of tradition and modernity has been thoroughly criticised (Rabinow 1975, Herzfeld 1992, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Hobsbawm, for example, speaks of “invented traditions.” He explains that, insofar as these refer to a historical past, their distinctive feature is that the continuity with the past is largely artificial. “Invented traditions” are an attempt to establish a continuity with a suitable historical past and

“(…) responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations, or which establish their own past by quasi-obligatory repetition. It is the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure at least some parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant
Traditions are fluid and always susceptible to change: what was seen as ‘traditional’ twenty years ago may be seen in a different light nowadays. Thus, as it keeps changing through time, tradition is not a static but rather a flexible phenomenon. Likewise, some traditions that we regard as longstanding are actually quite recent (Smart 1998: 86). Traditions are not merely handed down but in the process also interpreted, projected back, and altered. Authenticating the past into the presence entails that while we cannot change certain historical events, we can and do change our retrospective perception of them.

The universal approach to modernity

The rise of Europe, especially through the 18th and 19th centuries during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, brought unprecedented levels of economic growth and increased power to Western Europe. Colonialism funded the investments that produced the Industrial Revolution.

With the introduction of the steam engine and the ensuing Industrial Revolution, the idea of the ‘modern era’ arose as a period in world history “as distinct from, say, the medieval age or classical antiquity” (Wittrock 2000: 31). Modernity was understood in universal terms and was conceptualised as a period in time, where modernity existed everywhere and in the same way: ‘the Modern era,’ during which everything was modern. The proponents of this modernity approach located the origin of modernity in the Enlightenment; the end of modernity, then, lay in the post-modern 20th century.

The colonial experience of the 19th century, however, with its urge to ‘civilise,’ lay bare a hidden contradiction within this approach. Colonialists were confronted with an ‘Other’ that was not modern according to their standards and interpretation of modernity, which they believed should have been prevalent everywhere. These ideas about modernity were also reflected in the development discourse of the 1950s, which reflected the idea that social, political, and cultural progress could only be achieved through material advancement (Escobar 1997: 86).

The main criticism of this approach is that while it does locate in time the beginning and ‘end’ of modernity, it does not explain what modernity consists in (Wittrock 2000: 31). The universal approach to modernity does not account for the substantial differences between countries, such as differing economic
On Modernity

and political institutions among European countries – let alone elsewhere in the world. But the differences are larger, namely how a society, a market economy, and a modern political system are organised:

“Until the end of World War I, (…), virtually no European country had the type of political order that theorists now define as emblematic of modernity, i.e., that of a democratic nation state” (Wittrock 2000: 35).

Secondly, the universal approach, in taking Western ‘modernity’ as one single reference point of how modern other societies are, unavoidably needs to find the defining institutions and behavioural patterns of that modernity (Wittrock 2000: 32). Which institutions and practices are the defining ones when we use the term modern to characterise an epoch? This question is a substantive one, hence one has to know or determine which institutions and behaviours are modern and which are not. Theorists attempted to see whether some patterns or trends were evolving universally into a certain direction, but hardly arrived at an actual definition of the necessary conditions other than broad trends such as ‘the industrial revolution,’ ‘the democratic revolution,’ and ‘the educational revolution’ (Wittrock 2000: 32-33). We cannot but conclude that the universal approach of a ‘modern era’ and its “temporal conception of modernity ultimately rests on a substantive one” (Wittrock 2000: 36).

The institutional approach to modernity

The questions that the universal approach to modernity led to – if reality shows that (Western) European modernity does not exist everywhere and in the same way, then what is modernity and what does it consist in?; which institutions or processes or practices define modernity? – were tackled by those theorists who took an institutional approach to modernity.

When the welfare state came into being and institutions such as the nation state and mass education developed in the late 19th and early 20th century, a new approach to modernity developed: the institutional approach. The ‘linking figure’ between the universal and institutional approach was Karl Marx (1818-1883). Marx saw modernity as based on freeing societies and the working class from the oppressive conditions that they are subjected to, formulating the economic restructuring of society as a precondition for modernity. At the same time Marx claimed that modernity is moving towards a specific universal end point, such
that economically developed countries show the future to those countries that are less developed.

Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920) are two classic sociological thinkers representative of the institutional approach. They have left us with what Appadurai calls “one of the most problematic legacies of grand Western social science” (Appadurai 2000: 3), namely “…the sense of some single moment – call it the modern moment – that by its appearance creates a dramatic and unprecedented break between past and present” (Appadurai 2000: 3).

Both Durkheim and Weber look at the substance of modernity, seeing modernity as the result of processes such as the industrial revolution and urbanisation that took place in Western Europe and that created institutions. Weber considered bureaucracy to be the hallmark of modernity (Weber 1978 [1922]) – the dark side of which the world would soon experience.9 Other features of modernity were rationality, secularism and disenchantment, individualism, mass education, capitalism, democracy, and the nation state:

“Modernization, the change that results in modernity, is an interlinked process of structural differentiation, cultural rationalization, and personal individuation in the view of these classics” (Schmidt 2010: 513).

As a consequence of the identification of historical processes and social institutions that made up ‘modernity,’ a country would only ‘qualify’ as ‘modern’ if it had several of these characteristics.

The institutional approach, like the universal approach, is problematic in several ways. Firstly, it conflates conceptual with empirical questions (Wittrock 2000: 32). As Wittrock points out, the advocates of the institutional approach rarely succeed in defining the parameters of what constitutes a modern society. Instead, they focus on empirical questions such as whether family structures in the USA and other parts of the world evolve in a similar way or not; a question that is interesting but that blurs the basic question about the diversity of modern societies (Wittrock 2000: 32).

Secondly, the institutional approach assumes that all Western countries have followed the same historical trajectory (Wittrock 2000: 33-35). It presents a homogeneous view of the historical trajectory of Western societies, suggesting all

9 While Weber posits in this work that a rational-legal bureaucracy is the hallmark and epitome of modernity, he does not present a coherent theory of modernity. The study however has been influential in later thinking and theorising about modernity.
On Modernity

have followed the same processes and have developed the same institutions. As such, the institutional approach does not account for the substantial institutional differences between European countries for instance with regards to economic and political institutions.

For example, with respect to modernity’s alleged feature of ‘secularism,’ it may be noted that France, with its concept of laïcité\(^{10}\), has a different way of dealing with religion in the public space – namely a strong separation between church and state – than a country like the Netherlands, where political parties with a confessional basis often form part of a coalition government, and in the United Kingdom where the Queen is also the head of the Anglican Church of England.

Thirdly, as Taylor (2004) argues, by homogeneously defining all Western societies as ‘modern,’ this induces us to forget that many people in this ‘modern West’ were not part of the ‘blessings and curses’ of 19\(^{\text{th}}\) and 20\(^{\text{th}}\) century modernity:

“We should (...) remember that it wasn’t very long ago when whole segments of our supposedly modern society remained outside of this modern social imaginary (...). This is easy to forget, because once we are well installed in the modern social imaginary, it seems the only possible one, the only one that makes sense” (Taylor 2004: 17).

Fourthly, the institutional approach takes one geographical unit (Western Europe) as reference point or point of measure of ‘how modern’ other societies are. This Eurocentrism converts the non-European world into modernity’s ‘Other,’ which is then defined in terms of what it lacks in Western qualities (Van der Ree 2007: 32). This approach seems to imagine modernity as an ideological concept: ‘the West’ is posited as the ‘norm’ and ‘normality’ to which the ‘rest of the world’ should mirror itself: modernity is conflated with Westernisation, or even Europeanisation, and is defined as a “process of catching up” (Van der Ree 2007: 32).

Lastly, the institutional approach seems to bring with it a value judgement of progress. The state of modernity is the end of the process of modernisation, and this is something societies should strive at. However, while progress may be perceived as ‘always good,’ it also positions ‘the West’ as the ‘winners of history.’ This is problematic as there seem to be what others may regard as negative consequences of this Western-type modernity, such as the perceived moral

\(^{10}\) Laïcité does not only denote a separation between church and state but also the idea of state neutrality towards the various religions. This is expressed by a lack of visible expressions of religion in public.
degeneration of the modern West.

Nevertheless, it was not so much due to these criticisms as to events in world history that theorising and thinking about ‘modernity’ hit a crisis. Hitler (1889-1945), as well as Lenin (1870-1924) and Stalin (1878-1953) who came to power in the 20th century, were not so much a derailment of modernity or representative of an anti-modernity but rather a representation of certain aspects of modernity (Wagner 1994: 13). Their practices showed Europe the dark sides of modernity (Bauman 1989) and the bureaucratic capacity for tyranny (Herzfeld 1992) - the same bureaucracy that Weber had considered to be the hallmark of modernity.

The locality of modernity: modernity as a universal process, experienced differently

Against this historical background other theories of modernity were formed. In what may be seen as the start of the process of ‘localising’ modernity and wresting it from its Eurocentric analytical domination, Talcott Parsons (1977) and Habermas (1987) were among the first scholars to argue that modernity should indeed be seen as one universal process, but one that may be experienced differently in various locations - also outside the West.

Parsons (1977) argued that there is more than one route to modernity, and he allowed for a differential institutionalisation of the programme of modernity. For example, while sceptical of the long-term stability of the Soviet political system, Parsons did view the Soviet Union as near equal to the United States in terms of depth and level of modernisation, seeing the difference between the US and the Soviet Union as one of degree and not of essence.

Habermas (1987) opened up modernity to different forms of rationality, thereby suggesting there is more than one historical trajectory towards modernity (Van der Ree 2007: 33). However, while modernity is a global experience and locally mediated experiences of modernity exist, the modernity project is, according to him, founded in the Enlightenment and essentially connected to European history (Habermas 1987).

Historical trajectories towards modernity

Scholars such as Wagner (1994) and Therbon (1995) took the idea of ‘localising modernity’ a step further, and argued that there are different historical trajectories towards modernity in different parts of the world. Where Wagner (1994: 13) sees three modernities in the 20th century: the United States, Europe, and the Soviet
On Modernity

Union, Therbon (1995) claims that there are four trajectories towards modernity: the European, the ‘new world,’ the colonial, and the ‘externally induced modernisation’ trajectory (Therbon 1995). Nevertheless, there is only one end state into which these different trajectories converge: European modernity as the ultimate, inescapable modernity.

While Wagner and Therbon’s approach allows for slightly more analytical flexibility, it still forces modernity into the straightjacket of a specific blueprint of modernity – albeit one of four. This clustering and homogenising does not do justice to possible contradictions and (substantial) differences within clusters: while recognising different trajectories, these are still homogenised as ‘blocks,’ such as ‘European modernity,’ which will eventually converge in one universal modernity (Van der Ree 2007: 34-5). Even though non-European forms of modernity exist, they will all eventually and inevitably unite in that one blueprint of Western modernity that will ultimately become globally prevalent.

The locality of modernity: hybrid modernity

In the 1980s and 1990s, against the background of globalisation, ‘glocalisation,’ and the multiculturalism debate, Nestor García Canclini (1995) developed the idea of ‘hybrid cultures,’ describing them as a blend between tradition and modernity and exploring “the tensions, verging on contradictions (…) in Latin American nation-states” (Canclini 1995: xi). He claims that “these states regard themselves as caught between traditions that have not yet gone and a modernity that has not yet arrived” (Canclini 1995: xi).

In Canclini’s approach the hybrid nature of modernity, then, in Latin America lies in the interaction between tradition and modernity, “(…) which are usually viewed as being antagonistic and non-compatible, [but] often cohabit rather than mutually excluding each other” (Van der Ree 2007: 35). For the Indian context, Hancock (1999) describes Indian home education science as a location of ‘hybrid modernity.’ This hybridity, she argues, consists of allowing at the same time a Gandhian nationalism and Euro-Western feminisms.

Modernity and tradition are then not necessarily opposed to each other: modernity does not mean the simple destruction of tradition (Rabinow 1975: 1). Rather, both mix into a particular local blend, which creates particular patterns of “being in modernity” (Van der Ree 2007: 36).

The ‘hybrid modernity’ approach can be criticised quite fundamentally. Firstly, the very essential point has to be made that we must go back to the question what ‘tradition’ actually means. Does the hybrid approach to modernity not present us with a false dichotomy of modernity and tradition? The dichotomy
between tradition and modernity that the hybrid modernity approach presents us with does not fully reflect the way in which traditions function. I have explained earlier in this chapter that ‘tradition’ is not static but rather ever-changing.

Secondly, a fundamental question that the hybrid modernity approach leaves unanswered – as did the universal approach – is how to identify the processes within society that construct modernity (Van der Ree 2007: 37). If modernity may be taking a different trajectory, then what does this trajectory look like? How is it shaped? This is how we arrive at the multiple modernities approach.

The locality of modernity: multiple, alternative modernities
While calling them “alternative modernities,” Taylor (1998) was the first to introduce the concept of multiple modernities into the modernity debate. He argued that Europe should no longer be the point of reference and that Europe should be ‘provincialised’:

“This means that we finally get over seeing modernity as a single process of which Europe is the paradigm, and that we understand the European model as the first, certainly, as the object of some creative imitation, naturally, but as, at the end of the day, one model among many, a province of the multiform world” (Taylor 2004: 196).

So while the European ‘brand’ of modernity may still influence other modernities, modernity is no longer seen as a universal process and end state which other parts of the world must achieve should they want to become modern.

Other scholars, such as Eisenstadt (2000), Wittrock (2000) and Chakrabarty (2007) took up Taylor’s approach and further developed it, arguing that societies form a modernity within their own political, institutional, social, and cultural identities. Building on the elements of multiplicity in the earlier approaches, the ‘multiple modernities’ approach, as coined by Eisenstadt (2000), advances the idea that modernisation is an endogenous process, even if or while influenced by or initiated from the outside.

This means that we can now look at the process of modernisation without conceiving of it necessarily as a process of Westernisation:

“One of the most important implications of the term ‘multiple modernities’ is that modernity and Westernisation are not identical; Western patterns of modernity are not the only ‘authentic’ modernities, though they enjoy historical precedence and continue to be a basic
reference point for others” (Eisenstadt 2000: 2). So while Europe and ‘the West’ may still be a point of reference for theorists, modernisation is no longer equalled to Westernisation. At the same time, this modernity can capture its own-ness, in a mode that is regarded as ‘authentic’ by those who live and experience it. Modernities no longer converge into the one blueprint of modernity, but rather co-exist. Nonetheless, the discursive power of the West and people’s relationship thereto, should not be underestimated as it is almost impossible not to see the West as a point of reference, if only because of the cultural permeation through technology, satellite, and internet.

Although it has been helpful in further developing our understanding of modernity, the multiple modernities approach has been criticised for several reasons. An important critique is that, again, the content of these ‘multiple modernities’ remains undefined:

“There can thus be no meaningful talk of modernities without a proper definition of modernity” (Schmidt 2010: 514).

This leaves us with the question whether this modernity is truly an alternative modernity to the Euro-centred one or whether it is after all a variation of one universal modernity (Schmidt 2006: 80, 2010: 527).

Secondly, there is no indication of how many modernities there actually are and at what level they are constructed (Schmidt 2006: 80). If we speak of multiple modernities, does that not, in the end, reduce modernities to cultures? And how does the multiple modernities approach explain intra-societal differences?

Schmidt’s third criticism of the multiple modernities approach is that it focuses on institutions and culture. He claims that if we also look at other markers, so-called multiple modernities may perhaps not differ so much from universal modernity (Schmidt 2006: 81). In his 2010 article, he further elaborates this point:

“...confusing the study of modernity with the comparative analysis of developmental policy paths pursued, of institutional regime types enacted, of temporarily adopted collective identities, and of allegedly unchanging cultural traditions upheld by (the intellectual and political elites of) particular countries simply conflates levels of analysis and hence does not further our understanding of either” (Schmidt 2010: 523).

Finally, Schmidt advances the view that the multiple modernities approach
Chapter 1

overrates the differences that exist between societies, just as modernisation theories of the 1950s seemed to underestimate them (Schmidt 2006: 81).

Notwithstanding these criticisms of the multiple modernities approach, I do choose to follow it. Rather than focusing on pre-conceived ideas and theories, I find the multiple modernities approach helpful for the bottom-up analysis, whether and if so how on the one hand the Saudi and Kuwaiti states, and on the other hand my interlocutors, themselves lay claim to the concept of ‘modernity.’ Do they conceive of and present themselves and/or their country as modern, and if so, how do they do this? What do they consider modernity and being modern to be? The multiple modernities approach allows for an examination of both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in a way that modernisation is no longer equalled to Westernisation while ‘the West’ might still be a point of reference.

The construction of modernity: promissory notes

The two main recurrent criticisms of all theoretical approaches of modernity so far are that none address how modernity is constructed, and that none address its substance. In this dissertation I will concern myself with the first criticism of how modernity is constructed.

When taking a closer look at the construction of modernity, I am interested in the way in which the trajectory towards modernity has been constructed. I examine how discourses construct a modernity, how the negotiation over modernity takes places, and whether that means that we can detect fundamentally different ways of fleshing out modernity. An approach that provides a framework to help us understand this is are Björn Wittrock’s ideas of “promissory notes” and “desiderata” (Wittrock 2000).

Wittrock, a Swedish sociologist who has published extensively in the fields of intellectual history, historical social science, social theory, and civilisational analysis, argues that rather than looking at modernity as a set of institutions, it should be approached in terms of what he has called ‘promissory notes.’ Modernity, in his view, is a set of ideals, of hopes and expectations, on the basis of promissory notes. These hopes and expectations are generalised reference points in debates; a cluster of what Wittrock calls ‘desiderata’ or hopes of a society. Promissory notes are well-articulated and driven by concept and values. They find their truest expression in public, where individuals as well as society at large manifest their will on “the proper forms of polity and social belonging” (Wittrock 2000: 37).
Promissory notes, in Wittrock’s definition of modernity, lay at the base of modernity. Modernity, then, rather than being limited to a set of institutional arrangements, has to be understood in terms of conceptual changes in which these institutional projects are grounded. Wittrock argues that “these institutional projects were premised on new assumptions about human beings, their rights and agency. These conceptual changes entailed promissory notes that came to constitute new affiliations, identities, and, ultimately, institutional realities” (Wittrock 2000: 37). In other words, the hopes and visions that these promissory notes are become reference points in discourse, which have concrete outcomes, effects, and results.

Wittrock posits that promissory notes presuppose that six conditions are met. First of all, they “point to desiderata that can be formulated as statements about a range of achievements that may be reached by the members of a given community” (Wittrock 2000: 37). So promissory notes are explicit rather than vague desires; they are grounded in concrete ideas. They are also reachable and realisable in the community.

Secondly, Wittrock’s promissory notes refer to the situation of a community rather than an individual (Wittrock 2000: 37). As such, they propose a vision of what the community needs and into which direction the community should develop.

Thirdly, promissory notes are not just general, broad hopes but rather are supported by powerful, deeply held values (Wittrock 2000: 37). These values inform the well-articulated hopes of a society that promissory notes are according to Wittrock. As such, fourthly, they depend on a variety of new conceptions of human beings and their ability to act individually and collectively about their place in history, as well, as members of the community, about the suitable forms of polity and social belonging (Wittrock 2000: 37).

Fifthly, promissory notes are formulated within their own political, institutional, cultural context. Entrenched institutions, for example the state, express their own promissory notes, a promise for how they view the way the future will look. These promissory notes, subsequently imply the reasonableness and legitimacy of the expectations as expressed by members of the community in response to the promissory note (Wittrock 2000: 37). So it is the existing macro-institutions that determine which promissory notes are legitimate. The new set of promissory notes is always formulated as a reaction - affirmative or rejectionist - to the status quo and as such may affirm or reject the promissory notes that are already embedded in a country’s social and political institutions (Wittrock 2000: 38).

Lastly, Wittrock proposes that promissory notes need to be expressed in
public fora. These fora need to be of the public sphere type and “a discourse to which access is in principle open” (Wittrock 2000:38). The holders of the promissory notes moreover need to direct themselves at the rulers, with the aim of “influencing or changing the polity and the sphere of officialdom” (Wittrock 2000:38). Promissory notes proposed by one (group of) actor(s) thus may lead to confrontation with another.

Based on Wittrock’s ideas, for the present study I propose to use the concept of promissory notes. I here mean with promissory note a promise of modernity, and visions as to its realisation. They are promises for personal and communal advancement that the party who expresses and therewith issues them hopes and intends to fulfil, propelled by deeply held values and ideas about ways of belonging.

Furthermore, a promissory note is an agreement in which the issuer admits it owes the receiving party something. The receiving party that holds the promissory note holds the issuer to their promise. Here, the state is the issuing party, that expresses through discourses and development projects its promissory note: their vision of modernity. The state, as we shall see in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, issues a promissory note of ‘modernity.’

Interlocutors, in turn, are the holders of the promissory note: they hold the promissory note in hands and hold the state to its promise – the right to the modern future:

“To be modern, it is enough merely to hold the promissory notes, to feel that one has a right to what they promise, and to struggle to redeem them through institutional experimentation with new kinds of exchange, of polity, and of knowledge seeking” (Robbins 2001: 902).

It does not matter, then, what the actual substance of the promissory note is: merely holding them is enough to be modern. The party (in this case, my respondents) that holds the note can claim ‘payment’ (in our case, through women-only public spaces or ikhtilat). Interlocutors hold the state to their promise of living in a ‘modern state’ (as presented in the state’s discourses and development projects) in which women are a central modality through which that modernity is negotiated, imagined, and measured against and must deliver.

The negotiation plays out over the promised redemption of the promissory note: the way in which the promissory note is realised. Respondents give substance to the promissory note that they hold by the desiderata that they express, namely
of participation through *ikhtilat* and/or women-only public spaces.

Promissory notes are set out in public forums to gain influence among leaders, activists, the religious establishment, and ordinary citizens. They serve as generalised reference points for modernity and what it should look like and thus are the point of departure for various projects and proposals that would lead to its realisation. They derive from seeing oneself and the community through the eyes of what one thinks is modern and what modernity should and should not be.

It is here that the negotiation takes place between the issuer of the promissory note (the state) and the holders thereof (interlocutors). The perspective of promissory notes allows us to view modernity as being mediated through proposals and projects, which are constituted culturally, but entrenched institutionally (Wittrock 2000: 38). What Wittrock means with this is that the conceptual changes that promissory notes express lead to new identities and affiliations in reality – which in turn, eventually become new institutional realities (Wittrock 2000: 37). Thus, promissory notes are not only reference points in a confrontation of ideas, but, importantly, also effect change and lead to the development of new institutions (Wittrock 2000: 38).

These different visions are pushed by the aforementioned internal conflict that propel the constant and evolving negotiation over modernity. It is exactly this process of negotiation that constructs modernity and that makes ‘the modern’ - the mere fact that they are negotiating already makes them modern. This negotiation process is shaped by the historical trajectory of the country and its place in the globalised world.

**An enchanted modern\(^{11}\)**

When investigating Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, the issue of religion cannot be overlooked. Appadurai says that while many thinkers, such as Weber, Talcott Parsons, Shils, Lerner, and Inkeles “largely accepted the view of the modern world as a space of shrinking religiosity” (Appadurai 2000: 6) and disenchantment, the idea that traditions and religion disappear when ‘modernity’ and its secular scientific education ‘arrive’ is no longer tenable (Göle 1996: 2).

Specifically, scholars have attempted to dislodge the idea that Islam and modernity are incompatible. Göle in her book *The Forbidden Modern* describes how “the quest for differentiation from the Westernized self, for an “authentic”

\(^{11}\) See Deeb 2006.
Islamic way of life, has engendered a critical alertness for both traditional Islam and the contemporary forms of Western modernity imposed by the globalization of culture and lifestyles” (Göle 1996: 18). The quests for authenticity and modernity seem to go hand-in-hand.

Modernising reformers Qasim Amin and Huda Sha'rawi in the 19th and 20th centuries positioned their projects as a defence of Islam and a critique of customs (taqlid) such that true Islam, free of traditions and customs (‘adat wa taqalid), is fully compatible with modernity (Shakry 1998: 148). If this true Islam is adhered to, the rights of women will follow naturally. Shakry argues that Salafi reforms are part of an Islamic discursive tradition, and an alternative attempt to formulate an Islamic modern (Shakry 1998: 151).

Abu Lughod points out that Islamists today are often regarded as ‘medieval’ by their challengers, as they look back to a long-gone past and reject many features of Western modernity. She however rather positions them as part and result of modernity and as striving for an alternative modernity (Abu-Lughod 1998: 4): like many other contemporary religious movements, Islamist movements attempt to appropriate some aspects of ‘Western’ modernity for themselves while rejecting others.

Referring to contemporary religious movements, including fundamentalists, Eisenstadt posits that these movements attempt to appropriate modernity for themselves on their own, often anti-Western terms, therewith dissociating Westernisation from modernity (Eisenstadt 2000: 22).

Lara Deeb, in her study An Enchanted Modern: Gender and Public Piety in Shi’a Lebanon demonstrates the enchanted, religious modern that is constructed by Shi’i women from the Beirut suburb of al-Dahiyya. She argues that Islam and modernity are not merely compatible, but go hand-in-hand (Deeb 2006). Opposing Weber’s modern disenchantment, Deeb argues that the core of the “enchanted modern” she found among pious Shi’i Muslims in South Lebanon “is a dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress as necessary to modernness” (Deeb 2006: 5).

It is precisely this duality of material progress and religiousness where my interest lies. In the enchanted modern, scientific rationalism and religious belief do not mutually exclude each other but rather go hand in hand:

“(…) there are routes other than the Protestant Ethic paradigm by which religious traditions might produce comparable achievements in terms of economic, bureaucratic, and even scientific rationalities. There are, for example, other views of community, other concepts of
On Modernity

rights and obligations, virtues and vices, other models of personality, and, in particular there are views and notions where we do not necessarily observe a disenchantment in the Weberian sense” (Höfert and Salvatore 2000: 16).

Nonetheless, the discursive power of the West, and people’s relationship to it, should not be underestimated, as “ideas and judgments about what is modern (...) emanate from various media and are backed by political, economic and military power” (Deeb 2006: 25).

Deeb argues that it is almost impossible not to see Europe or ‘the West’ as a point of reference, if only due to cultural permeation through technology, satellite and internet. But while Europe or the US may still be a point of reference, modernisation is no longer equalled to Westernisation. Images of the West - sometimes with negative and sometimes with positive connotations - are employed and deployed to develop a distinct idea of modernity, in an attempt to “(...) posit a way of being that is neither West nor East, and that is both ‘modern’ and ‘authentic’” (Deeb 2006: 33).

It is a modernity that can capture its own-ness, in a mode that is regarded as ‘modern’ by those who live it and claim it. I will examine how the (Saudi and Kuwaiti) state and (Saudi and Kuwaiti) interlocutors interact and negotiate over this ‘modernity,’ and thereby shape it.

Gender and modernity

Gender is a basic component of discourses about being modern, “one of the central modalities through which modernity is imagined and desired” (Rofel 1999: 20). Women have historically played an important role as national and as cultural symbols, and during transitional periods in a country’s development they are often either linked to modernity or to tradition (Moghadam 2003: 105). Often, the woman question is framed in the context of modernising projects, particularly at times of state-building and regime consolidation when questions of gender relations, the position of women and men, and ideas about masculinity and femininity come to the fore. In social transformation, changes in gender relations take place and are reconfigured, with the state becoming the moderator and manager of gender (Moghadam 2003: 105).

Additionally, the position of women in Arab societies (as well as in South Asia) was used as a measure of modern-ness in the related senses of modern/civilised
Chapter 1

and modern/progressive by European colonisers and local elites (Deeb 2006: 29). Gendered power has and can take on many different forms (Abu-Lughod 1998). The female body in particular in the present day is often a central site of political difference and of resistance to and criticism of forces of Western modernity (Göle 1996: 1). Göle says, inspired by Foucault, that the body is the locus of all struggles of this gendered power. This works, she argues, by the way space is organised and by division of space (Göle 1996: 9).

Dividing space into mixed and only-for-women spaces, gender segregation can be seen as both a regulatory and as an emancipatory process. It creates new forms of subjection but also creates new possibilities for women. Gender segregation can be regulatory in that it determines which spaces are and which are not accessible to women, determining in which spaces they can and cannot participate in public life and develop activities. At the same time, and as Abu-Lughod illustrates, they can be emancipatory in that women-only public spaces can open up spaces to women that otherwise would remain closed to them.

Through the discussion of gender segregation, ‘modernity’ can be investigated. Gender segregation of women is often conceived to be a consequence of tradition and conservatism of society. Abu-Lughod (1998) and Le Renard (2008), though, argue that “reference to the traditional does not help us to understand the persistence and consolidation of gender segregation” (Le Renard 2008: 610). The ‘modernism-traditionalism dichotomy’ relegates “women’s domesticity to the realm of conservatism and tradition and labels women’s emergence into the public, whether in politics, employment, or education, as radical and new” (Abu-Lughod 1998: vii).

Badran (1998), Le Renard (2008), and Tétreault and al-Mughni (1995b) have shown that rural women in particular used to work in the fields or earn money, for instance through crafts or pearling, and that forms of segregation as well as mixing were more flexible and diversified according to region and social groups. The segregation in Saudi Arabia as we know it today rather stems from the 1980s, as we shall see in Chapter 2, while Chapter 4 will show that Kuwait’s historical trajectory with respect to gender segregation differs from that of Saudi Arabia.

In the Saudi context, Le Renard argues that as the authority of the modern state spread over the territory, segregation became increasingly implemented and strengthened. She positions public segregation between women and men as inseparable from the development of the state. The public segregation of women and men undermines the paradigm of a private sphere for women and a public sphere for men. Whereas in other countries in the region this division gradually declines with an increase in women’s education and participation in the labour
market, in Saudi Arabia the gender-segregated public spaces have consolidated, creating a separate space for women within the public (Le Renard 2008).

In addition, Le Renard argues that “the strict segregation between women’s and men’s workplaces and socializing spaces has been instituted legally and perpetuated through a discourse on modernization” (Le Renard 2008: 612). It is exactly for this reason that the (discourses around) gender segregation constitute a good mode through which to investigate ‘modernity.’ Comparing the development of and discourses around gender segregation in Saudi Arabia with neighbouring Kuwait gives us an additional context within which to evaluate this.

Here, Hobsbawm’s concept of “invented tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983), as explained earlier in this chapter, is helpful to understand the practice of gender segregation. While gender-segregated public spaces in Saudi Arabia did not come about until the 1980s, some people do attempt to establish a historical continuity with the past and with the alleged practice of gender segregation by the Prophet Muhammad. Others contest this historical continuity.

As the historical overview of the development of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia will show, the development and strictness of the practice of gender segregation is a relatively new phenomenon. As such, gender segregation seems to be an ‘invented tradition.’ In Kuwait, on the other hand, as we shall see people lay claim to a historical practice of ikhtilat (mixing between women and men), attempting to draw a historic continuity into the present thereby explaining and legitimising ikhtilat as the dominant mode of public interaction between women and men in the country.

Here, a struggle is at work over the collective memory of the country and the position of that memory in the present-day nation. Negotiations about the authenticity of particular narratives such as this one reflect the tension that exists between ‘the past’ and ‘the authenticated.’ It also reflects a tension over what is the correctly authenticated narrative and which interpretation of Islamic history is considered to be the most trustworthy and legitimate, and worthy of entry into the present-day view of the nation.

In that light, we may also see the reference to the past as an attempt to structure (parts of) public (social) life, as well as a way of making sense of life and seeking stability and continuity in a society that is undergoing rapid socio-economic changes. As Göle put it, “there is a constant oscillation between affirmation of authenticity and globalisation of modernity” (Göle 2000: 92). This authenticity is not formulated in a political, cultural, and social vacuum but rather is formulated in a collective “effort to redefine Islamic ‘authenticity’ in a manner that is no longer apologetic before Western modernity” (Göle 2000: 96), and
Chapter 1

attempts to establish what it means to be authentically modern.

Discourses around gender segregation and the women’s issue in particular are “part of an ideological terrain where broader notions of cultural authenticity and integrity are debated and where women’s appropriate place and conduct may be made to serve as boundary markers” (Kandiyoti in Cole 1992: 246). Discourses of Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors about gendered spaces such as women-only and mukhtalat (mixed) public spaces are thus a key theme through which to study the negotiation of modernity.

Operationalisation: negotiating modernity

The concept of ‘modernity,’ as I have shown, is not a neutral, value-free concept. Rather, it is entangled with ideas about its universality and later, locality and multiplicity. In this process, ‘the West,’ especially the US and Europe, remains a point of reference, not as fixed geographical entities but as cultural representations that are not free of historical power relations.

Modernity cannot be conceived as external to the Saudi and Kuwaiti experience but, on the contrary, needs to be examined as part of these countries’ historical experiences and social settings and “for its part in shaping public narratives, collective identities, and social practices” (Göle 1996: 8). Modernity’s link with gender shows us the centrality of the gender question in thinking about modernity.

While unpacking state policies and national projects, I do not wish to make my interlocutors appear merely as objects of these reforms but rather, through three case studies, I aim to investigate in which ways the emergence and development of women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are linked to notions of Islam, gender and the nation as recounted by interlocutors themselves. These gendered public spaces are a good way to examine the negotiation of modernity. The central question here is whether and if so what this tells us about different interpretations of modernity. Are we indeed looking at an alternative modernity? Is this modernity ‘enchanted’?

Gendered spaces are at the crossover of discourse of notions of gender, Islam, and the nation. Through these discourses, the state expresses its promissory note(s) as to what modernity should be like and the place of women-only public spaces (and ikhtilat) therein. The state attempts to project its promissory note of modernity and shape the position and roles of women (and men) therein.

My interlocutors, on the other hand, are the holders of the promissory
note and hold the state to what it promised by expressing how they want this modernity to take shape. What promissory note does the state issue, and how do interlocutors hold the state to it? How do these enterprises resonate with each other? As such, modernity is constructed by a negotiation process that takes place over the expression of promissory notes and responses to that, in the discourses about women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*.

In my analysis, I will use the concept of promissory notes to analyse the potentially different visions of modernity and the negotiation thereof through discourses in society about *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces. Through three case studies in Saudi Arabia and three in Kuwait, I will analyse the different discourses in Saudi and Kuwaiti society about women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*. This allows us to get to know interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis these cases. Moreover, it will give us an insight into whether and how interlocutors’ discourses of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces are a way of holding the state to its promissory note. The question here is, what kind of promissory note(s) are proposed and what kind of modernity is negotiated.

I examine an alternative model for modernity, and ask to what extent this modernity encompasses religion. I will not attempt to establish ‘whether or not’ Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, or my Saudi and Kuwaiti interlocutors, are ‘modern.’ Rather, the point here is to discover whether and if so how interlocutors position themselves vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and/or *ikhtilat*, perhaps with paradoxes, ambiguities, tensions, and various claims to ‘modernity.’
Chapter 2 | Saudi Arabia: the historical development of gender-segregated, ‘for women only’ public spaces
Introduction

In March 2010, Dr Yusuf al-Ahmad, a professor of Islamic jurisprudence at Imam Muhammad bin Sa'ud Islamic University in Riyadh, called for demolishing part of the Great Mosque in Mecca and subsequently constructing separate floors for women in the mosque. This so that women and men would be prevented from *ikhtilat* (gender mixing) during *tawaf*\(^2\) and prayer. Dr al-Ahmad's proposal was met with both consent (endorsing the practice of gender segregation) and criticism (favouring *ikhtilat*).

Al-Ahmad's statement illustrates the debate over gender mixing that was taking place in Saudi Arabia at that moment, with some as strongly in favour of gender segregation as others were in favour of *ikhtilat* (Foley 2010; Meijer 2010). The debate about segregation and *ikhtilat* centres around the questions how women should participate in the public domain and which ways of accessing the public domain are legitimate for women.

Public life in Saudi Arabia knows separate public spaces that are only for women, such as women-only banks and offices, entrance into which is forbidden to men. Gender segregation has become a cornerstone of the Saudis' interpretation of Islam (Abdella Doumato 2009: 25) and epitomises the Islamic character of the Saudi state and society. Important factors influencing the position of women and supporting stricter and new forms of public gender segregation were the discovery and exploitation of oil and its ensuing wealth, the process of urbanisation, and the rise of the revivalist al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya movement (Islamic Awakening or Sahwa movement) and its discourse on segregation – the period during which gender segregation became more prevalent.

Yet, in the present day the Saudi state takes an ambiguous stance towards the phenomenon of women-only public spaces. On the one hand it presents these spaces as 'progress' for women and the nation and “governmental discourses, including laws, measures, and policies, have served to perpetuate and consolidate the principle of gender segregation” (Le Renard 2008: 611).

On the other hand, the state also supports the development of mixed spaces. In these developments and discourses, the state presents itself as a ‘forerunner’ that is ahead of society and implements change slowly so as to prevent a societal backlash, while also attempting to confirm and show the Islamic identity of the state. Women are the ultimate and most visible sign of such piety (al-Rasheed 2014: 296) and positioned as symbols of the pious nation (al-Rasheed 2013: 38).

\(^2\) Circumambulation of the Ka'ba during haj.
Chapter 2

As a consequence, they occupy a central role in these legitimisation narratives and projects.

In what follows I will examine these developments, taking the proclamation of the Third Saudi state in 1932, when the kingdoms of the Najd and the Hijaz were unified into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, as a starting point. The chapter will also demonstrate how the women’s issue gradually became integrated in the country’s political and religious discourse, as well as its discourse on reform and modernisation and the promissory note of modernity that the Saudi state issued into society.

The pre-oil and pre-unification Period (pre-1932)

Before the foundation of the kingdom in 1932, only businessmen and hajj operators travelled abroad. Women would only travel outside the country to receive medical treatment. Oil had not yet been discovered and the Saudi state’s main revenue came from the annual hajj to Mecca.

Before the foundation of the kingdom as we know it today in 1932 and before the discovery of oil, in rural areas and in nomadic families both men and women would work and contribute to the family income. This need for female labour in rural areas lessened restrictions on women’s mobility outside the house (al-Torki 1986). Women would wear clothing suitable to outdoor work rather than the long black cloak that women wear outside the house in contemporary Saudi Arabia (abaya). Only women of sedentary families could afford to stay at home, making gender segregation a status symbol (Le Renard 2014a: 30). Le Renard (2008, 2014a) remarks that several studies by Saudi researchers have shown that rural Bedouin women used to work and earn money through crafts and participation in camel and sheep breeding, and that it was not until the processes of urbanisation and Saudisation set in that these tasks almost disappeared.

The confinement of elite women, thus, was an exception (al-Rasheed 2013: 54).

---

13 The First Saudi State started in 1744 with the alliance between Muhammad bin Sa’ud and Muhammad ibn ‘Abdul Wahhab. It ended in 1818 when Ibrahim, the son of Muhammad ‘Ali (the Ottoman governor of Egypt) ousted Bin Sa’ud’s son who had captured the Hijaz, which the Ottomans saw as a threat to their reach. The reconquest of Riyadh by Turki ibn ‘Abdallah in 1824 is seen as the start of the Second Saudi State. The 1891 battle of Mulayda between ‘Abdul Rahman ibn Faisal ibn Turki and the Al Rashids of Ha’il, won by the latter, is regarded as its end. In 1902 Ibn Sa’ud recaptured Riyadh. Between 1913 and 1926 he conquered among others the rest of the Najd as well as the Hejaz, resulting in the Kingdom of Najd and Hijaz under the 1927 Treaty of Jeddah. When the Third Saudi State was proclaimed in 1932 it included the other areas of the kingdom as we know it today.
Al-Rasheed argues that the freedom of movement that Bedouin women enjoyed was not related to rights but rather to the fact that these women lived and travelled in constellations of lineage (Al-Rasheed 2013: 55). This participation of women in a variety of occupations was mostly the case in the Hijaz and Asir provinces.

In the Najd, on the other hand, where the country’s capital Riyadh is located, gender segregation was practiced in the pre-oil and pre-unification period. Al-Rasheed (2013: 56) describes how the oasis dwellers of the Najd found in the Wahhabi body of literature on segregation a solution to the intermingling in the small space of the walled towns, where “the Wahhabi movement reflected the fears and agony of men in the oases where population density and diversity created the conditions that required greater control of women” (Al-Rasheed 2013: 56). As a consequence, only the poorest women would work outside the home, out of necessity (Le Renard 2014a: 30). Women would for example run the vegetable markets of Burayda and ‘Unayza (Al-Rasheed 2013: 87).

In short, forms of segregation as well as mixing were more flexible and diversified according to region and social groups (Badran 1998; Le Renard 2008; Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b). Yamani argues that after unification, the Najd became the culturally dominant in the newly formed kingdom (Yamani 2009). In its drive to homogenise the country (what Yamani calls “attempts at Najdification”) the Najdi practices of gender segregation slowly spread throughout the kingdom (Al-Rasheed 2013: 58).

Unification took place in 1932. Politically, the 1927 Treaty of Jeddah with Britain recognised Ibn Sa’ud as the sovereign king of the Hijaz and the Najd. In return, Ibn Sa’ud recognised Britain’s special relationship with the rulers of the coastal territories of the Arabian peninsula and pledged to respect their realms. In 1932, the regions of the Najd and the Hijaz would be unified into the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. By that time, the international community had recognised the new kingdom. King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, also known as Ibn Sa’ud (r. 1932-53) focused on creating a central authority and building alliances among the various warring tribal constituencies, trying to forge a state and build a nation while founding his rule on Wahhabi Islam and tribal politics. The 1744 pact between Muhammad

---

14 The treaty was not aimed at the recognition of a state but rather recognised the person of Ibn Sa’ud as the rightful ruler. For more on the Treaty of Jeddah see Al-Rasheed 2010: 45-46.
ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Muhammad Ibn Sa‘ud was the foundation for this. This process of unification was slow and the impact of change was still manageable (Yamani 1996: 265).

**Discovery and exploitation of oil (1930s – 1940s)**

During the first 20 years of its existence, the Saudi state was impoverished, its main revenue coming from the annual hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. The world-wide economic recession of the late 1920s and early 1930s had led to a decrease of hajj pilgrims and thus a dwindling income from the pilgrimage. Against this background, in 1933 King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz granted oil concessions to the Californian Arabian Oil Company, a forerunner of Aramco. Subsequently, oil was first discovered in 1938. However, and as in Kuwait, the outbreak of World War II delayed exploitation. At the same time, hajj income further plummeted during the World War II years. The country was kept afloat by British direct subsidies and American indirect subsidies.

After World War II however, oil exploitation continued and its revenues started. Gradually, increasing oil revenues financed developments such as changes in lifestyle and education abroad. The oil wealth provided elite families from Jeddah with the financial means to travel abroad, to Egypt for example, for vacation and to buy real estate outside Saudi Arabia, sometimes temporarily residing abroad. This exposed the elites to non-Saudi cultural values and experiences. Women took on dress and eating habits they saw in Egypt. The experience abroad also changed elitist people’s views on girls’ education. In the 1940s some families of the Jeddah elite allowed their daughters education while residing abroad.

In mid-1940s Jeddah some elite families would enrol their daughters in informal schools or study circles in the mosque or at home for girls (kuttab),

---

15 The 1744 pact marked the emergence of the First Saudi State, the Amirate of Dir‘iya. In 1744, Ibn Sa‘ud, the sheikh and leader of a tribe that had settled in Dir‘iya, and Ibn Wahhab, who preached a return to the fundamentals of Islam as he saw them, cemented an alliance. According to Ibn Wahhab, popular unorthodox practices such as saint-worship necessitated this return. Their oath of loyalty of 1744 made Ibn Sa‘ud the political and military leader, and put Ibn Wahhab in charge of religious matters. This mix of Ibn Wahhab’s strong religious message and Ibn Sa‘ud’s military prowess would lead to the Saudi-Wahhabi movement conquering much of Arabia (Anscombe 1997: 13). In short, Ibn Wahhab supported Ibn Sa‘ud’s political ambitions, and Ibn Sa‘ud supported Ibn Wahhab’s religious teachings. This power-sharing arrangement continues to this day in Saudi Arabia. The Al Sa‘ud, descendants of Ibn Sa‘ud, continue to be the political leadership of the country. The Al al-Shaykh, who are the descendants of Ibn Wahhab, are still the country’s leading religious family and dominate the state’s clerical institutions.

16 Saudi Aramco is the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, the national petroleum and gas company. Its headquarters is in Dhahran in Saudi Arabia’s Shi‘i-majority Eastern province.
a practice that was gradually adopted by other Jeddah families (al-Torki 1986: 19). These kuttab were run by female teachers (faqihas), and girls would learn needlework and basic arithmetic, and memorise passages from the Qur’an. This education stopped when the girls reached puberty (al-Torki 1986: 19). At the same time attempts were made to uphold a system of religious and social values that were at odds with those of outside influences on the country.

Before taking a closer look at girls’ education, an area that clearly illustrates this process, I will first address the development of urbanisation as a new factor in the development of women-only public spaces. Understanding the influence of urbanisation provides us with a background to look at the development of girls’ schools.

**Urbanisation (1950s - 1970s)**

Urbanisation was a new phenomenon at this time and a new factor in the process of gender segregation. The developing oil industry led to an increased demand for labour in the cities in both the industrial and governmental sectors, which in turn led to a substantial number of people moving away from their traditional tribal configurations into cities (al-Munajjed 1997). This process of urbanisation influenced the position of Saudi women.

Whereas in the rural areas both men and women would work and contribute to the family income, urbanisation resulted in a significant increase in men’s salaries and an improved standard of living. While the need for female labour in rural areas had loosened restrictions on women’s mobility outside the house (al-Torki 1986), now that men earned so much that female salaries were no longer needed to sustain the family, there was no need for women to work anymore and women not working became a symbol of wealth and of moral distinction. At the same time, it contrasted Saudi women with foreign women who did have to work (Le Renard 2008: 613, al-Munajjed 1997: 43).

Today, the practice of segregation is still mostly an urban and not a tribal phenomenon, practiced among all classes but most frequently in the wealthier and middle-class strata, and regarded as a sign of wealth (Le Renard 2008: 613, al-Munajjed 1997: 43).

Ibn Sa’ud died in 1953 and was succeeded by his son Sa’ud (r. 1953-64). Due to his economic mismanagement and failure to deal with the challenge that the
socialist, Pan-Arabist Gamal Abdel Nasser posed to the Saudi state.\(^{17}\) Sa’ud was deposed in 1964 in favour of Faisal (1964-75). The period of Faisal’s reign saw an increase in oil wealth and intensified contacts with the West.\(^{18}\) Faisal’s reign saw an increase in oil wealth and intensified contacts with the West. – and continues to be in the present day in the country’s narrative - also marked by his efforts in the field of girls’ education.

**Women’s education (1950s - 1970s)**

As al-Munajjed (1997: 59) puts forward, education in Saudi Arabia is a relatively recent phenomenon. Schools that had been established in Saudi Arabia during the Ottoman era had mainly served to educate the children of Ottoman officials. While in 1904, as al-Torki (1986: 9) recounts, leading men of Jeddah had opened a first formal school, it was not until 1926 that the Directorate of Education was formed to supervise private schools and introduce government-supported education for boys. In 1953, the Ministry of Education was founded and public (government) schools for boys opened for the first time in that year (al-Munajjed 1997: 60). These public, government schools were not accessible to girls and their education was restricted to the home and the aforementioned *kuttab*.

However, during the 1950s, when the increasing oil wealth led to more of the elites going abroad, an increase in popular demand for formal girls’ education started to emerge. Also, some young Saudi men who had been educated abroad expressed their wish for “educationally compatible wives” (al-Munajjed 1997: 61), arguing that “women’s education was necessary to the family, the children and the marital harmony of the couple” (al-Munajjed 1997: 61). In the 1950s, only very few girls from elite families were sent abroad to other Arab cities (al-Rasheed 2013: 86, al-Torki 1986: 19) and so in 1957, the Dar al-Hanan School in Jeddah was the first private school for girls to open in Saudi Arabia (Hamdan 2005: 49).

The government would follow in the 1960s with its own girls’ schools. Faisal’s main achievement, indeed, lay in the field of girls’ education. Whereas at first the Jeddah elite started to educate their daughters, subsequently other Jeddah

---

\(^{17}\) Nasser’s socialism and pan-Arabism posed a threat to the Islamic and monarchical foundations of the Al Sa’ud’s rule. At the same time, Sa’ud’s financial mismanagement of coalescing the state treasury and his own wallet almost plummeted the state into bankruptcy. Sa’ud was deposed by a coalition of family members and Faisal put in his place (Cleveland 2000: 437-438).

\(^{18}\) As in Kuwait, the oil industry led to an ever increasing demand for labour and the kingdom saw a large influx of foreign workers from Western countries as well as Arabs from other parts of the Middle East. Many of these Arabs acquired Saudi citizenship, a practice that would be curtailed heavily a decade later in an attempt to confine the definition of ‘Saudi’ to the local population and as a sign of nationalism (Yamani 2000).
families “gradually began to emulate ideas and attitudes held by the elite” (al-Torki 1986: 19) and adopted the practice too. When King Faisal’s government started providing formal public girls’ education in the 1960s, it was accepted by numerous Jeddah families (al-Torki 1986: 19). Girls, who were to receive this education, but also their ‘nature’ as women, occupied a central role in this project and in the legitimisation narratives of both the state and the religious establishment.

Education was the first field in which the government opened women-only public spaces – presenting it as national development in a way that fit Islam and Saudi national identity. During his reign, King Faisal introduced “changes to the status of Saudi women” (al-Munajjed 1997: 61), while trying to initiate those changes without abandoning the traditions of the country. Faisal positioned his reforms within a framework of upholding the Islamic character of the nation, claiming progress and modernity in a way that was in accordance with Islam and that eventually gained the approval of the religious establishment (Kechichian 2008). Improving the participation of women in education for example was achieved through creating separate schools for girls, presenting this new women-only public space as national development, and as fitting with Islam, prevalent ideas about the role of women, and the country’s national distinctive character.

Some religious scholars (’ulama’) however, opposed girls’ education, claiming that education would corrupt girls’ morals and destroy the foundations of the Saudi Muslim family. Faisal had appointed the chief alim of the ‘ulama’ from outside the Hijazi Al al-Shaykh family19 and had chosen a Najdi and not a Hijazi, thereby reducing the influence of the ‘ulama’. He managed to do so because of his pious reputation and because his mother was from the Al al-Shaykh family.

At the same time, with respect to girls’ education Faisal decided to work together with the ‘ulama’, insisting that “all Saudis should be provided with educational opportunities within an Islamic framework” (al-Munajjed 1997: 61-62), quoting the Qur’an and hadiths (reports about the life of the Prophet Muhammad) to convince conservatives that Islam does not oppose women’s education. Faisal convinced the opposing ‘ulama’ that education would also contribute to girls’ Islamic education, making them better Muslim mothers (Yamani 2000: 52).20

---

19 The Al al-Shaykh are Saudi Arabia’s most important religious family and direct descendants of Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab. Their dominance of the country’s religious establishment has decreased over the past decades but they still have the most important religious positions. They are closely connected to the Al Sa’ud through intermarriage. The legitimacy of the Al Sa’ud still rests on the alliance between the two families. The current grand mufti of Saudi Arabia, the country’s most important religious office, is ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al al-Shaykh.

20 This debate also took place in Egypt and the Sudan in the first half of the 20th century. See also Abu Lughod (1998) and Ahmed (1992).
Chapter 2

As a concession he issued a decree placing the education of girls under a special government body, separate from that responsible for boys’ education. The General Presidency of Girls’ Education would be headed by the leader of the Wahhabi establishment, sheikh Muhammad Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh. Faisal also appointed conservative ‘ulama’ to the General Presidency of Girls’ Education\(^{21}\). It was not until the ‘ulama’ confirmed that girls’ education was in accordance with Islam that conservative families started sending their daughters to school (al-Munajjed 1997: 64).

Simultaneously, it is important to bear in mind that it was not only the state that supported girls’ education; Hijazi writers, journalists, and poets had already been calling for educating girls before these reforms started, invoking the Arab nation, Islam, and women’s role as mothers raising men (al-Rasheed, 2013: 78-80). Al-Rasheed argues that the state was unable to address these calls until the 1960s, when oil wealth allowed the building of schools for girls (al-Rasheed 2013: 82) – the need to educate girls separate from boys required an expensive, separate, infrastructure of girls’ schools.

So it was backed by the increasing income from oil that King Faisal prioritised girls’ education (al-Rasheed 2010: 117). Education was the first field in which ‘progress’ and ‘enhancement of women’ was realised by creating separate spaces for women. Official Saudi history as well as other biographers frame Faisal as a proponent of reform and progress, projecting the king as the moderniser who tries to win over the ‘ulama’ and the people.\(^{22}\) It also proposes a model of ‘the Saudi woman’ as educated, devoted to her family, moral, and pious.\(^{23}\)

This discourse of reform and its claim to modernisation, as well as the positioning of the king as a moderniser through development embedded in Islam with specific reference to the women’s issue, resonates in the reform and modernisation discourse of the Saudi king. By presenting this progress within an Islamic framework, the state issued into society a promissory note of an Islamic modernity in order to create the necessary support to push it through.

Al-Rasheed argues that its project of schooling girls projected “the state as a progressive and modern development agency” (al-Rasheed 2013: 77). Separating girls from boys into the women-only public space of a girls school became a sign of modernity, progress, reform, and national development - in a way that fit the

\(^{21}\) The General Presidency of Girls’ Education is independent of the Ministry of Education and is supervised by the ‘ulama’. It is responsible for girls’ education (4 to 18-year-olds). The General Presidency is headed by a member of the ‘ulama’ who has the same power as a minister.

\(^{22}\) See for example Kechichian 2008.

\(^{23}\) The model of femininity that is prescribed is directed only at Saudi women. Many women in Saudi Arabia are non-nationals, working as for example maids and nannies.
Saudi national identity. As al-Rasheed posits, “While Wahhabi religious nationalism insisted on a return to authentic Islamic tradition, the state endeavoured to project itself as an agent of modernisation” (al-Rasheed 2013: 77). In its project of schooling girls, the state issued a promissory note of a modernity that fit the Saudi national identity, within an Islamic framework. As we shall see later on in this Chapter, this discourse also reverberates in the positioning of King ‘Abdallah (r. 2005-15).

By the early 1970s, the oil boom had led to the widespread development of both boys’ and girls’ education, leading to a “considerable development in the status of Saudi women both socially and intellectually. Education gave Saudi women knowledge, skills and a way of recognising -but not necessarily exercising- their own social and economic power in society” (al-Munajjed 1997: 59).24 This development would play out further during the period of the al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya of the 1960s and 1970s.

The rise of the Islamic Awakening Movement (al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya) (1960s-1970s)

The exploitation of oil from the 1950s onwards led to an explosive economic and material development in the 1960s and 1970s. Saudi Arabia’s economic and material development, as well as the population’s wealth reached unprecedented heights in the 1970s. Particularly the increase in oil prices in the 1970s (partially due to the oil crisis) spurred fast economic development.

It is also in this period that the debate about the women’s issue gradually intensified. Education and urbanisation had led to employment opportunities for women (al-Munajjed 1997: 81) – albeit separate from men. For example, a consequence of girls’ education segregated from boys’ was the increasing need for women teachers to teach female pupils in girls’ schools (al-Munajjed 1997: 87).

Oil revenues paid for the development of women-only spaces, enabling female labour participation while upholding the labour law25 that women cannot mix with unrelated men.26 Thus, urbanisation indeed had the effect of increased

24 I will further look into the case of education in Chapter 3.
25 Article 160 of the 1969 Labour and Workmen Law states: ‘In no case may men and women co-mingle in places of work or in accessory facilities or other appurtenances thereto.’ The labour law was adjusted in 2005, removing the explicit prohibition on mixing. However, the new law states that the shar‘i must be complied with, leaving space for different interpretations whether or not ikhtilat is allowed in the workplace.
26 I will further explore this in Chapter 3.
Chapter 2

segregation, while at the same time it resulted in increased opportunities of women’s labour participation – separate from men. More women-only public spaces emerged as schools, universities, houses and communications systems were constructed during this period (al-Munajjed 1997).

It was also a period of rapid social change, affecting the whole structure of Saudi society (Yamani 1996: 265). Saudi men adopted the thob and Saudi women the abaya, a national education curriculum was instated, and national newspapers were published. In short, a Saudi Arabian national identity had started to emerge (Yamani 2000). Part of this national identity at this time was the public separation of women and men, through women-only spaces.

Saudi Arabia had started to open up to the outside world in the 1960s. During that period, the country had provided refuge for thousands of Arabs from the Levant who had left their countries that had turned to Nasserism. Many of these refugees were members of the Muslim Brotherhood and were being persecuted by their Ba’hist and Nasserist governments. Saudi Arabia was eager to absorb these refugees for two reasons. Firstly, the processes of oil-induced modernisation that the country was going through demanded well-educated and well-trained professionals. In the 1960s these often highly-educated Levantine and Egyptian refugees quickly filled up teaching positions and became involved in designing school curricula. Secondly and simultaneously, the Al Sa’ud turned to the brand of political Islam that the refugees had brought with them and used it “as a weapon in its ideological clash with influential concepts of Nasserism and Baathism” (Beranek 2009: 3) that were rippling through the region. The Al Sa’ud regarded Nasser’s socialism and Pan-Arabism as posing a threat to the Islamic and monarchical foundations of their rule.

The Sahwa movement in Saudi Arabia first emerged in the 1960s and gripped Saudi universities in the 1970s and 1980s, while it rose to prominence in the 1980s. Saudis who were part of the Sahwa movement combined their Wahhabi theology with the modern ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood about political matters (ICG 2004: 2). These ideas had taken hold through the aforementioned members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had sought refuge in Saudi Arabia in the 1960s due to persecution by their Ba’hist and Nasserist governments. Other (regional) developments such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Islamic revolution in Iran also influenced the politicisation of Saudi Islam.

Aside from his educational and economic reforms, King Faisal also introduced the television to Saudi Arabia. While some embraced this development, others took to the streets to protest against it. One of these protests was led by prince Khalid. Khalid was shot by a police officer during an incident during a protest at a
television station. The police was King Faisal’s responsibility, and Khalid’s brother therefore held King Faisal responsible for his death. Khalid’s brother wanted revenge, and shot and killed King Faisal on 25 March 1975. Other personal motives may also have played a role in the murder. Inter-familial rivalries and his reputation for being a moderniser had probably killed Faisal. He was succeeded by King Khalid (r. 1975-82) (Vassiliev 1998: 394-395).

During this period of Faisal’s reign, Saudi Arabia had undergone a process of politicisation (Hegghammer and Lacroix 2007: 114) and rapid socio-economic changes. Angry at the pace of modernisation in the country, on 20 November 1979 a group of rebels led by Juhayman al-Utaybi lay siege to the Great Mosque of Mecca while thousands of haj pilgrims were completing their morning prayers in Mecca. Al-Utaybi and his followers believed that Saudi society had become immoral due to Western influences such as cinema, working women and sports and that King Khalid had not countered these developments. Therefore, they believed, the Al Sa’ud had lost their legitimacy as Saudi Arabia’s rulers.

The militants’ aim was to usher in a new age of purism. The siege lasted for 2 weeks, hundreds of pilgrims were taken hostage and militants, security forces, and hostages were caught in crossfire. The incident rocked the Saudi monarchy to its core, not least because Saudi soldiers had to enlist the assistance of Pakistani and French commandos in order to end the siege.

The siege of the Great Mosque was a reflection of a resurgent Muslim identity in the wider region, which was one of the effects of the Iranian Revolution of January 1979 and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Khomeini had called to overthrow the Al Sa’ud, who in his opinion were not worthy of the Custodianship of the Holy Places. This too posed a direct challenge to the kingdom and the legitimacy of the Al Sa’ud. At the same time, only five days after the three-week siege of the Great Mosque started, Shi‘i demonstrations took place in the Eastern Province with crowds growing bigger as the days progressed, alerting the Al Sa’ud to a possible uprising across sectarian lines and posing another challenge to Saudi Arabia’s internal stability (Matthiesen 2015: 101-9).

It was a period during which Saudi leaders had to show themselves worthy of their position in the Islamic heartland: the success of the Islamic Revolution
in Iran posed a serious alternative for the Wahhabi doctrine and the Al Sa'ud’s custodianship of the Holy Places. At the same time, the Juhayman al-'Utaybi episode had shown the Muslim world that the Saudi leadership was incapable of protecting the Holy Places. It was particularly painful that French commandos had to be involved to end the siege.

As a consequence of the siege, “the Saudis tried to seal the connection between themselves as rulers and adherence to a ‘one true Islam’” (Abdella Doumato 2009: 24). As a result, the Saudi elites became more and more preoccupied with projecting into the Muslim world an image of religious piety (Yamani 1996: 267) and Saudi Arabia became more religiously conservative. It was a trend that had already started some months before the Great Mosque siege - resistance against the presence of foreigners for example (especially foreign women) was already well-documented.

This conservatism often targeted women as culture bearers, which led to curtailing of their access to public spaces (De Long-Bas 2009: 19). The Jeddah branch of the Hay‘at al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar (Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice, CPVP) sent a message to foreign companies calling for a more modest dresscode for both women and men (Abdella Doumato 2009: 23). Women started to dress more conservatively, donning abayas and the niqab. Saudi women withdrew from the International Women’s Club of Riyadh, which was the centre of social life for foreigners. At the same time, female presenters disappeared from Saudi TV screens and women were barred from access to swimming pools (Abdella Doumato 2009: 23-4). In addition, towards the end of the 1970s the Saudi government had started to strongly discourage women to study abroad unless they were accompanied by their families (Yamani 1996: 270).

After the mosque siege, the Saudi government gave the country’s religious elements latitude to say what they wanted as long as it did not infringe on the interests of the Al Sa'ud. Simultaneously, in the aftermath of the siege on the Great Mosque the regime turned to the Sahwa sheikhs to boost their Islamic credentials. The Al Sa'ud poured money into the religious institutions in order to bolster their legitimacy and co-opt its critics, strengthening the Sahwa which had a strong presence in the educational sector and took advantage of the increase in funding (ICG 2004: 2). Islam had been confirmed as a way for the Al Sa'ud to legitimise their rule - as well as an avenue for popular protest and women had

29 See footnote 1 for a detailed explanation.
30 A detailed history on the coming into being, rise, and influence of the Sahwa movement can be found in Lacroix 2011.
once again come to occupy a central role in these narratives and projects.

The 1980s: a period of consolidation

Three years after the siege, King Khalid died (r. 1975-1982) and King Fahd (r. 1982-2005) ascended to the throne. “Separation of the sexes and control of women by their guardians blossomed over the next several years into tangible indicators of what it meant to be Muslim, and the Saudi political leadership got behind the task of enforcement” (Abdella Doumato 2009: 24). The 1980s became a period of consolidation and increase of gender segregation and women-only public spaces, with women being at the centre of discourses and development projects. Al-Rasheed points out how in this decade “women were singled out as deserving greater control because they alone could ensure the piety of the nation and its protection from increasing Westernisation” (al-Rasheed 2013: 110).

One of the ways in which this played out was through the Mutawa’a. From 1969 onward, government authorities as well as the Mutawa’a had started to ensure the implementation of the aforementioned article 160 of the Labour Law that women do not mix with men in the workplace. This became increasingly the case in the 1980s (al-Fassi 2011: 160). King Fahd’s underlined this with his decree that women were not allowed to work in any place where they would encounter men (Abdella Doumato 2009: 24).

On the one hand this restricted women’s work to women-only places of work. On the other it legitimised their presence in these spaces and opened up possibilities to them that did not exist before. So indeed women were restricted with respect to working with men. Simultaneously, however, the consolidation and diversification of women-only public spaces at this time broadened the types of workplaces available to them. These women-only public spaces symbolised progress in terms of increased women’s public participation – albeit separate from men. At the same time these spaces were framed as suitable to the national identity of Saudi Arabia and its national character. The areas in which women now could work were regarded as suitable to their nature.

The 1980s were a period of consolidation. The Saudi state as well as its people seemed less receptive to Western influences and became “preoccupied with defining their identity and sharpening their sense of belonging and, for the

31 See footnote 7.
32 I will further look into the case of work in Chapter 3.
government, its legitimacy” (Yamani 1996: 265). This question of identity also centred on the issue of women’s participation in public life.

Simultaneously, the Sahwa movement gained more ground, as the state had given the movement more space in the wake of the Great Mosque siege. Increasingly separating women and men in public life became a prime marker. The women-only public spaces were financed with oil revenues, which strengthened and diversified them: more women-only spaces started to develop in the public domain, with the first women-only branch of the al-Rajhi bank opening in al-Shmaisi in 1979.

More women-only spaces also emerged in the areas of teaching and healthcare. These fields were deemed ‘suitable’ to women’s ‘nature.’ Technological advances such as CCTV and fax allowed for communication without being in the same room, thus further strengthening segregation. Thus, the position of women played a role in shaping national identity and in the process of national development.

King Fahd initiated the policy of Saudisation to combat increasing unemployment among the increasingly well-educated Saudi graduates who could not find employment during the oil glut of the 1980s. Saudisation was also pursued in the educational sector and enrolment in local universities was encouraged. Women participated in the higher education system, separate from men, enrolling in universities. Education within Saudi Arabia rather than abroad was the trend in many families, in accordance with the prevailing moods of “piety” and “tradition” (Yamani 1996: 270). A contributory factor was “the need to reduce expenditure in the new, less favourable economic climate” (Yamani 1996: 270). Also, standards of education in Saudi Arabia had improved by this time. Simultaneously, so as to counterbalance a proliferation of unreliable Islamic legal

---

33 Saudisation is a strategy to nationalise the workforce and tackle the problem of unemployment among Saudi nationals. It forces the public as well as the private sector to hire more Saudis, as opposed to expats. According to Article 45 of the Labour and Workman Law of Saudi Arabia, “Saudi workers shall not [comprise] less than 75% of the total number of the company/establishment workers and their wages shall not be less than 51% of the total wages of workers. The ministry [of labour] may reduce this ratio in [the] absence of technical skills or educational qualifications (Saudi Arabia n.d.)’ http://www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/Labor_and_Workmen_Law-1of4.aspx, website accessed 13 October 2015). In the revised Labour law of 2005 (article 26) the qualification about the 51% of total wages is omitted (www.sagia.gov.sa/Documents/Laws/labor_law_en.pdf, accessed 13 October 2015).

34 The 1980s oil glut was a surplus of crude oil caused by falling demand as a result of the 1970s oil crisis. Demand had fallen due to slowed economic activity as a result of the 1973 (OPEC oil embargo) and 1979 (decreased oil output due to the Iranian revolution) crises as well as energy conservation due to the high prices. Saudi oil production fell from almost 10 million barrels per day in 1980 to about 2 million barrels per day in 1985.
opinions (fatawa), King Fahd re-instated the position of the Grand Mufti\textsuperscript{35} and founded a Ministry of Islamic Affairs.

The 1990-1991 Gulf War and its aftermath

During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, Saudi Arabia welcomed US troops on its soil to defend itself, the Peninsula, and Kuwait in particular against Iraqi aggression, a move that was endorsed by Grand Mufti sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz. However, Sahwa leaders, who functioned outside the official religious establishment, began to speak out against the Al Sa’ud, severely criticising them for allowing an army of infidels on Saudi soil (ICG 2004). The Sahwa leaders were also very critical of those in the clerical establishment who had given their approval to this move.

During the Gulf War, in November 1990, 47 Saudi women openly demonstrated for their right to drive. From the early 1990s onwards, deliberations on the women’s issue gradually had become a little more public, and with female US soldiers driving these women seized the moment to put their own right to drive in the spotlight. It did not have the intended effect. The Mutawa’a demanded punishment and the government took their passports, sentenced them to public flogging and those who were teachers were fired (while retaining their salaries). A fatwa by Grand Mufti ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz made the social ban on driving official. Also, women were prevented from travelling without a male guardian (mahram). While in the 1970s a man and a woman travelling together in a car would merely have been reprimanded, since the early 1990s they would experience more serious consequences.

In 1991 and 1992, several petitions were submitted to King Fahd. These had an Islamist inclination but included many demands with which liberal critics identified. What the petitions had in common were a call to end corruption, to increased freedom of expression, and the demand to instate a consultative council (Wagemakers 2012: 5-6).\textsuperscript{36} Simultaneously, dissidents in exile put forward

\textsuperscript{35} The Grand Mufti is the most influential religious authority in the kingdom and is appointed by the king. In 1969, King Faisal abolished the office of Grand Mufti and replaced it with a Ministry of Justice. In 1993, King Fahd restored the office. The current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia is ‘Abd al-‘Aziz Al al-Shaykh.

\textsuperscript{36} A month after the driving protest, a group of ‘liberals’ and ‘secularists’ circulated a reformist petition. Then, in March 1991, a group of religious intellectuals submitted a ‘letter of demands’ (khitab al-matalib) to King Fahd. Among the 453 signatories of the Letter were quite a few liberals. A second petition, a ‘memorandum of advice’ (mudhakkirat al-nashiha) was signed and submitted by religious scholars in July 1992 and was more distinctly oppositionist. See also Wagemakers 2012: 5-6.
similar demands (Okruhlik 1999: 306-308).

In the 1990s, both Islamic movements and liberals posed a challenge to the state. To acquiesce both, the aftermath of the Gulf War saw some political reforms such as the Basic Law of 1992.\footnote{The Basic Law of Governance lays down (Royal decree No: A/90 of 1 March 1992) the basic system of governance of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It does not override shari’ah, and article 1 of the Basic Law states that the country’s constitution consists in the Qur’an and the sunna (traditions) of the Prophet Muhammad. See also www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/The_Basic_Law_Of_Governance.aspx (website accessed 13 October 2015).} Also as a response to both Islamists and liberals, an (appointed) majlis al-shura (consultative council) was installed in 1991 (Yamani 1996: 267) - in which women did not have a role.\footnote{In 2013, King ‘Abdallah appointed 30 women to the majlis al-shura.} The consultative council started working in the mid-1990s and slowly gained some relevance. Okruhlik points out, however, that the effect of the 1990-91 Gulf War was merely that of a catalyst serving the outcome of a political and societal debate that was, as the previous section has shown, already underway (Okruhlik 1999: 302).

Simultaneously to these reforms, however, the (aftermath of the) Gulf War also led to a heightened turn to conservatism, a trend that gained further momentum later in the 1990s. With all the criticism it had faced regarding the deployment of US troops, the monarchy had a continuing need to maintain legitimacy as a legitimate, Islamic government in order to sustain itself at the centre of politics in the kingdom. In this struggle, women’s issues were pushed to the centre stage.

As Arebi points out, in the political situation in the kingdom at this time, women’s rights and behaviour became positioned at the heart of a latent power struggle between the ‘ulama’ and the state (Arebi 1994: 13-15). In this struggle, Yamani argues that the state makes symbolic gestures to maintain its legitimacy and show its commitment to Islam. These shows of commitment range from enforcing women’s public dress code of the abaya and hijab to the ban on women driving and the preservation of strict segregation in public spaces (Yamani 2000: 95).

In the state’s attempt to boost its credentials and legitimise itself, the women’s issue became the most visible expression of the state’s piety and once more came to occupy a central role in the state’s legitimisation discourse. The state positioned itself as the upholder of the nation’s piety and religiosity, framing the religion as the core part of the kingdom’s national identity and expressing this most visibly in its regulatory practices of women.

However, enhancing its image of commitment to Islam and using that as a mechanism of legitimisation came with its own challenges. According to Hrair Dekmejian, after the 1990-91 Gulf war, “Islam has become, once again,
a two-edged political instrument – as the kingdom’s primary medium of self-legitimisation, and as the main venue of protest for opposition elements” (Hrair Dekmejian 1994: 627).

When that Islamic route of protest became too strong, in 1994 King Fahd cracked down on Sahwa leaders and locked them up for some years. Among them were prominent sheikhs such as Salman al-‘Awda and Safar al-Hawali, whose taped sermons gained wide-spread popularity. At the same time, the Al Sa’ud felt they had to deal with liberal-minded dissidents, who called for the implementation of a reform programme that would open up the political and social realms to increased diversity (Jones 2005: 3).

Eventually, in 1999, al-‘Awda and al-Hawali were released. Their release was arranged by then Crown Prince ‘Abdallah after their promise they would only engage in social activism and refrain from political activism (Lacroix 2011: 240). His reputation for probity and personal piety helped ‘Abdallah secure his positive relationship with the Sahwa movement. This, in turn, allowed ‘Abdallah when he became king (r. 2005-15)\(^39\) to pursue a social agenda since his ascendancy to the throne, despite the opposition of an important segment of the religious establishment (Lacroix 2011: 269).

9/11 and its ramifications: the National Dialogue

The events of 9/11\(^40\) and the domestic terrorist attacks on Riyad compounds in 2003\(^41\) led to more pressure for reform from outside as well as within the kingdom. Eventually, the reforms stemming from these events would break the hold of the Sahwa. This particularly played out in the field of women – due to external and internal demands for reform, and because the state realised that the women’s issue could serve to the outside world as a softener of its authoritarian reputation. While eager to preserve the piety of the nation, the Saudi state was simultaneously increasingly keen to appear modern (al-Rasheed 2013: 31-32).

Aware of its unfavourable reputation regarding the position of women and seeking legitimacy at home and certainly abroad, since the early 2000s one can trace a discourse of reform (which also extends to other areas) that promotes the

\(^{39}\) King ‘Abdallah ascended to the throne in 2005 but as a crown prince had governed the country since 1996, the year that King Fahd had a stroke.

\(^{40}\) 15 of the 19 hijackers were Saudi citizens.

\(^{41}\) Three major bombings on Riyad compounds took place in 2003. Living on these compounds were mostly Westerners and non-Saudi Arabs. Before the compound bombings, individual expats had been targeted and killed by car bombs.
participation of women and encourages their role in society, not only in women-only public spaces but also in *ikhtilat*.

King Faisal’s promissory note of Islamic modernity resonated under the leadership of first crown prince and then King ‘Abdallah. ‘Abdallah was framed as a reformer who could not rush society into fast changes, especially in the field of women, as long as society was not yet ready for it (al-Rasheed 2013: 31-32, 152). This reform discourse in the field of women as well as in other areas played out, for example, in the National Dialogue mechanism.

During the period 2003-2005 (labelled by some the ‘Riyad Spring’) then-crown prince ‘Abdallah received more than six petitions asking for more basic freedoms and political participation (al-Rasheed 2010: 261). In June 2003, ‘Abdallah received some of the signatories and invited them to a national dialogue forum that would form the basis of the National Dialogue (al-Hiwar al-Watani) sessions (Matthiesen 2015: 181).

The first National Dialogue took place in Riyadh in June 2003 and resulted in a Charter with recommendations. In the Charter the intellectual and confessional diversity of the Saudi nation was recognised. This is noteworthy in that this recognition runs counter to the exclusivism of Saudi Wahhabism. Secondly, the Charter was critical of one of Wahhabism’s judicial pillars, namely *sadd al-dhara’i* (‘the blocking of the means’), meaning that actions that may lead to committing sins must not be permitted. Significantly, none of the members of the official-Wahhabi establishment were invited to participate, marking a tendency to marginalise them (Lacroix 2005: 17). The second National Dialogue (December 2003) dealt with the topics of extremism and moderation, the relationship between the ruler and the ruled, and the rights and obligations of citizens.

The third National Dialogue (2004) took place in Medina in June 2004 and

---

42 The petitions called for political reform, anti-corruptions measures, constitutionalism, social justice, and an end to sectarianism. For more background to these petitions, see Al-Rasheed 2010: 261-3 and Matthiesen 2015: 181-5.

43 According to the King ‘Abd al-Aziz Centre for National Dialogue (KACND), the National Dialogues serve as a platform for continuing and expanding the scope of dialogue in the kingdom, based on two pillars: the shari’a and national integrity. See the KACND website www.kacnd.org (website accessed 12 October 2015) and Thompson 2014.

44 For more information about the first National Dialogue, see www.kacnd.org/eng/first_meeting.asp (website accessed 12 October 2015).

45 For example, the concept of *sadd al-dhara’i* is the basis for the ban on women driving – an action that could lead to committing sins, such as meeting with unrelated men.

46 For more information about the second National Dialogue, see www.kacnd.org/Meetings/details/2 (website accessed 27 June 2017).

47 For more information about the third National Dialogue, see www.kacnd.org/eng/Third_meeting.asp (website accessed 12 October 2015).
focused on women: their duties and obligations, education, and participation in society and the labour market. Thirty-five men and thirty-five women participated in the dialogue. At the meeting, which was closed to the public, a clash seems to have taken place between those who opposed women’s full participation in society and those who were ‘with’ women (Le Renard 2008: 619).

One objective of the National Dialogue was to have women pledge allegiance to the state. In the post-9/11 framework, the National Dialogue on women fitted the state’s fight against domestic terrorism and extremism. Women, in their role as mothers, it was thought, would detect the first signs of deviance and thus had a role to play in preventing radicalisation (al-Rasheed 2014: 309).

After the meetings of the third National Dialogue on women, the participating men presented the recommendations to Crown Prince ‘Abdallah, while the participating women presented the same recommendations to ‘Abdallah’s wife, respecting and reinforcing the practice of gender segregation (Le Renard 2008: 618). After ‘Abdallah’s agreement, the recommendations were published.

An interesting common feature of these recommendations is that “they do not question gender segregation but rather reinforce it by suggesting the creation of more specific institutions for women” (Le Renard 2008: 619), thus recommending the establishment of more women-only public spaces. The result of these recommendations was mainly to ‘de-taboo’ the women’s issue and to make the debate public with this ‘state approval,’ underlining the state’s claim to being a force of ‘progress’ in a conservative society.

One of the sessions of the 2008 Seventh National Dialogue on Work and Employment focused on progressing women’s employment. It reaffirmed the necessity to develop the women’s labour market, encouraging women’s labour participation by achieving ‘progress’ and ‘reform’ by creating women-only sections in ministries, courts, and other institutions as well as the need to reduce unemployment by private-sector employment for young women and men (Le Renard 2014a: 42). Thus, women were encouraged to participate in ‘national development’ – achieving ‘progress’ and ‘reform’ in a way that suited Saudi Arabia’s national distinctive character (khususiyya): separate from men.

---

48 For more information about the Seventh National Dialogue, see www.kacnd.org/eng/seventh_meeting_details.asp (website accessed 12 October 2015).
Women’s participation in the public space in discourses and projects until 2011

From the early 2000s until 2011 we see not only a further consolidation of public expression of approval of women-only public spaces, but also a demand by some ‘liberal-minded’ reformists for the practice of *ikhtilat*, framing it as an Islamically acceptable practice. In other instances, some ‘simply’ defied segregation practices. In 2010 for example, Bridges Cafe & Library was opened in Jeddah, a bookstore-cum-cafe that also organised events. Young men and women would gather at Bridges in a *mukhtalat* environment. The café was tolerated for a while, but on 7 May 2012 it was closed down by the authorities for selling banned books, remaining open during prayer time, and for promoting gender mixing. Some private businesses in Jeddah that should have separate offices ignored this requirement and let female and male employees work together in a mixed space, hoping not to get caught by the Mutawwa’a.

In 2010 for example, Bridges Cafe & Library was opened in Jeddah, a bookstore-cum-cafe that also organised events. Young men and women would gather at Bridges in a *mukhtalat* environment. The café was tolerated for a while, but on 7 May 2012 it was closed down by the authorities for selling banned books, remaining open during prayer time, and for promoting gender mixing. Some private businesses in Jeddah that should have separate offices ignored this requirement and let female and male employees work together in a mixed space, hoping not to get caught by the Mutawwa’a.

In 2010 for example, Bridges Cafe & Library was opened in Jeddah, a bookstore-cum-cafe that also organised events. Young men and women would gather at Bridges in a *mukhtalat* environment. The café was tolerated for a while, but on 7 May 2012 it was closed down by the authorities for selling banned books, remaining open during prayer time, and for promoting gender mixing. Some private businesses in Jeddah that should have separate offices ignored this requirement and let female and male employees work together in a mixed space, hoping not to get caught by the Mutawwa’a.

In the 2000s, in order to placate both conservatives and more liberal-minded reformists in the kingdom, both the development of women-only public spaces and that of the practice of *ikhtilat* in the public domain were supported by the government – although the latter much less strongly. In 2005 King Fahd passed away and ‘Abdallah (r. 2005-2015) ascended to the throne. His positive relations with Sahwa sheikhs allowed him to generally pursue a more ‘liberal’ social agenda since his accession to the throne. However, opposition did come, from an important segment of the religious establishment (Lacroix 2011: 269) and also from other societal actors.

Notwithstanding the positive relations between ‘Abdallah and the Sahwa sheikhs, the latter rejected suggestions that the status of women in society should be revised. When Lubna al-‘Ulayan, the most prominent and also wealthiest Saudi businesswoman, attended the 2003 Jeddah Economic Forum partially unveiled and a picture emerged in ‘Ukaz showing 27 unveiled women attending the forum,

---

49 I restrict this historical chapter to developments up to and including 2011. Much has happened in Saudi Arabia since then, such as the installation of female members of the majlis al-shura (2013), several driving protests (2013-2017), active and passive voting rights for women in the municipal elections (2015), and a loosening of the male guardianship system (2017). However, I did my fieldwork in 2010 and 2011 and the discussions in my fieldwork (see Chapter 3) all took place within the historical and societal context of Saudi Arabia until 2011. This historical chapter thus lays down the context of respondents’ positions and arguments at that time.


51 Interview with Daliya, business woman, in Jeddah, 27 June 2010.

52 During her speech, her headscarf slipped off and she continued her speech without covering up.
Sahwa preachers as well as the official religious establishment responded with heated reactions (ICG 2004: 10).

The National Dialogue on Women in 2004 had also prompted warnings from Sahwa preachers. In its wake, a group of Islamist women (most notably Nura al-Sa‘ad) emerged who are close to the Sahwa movement, advocating the veil as well as gender segregation (ICG 2004: 10-11).

In 2008, a group of Saudi women led by Rawda Yusuf initiated a campaign and petition called My Guardian Knows What’s Best for Me (Wali amri adra bi-amri),\[^{53}\] defending the status quo vis-à-vis the male guardianship system over women in the kingdom and requesting punishment for activists demanding “equality between men and women, [and] mingling between men and women in mixed environments” (*New York Times* 2010).

However, also during this period, fields of study that were traditionally reserved for men, started to open up for women, for example engineering and law, management, telecommunications, and tourism. Before, women had been limited to working in fields such as education and healthcare, as these fields were regarded as ‘suitable’ to their ‘nature’ (DeLong-Bas 2009: 20). Women were also sent abroad to study, through the King ‘Abdallah Scholarship Programme\[^{54}\], to universities where *ikhtilat* is the default mode of interaction between students. These women then became not only students at these universities, but also like ambassadors whose task it is to change perceptions. In 2009, King ‘Abdallah opened Saudi Arabia’s first *mukhtalat*, co-educational university, the King ‘Abdallah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), which then became a much-debated development.\[^{55}\]

The state taking a leading role in opening up these fields of work and opportunities of study for women was part of its quest for a visible modernity, “which women appearing in the public sphere can project” (al-Rasheed 2013: 173). By these actions the state positioned women as pillars of its modernity “rooted in moderate Saudi Islamic credentials” (al-Rasheed 2013: 173) and gave off its promissory note of an Islamic modernity into society.

Le Renard (2014: 331) has pointed out that “the Saudi government is trying to promote an image of the Saudi society as modern and open-minded, toward the outside as well as toward Saudis.” During the reign of ‘Abdallah it did so clearly

\[^{53}\] For more information, please refer to the campaign’s Facebook page under “حملة ولي أمير أبي دمرى” at www.facebook.com/232903266768554/. Website accessed 3 June 2010.


\[^{55}\] I will further explore this debate in Chapter 4.
and consistently from an Islamic framework – resonating the approach of the late King Faisal in both their staging as modernists who try to convince their societies to accept progress and chance.

Since 2005 King ‘Abdallah occasionally received women in a private reception “to reinforce the impression that the state is the protector of female rights and interests, as defined by Islam” (al-Rasheed 2013: 150). Receiving these women separately on the one hand enforced the practice of segregation, while the mere fact of the king sitting with these women was the practice of *ikhtilat*.

In 2009, the first female cabinet member, Nura al-Fayiz, had been appointed Deputy Education Minister for Women’s Affairs. And at the Saudi-German business forum in Jeddah of May 2010, there was an attempt to impose segregation, but some of the Saudi women refused and they mixed with men.56 Likewise, the widespread use of social media such as Facebook also enables young Saudis to mix – in cyberspace (*CNN* 31 March 2010).57

The increased presence and visibility of women inside the kingdom, and outside the country on ‘Abdallah’s trips abroad and during press conferences with foreign dignitaries, was part of Saudi Arabia’s gender politics. Previously, women-only public spaces as a mode of public participation for women had been the visible sign of the state’s pious modern of women’s participation in the public space in a manner that fit with the Islamic character of the nation. Under ‘Abdallah too, the Saudi state “singled out gender as a criterion for its new modernity” (al-Rasheed 2013: 134-35), but in a way that requires a greater participation of women in public and a celebration of their achievements – not only separate from men but also in *ikhtilat*, such as during the very public trips abroad with the king: “women were expected to demystify Saudi society by projecting a modern and enlightened face” (al-Rasheed 2013: 40).

In the Saudi press, more liberal Saudis took on the religious establishment on women’s issues. At the same time, the state gradually replaced religious scholars as a way of extending its control over how gender roles and the status of women are debated and defined in the country (al-Rasheed 2013: 134; Meijer 2010). While conservative religious scholars still spoke out against *ikhtilat*58, other voices within the religious field could also be heard.

The director of the Mecca office of the Mutawa’a, Ahmad bin Qasim al-Ghamdi, gave an interview in the fall of 2009 saying that “there was nothing in

---

56 Interview with one of the managers of ‘Atallah Happyland theme park in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, 26 June 2010.

57 The contention about mixing in cyberspace will be further explored in Chapter 4.

58 See Meijer 2010 for an overview.
Islam that prevents women and men from mixing in public places like offices and schools” (Gause 2010). It was not just al-Ghamdi who has unorthodox views on women’s issues. Ahmad bin Baz, the son of former Grand Mufti sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz publicly stated that there is a legitimate basis in Islamic law for a more lenient position on *ikhtilat* (Gause 2010). From previous government stances it may be expected that “any substantive change in Saudi policies on women’s roles in society will be justified and explained by the government in terms of Islam” (Gause 2010), making al-Ghamdi and Bin Baz’ statements all the more interesting and again illustrating how change ‘must’ take place within an Islamic framework.

In short, opposing trends took place in Saudi society since 9/11 until 2011. Critics say that change is often more cosmetic and symbolic than substantive: women, for example, were not allowed to stand for election or vote in the 2005 municipal elections, and although Nura al-Fayiz occupied the highest position reached by a female, she only had minimal power.

King ‘Abdallah walked a tightrope, using Islam to legitimise the Al Sa’ud’s rule while at the same time Islam was one of the main platforms of opposition. “‘Abdallah’s strategy was one of political decompression: to make just enough concessions to appease Saudi Arabia’s subordinate and disheartened peoples and relieve pressure for reform” (Yamani 2008: 144). The “women’s issue” was central to this strategy, diverting attention from e.g. demands for political reform and participation and respect for human rights.

The examples in this section show how gender again became part of the state’s laying claim to a modernity that fits within the Islamic identity of the country and its rulers. ‘Legitimising’ *ikhtilat* through the king’s practice, the state now issued into society and the world the promissory note of an Islamic modernity, which no longer included only women-only public spaces but also *ikhtilat*.

**Inventory of ‘for women only’ public spaces until 2011**

Many women-only public spaces have developed in Saudi Arabia. What follows below is an inventory of these spaces up to 2011 on the basis of fieldwork carried out in 2010 and 2011. The inventory outlines the context and status quo in which I carried out fieldwork during that period.
Education

Article 155 of the official Saudi Arabia Education Policy states that co-education is forbidden at every stage with four exceptions: in daycare, kindergarten, some private elementary schools, and some medical schools (Smith and Abouammoh 2013: 2). Media and communication devices such as video and e-learning are used to extend educational fields for women (Vidyasagar and Rae 2004: 267) so that they may watch male professors lecturing through a CCTV system such as on the women’s campus of ‘Abdelaziz University.

Not all faculties are open to women but the scope and diversity of studies is increasing. Yet, a tendency for female concentration in the humanities is still strong, not only due to lack of access to some faculties but also related to the dominant views on which activities are in accordance with women’s nature and roles in society.

In 2003, female literacy was estimated to be 50% for women and 72% for men (Hamdan 2005: 42). By 2009, 58 % of all higher education students were women (Abdella Doumato 2009: 24). Al-Manaa points out that while in the 1970s conservative elements in society opposed girls’ education because if “women were educated beyond the elementary level, [they] might have access to men’s professions or become associated with them” (as quoted in al-Munajjed 1997: 68), twenty years later women-only universities exist, such as the women’s campus of the King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz University, colleges such as the Dar al-Hikma College for Women in Jeddah, and the Princess Nora bint ‘Abd al-Rahman women-only university on the outskirts of Riyadh.

Important is the opening of religious faculties for women so that they can become teachers of Islamic education or preachers for women (Jamjoom 2009). It opens up an important field of study for women because it enables them to use and challenge the legitimatising religious language of the state and its religious actors to further their rights.

Religious classes and lectures by female Islamic preachers (da‘iyat) are increasing due to the spread of religious education among women. Participation in religiously-based groups is easy and legitimate in the Saudi context. Lessons to learn the Qur’an are organised in all urban areas. Female preachers are frequently asked within universities, religious and charitable foundations or mosques that are reserved to women for that occasion. Some female preachers have become well-known (Le Renard 2008: 623).

The case of the mixed KAUST university near Jeddah, the only co-educational university in Saudi Arabia, will be explored in Chapter 3.
Labour market

Urbanisation and industrialisation have led to increased employment opportunities for women (al-Munajjed 1997: 81), in contrast to the pre-oil boom effect that work outside the domestic sphere had on women’s mobility. However, women are dependent on male drivers and male family members to drive them places (DeLong-Bas 2009: 20), such as work, or depend on home-work transportation organised by their employers. Simultaneously, well-educated daughters and wives are seen as contributing economically to the family income, which is often highly necessary in present-day families (DeLong-Bas 2009: 19).

The number of female graduates has risen, but despite these increased opportunities and changing attitudes, women’s entrance into the labour market is lagging behind. In an attempt to remedy the discrepancy between female graduates and their entry into the labour market, in 2003 and 2004 the Council of Ministers published decrees nr. 63 and nr. 120 that recommended the creation of women-only sections and the employment of women in both the public and the private sector (Le Renard 2014b: 322).

The ‘Saudisation policy,’ aiming to replace the number of foreign workers by national citizens, reducing the size of the foreign workforce by increasing the pool of economically participating nationals is targeted not only at men but also at women. The process of Saudisation seems to create certain jobs for women and encourages the rise of entrance of women in separate spaces. In hospitals women and men do work together.59

The development of women-only work spaces is taking place with regard to teaching and healthcare, but also women branches of banks or shops are opened (Abdella Doumato 2010: 2). Some Ministries have segregated divisions, such as the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and the Ministry of Health (al-Munajjed 1997: 87). In 2010, the Ministry of Education identified several occupations that should provide special opportunities to women, such as receptionists, photographers and nutritionists (Saudi Gazette 30 March 2010). While the majority of Saudi women remain unemployed, women-only work spaces have made paid employment more accessible to women.

At the same time, women are still confined to jobs that are seen as feminine and compatible with their ‘nature,’ and do not often get to occupy decision-making or management positions. Article 3 of the revised labour law implemented in 2005 states that “work is the right of every citizen” and that “all citizens are equal in the right to work” (Saudi Arabia Labour and Workmen Law 2005 article 3).

59 I will further look into the case of hospitals in Chapter 3.
The revised labour law removed the explicit ban on *ikhtilat* in the workplace but article 4 of the law requires that all workers and employers adhere to the provisions of shari’a when implementing this law (Saudi Arabia Labour and Workmen Law 2005 article 4). Moreover, article 149 says that women shall work only in fields “suitable to their nature,” excluding jobs “deemed detrimental to health” and “likely to expose women to specific risks” (Saudi Arabia Labour and Workmen Law 2005 article 149). In effect, “this new law offers an ambiguity that can be used by those arguing either for or against women’s increased participation in the workforce” (Abdella Doumato 2010: 15).

In Hofuf, a women-only industrial area to work in manufacturing is being established. In some shops, Saudi women sell lingerie, although this does not go uncontested. Challenges of these developments include finding capable and willing women and societal and cultural acceptance. Questions arise as to how to maintain segregation and how to organise transportation to and from the workplace (De Long-Bas 2009: 20). Some companies, such as the Saudi-Cairo bank, provide transportation for female employees.

The number of businesswomen is estimated to range between 20,000 and 40,000 (ADHR 2005). The Chambers of Commerce have opened their doors to women (FRIDE 2009: 12). The women’s branch of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce is named after Khadija: the Khadija bint Khuwailid Centre for Business Women.

Yet female entrepreneurs experience many practical and legal difficulties in running their women-only enterprises. Many of the businesses run by women are in some way connected to fashion and by using the internet they can see fashion shows around the world and find and order the items they want from anywhere in the world (*The Economist* 1999: 48), circumventing the need for a *mahram* to travel abroad.

Some ‘*ulama*’ assert that women should primarily focus on their reproductive capacities and on motherhood, arguing that the Qur’an (Q. 4: 34) states that men

---

60 As we shall see in Chapter 4.

61 The Centre aims to “be the motivating force to eliminate all obstacles the woman faces and support her economic and social journey to effectively participate in the national development” (website). It aims to raise awareness by organizing workshops and conferences for female entrepreneurs and female entrepreneurs-to-be, such as the US-Saudi Women’s Forum on Social Entrepreneurship in October 2011. For more information about the Khadija bint Khuwailid Centre at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, see www.jcci.org.sa/JCCI/EN/SpecializedCenters/Khadija+Bint+Khuwailid+Center/About+The+Center/ (website accessed 17 November 2011). Site visit on 23 June 2010. For more information about US-Saudi Women’s Forum on Social Entrepreneurship, see www.facebook.com/pages/US-Saudi-Womens-Forum-on-Social-Entrepreneurship-II/164720376941505?sk=wall (website accessed October 19, 2011). Forum attended on 19 October 2011.
should be the breadwinners of the family. Other ‘ulama’ only support female labour if the nature of the work is in line with the biological characteristics of a woman. A number of conservatives claim that female employment leads to corruption, sexual deviance and increased divorce rates (al-Munajjed 1997: 84). Some religious figures though claim the opposite and, for example, state that preventing women from working is against the shari’a.

The responses of Saudi men to increased labour participation of Saudi women range from outright rejection to favouring the gradual absorption of women in the labour force. Al-Munajjed (1997: 82) argues that the underlying issue seems to be whether women should or should not be allowed to become active members of society. However, the practice of gender segregation and the (public) debates pertaining to it seem to suggest that the underlying issue is not so much whether women should become active members of society but in which way they should be able to do this and which is a legitimate way for women to participate in the public domain.

**Politics**

In the first cabinet reshuffle since assuming the throne in 2005, King ‘Abdallah appointed Nura al-Fayiz, a US-educated former teacher, Deputy Minister of Education in charge of a new Ministry department for female students. In the current King Salman’s (r. 2015-to date) first cabinet shuffle, she was sent home.

In 2003 municipal elections were held in Saudi Arabia, for which no criteria were set. As a consequence, several women registered to run as candidates. Strong objections came from conservative ‘ulama’. In the end, the Interior Minister Prince Nayif bin ‘Abd al-‘Aziz stated that women would not be voting because polling stations as well as municipal meeting halls would need to be segregated. “By citing logistic rather than religious reasons against women’s participation, he left the door open for women to take part in future elections” (Abdella Doumato 2010: 21).

While not allowed to cast votes in municipal elections, in Jeddah women are allowed to vote for the Chamber of Commerce, and several women have been elected. Women in Jeddah, Mecca, and the Eastern Province started the “My Country Campaign” (hamlat baladi), organising meetings, workshops, and shadow reporting to prepare women to run for the municipal elections should it be allowed in the future.62

---

62 Interview with one of the founders, Jeddah, 16 October 2011. Meeting attended in Jeddah, 18 October 2011. See also the campaign’s Facebook page www.facebook.com/حملة-بلدي -178771468839225/ (website accessed 16 October 2011).
In September 2011, King ‘Abdullah announced the opening up of the consultative council (majlis al-shura) to female members. He framed his decision as fitting with Islamic history, in which he said women played an important role. ‘Abdullah also stressed that he had been advised on the matter by some of the country’s religious scholars. The Grand Mufti, ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Shaykh, immediately publicly supported the king’s decision.

However, there was also opposition to the decision, and in January 2013, a few weeks before the king was to swear in the new consultative council including its female members, conservative scholars staged a protest outside the king’s palace in Riyadh. Outside of Saudi Arabia the king’s decision was met with much acclaim. While during the council’s inauguration in February 2013 the female members sat in the same room as the male council members (though on a separate side), when in session the female council members enter the council by a women-only entrance and are seated in a room separate from their male counterparts.

Civil society
Charity has been an important form of civil engagement for elite women since the 1960s and activities in this field usually take place under the aegis of one of the princesses of the Royal house. An example is the organisation Nahda, which was founded by Princess Sara al-Faisal. These organisations and associations take care of poor women, handicapped children and orphans. The Human Rights Commission, decreed by King ‘Abdallah, has branches throughout Saudi Arabia with two specifically for women. It tries to promote Arab and Islamic concepts of human rights and apparently has been instrumental in reporting to the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2007 (Fride 2009).

Diwaniyyat or salons are the most important intellectual and cultural platforms in Saudi society. The cultural diwaniyya of the secular political activist Najib al-Khunaizi is one of the few gatherings that allow women to attend. Thus, it is no

---

63 For a general overview of the types of civil society in Saudi Arabia and its political context, see Kanie 2012.

64 CEDAW is an international treaty that is generally seen as the international bill of rights for women. It was adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Saudi Arabia signed and ratified the treaty in 2000, with two reservations. Firstly, in case of contradiction between any term of the treaty and the norms of Islamic law, Saudi Arabia is under no obligation to observe the contradictory terms of the Convention. Secondly, Saudi Arabia does not consider itself bound by article 9.2 (granting women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children) and article 29.1 (submitting any dispute between two or more States Parties that is not settled by negotiation to arbitration at the request of one of them). See the CEDAW treaty at www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/ (website accessed 27 June 2017).
wonder that women started to organise their own *diwaniyyat*, discussing several issues including religious and cultural topics as well as women’s rights. They do not post photos and videos of their meetings on the internet or otherwise circulate these, and for that reason only reach a limited audience (Matthiesen 2009: 15).

The media, internet, and social media provide new spaces in which segregation can take different shapes or become a less direct issue. Women enjoyed greater media visibility in the post-9/11 period. New radio stations introduce young Saudi women presenters and in the expansive mediascape of Saudi Arabia some female presenters figure. The Saudi Ministry of Information has however imposed the national abaya dress and full head covering on all Saudi female presenters (Mellor 2009: 12). Female media personalities can function as role models for other women.

Women may work as journalists, but sometimes face considerable difficulties in exercising their profession. There is a lack of transparency and cooperation, two problems that male journalists also face. Women have to face the stereotype that they should only cover women-related topics. They also have to deal with the issue of needing a male driver to take them places, which makes them less flexible in responding to breaking news. Sometimes they are refused entry to events they want to cover. One journalist also cited as a problem the lack of cooperation from women, who instead of helping each other give each other a hard time (Menassat 2010).

In March 2010, Saudi female poet Hissa Hilal made it to the final round of the One Million Dollar Poet competition, aired on national TV. Hilal criticised the strict gender segregation in the kingdom as well as *fatawa* that prevent women from taking on jobs that have traditionally been regarded as for men only. Her poem, The Chaos of Fatwas, was interpreted as lashing out against Saudi cleric ‘Abd al-Rahman al-Barrak, who a month earlier had issued a fatwa calling for those who propose *ikhtilat* in education and in the work place to be put to death (*Timesonline* 2010). Some say that this would include the king and as a response 27 sheikhs signed a petition to support al-Barrak’s view (*Foxnews* 2010).

**Leisure**

A 2004 ministerial decree called for the construction of women-only sports (and cultural) centres. Nevertheless, access to sports in schools for girls is still limited. At ‘Effat college in Jeddah however, girls can take part in basketball training and the university organises basketball matches. A women-only gym, *Curves*, can be found in Riyadh, Jeddah and Dammam and Lina, a business woman from Jeddah has opened a basketball club, Jeddah United, that at first was women-only but
now also –separate from the girls – trains boys.65

Since 2008, Riyad hosts the only Middle East’s women-only hotel in which exclusively female attendants work and solely female guests are welcomed.66 Other leisure facilities are segregated by time of access. Parks and museums67 have singles, women-only, and family hours of access. For the Jeddah Zoo, morning visits on Saturdays, Sundays and Mondays are limited to female students, other days are for male students. ‘Atallah Happyland, an amusement park in Jeddah, also has separate family and singles time slots. While most cafes have a singles and family-section, some cafes, such as Bridges Jeddah before it was closed down, provided a space where unrelated men and women could mix, drinking coffee and talking.68

**Concluding remarks**

At the start of the Third Saudi State when the Najd and Hijaz areas were unified, the project of forming a new national identity - a political as well as a cultural project – ensued. This included ideas about the ideal woman and the ideal man (Moghadam 2000: 107). The nation-building project posed the question what it means to be a Saudi man, what it means to be a Saudi woman, and how the relations between women and men – within the family as well as within the public space – should be organised. Part of the nationalist project of the state is the construction of women and men as (public) citizens:

“At times of regime consolidation and state-building, questions of gender, family, and male-female relations come to the fore. The state becomes the manager of gender. (...) Whether political discourses support women’s emancipation and equality or whether they glorify tradition, morality, the family, and difference, the point remains that political ideologies and practices are gendered and that social transformation and state building entail changes in gender relations (...)” (Moghadam 2003: 105).

65 For more information about this initiative, see www.jeddahunited.com, website accessed October 19, 2011. Interview with Lina, the founder of Jeddah United, on 20 October 2011 in Jeddah.
66 For more information, see www.luthanhotel-spa.com, website accessed 1 November 2011. I stayed at the Luthan hotel 2-3 November 2011.
67 Such as the National Museum in Riyadh. Site visit on 24 January 2011.
68 Site visit to Bridges Cafe in Jeddah on 25 October 2011.
What this chapter has shown is that in Saudi Arabia gender segregation has been implemented, institutionalised, reinforced, as well as transformed and challenged by historical processes. These are processes of economic transition, education, urbanisation, and the influence of the Sahwa movement. These historical developments converged with projects of national distinction and modernisation. They have resulted in the creation, consolidation, and expansion of women-only public spaces, as well as their being challenged.

Up to the present day, the Saudi state attempts to control and shape the nation’s historical narratives, in particular those narratives that stress its role in the modernisation of the country. In school history textbooks, for example, “...the state highlights its efforts to accommodate the country’s Islamic heritage with its commitment to modernisation.” (Rasheed 2010: 11). These discourses are part of what constructs the modern nation and here too we detect the promissory note of an enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006).

Education was the first field in which ‘progress,’ ‘enhancement of women’ and ‘modernisation’ was realised by creating separate spaces for women. By presenting this development within an Islamic framework, the state issued into society a promissory note of an Islamic modernity in order to create the necessary support to push through women’s education, in women-only public spaces.

Official Saudi history as well as other biographers frame King Faisal as a proponent of reform and progress, positioning the king as the moderniser who tried to win over the ‘ulama’ and the people (Kechichian 2008). It also proposes a model of ‘the Saudi woman’ as educated, devoted to her family, moral, and pious. These projects and discourse of reform and their claim to modernisation, as well as the framing of the king as a moderniser through development embedded in Islam with specific reference to the women’s issue, would later resonate in the reform and modernisation discourse and framing of King ‘Abdallah.

In the 1980s, wealth stemming from the oil industry gave the state the financial means to open women-only public spaces. The oil revenues allowed a strengthening of existing spaces and a diversification into new areas of public life. It gave women more space to participate in public life – albeit separate from men. As such, the public segregation of women from men played a role in shaping and consolidating Saudi Arabia’s national identity and distinctive character (*khususiyya*), as well as in the process and projects of national development.

King Faisal’s claims to modernity reverberated in the leadership of first crown prince and then King ‘Abdallah. ‘Abdallah was constructed as a reformer who could not rush society into fast changes, especially in the field of women, as long as society was not yet ready for it. Under ‘Abdallah’s rule, the National Dialogue
and the result of the recommendations coming out of the women’s dialogue underlined the state’s claim to being a force of progress and modernisation in a conservative society, while at the same time encouraging the establishment of more women-only public spaces. Thus, women were encouraged to participate in ‘national development’ - but in a way that suited Saudi Arabia’s national distinctive character (khususiyya): separate from men.

It was however also in the post-9/11 period and mostly during the reign of ‘Abdallah that more room evolved for ikhtilat in the public space. Especially from the 2000s onward, a simultaneous development towards more ikhtilat can be traced. The increased presence and visibility of women inside and outside the kingdom on King ‘Abdallah’s trips abroad and during press conferences with foreign dignitaries, and mukhtalat study opportunities for women abroad and in the kingdom (KAUST), are also part of the state’s laying claim to modernity within an Islamic framework and of issuing this promissory note into society, no longer only with women-only public spaces, but also ikhtilat.

Striving to meet conflicting demands from society, the state’s promissory note of an Islamic modernity no longer includeded only women-only public spaces, but also ikhtilat. During the reign of King ‘Abdallah, during which the present study took place, the state’s ideas about how gender, Islam, and the nation should interplay were issued into society as a promissory note of an Islamic, enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006).69

On the one hand, the state used the role of women within society to make gestures that confirmed its commitment to Islam, supporting the development of women-only public spaces. In much of the Saudi state discourse on female segregation and its extension towards a widening arena of public spaces, creating women-only spaces was claimed to be ‘reform,’ ‘progress’ and ‘national development’ (Le Renard 2008) as well as ‘modernisation’ and a way of letting women participate in society in a ‘Saudi way’ that fit the Saudi national identity.

On the other hand, the state also allowed the emergence of more ikhtilat in the public domain, initiating change when ‘society is ready’ and ‘respecting national customs and traditions’ (‘adat wa taqalid) ‘within a framework of Islam.’ The purpose of this balancing act was to confirm the state’s centrality in modernisation.

The state thus unfolded contradictory practices of women-only public spaces and of ikhtilat within its promissory note of the enchanted modern: as the initiator and protector of the country’s Islamic identity as well as of reform and

---

69 See Chapter 1 for an explanation and operationalisation of this concept.
progress. The state positioned itself as an agent of and central to modernisation, demonstrating piety and authenticity, while at the same time claiming modernity, progress, development, and reform. The state’s claim to modernity is a modernity that must uphold the Islamic character and piety of the nation, as symbolised in the women’s issue in general and gender segregation and *ikhtilat* in particular, and a projection of an enchanted modern into society.
Chapter 3 | Saudi Arabia: women on mixing between men and women in public spaces (ikhtilat)
Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss and analyse my fieldwork material from Saudi Arabia. First, I go into the conceptualisation of *ikhtilat* and demonstrate how it is an ambiguous concept. Then, I will elucidate which standpoints my interlocutors (da‘iyat, activists, and business women) express vis-à-vis *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces and what types of arguments they use to support their standpoints.

More concretely, I will look at the ways in which they position themselves in relation to *ikhtilat* in the workplace, in the university, and in hospitals and how they think about women-only offices, universities, and hospitals. I have chosen these three cases for two reasons: they come up most regularly in interviews because many interlocutors have experience with *ikhtilat* (or a lack thereof) in these spaces, and these cases each received media coverage.

Subsequently, using these three cases of *ikhtilat* in the workplace, in the university, and in hospitals as the starting point, I will analyse how the issue of *ikhtilat* is connected to notions of gender, Islam, and Saudi national identity. In the conclusion of this chapter I will address the question how this analysis is connected to interlocutors’ ideas about modernity and the ‘modern Saudi nation.’

Ambiguous concepts: segregation, *ikhtilat*, and *khilwa*

In this section, I will first examine the concepts of segregation and *ikhtilat* and clarify what they mean to my interlocutors. Then, I will explain which factors determine what does and does not constitute *ikhtilat*. Finally, I will look into the concept of *khilwa*.

Contesting segregation and *ikhtilat*

Among my interlocutors, gender segregation as well as its opposite, *ikhtilat* or gender mixing, is a contested concept and practice. Interlocutors have well-articulated yet divergent ideas about what gender segregation and *ikhtilat* actually are. Let us start with gender segregation.

An outsider might discuss the situation in Saudi Arabia regarding the relations between women and men in the public domain as gender segregation. However, in Saudi Arabia itself, the public discussion focuses on the concept and practice of *ikhtilat*: gender mixing. My interlocutors too use this concept as opposed to segregation: when asked for a word in Arabic that denotes ‘segregation,’ most of them had to think for a while, and then came up with words such as *fasl* (partition,
disjunction), *infisal* (dissociation, withdrawal), *iqsam* (sectioning), *hajiz* (obstacle, dividing wall), and *hijab* (here meaning screen, barrier), all denoting variations of the English word ‘separation,’ while immediately adding ‘but we don’t really use this word,’ indicating that these are artificial descriptions. May, a business woman from Jeddah said:

“Euhm… euhm… No I don’t know. I’m not sure. The opposite of mixing [*ikhtilat*]… separation [*al-fasl*]… but it’s not a term we really use. *Fasl* you have to add words, like separation between men and women [*fasl bayn al-rijaal wa-l-nisa’*].”

Other terms used by women I spoke, further illustrating the fact that they did not use the concept of ‘segregation,’ are *ihtijab* (concealment, seclusion), *infirad* (solitude, seclusion), *inghilaq* (closing off, locking) and ‘*azl* (isolation). Idiomatically, *fasl al-jinsayn* (separation of the sexes), ‘*adam al-ikhtilat* (lack of *ikhtilat*), as well as *far’ nisa’i* (women’s branch), *far’ rijaali* (men’s branch), and *qism li-l-‘a’ilat* (family section) were put forward. The fact that segregation is ‘the norm’ and *ikhtilat* the subject of public debate is thus reflected in spoken Arabic –there is no current term in spoken Saudi Arabic for ‘segregation.’

‘Segregation’ is not a clear, straightforward concept. For some women a screen between women and men in a conference room amounts to segregation. The screen divides the room into a male and a female section, each with their own entrance but with a shared view of the stage. For other women, however, this qualifies as *ikhtilat*, since despite the screen women and men are physically present in the same room and mingle during breaks. The origin of segregation is a source of disagreement, too. Some interlocutors say that segregation comes from Islam and should be practised today because that was how it was done in the Prophet Muhammad’s time. To illustrate their point, several of these interlocutors recount how, in the Prophet’s mosque, men would pray in front and the women at the back. Other interlocutors say that segregation is a societal phenomenon that was invented in the 1980s with the rise of the Sahwa movement.

The debate that is taking place in Saudi Arabia about what *ikhtilat* is and is not, is much more prominent and complex than that about segregation, which is virtually non-existing. In the media, vehement discussions have taken place over

---

70 Interview with May, business woman, Jeddah, 25 October 2011.
71 See Chapter 2.
the last few years about issues such as *ikhtilat* in the Great Mosque in Mecca (*al-Riyadh* 2012) and at the King ‘Abdallah University for Science and Technology (KAUST).\(^72\) At the same time, the enforcement of gender segregation by the religious police and a call for women-only hospitals also received media attention (*al-‘Arabiyya* 2011).

In these discussions in the media, the focus is mainly on whether and where *ikhtilat* should or should not be allowed rather than on what *ikhtilat* actually is. The women I interviewed however do have varying ways of defining the specifics of what *ikhtilat* is and is not, which shows that it is an ambiguous concept. Ibtisam, an activist from Jeddah who has worked on women’s issues all her life recounted her experience at the Fifth Jeddah Economic Forum of 2005, where she asked the Forum’s participants for a definition of *ikhtilat*. She explained to me how she put the same demand forward two years later during the 2007 Economic Forum – to no avail.\(^73\) In 2008 the issue of *ikhtilat* was finally taken up in the Seventh National Dialogue on Work and Employment (KACND 2008). Nevertheless, the term has not yet been defined officially.

In a similar vein, Su‘ad, a business woman from Khobar, recounted the story of her husband having to visit the office of the religious police, as their business was accused of employing ‘a female waiter’ and allowing ‘a lot of mixing.’ She said her husband entered the office, found five men of the religious police sitting at a round table, and asked:

> “What would you like us to do so you don’t shut our store down? They [the 5 men of the religious police] had no answer. Everybody had a different opinion [on what *ikhtilat* is], and that is the major problem when it comes to *ikhtilat* in a public place. It’s subjective because there’s no consensus and there’s nothing written, and they won’t write it down for you [what *ikhtilat* is/isn’t]. They will not put it in writing because each and every one has a different opinion.”\(^74\)

Despite this ambiguity, there is a general understanding that the word *ikhtilat* literally means ‘mixing.’ Khadija, a young female Islamic teacher from Jeddah explained it as follows:

---

\(^72\) See section “For women only’ universities and *ikhtilat* at university’ in this Chapter for a detailed overview of the debate about KAUST.  
\(^73\) Interview with Ibtisam, activist, in Jeddah, 27 October 2011.  
\(^74\) Interview with Su‘ad, business woman, in Dammam, 3 November 2011.
“In the language, it is you and me right now. I can sit with you, laugh with you, eat with you. That is ikhtilat in the language. It doesn’t have anything to do with Islam. Any ikhtilat. Also between women. Even with – excuse me – animals. I mix with them. I am in one place, and a cat sits next to me. That’s ikhtilat.”

Just as with segregation, the origin of ikhtilat is a source of disagreement. Some of my interlocutors said that ikhtilat is allowed in Islam and should be allowed and practised today. Interestingly, they refer to the same mosque example to support their standpoint as those interlocutors who are against ikhtilat, only arguing that the situation in the mosque during Muhammad’s time constitutes ikhtilat and not segregation.

This disagreement is of further relevance to the present study in that it plays a role in the dynamics in the struggle over the collective memory of the country. Negotiations about particular narratives such as this one reflect the tension that exists between the past and the present-day ‘correct’ interpretation of Islamic history that is considered to be the most trustworthy and legitimate in modern Saudi Arabia. The question here is whether ikhtilat can be framed as part of Saudi Arabia’s Islamic history and thereby be positioned into the present community. In other words, whether or not ikhtilat belongs to Saudi Arabia as a modern nation.

Factors determining what is ikhtilat

There are four main factors that according to my interlocutors determine whether a situation is ikhtilat or not. They are firstly the purpose of the mixing, secondly its duration, thirdly the location where the mixing takes place, and lastly with whom one mixes.

The first and most important factor determining whether or not a situation is ikhtilat is its purpose. One interlocutor indicated that for her work for a charity organisation she needed to phone men. She maintained that this did not amount to ikhtilat, as she would speak with the man for the purpose of organising her volunteer work for the charity. Several other women said that the tone of the telephone conversation determines whether it is ikhtilat or not: when the tone is business-like, it is not ikhtilat. But when the tone is too personal, the conversation does constitute ikhtilat. While some students indicated that having a male professor in the classroom would be an ikhtilat situation, because they would be sharing the room with a non-mahram man, others said it did not amount to

---

75 Interview with Khadija, Islamic Studies teacher (da’iya) in Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
*ikhtilat* because the purpose of the professor’s presence in the room with the female students was to gain knowledge.

Secondly, several respondents refer to the duration of the mixing, indicating that only when the mingling takes place for a long time can it be qualified as *ikhtilat*. Hind, a *da’iya*, said:

“*Ikhtilat* is a place where men and women spend a lot of time together.”

Short encounters and transactions between women and men, then, cannot be qualified as *ikhtilat*. The idea is that *ikhtilat* should not happen, but if it is unavoidable, then only for a short time.

The third factor that was put forward was the location where the mixing takes place. Some interlocutors say that mingling in private spaces is *ikhtilat* but in public spaces it is not, because the nature of relationships in public places is of a more transitory and formal nature. Other women I spoke with specify that *ikhtilat* also includes mingling in a work environment, for example in an office or in meetings, of more than one man and one woman.

Lastly, with whom one mixes is, for some women, also a factor determining *ikhtilat*. They maintain that if a meeting takes place with different people each time rather than with the same group of persons, it does not constitute *ikhtilat*.

The factors that determine whether or not a situation is *ikhtilat* all have one thing in common: the, often unexpressed, premise that the contact with the non-*mahram* man and a woman can lead to illicit relations, *zina* (unlawful sexual intercourse) and *fitna* (chaos in society). *Fitna* here is taken to mean temptation, enchantment, discord and a temptation that comes from the outside - not within the believer that tests his or her faith (Gardet 2012). *Zina* is taken to mean adultery (sexual relations outside of marriage) and fornication (sexual relations between two unmarried persons) (Peters 2012). Several verses in the Qur’an mention it as a sin that will be punished in the hereafter.

Thus, interlocutors’ ideas pertaining to which factors determine whether or not a situation is *ikhtilat* are very much related to ideas about sexuality and illicit relations. Also *sadd al-dhara’i* or the blocking of the means is important. *Sadd al-dhara’i* requires preventing from happening actions that might in and of themselves not be forbidden (*haram*) but that could *lead to* situations that are

---

76 Interview with Hind, teacher of Islamic Studies (*da’iya*), interview in Riyadh, 27 January 2011.
77 Here, there seems to be a relationship with the two dimensions of duration and purpose.
Chapter 3

*haram.* ‘The blocking of the means’ is one of Wahhabism’s judicial pillars. Not only *ikhtilat* itself must be prevented, but also what might lead to it must be prevented. The purpose of the mixing, its duration, location, and with whom one mixes all relate to the prevention of the establishment of illicit relations.

**Defining *khilwa***

A much less contested phenomenon than *ikhtilat* is *khilwa*, a concept that is also connected to ideas about sexuality, *fitna*, and *zina*. The basic definition of *khilwa* as interlocutors identified it is a woman and a non-*mahram* man being together in a closed space. *Khilwa* literally means seclusion, isolation, in a private room and is rejected by all my interlocutors.

Nevertheless, varying opinions about it exist as to which factors determine whether a situation is *khilwa* or not. To the basic definition, some women would add ‘where no one sees you,’ so that a glass window separating the man and woman from a larger group of people would not amount to *khilwa* but a locked office door would. If, however, the door is only closed (and not locked), some would say this amounts to *khilwa* while others disagree and put forward that if the door is closed and not locked a third person can always walk into the room and therefore it does not constitute *khilwa*.

Similarly, while some interlocutors say that being in a car with a (Saudi or non-Saudi) male driver amounts to *khilwa* because the car is a closed space and they are alone with him, others say it is not a situation of *khilwa* because the car moves around in a public space. Most women will add that when a man and a woman are in *khilwa* the third presence among them is the devil - tempting the pair into illicit relations.

While disagreement exists among women whether *ikhtilat* is or is not allowed, and should or should not be a larger part of public life in Saudi Arabia, consensus exists on the rejection of *khilwa*. The criterion seems to be whether or not contact between the man and the woman can – through the situation of *khilwa* – lead to relations (*'alaqat*), *zina*, or *fitna*. It is these relations, adultery, and societal chaos that need to be prevented.

My interlocutors’ ideas as to how to ‘block the means’ (*sadd al-dhara‘i*) range from allowing women’s participation in the public domain exclusively in women-only spaces, to believing that *ikhtilat* can take place albeit only under certain circumstances so that no relations can develop between two members of the opposite sex, to expressing the desire to prevent *khilwa*. It is to prevent *khilwa* that some of my interlocutors do not invite or accept male friends on Facebook: to them, a man and a woman chatting on Facebook chat constitutes *khilwa*.
liktruniyya (electronic khilwa) and is forbidden.78

Most interlocutors indicate that the basic definition of *ikhtilat* is the mixing of more than one man and one woman in a public place such as a mall, the street, or in a hospital, and *khilwa* is a woman and a non-mahram man being together in the same space. It is important to bear in mind that in the case studies that follow, I will use this aforementioned definition of *ikhtilat*. This means that *ikhtilat* in the workplace-case involves women and men working together in an office and meetings; in the university case boys and girls studying together in the same university building; and in the hospital case women and men visiting the same hospital and male and female doctors treating men and women.

### Case studies on *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces

In what follows, I will investigate how interlocutors position themselves in the debate about *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia. I will do this by describing the positions interlocutors take vis-à-vis *ikhtilat* (against, in justification of, in preference of) in the three cases of the workplace, universities, and hospitals, and by analysing the arguments that they use.

Those interlocutors who position themselves against *ikhtilat* believe that interaction between women and men in the public space should not take place in mixed spaces but rather that women should participate in public life through women-only public spaces. Interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat*, defend and validate the practice of mixing between women and men – as we shall see for a wide variety of reasons. Finally, interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* give arguments in favour of *ikhtilat* over women-only public spaces as the way for Saudi women to participate in the country’s public space.

What these cases have in common is that they are all relatively ‘new’ instances of public spaces. All three cases are examples of public spaces that are unavoidable and inescapable and therefore they require women to relate to them. In the case of the workplace this means that either the interlocutor and/or her husband and/or her children work, and even if she doesn’t work she still must relate herself to the idea of the workplace and determine whether she is against ‘mixed’ workplaces, justifies them, or prefers them, and why.

Equally, with respect to education, interlocutors need to relate themselves to the idea of mixed universities even when they themselves have long ago left

78 Interview with Hanan, activist, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.
education; their children too are going or might go to university, and thus they need to determine where they stand vis-à-vis mixed universities.

Finally, because everyone in their lives at some point will need to go to hospital and because all hospitals are mixed, interlocutors need to relate themselves to that idea, how they deal with that situation, and how they position themselves towards mixed hospitals: against, in justification, or in preference of.

Here I use Wittrock’s concept of promissory notes, as operationalised in Chapter 1. By positioning themselves against, in justification, or in preference of *ikhtilat* in the workplace, university, and hospitals, interlocutors hold the state to its promissory note and express desires and wishes about what they deem desirable for themselves and for the community with respect to women’s participation in public life in Saudi Arabia.

This involves a process of negotiation: again in terms of Wittrock, holding the state to its promissory note is the point of departure for various proposals that leads to their realisation, as well as counter-proposals that seek to maintain other aspirations. It is these proposals and counter proposals, shining through in the arguments used by interlocutors, that inform us how interlocutors experience the case of *ikhtilat* in the workplace and how they hold the state to its promissory note of modernity.

An example of these proposals and counter-proposals is that by positioning herself against *ikhtilat* in the workplace, an interlocutor expresses a position as to how she wants the Saudi workplace to be realised, namely women working separated from men in women-only workplaces. At the same time, another interlocutor might position herself in defence of *ikhtilat* in the workplace, also expressing a view as to how she wants the Saudi workplace to be realised, namely women and men working together in the same workplace. These aspirations may or may not be realised and if they have been realised they may or may not be maintained in the future.

Aspirations may also take a public form of campaigns, such as for female salespeople in lingerie shops and for a women-only hospital, making clear more explicitly how interlocutors make known their views and demands to the government vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* and how they hold the state to its promissory note.

The issue of *ikhtilat*, then, becomes an arena of negotiation: rejecting that which does not suit the individual and the community, and accepting that which does suit the individual and the community, in terms of rejecting, justifying, and defending the practice of *ikhtilat* in various ‘new’ public spaces. As we shall see in this chapter, this is formulated in an “effort to redefine Islamic ‘authenticity’ in a
manner that is no longer apologetic before Western modernity” (Göle 2000: 96). The (gendered) public space (in casu: the three cases that I will analyse below) is the place where the negotiation of modernity takes place.

‘For women only’ offices and *ikhtilat* in the workplace

I begin with the case of *ikhtilat* in the workplace and women-only offices because it is the more general issue in the public debate in Saudi Arabia and allows me to lay out and analyse the main types of arguments that are used against, in justification, and in preference of *ikhtilat*.

The separation of the sexes into workplaces that are ‘only for women’ and where entrance is forbidden for men is a prominent feature of the Saudi labour market. Since 2004-2005, following up on recommendations of development plans since the 1990s and in a discourse of reform, the Saudi government has encouraged female employment by recommending the creation of women-only sections and the hiring of Saudi women for jobs in the public sector (Le Renard 2008: 625). Saudi women, who have become increasingly educated, are at least on the part of the government regarded as a suitable pool of labour, provided they work separately from men as required by the Labour Law of 1969.

The Labour Law forbids *ikhtilat* in places of work but at the same time regulates and legitimises the public presence of women – in women-only offices into which men are not allowed to enter. The law can be implemented because of the enormous financial resources the country has -a separate infrastructure is expensive-, and because of technological progress, enabling for example segregated meetings through telephones or CCTV systems.79

However, as became apparent through both interviews and participant observation, in practice the labour law is not enforced in all Saudi workplaces. The fact that these mixed workplaces, in the private and not the public sector, are tolerated by the government illustrates a justification or preference of *ikhtilat* in the workplace. Yet, ministries, the Chamber of Commerce, and the government-affiliated Human Rights Commission all have a women-only entrance and a women-only section (*qism li-l-nisa*) and this separation is practiced and enforced. Men and women thus work in the same building but the building is separated into

---

79 Article 160 of the 1969 Labour and Workmen Law states: ‘In no case may men and women co-mingle in places of work or in accessory facilities or other appurtenances thereto.’ The labour law was adjusted in 2005, removing the explicit prohibition on mixing. However, the new law states that the shari’a must be complied with, leaving space for different interpretations whether or not *ikhtilat* is or is not allowed in the workplace.
male and female sections with their own entrance.

Visits to both the branches and the headquarters of the Saudi-Fransi bank made clear that while this bank – as all Saudi banks – operated men-only and women-only branches, its headquarters is a mixed (mukhtalat) environment where women and men work together. When I arrived at a ladies-only branch of al-Rajhi bank, the first bank in Saudi Arabia to open women-only branches in the early 1980s, I entered a separate building: the bank operates separate branches that are only for women rather than a women’s section in a main building. I entered the bank through juxtaposed screens so that passers-by cannot look into the bank when a woman enters. Once inside, a woman can take off her abaya and hijab if she likes. The bank employees do not wear their abayas or hijabs inside the bank. Communication with male colleagues, who are of course not present in the women-only bank, takes place via telephone or email.

Al-Rajhi bank also operates a credit card called laki ("for you") especially for women. The card offers all benefits of regular credit cards with the addition of special discounts at selected retail outlets for women’s goods and services (al-Rajhi Bank). This shows that the principle of ‘only-for-women’ does not only find expression in women-only public spaces but is also turned into a symbol for marketing purposes, targeting a specific group of customers who might be interested in a credit card that comes with tailor-made offers only for women.

As opposed to the strictly women-only environment of this bank, some business women spoke of working in a women-only environment, yet cooperating with men in mixed staff meetings. Others indicated how they defied the labour law, officially providing separate offices for male and female employees but practically mixing in the office. Heba, a business woman from Jeddah told me:

“\[In my business we are mixed in my office. Officially, the women are in a separate room. Because this is what they want, the government, and if they come and check in the office I am in the legal area, not doing anything wrong. The meetings are mixed and the girls sit with the men finishing their reports. […] We sit together in the sitting area, we all sit together, sometimes have our breakfast together. It’s a small, nice, not professional meeting, but just to sit and talk, what are you going to do today. Giving the jobs, the tasks. This is mixed. Then each one goes to their office. [...] We also have mixed workshops.\]”

80 Interview with Heba, business woman, Jeddah, 24 October 2011.
Heba and other interlocutors painted to me a clear picture of how they experienced *ikhtilat*. While officially the labour law stipulates a ban on mixing in the workplace, practically the law is not always followed, nor always enforced. Towards the end of my third fieldwork period however, in October 2011, a notable change took place in the law.

Since 2008, one of my interlocutors, Reem from Jeddah, has been campaigning for Saudi female lingerie sellers in the kingdom, prompted by a negative experience with *ikhtilat* in a lingerie shop. Inspired by an uncomfortable situation with a male salesclerk in a lingerie shop in 2008 Reem set up her lingerie campaign, aiming to replace all male vendors with female ones and stimulating female employment and raising women’s financial awareness at the same time. “Gradually,” she said “the campaign evolved into something more meaningful: women’s employment. Why should all these women sit at home, do nothing, and be deprived of income?”

At the time Reem started her campaign – first on Facebook, later also through regular media – all shop assistants in Saudi lingerie shops were non-Saudi men.

In public campaigns such as this one, demanding that the state provide a legislation that enables women to shop and work in a women-only shop, in a mixed mall, women make known publicly their desideratum to the government vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*.

In June 2005, the Labour Minister had already proposed to replace the non-Saudi male shop assistants working in lingerie shops with Saudi, female shop assistants, while making these shops only accessible to female customers. The government, aiming to appease the religious establishment, presented it as a move that was to strengthen the segregation of the sexes, with female shop assistants helping women chose their lingerie, again framing themselves as being against *ikhtilat* in the workplace. Nevertheless, it was opposed by religious scholars (*‘ulama*) who viewed Saudi women working in a mixed mall as a threat to the separation between the sexes (Le Renard, 2008: 625– 6). The female shop assistants would be employed in shops that are located in mixed malls.

On 17 October 2011, the day that I interviewed Reem, she handed me the front page of the day’s newspaper, saying the Minister of Labour had ordered

---

81 Interview with Reem, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.
82 During the periods of fieldwork, all shop assistants in shops (i.e. mobile phone shops, clothes shops and also lingerie shops) were non-Saudi males. These types of jobs, just as jobs in construction or waiting tables, are generally not regarded as jobs that Saudi nationals do. Specifically, they are jobs that up until a few years ago were regarded as not suitable for Saudi women as they would threaten the separation of the sexes and would too easily bring Saudi women into contact with non- *mahram* men.
the implementation of the measure that had been proposed in 2005, giving a deadline to all stores to replace male salespeople with female sellers. Shops would be forced to implement the measure and otherwise they would be shut down and suspended from the services that the Ministry provides. Reem was optimistic about the development, even if the women would be non-Saudi female guest workers, saying that the first move was to change males for females and that “the Saudi thing”\textsuperscript{83} would follow.

This example shows how certain types of arguments can be used both to support a position in preference of ikhtilat as well as against ikhtilat in a certain place. In this case the argument to strengthen segregation in lingerie shops in malls was used to argue both in preference of and against the employment of Saudi female lingerie shop assistants. On the one hand, this would lead to a further strengthening of segregation, with female shop assistants helping women choose their lingerie. Simultaneously however, this development would undermine segregation as these female shop assistants would be employed in shops that are located in mixed malls.

Another workplace where only non-Saudi males are employed are coffee shops. The Starbucks next to the al-Khozama hotel on ‘Ulaya Street in Faysaliyya, Riyadh, only employed non-Saudi male baristas at the time of fieldwork. The coffee shop has a bachelors’ section, where only men are allowed to enter, and that has glass, see-through windows. The coffee shop also has a family-section, where only families and women are allowed to enter. The family section has no see-through windows. Groups of women also sit in the family section and keep on their abayas and hijabs. Each section has a serving counter. A little hallway connects the two sides, allowing the non-Saudi male baristas to easily move between the two sides and serve the customers in each section.\textsuperscript{84}

In Jeddah, a business woman opened Sara’s Corner Ladies Café on Batarji Street. Sara’s Corner is a women-only coffee shop. Its windows are blinded, allowing customers to look out while preventing passers-by from looking in. As with the women-only banks, one enters the shop through juxtaposed screens, so that passers-by cannot look into the coffee shop when a customer opens the door to enter or leave the shop. Sara’s Corner is only for women and as such does not have a bachelor’s or family section. Once inside, the female customers are served by an all-female non-Saudi staff and women take off their hijabs and

\textsuperscript{83} Interview with Reem, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.

\textsuperscript{84} Visit to Starbucks, ‘Ulaya Street, Faisaliyya, Riyadh, 17 January 2011.
sometimes also abayas.\textsuperscript{85}

\textbf{Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis ‘for women only’ offices and \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace}

In 35 of the 45 interviews, interlocutors discussed \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace with me. A minority of 7 interlocutors (7 da’iyat, no business women, and no activists) believed that \textit{ikhtilat} is unacceptable. They were against \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace. A majority of 22 interlocutors (5 da’iyat, 9 business women, and 8 activists) justified the practice of \textit{ikhtilat}. A (small) third group of 6 interlocutors (no da’iyat, 3 business women, and 3 activists) preferred \textit{ikhtilat}, and some of those actively promoted it. Let us now take a closer look at the arguments interlocutors use when positioning themselves against, in justification of, and in preference of \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace.

\textbf{Against \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace}

The argument against \textit{ikhtilat} in the workplace that I heard most commonly was that separation between women and men is better because it prevents the possibility of contact between the sexes, which could lead to ‘relations.’ Samia, a da’iya from Jeddah said:

\begin{quote}
“I always tell the girls, what if a man has a female secretary at work. The secretary, he sees her every day. And how does he see her? She looks beautiful, she talks nice, and when they talk, they choose nice words. Her movements and her words are deliberate. And then the man goes home, and he sees his wife. How does he see her? When she gets up out of bed, with her hair all messy, he sees her in the kitchen, in the bathroom... In all her shapes.”\textsuperscript{86}
\end{quote}

Samia, who teaches Islamic Studies at a school in Jeddah, says that this type of situation might lead to temptations between the man and the woman in the office, extra-marital affairs, and eventually the possibility of children born out of wedlock and the breakdown of the family. This should be avoided, and therefore \textit{ikhtilat} should be avoided. Here, the underlying principle is that of \textit{sadd al-dhara’i} or the blocking of the means. What one interlocutor might see as a possibility for such relations to occur – for example by women and men working together – is

\textsuperscript{85} Visit to Sara’s Corner Ladies Café, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.

\textsuperscript{86} Interview with Samia, da’iya, Jeddah, 22 October 2011.
not necessarily seen as such by another.

Secondly and just as common as the previous argument, interlocutors used the argument that *ikhtilat* is not a necessity (*darura*). The state of *darura* is:

“(...) used to denote what may be called the technical state of necessity, and a wider sense (...) to describe the necessities or demands of social and economic life (...)” (Linant de Bellefonds 2012).

*Darura* is a state of necessity that allows one to omit something that is required, or commit something that is not allowed in Islam. This means that if the necessities of social or economic life demand it, one may do something that under other circumstances would not be allowed. As there are women-only workplaces in Saudi Arabia, these interlocutors argue, there is an absence of *darura*: there is no need for a Saudi woman to work with a man as she can also participate in the labour market separate from men and develop herself professionally in a women-only environment.

Thirdly, my interlocutors often used the argument that women-only workplaces are more relaxing for women and therefore better for them. In women-only spaces women are not surrounded by ‘strange men’ who are not related to them and therefore they can take off their abaya and hijab. In Saudi Arabia, all women, Saudi as well as non-Saudi, are required to don the all-covering abaya and cover their hair when moving around in a mixed public space. This dress code is enforced by the religious police. When moving around in a women-only space, women can take off their abayas and head covering, which is labelled as ‘more relaxing.’

Most women say the abaya is ‘not from the religion’ but from ‘traditions and customs’ (*adat wa taqalid*), and that the hijab is ‘from Islam.’ So on the one hand there is a state-enforced view of what women in Saudi Arabia should look like – namely wearing the abaya and at least also the hijab – while on the other hand women themselves reproduce this state-enforced view in mixed and non-mixed public spaces by mostly not contesting the abaya or hijab. Here, the ‘more relaxing’ argument is used to express the idea that women-only public spaces are better for women.

A fourth, and interestingly two-sided, argument was based on ideas about masculinity, femininity, and the complementarity of men and women. Hanadi, a *da’iya*, said that by working and performing well a woman might put a man in her shadow:
“It is possible that she works. But with the partition. If all the women in the society work that would be a real problem because the woman, she grows, and then she puts the man in her shadow. So if you [referring to the female] go out, who remains at home? She is the mother. So we have to beware that she doesn’t become tired. I saw on YouTube a woman in a conference, and she was sleeping. She was tired! A woman is not like a man.”

Interestingly, by saying this, Hanadi, who along with her activities as a da’iya works as a teacher in a local primary school, does not doubt the competency of the woman at her job but says that she might be so good at it that she outperforms the man. She should therefore not work with men, because in that ‘competition’ or ‘comparison’ the man might lose, which might hurt his manliness: men are not used to women outperforming them.

It seems as though Hanadi turns the gender norms upside down: the man will feel tainted in his manliness and become the weaker party, while the woman who does better at the job than he experiences no negative emotions because of that, and becomes the stronger party.

At the same time she implies that all this does not conform to prevailing gender roles and ideas about the nature of women, and that it should be avoided: “we have to beware that she doesn’t become tired” Hanadi continues, positioning the woman as weak and turning back the previous flip in gender roles, because “if you [f] go out, who remains at home [to perform the domestic duties]? She is the mother.”

Here, Hanadi constructs her perception of gender roles as the complementarity of men and women, each having their own role suiting their nature, with men taking care of the family’s finances by going out to work and the woman taking care of the domestic tasks and motherhood. Later on in the interview Hanadi refers to the principle of qawama, which makes the husband responsible for the family income and the wife for domestic duties, reconfirming the prevailing gender roles by articulating the idea that even if they work, women are the ones who are responsible for the housekeeping. So Hanadi in fact uses two ambiguous arguments

---

87 Interview with Hanadi, da’iya, Riyad, 3 October 2011.
88 Qur’an 4:34 states: “men are the protectors and maintainers of women because Allah has given one more than the other and because they support them from their own means.” “Men have qawama (guardianship and authority) over women because of the advantage they (men) have over them (women) and because they (men) spend their property in supporting them (women).” Many of my interlocutors mentioned this verse to support their opinion that men should financially support women while she is responsible for the domestic sphere.
to support her position against *ikhtilat*, both related to the complementarity of men and women and ideas about gender roles in Saudi Arabia.

Another argument that is used against working in a mixed environment is that this is not only better for women but also safer for women. *Da‘iya* Maysa said:

“For me it’s a conscious choice to work in a non-*ikhtilat* environment. In my opinion it is much safer and much easier to work without men. *ikhtilat* would cause a lot of problems, such as rape. In countries where men and women work together there is a high percentage of rapes. The UN documents show that the percentage of rape are higher in countries that have mixed environments.”

In a women-only work environment there is no risk of men harassing women. This thought is grounded in ideas about gender and sexuality: wherever they get together, there is the possibility of men approaching women, making them feel uncomfortable or even harassing them. At the same time, it frames the man as the (strong) actor and the woman the (weak) recipient of this unwanted male attention, reaffirming prevailing gender roles.

Lastly, some interlocutors used arguments to support their position against *ikhtilat* in the workplace that are grounded in ideas about what is regarded as acceptable to Saudi society. They argue against *ikhtilat* in the workplace by saying that it is a phenomenon that Saudi society should not be exposed to, for Saudi Arabia is conservative by nature. *Da‘iya* Dr ‘Abir said:

“The bank especially for women [*bank nisa‘i mustaqill*] is right next to the bank for the men. If the employees want anything, they use the phone. That’s the *ikhtilat* we have. We are conservative.”

Here, as was explained before, it is technology (CCTV, phone, fax) that facilitates these women-only public spaces. Dr ‘Abir here positions herself as being ok with the type of *ikhtilat* that does not involve physical contact, such as talking over the phone. Other interlocutors also say that the lack of *ikhtilat* and the existence of

---


90 An activist, Fayza from Riyadh who I interviewed on 2 October 2011, recounted how at one point she and some other women developed the groundwork for an organisation called Sexual Harassment in the Workforce. She related how in the end the women were afraid from the possible backlash from religious groups, fearing that they would say “see, we told you you would get sexual harassment from *ikhtilat* in the workforce.” Therefore, the organisation never took off.

women-only offices and factories is the way things should be organised in Saudi Arabia, as it is a conservative society.

The type of argument Dr ‘Abir uses informs us about what interlocutors think the nature of Saudi society is and whether or not ikhtilat suits that nature. Examples of ikhtilat before the oil boom can be found in Saudi Arabia’s history, and while interlocutors sometimes refer to “the 70s” as a period in which ikhtilat was practiced in Saudi Arabia, other interlocutors frame ikhtilat as a phenomenon and practice that is alien to Saudi Arabia and its history, and does not suit the country’s contemporary character. At the same time, women-only public spaces are framed as something that makes Saudi Arabia special. This informs us about how respondents look at the national identity of Saudi Arabia with respect to ikhtilat and women-only public spaces, and in which direction they believe their country should develop itself.

**Justifying ikhtilat in the workplace**

Now let us move on to examine the types of arguments used by those interlocutors who justify the practice of ikhtilat in the workplace. The argument most commonly used to justify ikhtilat was related to darura. Above I have noted that the absence of darura is invoked against ikhtilat. It is therefore interesting to see that interlocutors such as business woman Sara referred to the principle of darura to justify their practicing ikhtilat.

Sara said: “It is darura, at work I have to be able to mix with men to be able to do my job.” Sara needs to connect, talk, and deal with men to be able to run her women-only coffee shop, Sara’s Corner. Rather than seeing the principle of darura as impeding her activities she uses it as an “enabler” to carry out her work, drawing on it to give the activities that she has to undertake in order to run her business an Islamic legitimisation.

Other interlocutors argue that it is better to have separate workplaces for women, but if there has to be ikhtilat, if there is no other way to get the job done, then it is darura and thus allowed in Islam. This ikhtilat must have a purpose (hadaf), not just ikhtilat for the sake of mixing between women and men in and of itself.

Others draw on other Islamic principles to justify ikhtilat in the workplace. Heba, one of Saudi Arabia’s most successful business women, said:

“We are working in a working environment and it is understood that

---

92 Interview with Sara, business woman, Jeddah, 20 Otober 2011.
there are limits, you don’t jump your boundary, the woman with the man. The boundary for me is strictly business. You just talk about your job, your work, what you need from him, what he needs from you, not too soft, because anybody can understand the softness in the way they like, it depends on the person of course. And also from the man it’s the same thing. He should not be too forward, no soft words, because this will make her a little bit shy. So there is this boundary and this strict thing... and the women usually do that from the beginning.”

Talking from her own experience, Heba explains that the limits lie in keeping the relationship strictly business. This limit has to be respected by the woman and the man, in the way they dress (modestly - *muhtashim*), talk (strictly business/official - *rasmi*), how they behave towards each other (with respect – *bi ihtiram*), and that the aim (*hadaf*) of the meeting is not friendship but work.

Other interlocutors refer to Islamic history and the prophet Muhammad’s way of dealing with women to justify *ikhtilat* in the workplace, saying that:

“The prophet himself was in *ikhtilat*, he used to meet with women when they had questions. There are a lot of narrations of the companions of the prophet and they were also women he knew and interacted with.”

Muhammad himself, it is argued, talked with, sought advice from, and met with women, so why would this then not be allowed on the present-day work floor? These references to Islamic history, are used to justify the practice of *ikhtilat* in the workplace in present-day Saudi Arabia.

From a practical perspective, interlocutors say that not mixing in the workplace is neither feasible nor sustainable. It is for example impossible to run a factory on one gender, one activist said. Some professions, for example in the maintenance field, are simply not practiced by women in Saudi Arabia. When I stayed at the Luthan Hotel & Spa in Riyadh, the only women-only hotel in the country, my explicit permission was asked by the non-Saudi female receptionist for the non-Saudi maintenance men to pass through the lobby where I was sitting

---

93 Interview with Heba, business woman, Jeddah, 24 October 2011.
94 Interview with Lina, business woman, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
95 I stayed at the Luthan hotel 2-3 November 2011. For more information, see www.luthanhotel-spa.com. Website accessed 1 November 2011.
– without my *abaya* and *hijab* as it was a women-only space – checking my email.\(^6\)

Nihal, a business woman in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia, told me that she is starting up a new business and would like her shop to be a mixed shop in a mixed mall:

> “We want men to be able to come to our shop as well. A man might want to buy for his wife, for his daughter, and they need to be able to come.”\(^7\)

With this pragmatic, business economics argument that relates to the experience that families go to the mall together and want to be able to enter a shop together, without the man having to wait outside for his female relative, Nihal justifies her desire to open a shop in a mixed mall rather than for example on the women-only floor of a mall.

Another business woman in the Eastern province, Su’ad, found that it is much easier to arrange one’s affairs in a mixed environment. She said: “I always go into the male branch because it’s just easier to get things done.”\(^8\) She justifies her defying the restriction on *ikhtilat* in this location by her pragmatic statement that the male clerks in the male branch at least have the responsibility and the mandate to make decisions and help you, speeding up the process. In a women-only office, the female employees often do not have such a mandate.

Lastly, I also came across arguments that are linked to ideas about the national identity of Saudi Arabia. As already became clear in the historical overview, the Saudi state portrays itself as a ‘modern’ state that embraces progress in an Islamic way - especially with respect to the public participation of women - while holding on to its status at the keeper of the two holy places and the leader of the Muslim world. Many of my interlocutors engaged in this discourse when saying that “king Abdallah is ‘with’ women.” As Nesreen, a business woman from Riyadh, put it:

> “I think a woman can work in a supermarket, she can work in any place. But the society doesn’t think that. The Ministry of Labour decided ok, the girl can work in the supermarket as cashier. So the state says ok. The girl says ok. But the society... not all of society, but

---

\(^6\) At Princess Nora bint Abdul Rahman University in Riyadh the architects thought of a solution to this practical problem. This campus has been designed such that maintenance can be done, by men, underground.

\(^7\) Interview with Nihal, business woman, in Khobar, 1 November 2011.

\(^8\) Interview with Su’ad, business woman, Dammam, 3 November 2011.
part of society, says no.”

Nesreen herself justifies *ikhtilat* in the workplace, as it also happens in her business, and reasons that if the state gives off signals that it is permissible and the woman finds it acceptable, then why would she not practice it in her business? At the same time, the premise in what she says is that both the government and the woman herself are more developed than society at large.

Ayla, a *da'iya* from Riyadh, also engaged in this notion of the nature of the Saudi nation, pointing out that when going back in history – i.e. 1960s Riyadh – women used to be salespeople in the street:

“Here, a long time ago, women were the ones selling! My Mum, when she was young (...) it was all women selling, all women. So why is it such a big deal, it’s not a new thing.”

When even in ‘the old days’ women were salespeople, Ayla argues, it is strange that nowadays salespeople need to be men. She says that one would expect ‘progress’ from ‘then’ to ‘now,’ that in reality this is not the case, and that not having female salespeople nowadays while Saudi Arabia did have them before is being behind on times past. By trying to establish continuity with a (real or invented) historical past, Ayla includes saleswomen in the modern.

**In preference of *ikhtilat* in the workplace**

A third group of interlocutors argued in favour of *ikhtilat* in the workplace. Their main argument was that in a women-only environment there is not much room for upward mobility on the career ladder: if a woman wants to move upward she has to work with men. Management teams often include men – positions which are unattainable if one chooses not to work with men or if one is not allowed to work with non-related (non-*mahram*) men. In this view, women are held back in women-only workplaces while men smoothly move up the career ladder. As Reem, an activist, put it:

“The real operations are carried out in the other branch [where all the men work]. The decision-making is imposed by the male upper management. In a female-only branch you hit the glass ceiling pretty

---

99 Interview with Nesreen, business woman, Riyadh, 21 January 2011.
100 Interview with Ayla, *da'iya* and chiropractor, Riyadh, 25 January 2011.
fast. So I think this is not sustainable and short-lived. Women with ambition who have worked in a women-only environment and are high up there aspire to go to the mixed HQ because that’s where the decisions are made. If you are happy with your job and your goal is only to get a salary then there is nothing wrong with that, as long as it is your choice. Career by choice. You cannot force all women to seek promotions, in any economy. We can only educate, raise awareness, but then the choice is yours.”

At the same time, some activists such as Rawan explained that while they believed that women-only public spaces in and of themselves are not a good development, women-only public spaces also offer women a choice where to participate:

“I think segregation between men and women does not help women. I think it can only help women in a transitional case. As a transitional phase in Saudi Arabia it is good. For example for businesses, women would otherwise maybe not work because they are not raised in that way and don’t know how to behave. But in the long term I think it is detrimental to women’s rights.”

Not having these women-only spaces would exclude certain women from public life. As such, these activists say, the currently existing women-only workplaces can be good for a transitional period – but in the long run they harm the improvement of the position of women. There are several more activists such as Rawan who say that there should be more women-only spaces in Saudi Arabia, for the same reason, but that they should be broken down once people are used to women being in the public space.

Secondly, it was argued that segregation in the workforce is an impediment to Saudi Arabia’s progress as a nation. Muluk, who is an activist from Jeddah said: “It is detrimental to our progress as a society that children get separated in the homes and that men and women are separated in the workforce.” She argues that society has to be educated, that awareness needs to be raised, and that this separation between women and men is detrimental to the progress of Saudi Arabia as a nation and as a country.

---

101 Interview with Reem, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.
102 Interview with Rawan, activist, Riyadh, 5 November 2011.
103 Interview with Muluk, activist, Jeddah, 17 October 2011.
Conclusion
In short, the picture with respect to the arguments that are used to support positions against, in justification, and in preference of *ikhtilat* in the workplace looks as follows. Interlocutors who are against *ikhtilat* argue that ‘relations’ between men and women as well as sexual harassment of women must be prevented. Here, the principle of *sadd al-dhara‘i‘* resonates. In addition, there is no *darura*. Also, it is more relaxing for women not to work with men. Furthermore, *ikhtilat* goes against the prevailing gender roles and the complementarity of men and women. Women-only public spaces, moreover, are safer for women. Finally, interlocutors argue, Saudi Arabia is a conservative country that should not be exposed to *ikhtilat*.

Those interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat* in the workplace do so as follows. They too invoke *darura*. They also argue that there are boundaries and limits that are respected. In addition, they refer to Islamic history to show that in present-day Saudi Arabia *ikhtilat* was also practiced. Besides, they use pragmatic arguments to justify *ikhtilat*. Finally, *ikhtilat* is presented as part of Saudi Arabia’s national identity.

Interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* at work say that it supports the upward career mobility of women. They also further the argument that while as a matter of principle they prefer *ikhtilat*, but pragmatically women-only public spaces should also exist in the kingdom so that women have the choice.

Several arguments that we came across in the workplace-case we will not encounter again in the next two cases. They are unique to the work case. In reference to the workplace, it makes sense to refer to women’s upward mobility when arguing in preference of *ikhtilat* in the workplace, as it is a circumstance typically related to the workplace: of breaking through the glass ceiling that automatically comes with women-only workplaces, as I have explained. The principle of *qawama* was also only appealed to in the workplace-case to support one’s position against *ikhtilat* in the workplace. This can be explained by the fact that these interlocutors believe that it is the task of the man to take care of the family income – and thus work outside the house - and the woman of the domestic duties – and thus work inside the house.

‘For women only’ universities and *ikhtilat* at university

The university-case is different from the workplace-case in that we are dealing with possible *ikhtilat* among students, who are generally speaking (much)
younger in age and seen as more immature than professionals in the workplace. One would therefore expect it to be a more sensitive issue than ikhtilat in the workplace. Furthermore, it is not a case that is contested in practice: all but one university in the kingdom are segregated. Yet, the fact that with the exception of KAUST there are only women-only universities in the kingdom does not mean that the phenomenon of ikhtilat at university goes uncontested in interlocutors’ discourses. In Kuwait, on the other hand, as we shall see in Chapter 5, all but one university are mixed. This too is contested in discourses.

Up to 2009, all universities in Saudi Arabia were women-only or men-only.\textsuperscript{104} As we however have seen in Chapter 2, this is connected to the state’s strategy to enable girls’ education and therewith a justification/preference of that and against ikhtilat at university. Outside the kingdom, in popular study-destinations like the UK, the USA, and Australia,\textsuperscript{105} there are of course plenty of opportunities for Saudi youngsters to study at mixed universities.

Since February 2009 however, at one university in Saudi Arabia ikhtilat is permitted and practiced: the King ‘Abdallah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) in Jeddah. KAUST was built and supported by Saudi Aramco\textsuperscript{106} and supported by the king, who opened the university in September 2009. The king’s support for KAUST is a case of preference of ikhtilat at university. Located in Thuwal, 100 kilometres north of Jeddah, this mixed university offers only graduate degree programmes. This means that at undergraduate level it is still impossible for young women and men to study in a mixed environment in the kingdom. At KAUST, men and women are not obliged to wear abayas and thobs and except for the swimming pool mingle freely on campus and in laboratories and classrooms. The majority of students are not Saudi nationals.

When it opened, due to its ‘mixed’ nature, KAUST was a much-debated development.\textsuperscript{107} In this debate, liberal-minded Saudi citizens referred to the king as an advocate of modernisation and portrayed “the conservatives as ‘reactionaries’ who oppose reform, progress, science, modernity and the development of knowledge ‘which should be enjoyed by both sexes’” (Meijer 2010: 267).

\textsuperscript{104} For an insight into how and why the education system in Saudi Arabia evolved in this way, see Chapter 2.

\textsuperscript{105} The Saudi government initiated the King ‘Abdallah scholarship programme in 2005. Through the programme well over 140,000 students have studied abroad. About 20% of scholarship recipients are women. Half of all students study in the USA.

\textsuperscript{106} The Saudi Arabian Oil Company is the Saudi Arabian national petroleum and natural gas company based in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia

\textsuperscript{107} For a detailed overview of the debate about ikhtilat that ensued after the opening of KAUST see Meijer 2010.
Conservatives, in their turn, looked at liberals as people who believe the loss of religion and moral degeneration are the basis of progress. They claimed that applying ‘Western’ industries in Saudi Arabia would mean that the West’s ideas and values too will influence Saudi society. Only the application of shari’a can, in their view, block corruption and prevent that what is forbidden (Meijer 2010: 9).

Interestingly, the conservatives, too, appeal to the king – only they do this to criticise KAUST. They say that the liberals want to Westernise Islam and replace it with a modern, moderate version, which they call an American Islam, and they denounce KAUST as a development that will lead to the degeneration of Islam and its morals and values (Meijer 2010: 9-10).

The religious establishment was divided on the issue of KAUST. Six months after KAUST’s opening, the director of the Mecca office of the religious police, Ahmad bin Qasim al-Ghamdi, gave an interview saying that “there was nothing in Islam that prevents women and men from mixing in public places like offices and schools” (Gause 2010). Ahmad bin Baz, the son of former Grand Mufti sheikh ‘Abd al-‘Aziz bin Baz, also publicly stated that there is a legitimate basis in Islamic law for a more lenient position on ikhtilat (Gause 2010). At the same time, Sa’d al-Shithri, member of the Council of Senior Ulama, stated in a television interview that mixed gender universities give room for corruption and that ikhtilat is a “massive evil” (Meijer 2010: 14). King ‘Abdallah relieved al-Shithri from his position, which led to much protest by the religious establishment.

So far, KAUST remains an exception to the rule of men-only and women-only universities and not a catalyst for more schools and universities like it. Bearing in mind that the Saudi government walks a tightrope trying to balance the different streams in Saudi society, KAUST could be interpreted as a symbolic gesture to please the liberals.

This debate about KAUST upon its opening is the background against which I asked my interlocutors about their views vis-à-vis ikhtilat at university. Because there had been such a vehement debate about KAUST after it had opened, I expected it to be important in interviews. But while many of my interlocutors talked about ikhtilat at university, KAUST rarely came up in interviews: it is a self-contained ‘oasis’ with little or no direct relation to society at large since the majority of students are non-Saudi. KAUST, simply, is not part of the mainstream. Nevertheless, my interlocutors did have opinions about the general topic of ikhtilat in university education.

---

108 For more information see Chapter 2.
Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis ‘for women only’ universities and *ikhtilat* at university

In 32 of the 45 interviews, interlocutors discussed university education with me. As with the *ikhtilat* in the workplace-case, three positions can be discerned: against, in justification of, and in preference of *ikhtilat* at university. A minority of eight interlocutors (five da’iyyat, one business woman, and two activists) expressed the view that *ikhtilat* should be forbidden at universities. A large majority of nineteen interlocutors (five da’iyyat, six business women, and eight activists) justified *ikhtilat* at university. A small minority of five interlocutors (no da’iyyat, four business women, and one activist) would prefer *ikhtilat* at university. It is interesting to note here that in the *ikhtilat* at work case, too, a minority of respondents positions themselves against, a majority in justification of, and a minority in preference of *ikhtilat* at work.

**Against *ikhtilat* at university**

As was also the case in the workplace case, the argument that I heard most commonly was a negative one, namely that there is no *darura*. With respect to university education in order to gain an education, young women can get plenty of opportunities in women-only universities and complete their education there. As Nur, a teacher at a girls’ primary school said: “You can develop the capacity (*qudra*) of the girls and their way of thinking without *ikhtilat*.”

In short, when *ikhtilat* is not strictly a necessity (*darura*) for the attainment of the degree, it should be avoided.

The second main argument against *ikhtilat* at university is related to the way in which interlocutors believe Saudi Arabia should develop. Jamila, a business woman, referred to neighbouring Arab countries and the USA:

> “Even in Syria, in Lebanon, in Jordan, in the countries that are more open than Saudi Arabia] there are schools for girls and schools for boys. Even in America.”

Separation between boys and girls is posited here as something good; if ‘more open’ Arab countries and even the USA have single-sex universities, of

---

109 Interview with Nur, da’iya, Jeddah, 19 October 2011.

110 Jamila used the phrase ‘more open’ in the expression of “bi-d-duwal yilli mutafattihin aktar.” The word *mutafattihin* in the way Jamila uses it here does not have, contrary to what might be expected of the word, a positive but rather a negative connotation. The connotation she means is that of these countries being morally ‘permissive.’

111 Interview with Jamila, business woman. Interview in Riyadh, 14 January 2011.
which interlocutors know it is outside of Saudi Arabia perceived as something conservative, then surely it is good for a more closed society such as Saudi Arabia.

In addition to this, some interlocutors say that “even in the US they are now thinking of separating [...] universities because they find that mixed environments are causing problems. So we shouldn’t be doing what others have found not right.” If ‘even’ Americans don’t want to mix anymore in university, why should ‘we’ in Saudi Arabia want that – especially if it leads to improper relations between the sexes and pregnancies out of wedlock, interlocutors wonder.

Umm Muhammad, an activist who is against *ikhtilat* at university, referred to the character of Jeddah as a city to explain the practice of *ikhtilat* at KAUST, located close to Jeddah:

“It [KAUST] is in Jeddah, and there are a lot of foreigners there [...]. And maybe that’s why there is [...] *ikhtilat* there.”

She says that the Saudi women who study at KAUST wear abaya and hijab, and thus conform to the Saudi dress rules for women when non-related women and men interact in the public space. In reality, students at KAUST are not obliged to wear the abaya and hijab. At the same time, this quote informs us that she sees Jeddah’s attracting a lot of non-Saudis as an explanatory factor for the presence of KAUST in that location. KAUST is located close to Jeddah and not elsewhere in the country because of the more open character of the city. Here, *ikhtilat* is framed as incompatible with modern Saudi Arabia, while women-only universities are positioned as suitable to the nation.

Another argument that I heard often against *ikhtilat* at university was that mixed education can lead to relations between boys and girls before marriage and should therefore be forbidden: “There are a lot of pregnancies outside of marriage in the US. So why should we do the wrong thing?” The wrong thing here being mixed universities, creating the opportunity for extra-marital relations, the risk of having children out of wedlock, and moral decay. A *da’iya*, Daliya, said:

“You have *ikhtilat* [in the Netherlands] right? A lot of boys and girls have sexual relations. But we, we oppose that, completely. It is about the protection of the girl [h*imayat al-bint*]. I am at ease if she

---

113 Interview with Umm Muhammad, activist, Riyadh, 4 October 2011.
is without boys. If she is with boys [...] her morals will change. That’s not good."^{115}

Universities, therefore, have to be segregated, otherwise girls won’t study. As Maysa, a da’iya, put it: “Because the universities are separate so the girls go to university, otherwise they wouldn’t go to university.”^{116} The girls will not study because either they do not want to mix with male students, or because their male guardian would not allow them to mix with their male counterparts.

At the same time, and also connected to ideas about male and female behaviour, some interlocutors argue that women have their own specialness (khususiyya) that requires them to cover when they are surrounded by boys. Women-only universities, they argue, allow girls to take off their hijab, niqab or burqa, and abaya, facilitating a more relaxed study environment for the girls.

**Justifying ikhtilat at university**

Interestingly, just as interlocutors who were against *ikhtilat* at university, those who justify *ikhtilat* at university claim that this is because of the presence of *darura* (necessity). In this vein, Ayla, a da’iya, said that in principle mixing is not a necessity (*darura*) at university, but that nonetheless at KAUST it is permissible. She was talking about KAUST when she said:

“We were living fine without it [*ikhtilat*], a woman can get her Masters and PhD without sitting next to a man. I don’t think of it as a necessity [*darura*] but I don’t think it is wrong-wrong for adults.”^{117}

While Ayla says that she believes that there is no *darura* for mixed university education, she justifies the practice of *ikhtilat* at KAUST based on the age and maturity of the students who attend it.

Secondly, it is thought that if this type of *ikhtilat* is going to ‘benefit’ society - only leading to gain knowledge and not to dating and more – it can be justified. The underlying principle here is that of *maslaha*, denoting ‘welfare’ and used by jurists to mean ‘general good’ or ‘public interest.’ Anything that helps further this is equated with *maslaha* (Khadduri 2015). This argument is new; we have not come across it in the *ikhtilat* at work-case by women (the state on the contrary did

---

^{115} Interview with Daliya, *da’iya*, Jeddah, 19 October 2011.
invoke it in its discourse as the participation of women in the labour market aids the economy, see Chapter 2). Jihan, a da’iyya, said:

“In the university, we were mixing with our male doctor [professor]. Face to face. It was him and 300 female students. It [was permissible] because I need his knowledge.”

Jihan believes that if ikhtilat at university benefits society, she would find ikhtilat at university acceptable. She considers the case of a female student taking knowledge from a male professor as such.

In another interview, talking about a similar situation, activist Najla added to this that the ikhtilat should take place within the rules and moral checks of the shari’a (al-dawabit al-shariyya). For her, this means that a male professor can teach her daughter while standing in front of the class, but that she is “against a male fellow student sitting next to her.” The moral check, here, is in the physical proximity and the age of the man her daughter interacts with. Other respondents put this ‘moral check’ at the women sitting on one side and the men sitting on the other side of the lecture room. Here too the limit for mixing is the extent of physical proximity: ikhtilat is fine as long as women and men don’t sit too close to each other.

Thirdly, often the character of Saudi Arabia was referred to, and the (in) compatibility of ikhtilat with the nature of Saudi Arabia to justify ikhtilat at university. ‘Umniya, a young activist, argued for the availability of choice: “Some people like to only be with women. Others like to mix. So it is normal to have these two options, these two kinds.” So while KAUST goes against the regular way of organising university education, ‘Umniya does see it as compatible with Saudi Arabia and with what she believes its identity should be: one of a choice between gender segregated and mixed universities. She frames both types of education as part of modern Saudi Arabia.

Fourthly and lastly, interlocutors used arguments based on ideas about the complementarity of men and women to justify ikhtilat. Interlocutors often said that development (tatawwur) can only take place in a mixed environment as men and women need to learn from each other and their way of thinking. The nature of women and men is seen as different, and they complement each other by

---

118 Interview with Jihan, da’iyya, Jeddah, 23 October 2011.
119 Interview with Najla, business woman, Riyadh, 18 January 2011.
120 Interview with Nihal, business woman, Khobar, 1 November 2011.
121 Interview with ‘Umniya, activist, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
learning from each other and by using the ‘natural differences’ between women and men to the benefit of Saudi Arabia. In that way, the country develops. This too is an argument we have not come across in the *ikhtilat* at work case.

With respect to mixing in secondary schools, most of my interlocutors believe that this should be prevented due to the changing physicality of boys and girls, their different interests, and the risk of teenage pregnancies. Nevertheless, they justify *ikhtilat* at university as for example Lubna, a *da'iya*, did:

“*It is good to separate them in school. Their bodies change [...]. And the boys want to play with cars, the girls with dolls and cooking. [...]. But at university, I think it is fine. They are old enough. And if there is a problem it is not a problem with all but with the individual.*”

Young men and women of university-age are mature enough to deal with a mixed environment. Young men and women should get used to *ikhtilat* because in society there is *ikhtilat* and because there is an equilibrium between young men and women. Here too, ideas about men and women as both opposite in nature and complementary, resonate. At the same time, while *ikhtilat* at schools is not seen as a part of Saudi Arabia, *ikhtilat* at university is framed as such.

**In preference of *ikhtilat* at university**

Interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* referred to the principle of gender equality to support their position. This is an argument we have not come across in the *ikhtilat* at work case. For example Yasmin, a business woman, appealed to this principle to support her point of view when she said:

“*I would have liked to have studied mixed with boys. When men and women are together there is equilibrium, something that men have and women don’t and the other way around. [...]. Because I’m a woman that doesn’t mean that I am less than a man. It’s also about being confident. You have nothing to be ashamed of. You have the same right to be there as a man.*”

Yasmin studied at Dar al-Hikma, one of the women-only colleges in Jeddah. Yet, she would have preferred to study together with her male counterparts. She

---

123 Interview with Yasmin, business woman, Jeddah, 20 June 2010.
argues not only that they would have learned from each other, but also that both men and women have a right to that experience. Being in a mixed educational environment helps a woman to gain and grow a sense of confidence when being around men. Based on the principle of gender equality and appealing to her own experience, Yasmin sees women-only university education as incompatible with Saudi Arabia, while framing *ikhtilat* at university as part of it.

Secondly, *ikhtilat* was framed as a process of catching up. Na’ima, an activist interlocutor, referred to the development of mixed university education in the USA:

> “Now, people blame us that we are not on par with the rest of the world, while the rest of the world started a long time before us. Just three decades ago, Harvard didn’t have men and women studying together. Princeton didn’t have women at all. [...] Now it is our responsibility to make things happen faster. But it has to be accepted by everybody.”

The way in which Na’ima talks about the introduction of mixed education is that she thinks that in Saudi Arabia it has to happen too – but at a pace that is acceptable to everyone and that suits the nature of Saudi society and protects the country’s identity. Na’ima’s reference to the USA also shows us the cultural power of the USA, framing Saudi Arabia’s situation with respect to mixed education in light of the USA’s trajectory in that field. So referring to her vision of what the future of university education should be like, Na’ima frames *ikhtilat* as a part of modern Saudi Arabia.

**Conclusion**

Just as in the workplace case, those who oppose *ikhtilat* at university argued that there is an absence of *darura*. Interlocutors also appeal to the character of Saudi Arabia as a nation and how it should develop; *ikhtilat* in this case is not regarded as part of that. Another argument against it is the risk of improper relations developing. Furthermore, women have a specialness (*khususiyya*), and they believe that *ikhtilat* goes against that. Those women who opposed *ikhtilat* at university, unlike those interlocutors who argue against *ikhtilat* in the workplace, did not use arguments such as ‘society refuses it’ or ‘we are conservative like that’. Nevertheless, they did invoke conservatism as an explanation for segregation.

---

124 Interview with Na’ima activist, Dhahran, 12 November 2011.
Others, in justifying *ikhtilat*, also invoke *darura*. A new argument that we come across here is the appeal to *maslaha*: *ikhtilat* benefits society. Interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat* also say it is compatible with the character and nature of Saudi Arabia. A last, also new, argument is that the complementarity of women and men justifies *ikhtilat* at university, and that development can only take place through that complementarity of men and women with men and women learning from each other.

Interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* at university say it is a matter of gender equality. Whereas in the workplace-case Islamic history was appealed to, interlocutors who prefer ikhtilat at university do not invoke Islamic history to support their stance.

What is striking about the university case is that, unlike the work case, interlocutors did not appeal to Islamic history (for example the story that Muhammad used to teach women) to oppose, justify, or prefer *ikhtilat* at university.

‘For women only’ hospitals and *ikhtilat* in hospitals

The third case I discussed with my interlocutors was that of mixing in hospitals. While the nature of a workplace is official, and a place in which it is possible to keep a physical and mental distance between the sexes in case of *ikhtilat*, in mixed universities this distance is more difficult to maintain as young women and men mix on the university’s grounds and in the classrooms. In hospitals, this distance becomes even less, due to the nature of the place and its necessary physicality, especially in the doctor-patient relationship. At the same time, the nature of this relationship is one of dependency. One would therefore expect *ikhtilat* in hospitals to be a very sensitive issue.

While there are women-only maternity hospitals in Saudi Arabia, general hospitals are mixed. Male doctors treat female patients and vice versa. A nurse, usually a non-Saudi female, is present in the room so as to assist the male or female doctor and avoid *khilwa*. Additionally, doctors often leave the door ajar to prevent *khilwa*. Waiting rooms, however, are women and men-only, although not everyone abides by this separation. While healthcare is accessible to all in Saudi Arabia, if a woman needs surgery she first needs the permission from her male *mahram* to proceed with the operation.

In January 2011 a group of Saudi sheikhs and doctors launched an initiative calling for the building of segregated hospitals, so that women would have the opportunity of avoiding men when needing medical attention, and so that female
doctors would be prevented from mixing with men (al-'Arabiyya 2011). Female doctors also signed the two petitions that were submitted to the Ministry of Health and the consultative council (majlis al-shura). In public campaigns such as this one, demanding that the state provide a women-only hospital, women make known publicly their desideratum to the government vis-à-vis women-only public spaces.

The petition was directed to the head of the consultative council, Dr Muhammad bin Ibrahim Al al-Shaykh. The petition stated that the demand to establish hospitals especially for men (mukhtassa bi-l-rijal) and women (mukhtassa bi-l-nisa) was one of the most important demands of the ‘ulama’ and sheikhs in the country “to protect the intimate body parts and ban ikhtilat (hafidh al-‘awrat wa-man’ al-ikhtilat), adding that “we know it is a difficult project [...] but not impossible” (al-'Arabiyya 2011). The expectation of the petitioners was that the establishment of women-only hospitals would give women the opportunity to continue in the medical field after graduation from medical school, since many do not take up their profession because of ikhtilat in the hospital (al-'Arabiyya 2011).

One of the signatories was Dr Yusuf al-Ahmad who prefers women-only hospitals because he believes it would prevent the harassment of women and safeguard their privacy, especially when it comes to obstetrics and gynaecology. He calls upon the shari’a prescript that women should protect their dignity (al-'Arabiyya 2011).

We will see that interlocutors too draw on arguments based on Islam to support their point of view vis-à-vis mixed and women-only hospitals. Al-Ahmad also claims that “every hospital has a blacklist of cases of sexual assault [...] and romantic relationships, even forcing some hospitals to place cameras in elevators [...]” to monitor the behaviour between men and women in this small space (al-'Arabiyya 2011). According to him, the hospital environment does not induce only official relations between men and women but encourages men and women to be physically close, which can lead to sexual harassment and more.

Dr ‘Adnan al-Bar, professor of medical ethics at King ‘Abd al-‘Aziz University in Jeddah adds to Dr Yusuf al-Ahmad’s statement saying that “the demand for women-only hospitals is not [only] a requirement in Saudi Arabia and the Islamic world but can also be found in the US for example [where there are] a lot of hospitals that seek that [separation between women and men] and are keen on the privacy of the woman” (al-'Arabiyya 2011).

Furthermore, al-Bar stresses that “a woman prefers her doctor to be a woman

125 The sheikh who called for the demolishing of the Great Mosque in order to rebuild it, gender-segregated (see Chapter 2).
(.). Unfortunately, the situation that we have depicts the situation between men and women as though it is a battle against each other while the two are complementary to each other (…)” (al-‘Arabiyya 2011). Of course, building separate hospitals would be a costly affair. Al-Bar’s suggestion of a solution to that obstacle is the creation of a women-only and a men-only entrance (al-‘Arabiyya 2011). Mujahid al-Hamdan, general supervisor of Wafa’ Hospital in ‘Unayza,126 the only general hospital in Saudi Arabia that segregates women and men, goes further and says that a lot of families come from other cities to the hospital because they are looking for privacy and wish to stay away from ikhtilat, adding that he hopes that all Saudi cities will have such hospitals (al-‘Arabiyya 2011).

**Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis ‘for women only’ hospitals and ikhtilat in hospitals**

When I put the idea of women-only hospitals to my interlocutors, many indicated that they had not heard about this initiative and the proposed petition. However, many immediately volunteered to give their opinion on the matter. Contrary to my expectation that ikhtilat in hospitals was potentially controversial, most interlocutors rejected the idea of women-only hospitals, stating that mixing in hospitals is something natural. Even those interlocutors who preferred women-only hospitals often added that the project would be unfeasible due to a lack of enough qualified specialised female doctors.127 All of the women I spoke with have experienced or will experience ikhtilat in hospitals, as almost all hospitals in the kingdom are mixed.

The topic of ikhtilat in hospitals came up in 24 out of 42 interviews. Three positions towards ikhtilat hospitals can be discerned: a minority (4 interlocutors) believes that ikhtilat should be forbidden in hospitals and women-only hospitals should be built. All four of them are da’iyat. A majority (16) justified ikhtilat in hospitals: six da’iyat, 7 activists, and 3 businesswomen. Four interlocutors said they preferred ikhtilat in hospitals, one of whom actively promoted it. One is a da’iya, one an activist, and two are business women.

**Against ikhtilat in hospitals**

Most frequently interlocutors used arguments related to Islam. Karima, a da’iya and a doctor, said that when a female doctor treats a male patient, the devil might be between her and the patient, and that she was therefore in favour of women-

---

127 Interview with Sara, da’iya and medical doctor, Riyadh, 15 January 2011.
only hospitals:

“A separate hospital would be better, I would prefer to work there. The men are strangers, the devil is between me and the patient. The nurse may fall in love with a doctor and he may have children [already]. With patients it’s the same story.”

This direct reference to the devil is new; we did not come across it in the work and university cases. Karima refers to the temptation the devil might cause: in this mixed environment relations can come about between (married or unmarried) women and men. The possibility of this happening should be blocked (sadd al-dhara’i’) and therefore it is better to gender-segregate hospitals. Building separate hospitals is ‘following Allah’s order,’ Karima says: some people who come to hospital have weak faith and not mixing women and men in hospital prevents those people from doing things that go against their religion. Karima pragmatically gets on with her reality of having to work in a mixed hospital.

An important argument against ikhtilat in hospitals is that mixed hospitals might lead to sexual harassment of women. Women-only hospitals significantly reduce this risk. One da’iya, who is also a doctor, recounted a personal experience:

“I used to treat males. [I used to think], if I’m professional then I can treat this guy, [...] you know, doctor-patient relationship [...] [but] I had men come in and tell me this is my number call me please after midnight that’s when my wife’s asleep... I was like, Oh my God I’m your doctor [...] With my profession I really have to get close, touching and all that. [...] I thought [...] obviously this profession doesn’t work well mixed. [...] the one that actually stopped me was I walked back into the room and the man had all his clothes off. And he was excited too. And I was like ooh my God. [And that’s when I decided] I’m never treating a man again.”

The incident led Ayla to open her own women-and-children-only clinic, allowing her to decide for herself which patients to (not) treat. The belief that the nature of men is such that men might at any time harass women and that women need to shield themselves from that also came up in the ikhtilat at work case. While Ayla

---

128 Interview with Karima, da’iya, Riyadh, 22 January 2011.
129 Interview with Ayla, da’iya and chiropractor, Riyadh, 25 January 2011.
took the step to start her own clinic, another *da‘iya* agreed that mixed hospitals lead to sexual harassment of women, but added that it neither possible nor feasible to separate men from women in hospitals.

Another argument that I often heard is that in a woman-only hospital women can be more relaxed and take off their abayas and *hijabs*: it is more comfortable for her both as a patient and as a doctor not to have to be covered all day while working or being treated. Some respondents argued that Muslim girls are shy when they are sick so that women-only hospitals are more suitable for them:

“It’s this shyness in every Muslim girl, she doesn’t want men to look at her when she’s sick. So she can get better information from a woman [doctor] than from a man. I’m with it [women-only hospitals], I don’t want to sit in hospital in front of a man when I am sick.”

Because of this “nature” of the Muslim woman it is easier and better for them to be treated by a female doctor. Some interlocutors argue that women-only hospitals would provide women with more privacy and that interacting only with female doctors would make it easier for women to seek medical help and advice. As Maysa, a *da‘iya* said: “It is easier to talk with a female doctor [instead of] a male doctor.” Especially in some specialisations, such as gynaecology and breast cancer, some women are rather treated by a female doctor, or their *mahram* does not allow them to be treated by a male doctor. “Umniya, an activist, explains:

“There are some husbands who don’t allow their wives to see a male doctor. So the woman might die until she finds a woman who is specialised in cancer. Because she has to uncover her breast.”

This argument is unique to the hospital case; it did not come up in the work and university cases. One might expect these women to apply the principle of necessity (*darura*) to a situation of suspected breast cancer, but they apparently do not do so. Even in an official, medical environment these women –or their *mahram*– believe that a male non- *mahram* doctor should not treat them.

An argument that did come up in the work and university cases and was also used in the hospital case is that of choice. In a non-mixed environment, a woman

---

130 Interview with Shu‘a, young working woman, Jeddah, 18 June 2010.
132 Interview with ‘Umniya, activist, Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
can control her surroundings and decide not to treat men at all—as Ayla did. The presence of women-only hospitals would give a female doctor the personal choice whether or not to treat male patients. It would also give those female doctors who do not want to treat male patients the opportunity to practice their profession, while giving patients a similar choice.

Others take it one step further and argue that now that there are so many female doctors and it is actually feasible to staff a women-only hospital, it should be done. As Karima puts it:

“We can make separate hospitals, we have a lot of female doctors so why not do separate hospitals, it’s good for the patients and for the doctors. I can dress up, and don’t have to wear the abaya. Now I don’t take my freedom, I am cautious because some people who work here have a weak faith. Separate hospitals would allow me to take my freedom.”

Karima believes that there are now no more practical impediments to the idea of a woman-only hospital. One da‘iya, Hanadi, said of the idea for women-only hospitals: “Very wonderful. Very very wonderful,” expressing the hope that her daughters would choose to go to medical school so that they could contribute to there being enough female doctors to make the opening of women-only hospitals feasible. Here, both Karima and Hanadi frame women-only hospitals as part of Saudi Arabia, based on a vision of the future of the community.

**Justifying ikhtilat in hospitals**

Those interlocutors who justified *ikhtilat* in hospitals, as in both other cases, said it was a matter of necessity (*darura*) to have *ikhtilat* in hospitals: “If there is no choice then a male doctor is fine in Islam because there is a necessity.” These interlocutors say that there is a necessity to have *ikhtilat* in hospitals because it isn’t always possible to be treated by a female doctor. As Daliya, a da‘iya, put it:

“My husband works in a hospital. That’s mixed. There is a necessity. But it would be better if it was separate. Like a hospital only for men

---

134 Interestingly, as we shall see in the next section, pragmatism is also one of the main notions in arguments in justification of *ikhtilat* in hospitals.
and only for women. But there aren’t enough specialised female doctors. But even in the hospitals there are moral checks (dawabit). There are no closed doors.”\textsuperscript{137}

Just as in the work-case, in relation to hospitals, too, the idea of the rules and moral checks of the shari’a (al-dawabit al-shar‘iyya) to ikhtilat comes up. In hospitals, there are limits to ikhtilat in hospitals, and therefore it is fine to mix. The limits are clear: first of all there should not be khilwa (such as the ‘closed doors’ that Nadia mentions). Secondly, the limit of respect (ihtiram) was used to argue in justification of ikhtilat in hospitals. In hospitals, doctors (male and female) respect themselves, and so do patients. Furthermore, as with the workplace-case, a hospital is thought to be a medical and formal (rasmi) environment, where women cover themselves and don’t wear excessive make-up:

“When you put make-up, and mix, and the clothes, and your hair, that is forbidden. But if you wear abaya, and hijab, and you respect yourself and then you work together, or I want to see a doctor, it is [fine].”\textsuperscript{138}

Or as Raja’, a young business woman told me:

“My sister works in the hospital as a physiotherapist and her husband doesn’t mind because she wears the niqab and a labcoat so she’s covered. There is no problem.”\textsuperscript{139}

Here, the limit is that of being modest (muhtashim). Therefore, there is no problem with visiting or being treated in a mixed hospital. The hospital environment induces respect between the two sexes and as such it is no problem in light of ideas about gender relations in Islam. So long as these conditions are met, both Dr ‘Abir and Raja’ told me that mixed hospitals are a normal part of Saudi Arabia.

Some interlocutors, as in the work case, refer to Islamic history to defend the current-day practice of ikhtilat in hospitals. One of them, Raja’, said: “In the Prophet’s time, there were female nurses who nursed men during the war.”\textsuperscript{140} If female nurses were allowed to nurse men at the time of Muhammad, then why

\textsuperscript{137} Interview with Daliya, da‘iyya, Jeddah, 19 October 2011.

\textsuperscript{138} Interview with Dr ‘Abir, da‘iyya, Jeddah, 21 October 2011.

\textsuperscript{139} Interview with Raja’, business woman, Riyad, 9 October 2011.

\textsuperscript{140} Interview with Raja’, business woman, Riyad, 9 October 2011.
would it not be allowed today, Raja’ wonders.

Quite a few interlocutors justify mixed hospitals saying that women-only hospitals or even women-only days in mixed hospitals are not feasible. Raja’ said:

“When you go to a hospital, you have the choice, a male or female doctor. [...]. [So] why make it separate? If you make it for women only, you need more spaces [and] it needs more money. [And] there are some specialisations where there are no women yet.”

Interlocutors such as Raja’ say that women-only hospitals aren’t feasible because of the tremendous financial cost of such a project of building, staffing, and running a women-only hospital. They argue that women-only hospitals are not feasible because hospitals cannot be run on one gender. Here, the argument supporting mixed workplaces because businesses cannot run on one gender clearly resonates. These interlocutors say that there aren’t enough female doctors to run women-only hospitals, and neither are there enough male nurses to run men-only hospitals. Also, in mixed hospitals one can already choose to be treated by a female rather than a male doctor. Umm Muhammad, an activist says:

“There are male and female doctors in the hospital, and when you go you can choose whether you want a male or a female doctor. You have the choice. You have the freedom of choice.”

The principle of choice here resonates also from the work case, where women who preferred mixed workplaces presented women-only workplaces as a matter of choice for those who might not want to or be allowed by their mahram to work with a man. It also rings through from the university case, where interlocutors who justified ikhtilat at university argued there should be the choice in Saudi Arabia between mixed and segregated university level education.

Lastly, some interlocutors referred to ideas about Saudi Arabia as a nation. Just as what some interlocutors said about mixed workspaces, they said that mixed hospitals are simply the way life is these days in Saudi Arabia. Jamila, a business woman, said:

“I am a woman, and I go to the governmental offices where men

---

141 Interview with Raja’, business woman, Riyad, 9 October 2011.
142 Interview with Umm Muhammad, activist, Riyad, 4 October 2011.
come too. How the people look at you there... it’s awful. It’s as if you [f] are coming from outer space...! (ka’annik jayya min al-fada). But in the hospitals it is different; there is ikhtilat there wa ‘adi, normal [uses English word]. There is nothing [wrong there between men and women and] everyone can see you [f].”\(^{143}\)

By labelling *ikhtilat* in hospitals as something ‘normal’ and viewing it simply as the way modern life is lived in the kingdom, Jamila illustrates how she believes interaction between women and men should take place in modern Saudi Arabia. Furthermore, in hospitals no *khilwa* occurs between doctors and patients, and so the interaction between men and women is fine.

Another business woman told me that she thinks that there are women who have no problem being treated by a male doctor but that their husbands control them and forbid them. Raja’ labels these gender relations as ‘traditional thinking’:

> “Some [of the women who refuse to see a male doctor] are controlled by their husband. Inside her she says it’s ok if I see a male doctor but her husband forbids it, he’s jealous or something. It’s traditional thinking.”\(^{144}\)

Raja’ opposes that way of thinking and the practice of men keeping their wives away from male doctors and as a result undoubtedly sometimes withholding treatment such as in the breast cancer example that I described earlier in this section, and sees this as traditional thinking that does not suit Saudi Arabia. Invoking the way they view modern-day Saudi Arabia and based in their own experiences, Jamila and Raja’ frame women-only hospitals as incompatible with modern Saudi Arabia while positioning mixed hospitals as part of it.

**In preference of ikhtilat in hospitals**

Those interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* in hospitals used two main arguments. First of all, they argue that if there were to be women-only hospitals in Saudi Arabia, the country would go backward instead of forward. Here, the separation of women and men is seen as something from the past rather than something connected to progress and development.

It is important here to bear in mind that hospitals in Saudi Arabia have always

\(^{143}\) Interview with Jamila, business woman, Riyad, 24 January 2011.

\(^{144}\) Interview with Raja’, business woman, Riyad, 9 October 2011.
been mixed and as such mixing in this location is not an anomaly. ‘Umniya, an activist, explained to me that she preferred mixing in hospitals, but would accept women-only hospitals if there was a majority demand for it. But, she says, “[…] if we do this, hospitals for only men and only women, we go baaaack back back backwards.” Mixed hospitals are seen as the normal situation, as opposed to the ‘backwardness’ of single-sex hospitals. By framing women-only hospitals as backwards, ‘Umniya excludes them from her view of what modern Saudi Arabia should be like.

One interlocutor explained to me how she was in preference of mixed hospitals and consciously defied the separation of women and men in hospital waiting rooms:

“There are separate waiting rooms in hospitals but sometimes we don’t care and we ignore the signs. I have to go to hospital a lot, and a man will sit next to his wife even though they should sit separately.”

By saying she is not the only one who does this, but that she has also seen other people defy the rules of separation, she indicates that this is a practiced part of contemporary Saudi Arabia. By defying the separation and thus based on her own experiences, Yasmin frames *ikhtilat* in hospitals as part of Saudi Arabia.

**Conclusion**

Interlocutors who are against *ikhtilat* in hospitals implicitly invoke the principle of *sadd al-dhara’i*. They also say that *ikhtilat* here might lead to sexual harassment of women. Furthermore, the absence of *ikhtilat* is more relaxing for women. It makes it easier for women to seek a female doctor’s consultation, which helps to detect diseases that otherwise might have gone unnoticed. This is an argument that is specific to the circumstances in a hospital and thus unique to this case. Women-only hospitals would give women a choice. And with all the female doctors graduating from university, they are now feasible. This argument is new; we did not come across it in the workplace and university cases. Another argument that is new, and unique to the hospital case, is the direct reference to the devil and the temptation he may cause between doctors and patients of the opposite sex.

---

145 Interview with ‘Umniya, activist. Interview in Jeddah, 20 October 2011.
146 Yasmin and those who agree with her.
147 Interview with Yasmin, business woman, Jeddah, 20 June 2010.
Those interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat* invoke the principle of *darura*. They also say that there are *dawabit shari‘yya* that are respected in hospitals. Here, too, Islamic history is invoked. Interestingly, interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat* in this case say, pragmatically that women-only hospitals are not feasible due to costs and a lack of female doctors to staff them. Again, a new argument: this argument is not used in the case of universities – all but one university are women-only so the feasibility argument does not apply. Women-only workplaces too have proved to be feasible; they are prevalent in Saudi society. Finally, *ikhtilat* is framed as a normal part of Saudi Arabia now.

Interlocutors who prefer *ikhtilat* in hospitals say that women-only hospitals would be going backward instead of forward for Saudi Arabia. This is a new argument, that interlocutors did not use in the case of the workplace or university. It makes sense that this comes up here because mixed hospitals are the default and the norm in Saudi Arabia. Some interlocutors go as far as to undermine segregation in waiting rooms by not respecting the separation.

**Cases conclusion**

As can be detected in the above, interlocutors’ positions towards *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces in the workplace, at university, and in hospitals do not neatly correspond with each category of interlocutor. For example, not all *da‘iyat* are against *ikhtilat* in the workplace, nor do all activists and business women prefer *ikhtilat*. Instead, they form categories of positions. Three categories of positions towards *ikhtilat* in the workplace have been discerned: against, in justification of, and in preference of *ikhtilat*.

Of the 33 *da‘iyat*, 16 were against *ikhtilat*, 16 justified it, and 1 preferred it. Of the 30 activists, 2 were against *ikhtilat*, 23 justified it, and 5 preferred it. Of the 28 business women, 19 were against *ikhtilat*, 18 justified it, and 9 preferred it. While *da‘iyat* are mostly against *ikhtilat* or justify it, activists and business women mostly justify or prefer it. Concerning the *da‘iyat*, one might not expect them to prefer *ikhtilat*, let alone actively promote *ikhtilat*. Rather, one might perhaps expect them to be against *ikhtilat* or at most justify it under certain conditions of restrictions of the shari‘a.

The results confirm this. Only one of the business women is against *ikhtilat*. Some business women even undermine the segregation of the sexes by going to the male section of the Chamber of Commerce because it is a quicker way to get things done, or they told me how difficult it is to operate in the port of
Jeddah as a woman and thus they depend on a man (often a *mahram*) to arrange their business affairs in these places. Of the activists only a small minority are against *ikhtilat* and this, too, is to be expected: they either justify it or prefer and/or actively promote it.

**Gender, Islam, and the Saudi nation**

Of the total of 91 interlocutors, 19 were against *ikhtilat*, 57 justified it, and 15 preferred it. Altogether, the majority of interlocutors justify *ikhtilat*. All interlocutors are active in public life. Despite the fact that they can and do take on this role in women-only public spaces, it is not surprising that interlocutors mostly justify *ikhtilat*. Women-only public spaces can and do have an enabling effect, as my fieldwork shows, but most interlocutors will have experienced the restrictions of women-only public spaces and/or practice *ikhtilat* themselves thus either justifying that practice or preferring it.

In the three cases that I examined (the workplace, university, and hospitals), we have seen that interlocutors draw on a wide variety of arguments to support their position against, in justification of, or in preference of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces. We have seen that arguments are based on interlocutors’ ideas about and experiences with Islamic principles, ideas about roles between men and women and sexuality, and visions of Saudi Arabia, its future, and what does and does not suit the nature of the country. When we take a closer look, we see that interlocutors draw these arguments mainly from underlying notions of gender, Islam, and ideas about the Saudi nation and its identity. Additionally, there is also a strong sense of pragmatism. These are then the modes through which the modern is negotiated.

The arguments that interlocutors use to support their positions (against, in justification, or in defence of *ikhtilat*) inform us how these interlocutors experience these three cases. The modes of framing – those of gender, Islam, and the Saudi nation – inform us how they envisage their lives in relation to *ikhtilat* and the way of participation of women in the Saudi public space. The desirability of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces are not homogeneous but differ.

Interestingly, arguments that are used by one interlocutor against *ikhtilat* may be used by another interlocutor in justification or in preference of *ikhtilat*. This is relevant to the present study in that it plays a role in the dynamics of the negotiation over whether or not *ikhtilat* can be positioned as part of Saudi Arabia. The underlying question in this negotiation is what does and does not belong to
Saudi Arabia as a modern nation.

In this process, Islam was the notion that my interlocutors drew on mostly. It is the heaviest-weighing argument both against and in justification of *ikhtilat* for each of the three cases. With the notion of ‘Islam’ I mean arguments based on Islamic principles that are grounded in shari’a. The notion of gender and that of the identity of the Saudi nation were drawn on equally often, but less so than the notion of Islam. With the notion of ‘gender’ I mean arguments that are based on ideas about societal roles of men and women, and sexuality. With the notion of ‘the nation’ I refer to arguments that are based on ideas about what does and does not suit Saudi Arabia and which direction the country should take. Of course these notions do not stand alone but rather are intertwined with each other. The Islamic shari’a principle of *sadd al-dhara* for example tells us something about conceptions of gender but also about which type of interactions between women and men is seen as suitable to the Islamic Saudi nation.

In expressing their positions vis-à-vis *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces, Islamic principles that interlocutors invoke, draw on, or deny are those of *darura*, *maslaha*, *dawabit shar’iyya*, *sadd al-dhara*’. They also derive arguments from Islamic history, the concept of *khilwa*, and the practice of *ikhtilat* in the Great Mosque in Mecca.

A recurrent principle that is invoked is that of necessity (*darura*). It is invoked both against and in justification of *ikhtilat*. While those interlocutors who justify *ikhtilat* invoke *darura*, interlocutors who are against *ikhtilat* challenge this with the argument that in the present situation, there is no *darura* to justify *ikhtilat*.

Interlocutors also refer to the concept of *khilwa* or seclusion, arguing possible temptation by the devil should be prevented by separating women and men into separate public spaces. Others argue that it is only *khilwa* that is forbidden, not *ikhtilat* and there is no such thing as *ikhtilat* in Islam or shari’a. Also engaging with the concept of *khilwa*, these interlocutors say that if Satan wants to be there he will be there, regardless of *ikhtilat* or not.

In justifying *ikhtilat* at university, interlocutors invoke the principle of *maslaha*, saying *ikhtilat* is allowed if it leads to gathering knowledge and benefits society as a whole. Others appeal to the principle of *hudud* (limits) or *al-dawabit al-shar’iyya*: the rules and moral checks of the shari’a. It is fine to practice *ikhtilat* as long as it happens within the limits of the shari’a: modest dress (i.e. abaya and hijab), behaviour (i.e. no loud voice), and looks (i.e. no excessive make-up), limited physical proximity (i.e. not sitting directly next to a man) and respect (i.e. no personal subjects of conversation). Thus, the boundaries of what kind of *ikhtilat* is permissible are based on the *dawabit shar’iyya*, and these set the limits
of acceptable behaviour for women (and men). In this case the notion of Islam is intertwined with gender.

The principle of ‘the blocking of the means’ (*sadd al-dhara*) was also brought up, when *ikhtilat* was rejected because it might lead to illicit relations, *zina*, and *fitna*. Anything that might lead to this needs to be blocked; hence, working together, studying together, or being treated by someone of the opposite sex in a hospital should be prevented. When invoking this principle, interlocutors do not only draw on the principle of Islam but also on that of gender: by appealing to the ‘blocking of the means’-principle, their stance on sexuality and relations between the two sexes becomes apparent as well. This shows that these two notions cannot easily be separated but rather are intertwined with each other.

Others refer to Islamic history and the practice of Muhammad arguing that the prophet himself was in *ikhtilat* and used to meet with women, seeking advice from them, or that at the time of Muhammad men and women used to pray in the same mosque, the men sitting in front and the women behind them. It is only *khilwa*, it is argued, that is forbidden, not *ikhtilat*. Some refer to the example of mosque prayer at the time of Muhammed saying that even at the time of the Prophet, *ikhtilat* was forbidden. They consider the example of men praying in front and women behind them as an example of separation between the sexes. Here, it is a contestation over whether the practice of Muhammad does or does not sanction mixing between men and women and so by invoking a historical past interlocutors legitimise or delegitimise *ikhtilat* in contemporary society.

In the Great Mosque of Mecca women and men mix during the *tawaf* or circumambulation of the Ka'ba (see Chapter 2). This is seen either as proof that *ikhtilat* should be allowed – if it can be practiced in the most holy site of Islam then why not in more mundane parts of life – or as an exception – the atmosphere in the Great Mosque is so holy that it is impossible for men and women to be distracted by and/or attracted to each other.

Interlocutors who stated that women-only workplaces and universities are more relaxing, because women can take off their abaya and hijab, also draw on the combination of Islam and gender. They maintain that in mixed spaces, they need to cover, whereas in a women-only public space, out of sight of non-*mahram* men, they can uncover – which they experience as more relaxing. To them, uncovering in a mixed space goes against their practice of Islam.

The second notion that interlocutors drew on was the notion of gender. Here, the nature of men and women, their complementarity, as well as sexuality and gender equality played a role. Boys and girls have different interests, as their nature and natural disposition differs. While for some this is a reason to separate
them, for others it is a ground to do the opposite. The idea of the nature of women is also appealed to when defining the non-acceptability of work that is tiresome for a woman: women are physically not as strong as men. At the same time, it was said, due to the natural shy disposition of the Muslim woman it is easier for them to deal with women rather than men.

Others appealed to the complementarity of men and women and the perceived role of men and women in Saudi society. Here, the Islamic legal principle of *qawama* comes in, which makes the man responsible for the family income and the woman for domestic duties. This again shows how various notions – here that of gender and Islam – can be intertwined in the discourse. If all women work, men are put in their shadow, something that clashes with prevailing gender roles, where the man is responsible for the family’s material welfare and the woman for the home, a division that is regarded as bringing equilibrium between men and women. The underlying idea is that men and women have different ways of thinking and complement each other, and that this may constitute an advantage. Others argued that boys and girls too complement each other, and that they can learn from each other. They maintain that mixing in schools therefore should not be a problem – if only up to a certain age.

Sexuality too is an important aspect. Issues such as harassment of women by men, intimate relations between them, the changing physicality of boys and girls in puberty, and the risk of teenage pregnancies come up frequently. The underlying idea is the protection of the girl or woman from men who might not be able to restrain themselves and women might be the victim of this. At the same time, some are convinced that young men and women of university-age are old and mature enough to be able to deal with each other in a mixed environment without all the afore-mentioned risks occurring. Of course, here the afore-mentioned legal principle of *sadd al-dhara‘i‘* also rings through.

Gender equality is appealed to by those who believe that anyone has the right to be in a certain space whether man or woman. The glass ceiling inherent to women-only public spaces inhibits career mobility and prevents women from having the same opportunities as men. The underlying ideas are about what the roles of Saudi women and men should be in present-day Saudi Arabia, and how they can enact and practice these roles: in a mixed or rather in a women-only environment. The underlying idea with all these gender-related arguments is the contestation and negotiation of visions on how relations between women and men in the public space should be organised.

The third notion that came up is the identity of Saudi Arabia as a nation and ideas about what Saudi Arabia should and should not be like regarding the
public interaction between women and men. Here, contestation takes place over the character of the country, whether or not Saudi Arabia is conservative and whether or not that is a good thing, and whether *ikhtilat* is something normal, how development should take place, as well as the idea of ‘traditional thinking’ and the concepts of ‘backwardness’ and progress.

Some say there should not be *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia as it is a conservative society, which rejects this kind of interaction: if even the USA have gender-segregated schools, then why would it suit Saudi Arabia, a more conservative country? *Ikhtilat,* it is argued, does not suit the character of Saudi Arabia nor is it the way in which the country should develop and as such is excluded from the modern: *ikhtilat* is an undesirable innovation. Others go even further and state that *ikhtilat* is something new, and therefore does not suit the country. Separating women from men, on the other hand, into ‘only for women’ public spaces, then, is something beautiful that makes Saudi Arabia special.

At the same time, others say it would be ‘normal’ for Saudi Arabia to have not only women-only spaces but also *ikhtilat* (in this case both types of education - mixed and separate) and thus provide people with a choice. Here, also a sense of pragmatism rings through. Mixing, such as in hospitals, is then presented as simply the way life is ‘these days.’

Some interlocutors link *ikhtilat* to development (*tatawwur*), framing it as part of a process of ‘catching up.’ They say that development can only take place in *ikhtilat* as it is impossible to live in a totally segregated society. The state and the women approve of it but society – at least a part of society - does not, positioning the state as at least partially allowing the practice of *ikhtilat* and using this to justify one’s own practice of *ikhtilat.* Implicitly this also means that both the government and women themselves are seen as more developed than society at large. Some interlocutors think that women are fine with *ikhtilat* but that their husbands control them and forbid them. They label this as ‘traditional thinking,’ disapproving of it and deeming it unsuitable and outdated for present-day realities.

Others link developments vis-à-vis women-only public spaces to ‘backwardness.’ For example, if there were to be women-only hospitals in Saudi Arabia, the country would go backwards instead of forwards and it would be detrimental to progress. When looking at Saudi history, women used to be the salespeople, mixing with non-*mahram* men in the marketplace. So why not now? Having only male salespeople nowadays is being behind on earlier times and separation between women and men is classified as detrimental to the progress of Saudi society.

These arguments are all related to the notion of the Saudi nation is whether
or not *ikhtilat* is or women-only public spaces are or should be compatible with the present-day character of Saudi Arabia.

Finally, what is striking is the pragmatic dimension of arguments. Here, ideas of feasibility, choice, efficiency, and comfort of women play a role. The feasibility of women-only public spaces is contested. Now that there are so many female professionals, it is actually feasible to staff a women-only institution, so this should be done, it is said by some. But at the same time many interlocutors who in principle prefer women-only spaces cite practical obstacles such as a lack of female professionals or the cost of such an effort and even the unfeasibility of having women-only and men-only days instead of separate buildings as a reason for not implementing this idea. At the same time, women already have a choice not to deal with men: there are already enough separate spaces. Also, it is economically more viable to allow both women and men to enter.

Choice is another pragmatic argument that is important, with women-only public spaces allowing girls to, for example, get an education. Women-only public spaces are seen as a mechanism of inclusion: if all universities were mixed, many girls would not want to or be allowed to go study. Or, while more women-only public spaces in and of themselves are not a good development, the women-only spaces that do exist should remain so that women have a choice where to go and where to participate. It can be good for a transitional period or as a tool to acquire what is needed, for example information in a meeting with one or more women who do not want to sit with men. In addition, owners of companies should be allowed to decide whether or not they want to have *ikhtilat* in their business or not. Here, whether interlocutors prefer or are against *ikhtilat*, the argument is based on the pragmatic idea of personal choice. Nevertheless, in these women-only public spaces there is always the issue of a lack of authority. All the real operations and decision-making take place in the headquarters, which is always mixed. Here, women-only public spaces are positioned as a mechanism of exclusion and as detrimental to a woman’s career prospects. Mixed spaces, on the contrary, are framed as as places where it is easier to get things done.

This analysis shows that in the discourse about *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces, notions of Islam, gender, and the Saudi nation are contested and negotiated. Additionally, there is a fundamental pragmatic dimension to the discourse. We have seen that interlocutors engage with the three cases through their discourse as well as in their daily experience and as such they consume, reproduce, and contest the phenomena of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces. These notions are intertwined and intersect in interlocutors’ expressed ideas about whether or not *ikhtilat* is sanctioned in Islam and whether or not it suits the
Saudi nation and the direction in which the country should develop.

All these arguments and the notions they are grounded in were expressed to support the interlocutors’ position against, in justification of, and in defence of *ikhtilat* in the workplace. These arguments also inform us how interlocutors look at *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces as ways of public participation of women in Saudi Arabia.

We see that interlocutors do not centre their arguments on a public-private distinction, but rather all argue about the ways in which women can or should participate in public. As such, there is a negotiation of views and positions with respect to *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces as different modes of participation, but the aspiration is actual participation of women in public.

This brings up the question of which way of participation interlocutors believe suits the present-day character of Saudi Arabia. Underlying this idea is the question how the positioning by interlocutors of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces informs us about their ideas about the direction of the country and Saudi modernity, and the way in which they believe women should participate in the public life of the country.

**Negotiating the modern Saudi nation**

The concept of promissory notes was introduced in Chapter 1, signifying the expression of a desire, a vision of what the community should look like. The state, as the issuer of the promissory note, issues its promissory note into society (see Chapter 2) and interlocutors, as holders of the promissory note hold the state to its promises by the desiderata they express. Through this process, modernity is constructed by a negotiation process that takes place between the state’s promissory note and the interlocutors holding the state to it.

*Are ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces part of Saudi modernity as envisioned by my interlocutors, and if so, how are they framed as (not) part of that modern? I will use the concept of promissory notes and desiderata as explained and operationalised in Chapter 1 to analyse the Saudi state’s as well as my interlocutors’ positioning of *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces as modern.

**The Saudi state’s promissory note: an alternative, enchanted modern**

In the early days of the kingdom up to the present day, the Saudi state had a clear vision of the direction in which the new nation should develop. Modernisation within an Islamic framework was the motto of King Faisal, framing a promissory
note of an enchanted modern. But this strategy became more and more problematic towards the end of his reign, when he had started to use Islam as a counter-ideology to the influence of Nasserists and Ba’athists who had fled Syria and Egypt and who were seen as a threat to the Saudi throne (Rasheed 2010: 10).

Up to this day, the Saudi state attempts to control and shape the nation’s historical narratives, in particular those narratives that stress its role in the modernisation of the country. In school history textbooks, for example, “…the state highlights its efforts to accommodate the country’s Islamic heritage with its commitment to modernisation” (Rasheed 2010: 11). These discourses are part of what constructs the modern nation and here too we detect the promissory note of an enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006).

At the same time, we see a negotiating process on the part of the Saudi government, negotiating its position among the various contesting streams in society by initiating both projects that support women-only public spaces and projects that support ikhtilat. In doing so the state creates a field of legitimacy that interlocutors can engage with, position themselves towards, and relate to. The state proposes the participation of women in public through the presence of both women-only public spaces and ikhtilat as a way of realising their promissory note of an enchanted modern. In issuing its promissory note of an enchanted modern, the Saudi state presents itself as ‘modern’ and as a ‘moderniser,’ in terms of ‘progress’ and ‘development,’ in a manner that to them corresponds with Islam.

**Interlocutors’ holding the state to its promissory note: an alternative, enchanted modern**

The state creates a field of legitimacy that interlocutors can engage with, position themselves towards, and relate to, holding the state to its promissory note by their desiderata. In the promissory note that the state issues, the participation of women in public, through the presence of both women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, are both a way of realising their promissory note of an alternative, enchanted modern.

Respondents engage with this discourse by articulating their desiderata, saying that only women-only public spaces are modern, that only ikhtilat is modern, or that both are modern. Hanan, who works on women’s issues for a charity, expresses the desideratum that only segregation is part of modernity, because it supports advancement:

“Segregation [fasl] is part of modernity [hadatha] and development [wa-tatawwur]. For example, this meeting [a women-only meeting of
the charity she volunteers for], isn’t that development? But if there were men here it wouldn’t be development [tawwur] at all.”

Hanan here implies that men and women would be preoccupied with each other rather than with the content of the meeting if meetings were to take place in ikhtilat rather than women separated from the men, which she believes undermines development and progress.

Other respondents, such as a da‘iya called Hasna’, stated the desideratum that only ikhtilat is part of modernity, but only if the woman wears her hijab and if both the man and the woman respect themselves:

“Ikhtilat is part of modernity, the separation (fasl) that we have is not. I think it is not modern. Ikhtilat, yes, it is part of modernity, when the woman holds on to her hijab, and that she respects herself, and that the man respects himself.”

Hasna’ argues that women-only public spaces are not modern but that ikhtilat, on the other hand is - if both the woman and the man guard their behaviour and when they behave respectfully towards themselves and, thereby, each other. According to Hasna’, for a woman that includes wearing her hijab in public.

Other interlocutors express their desideratum that both ikhtilat and women-only public spaces are part of Saudi modernity:

“Both ikhtilat and segregation is modern. Say for example with work. Sometimes a woman is fine with being with a man. A male colleague. Other women feel more comfortable with a lady. It is a personal choice. I believe we should have choices.”

May, here, does not take a principled stance with respect to ikhtilat and segregation and their position with respect to modernity in Saudi Arabia. Rather, she stresses that both options should be available so that a woman can choose how she wishes to participate in public life if she so desires.

Bearing in mind that the Saudi state issued into society as part of its promissory note an ambiguity with respect to women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, we can

---

148 Interview with Hanan, activist, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.
149 Interview with Hasna’, da‘iya, Seyhat, 2 November 2011.
150 Interview with May, business woman, Jeddah, 25 October 2011.
see this resonating among respondents. What happens here is that interviewees speak in the terms of and in relation to what happens in the field of legitimacy that has been created by the government and relate themselves to that. The government determines the playing field and the red lines of the conversation, which can be ambiguous and contradictory. This is clear in its undertaking of both *ikhtilat* and women-only projects. We see that respondents hold the state to its promissory note by expressing their desiderata with respect to both options as ways of participation of women in modern Saudi Arabia.

When asked whether Saudi Arabia is a modern country, and to define that modernity, my interlocutors put forward several characteristics. These characteristics recur among all activists, business women, and *da‘iyat*. They include technological inventions such as the internet, cars and airplanes, but also scientific progress and certain research methodologies. A central aspect of Saudi modernity, interviewees say, is Islam, which sets the limits (*hudud*) of modernity:

“The internet, the Blackberry or the computer, they’re not forbidden [*haram*] in the religion. You use them, but with limits [*bi-hudud*]. For example, I use my mobile for relations with my family, with my children. But not for forbidden relations [*‘alaqat muharrama*], for the opposite of family relations. That is from the religion.”

Material progress thus should take place within the limits and framework of Islam and its interpretations. As such, modernity has both a material and a spiritual dimension.

Women I spoke with view Saudi modernity as having a material as well as a spiritual side. Hanan, an activist working for a charity, said:

“Of course Islam is part of modernity. The idea of modernity without religion is an ignorant idea (*fikr jahil*).”

While most respondents said that they believe Islam is part of modernity and of what it means to be modern, Hanan takes it a step further and says that a lack of religion in modernity is a sign of ignorance. For this, she uses the word *jahil*, referring to the period of ‘ignorance’ before Islam came about. The majority of interlocutors indicate that they consider Saudi Arabia to be a modern Islamic

151 Interview with Daliya, Islamic Studies teacher (*da‘iya*), Jeddah, 19 October 2011.
152 Interview with Hanan, activist, Jeddah, 26 October 2011.
In addition to framing religion as part of modernity, the majority of my interlocutors make a distinction between modernisation and *taghrib* (Westernisation). Westernisation is most often defined as ‘copy-pasting’ whatever comes from America or Europe: food, clothes, speech, and morals. Fayza, an activist from Riyadh, put it as follows:

“I think Westernisation is adopting another culture. For example, I go to Holland, and on the façade it all looks really nice. And without having a deep understanding, I adopt the culture. But it isn’t part of my roots. That isn’t modernisation. That’s Westernisation. Modernisation is taking your own culture and developing it from within. And I think that is much more powerful because then I don’t lose my identity. As a Saudi, as a Muslim. If I become like a Westerner, I lose my identity. Modernity is not the property of the West.”

Fayza very clearly makes a distinction between modernisation and Westernisation, and dislocates modernity from the West. Modernisation is not mindlessly adopting (elements from) another culture but rather departing from within one’s own identity as a nation and developing from there. Modernity, then, involves taking “the positive, good things from them [the West] and leave the bad things that the religion doesn’t agree with.” These ‘good things’ are, according to Samia for example, among other things the internet, social media, and means of transportation.

Most respondents reject the secularity of state and society that they perceive to have permeated the West, and only very few of the women I spoke with agree with a separation of *din wa dawla*, or religion and the state:

“We are Muslims. So Islam is part of everything. Also the government. The religion informs the decisions. And I don’t have a problem with that. But the official religious scholars (*‘ulama’*)... I do think that they should be outside of the government. So that they don’t say what

---

153 Interview with Fayza, activist, Riyadh, 2 October 2011.
155 Interview with Samia, *da’iya*, Jeddah, 22 October 2011. Earlier on in the interview, she had mentioned what these ‘good things’ are: “Look, I can use a mobile phone. It is modern. Facebook, it is modern. Internet, cars, planes, cameras, air conditioning...So I can take things from modernity that go with the *dawabit* (regulations).”
the government wants them to say.”156

Zaynab here touches at the heart of the organisation of Saudi Arabian politics: the pact between the political rulers and the religious scholars (see Chapter 2) that lies at the basis of the governing of the country – the official ‘ulama’ often ‘legitimising’ political decisions by the Al Saud. By saying that the scholars should be wrested from this arrangement, she calls into question the foundation of the kingdom.

In addition, many interviewees associate Westernisation with women being able to have a relationship with a man before or outside of the framework of marriage, or with ‘moral degeneration’ and a fear of losing morals and values. This is rejected from the Saudi modern:

“Westernisation in my opinion is like, you know... women in Western countries, they can have relationships before marriage. And to them, personally and to society, that’s fine, they accept it. For me... I don’t want this to happen in my country. And when you ask about modern... It is not modern at all. And it doesn’t suit Saudi Arabia. Really I don’t accept this and I don’t want it. It is a bad influence for my children. I don’t want my children to become Western-minded. I don’t accept that my son has a girlfriend and goes out with her and has sex with her. It’s not acceptable.”157

For Layla, Westernisation is intimately connected to issues of sexuality and morality. While she regularly travels to the USA and Europe, and sometimes takes her children there, she does not accept them to become, as she calls it, ‘Western-minded.’ Pre-marital relations to her are not only unacceptable, but also decidedly not modern - not only to her family but also to Saudi Arabia.

As we have seen in the discourse analysis, ideas about ikhtilat and women-only public spaces as they are presented by the state and as coming from the women I spoke with engage with ideas about the Saudi nation and what its character is and should be. They propose a vision of what the community needs and these visions are not merely posited in reference to respondents’ positions in society but also in response to what they see as modern –ikhtilat, or women-only public spaces, or both.

156 Interview with Zaynab, activist, Riyad, 9 October 2011.
157 Interview with Layla, business woman, Jeddah, 16 October 2011.
As we have also seen in the discourse analysis, interviewees’ positions on ikhtilat and women-only public spaces link with notions of and ideas about gender, Islam, and the Saudi nation. Respondents express in their positions vis-à-vis ikhtilat and women-only public spaces their concerns and beliefs grounded in these notions.

Concluding remarks: towards an enchanted modern

This chapter has shown the ambiguity of the concepts of segregation, ikhtilat, and khilwa. In the three cases that were subsequently examined (the workplace, university, and hospitals), we have seen that interlocutors draw on a wide variety of arguments to support their positions vis-à-vis ikhtilat and women-only public spaces. They draw these arguments mainly from underlying notions of gender, Islam, and ideas about the Saudi nation and its identity. Additionally, there is also a strong sense of pragmatism.

I analysed how my interviewees view women-only public spaces and ikhtilat as (un)suitable modes of participation of women in the public in Saudi Arabia. This brought up the question which way of participation the women I spoke with believe to suit the present-day character of Saudi Arabia. I looked at how the discourse of my interlocutors about ikhtilat and women-only public spaces informs us about their ideas about the direction of the country and its modernity, and the way in which they believe women should participate in the public life of the country. Respondents are actively engaged in laying claim to modernity, holding the state to its promissory note as to what modern Saudi Arabia should be, by expressing their desiderata.

The ideas that interlocutors express relate to the way they envisage the future of women in Saudi society and their participation in public life, and about how to go about reaching that future (through ikhtilat and/or women-only public spaces) and within which parameters (the limits or hudud/dawabit of Islam).

Among my interviewees all three desiderata (ikhtilat, women-only public spaces, or both) exist and find their expression in discourses about concrete phenomena with respect to ikhtilat and women-only public spaces, as we have seen in the workplace, universities, and hospitals cases. In the course of the negotiation between the state and interlocutors, the state and my interlocutors share a view of an enchanted modern. In this enchanted modern, ikhtilat and women-only public spaces as ways of women’s public participation co-exist. The perspective of promissory notes allows us to view modernity as being negotiated.
between the issuer of the promissory note (the state) and the holders of the promissory note (my interlocutors), over whether or not women should participate in the public life of the modern Saudi nation and in which way: through *ikhtilat*, women-only public spaces, or both.

In the section ‘Negotiating the modern Saudi nation’ earlier in this Chapter, we saw that the majority of women I spoke with clearly distinguish between modernity and Westernisation. They reject ‘the West’s’ secularism and (perceived) moral differences while expressing the desire to integrate ‘the good things’ from the West into their own realities. Although respondents do refer to ‘the West,’ they do not equate modernity to Westernisation. Rather, they wrest their own, alternative, modernity (see Chapter 1) from it, which is different from ‘Western’ modernity yet with Europe and/or ‘the West’ remaining a point of reference.

Interlocutors’ views of modernity does not consist only of material progress (internet, television, mobile phones, infrastructure) but also has a spiritual dimension, leading to an enchanted modernity. It is the duality of material progress and religiosity that constitutes ‘the Saudi modern’ of which participation, be it through women-only public spaces, *ikhtilat*, or both, is an essential component. And so both *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces are different configurations of Saudi modernity as envisioned by the Saudi state as well as by my respondents.
Chapter 4 | Kuwait: the historical development of mixing between men and women in public spaces (ikhtilat)
Kuwait: Historical Context

Introduction

Kuwait is, like Saudi Arabia, an oil economy. However, it has followed a different historical trajectory leading to a different outcome regarding the visibility and practice of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in contemporary society. In Kuwait, women-only public places and places with separate opening hours for women and families do exist. Yet, as opposed to Saudi Arabia where women-only public spaces have become the default situation, in Kuwait *ikhtilat* has developed as the norm.

As Yamani (1996), Abu Lughod (1998), Kandiyoti (1991) and Le Renard (2008) argue, the position of women must be analysed in the context of the political projects of contemporary states and of their historical transformations. While there is literature that deals with Kuwait’s political and economic history, and literature that deals with ‘women in Islam’ in general, aside from the work of Haya al-Mughni and Mary-Ann Tétreault (often in conjunction), not much work has been done on the political-historical transformation of the position of women in Kuwaiti society.

In this chapter I will analyse that transformation. I will show that important factors supporting the prevalence of *ikhtilat* in Kuwaiti society today go back to developments during the periods of the pre-oil era before 1938 when oil was discovered, the 1945-1960 period of the *Nahda* and the Gulf War of 1990-1 and its aftermath. Furthermore, I will demonstrate how the Al Sabah ruling family, throughout these periods, projected into society their changing promissory notes of modernity. I will take the pre-oil era as a starting point.

Kuwait’s pre-oil period

In the early 18th century, clans belonging to the ‘Anaiza tribe coming from the Najd, the central region of present-day Saudi Arabia, gradually migrated to Kuwait and settled in “the little fort” - the literal meaning of “Kuwait” (Al Sabah 2013:

---

158 See Chapter 2 for an analysis of the historical development of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia.

159 Therefore, this chapter often relies on sources by Tétreault and al-Mughni. Yet, the angle I take is much more a new line of investigation, namely that of the development of the position of women within the modernity discourse of the state, and the public emergence of women through *ikhtilat* and women-only public spaces.

160 A cultural and intellectual renaissance that began in the late 19th, early 20th century in Egypt and arrived in Kuwait in the early 1950s.
11). These clans settled into a configuration and called themselves Bani ‘Utub. The Bani ‘Utub found a quite well-organised trading community in Kuwait, which at the time was a valuable marketplace for many commodities such as horses, coffee, wood, and, most famously, pearls (Al Sabah 2013: 12). Supported by these merchant families, in 1752 Sabah I bin Jaber was chosen as the first amir of Kuwait, favouring the Al Sabah family over other Bani ‘Utub families.161

This unwritten accord between the merchants and the Al Sabah encapsulates the ruling family’s legitimacy up to today: this legitimacy lies in the Al Sabah’s capacity to govern Kuwait’s affairs with support of the merchants. A little over ten years before, the Al Saud of Saudi Arabia had secured their legitimacy by combining religious and military strength through their 1744 pact with Ibn Wahhab (see Chapter 2). In Kuwait, it was more a matter of what Crystal (1990: 9) sees as a tacit power arrangement between the merchant families and the Al Sabah, as a result of which the merchants families’ economic strength increased while their political influence diminished. The character of the state, therefore, differs between the two countries.

The balancing act between the Al Sabah and the merchant class continues to this day. I will show that whenever the Al Sabah tries to assert itself, the merchant class responds by attempting to initiate or strengthen institutions of representation, such as the 1921 and 1938-39 attempts at establishing a representative council (majlis), and the 1962 constitution.163 This shows that - while political parties have never been allowed in Kuwait - consultative traditions were more engrained in Kuwait than in Saudi Arabia (Davidson 2013: 28-29). The Al Sabah would attempt to counterbalance the demands of the merchant class by looking for new allies in society. This meant naturalising tribes in exchange for loyalty (Davidson 2013: 29) and, as we shall see in the case of women, by extending certain rights to them. The Al Sabah nowadays thus have to share power with many more groups than the merchants alone.

At the same time, the Al Sabah saw themselves supported by foreign powers and oil money. In the 1913 Anglo-Ottoman convention,164 Mubarak Al Sabah was

---

161 The Al-Khalifa ruling family of Bahrein also descend from the Bani ‘Utub.
162 In 1921 some merchant families, unhappy with the course of events, created their own representative council. It was only the second attempt at this in 1938 that worked well, restraining the amir’s authority and building up a bureaucracy, only for it to be shut down by a group of sheikhs from the ruling family in 1939 (Al Sabah 2013: 12).
163 The Constitution will be dealt with later on in this chapter.
164 The 1913 Anglo-Ottoman Convention was an agreement between the British and the Ottomans that lay down the limits of Ottoman jurisdiction in the Gulf area of the Ottoman Empire, in specific the areas that are now known as Bahrein, Kuwait, and Qatar, as well as the Shatt al-‘Arab river.
officially recognised by the British and the Ottomans as the ruler of Kuwait and its hinterland.\(^{165}\) It was the eve of World War I and the British decided it would be in their interest to reach an agreement with the Ottomans rather than to secure full authority over Kuwait. But when the Ottomans sided with the Germans during World War I the British nullified the treaty. Kuwait became a protectorate and remained so until independence in 1961 (Cleveland 2000: 449). So while Kuwait and Saudi Arabia both experienced the Ottomans, Kuwait unlike the third Saudi state\(^{166}\) also experienced British imperial rule.

In painting a picture of women’s lives in pre-oil, early 20\(^{th}\) century Kuwait, al-Mughni (2001: 44-46) recounts how the Bani ‘Utub lived close to each other and only married within their own group. She describes how women of wealthy, upper-class families lived sheltered from the outside world in a part of the house where they could not be seen or heard by those outside the household. Al-Mughni explains that because of trading voyages the men were out at sea for prolonged periods of time. During this time, they wanted their women to remain protected from the outside world (al-Mughni 2001: 45). These families could afford servants and slaves to do the household chores and run errands, and only under strict conditions were the Bani ‘Utub women allowed to venture outside their courtyard.

At the same time, al-Mughni recounts that women from more modest or poor backgrounds had a less segregated life experience. They had to go out to work to contribute to the family income, go to the suq themselves as they could not afford servants to do so, and go out to the beach to fetch fresh water and wash clothes (al-Mughni 2001: 45). So especially women from the poor and middle-income classes worked and through that encountered non-\(mahram\) men. The extent of segregation, thus, seems to have depended on class.

Kuwaiti traders at that time did business with and in India, a country whose currency Kuwait used until independence in 1961 (Casey 2007: 7). Indian society at that time was much more open than Kuwait. Kuwaiti traders brought back those Indian experiences and ideas together with their trading goods. The Iraqi port city of Basra, to which Kuwait is close, also influenced the character of Kuwait. These connections with the world beyond the Arabian peninsula as well as a greater degree of sedentarisation gave Kuwait and the other coastal Gulf states a more

\(^{165}\) While Mubarak Al Sabah had merely been put forward by local tribal leaders and merchants to deal with the British, entering into treaties with them institutionalised him and his family as the ruling elite of Kuwait (Cleveland 2000: 448). The Treaty made Mubarak Al Sabah the one to be regarded as the founder of present-day Kuwait.

\(^{166}\) See Chapter 2.
open character (Anscombe 1997: 10).

At this time before the discovery of oil, there were Quranic schools in Kuwait known as *katatib* where reading, writing, and basic arithmetic were taught. Al-Mughni recounts how in the early 20th century women from lower class families started working from their homes as religious instructors, marking the beginning of Kuwaiti women entering the teaching profession and allowing them to earn an income (al-Mughni 2001: 50). The fact that these teachers were paid between 2 and 5 rupees per pupil, depending on the girl’s family income (al-Mughni 2001: 50), would indicate that girls from various economic background attended these classes.

In 1912, the boys-only al-Mubarakiyya school was established by merchant families to educate boys in commerce, writing, and arithmetic – skills they would need as traders (al-Mughni 2001: 28). Fourteen years later, in 1926, by private initiative the first girls school opened (al-Mughni 2001: 49-50). Quickly other women followed and set up their own schools to teach other girls what they themselves had learnt: reading, writing, embroidery, and dressmaking (al-Mughni 2001: 50). As in Saudi Arabia, these schools were funded by wealthy citizens. Teaching provided these female working class teachers with a much-needed, albeit small, income. The government first became involved in the education sector in 1936 and the first state school for girls was opened in 1937.

**The discovery and exploitation of oil (1938-1945)**

After the 1929 global economic depression and the following worldwide economic decline, Kuwait became one of the poorest countries in the world. The pearling industry was undercut by the economic crisis, as was the influx of cultivated pearls into the world pearl market (Cleveland 2000: 450).

In 1934, against this background and as a result of oil finds elsewhere, Amir Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah signed an agreement with the Gulf Oil Corporation (now Chevron Corporation) and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (now the British Petroleum Company), authorising them to become equal owners in a concession known as the Kuwait Oil Company (KOC). Four years later, oil was discovered in the Burgan field, one of the largest oil reserves in the world (Cleveland 2000: 450). While in the pre-oil period the Al Sabah depended on income from tax revenues of the merchant class, oil gave them an independent source of income (al-Nakib 2013: 8) and therewith potentially more political independence. It was against this background that a merchant opposition movement arose.

Merchant families had already pushed for a municipality, which opened in
1930, and municipal elections, which were first held in 1932 (Crystal 1990: 46). In 1936 they had set up the Education Council, an area in which they had practical experience through earlier funding of schools (Crystal 1990: 45). In the period 1938-1939 merchants started the afore-mentioned majlis movement, aiming to limit the power of the ruling family by creating a Parliament and write a constitution, challenging Amir Ahmad Al Jaber Al Sabah’s authority. Adherents of the movement set up a majlis to counterbalance the amir’s power. The movement was not given a chance to gain momentum and most of its adherents were arrested or fled the country (Tétreault 2001: 203).

World War II delayed further oil exploitation, but in 1946 commercial oil exports commenced (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 403) and a period of economic growth in Kuwait began. The discovery and exploitation of oil further consolidated the position of the ruling elite. The oil concessions, signed by the ruler whose signature represented the state, led to increased wealth that flowed directly to the ruler as there was no distinction between the ruling family and the state (Cleveland 2000: 448).

Arab nationalism and the Nahda (1945-1960)

During the period 1945-1960, oil revenues led to major governmental projects, in the fields of urban development and social reform, which were framed in a discourse of ‘modernisation.’ Young Kuwaiti men and women, especially sons and daughters of the elite merchant families, also called for modernisation. The position of women in society was central to this. As we have seen, modernity discussions often pivot around the position of women, also in other countries (see also Kandiyoti 1991; Abu Lughod 1998; Moghadam 2003). In Kuwait too, we will see how this was the case. More schools were opened during this period, women went abroad to study, and these newly-educated women started entering the labour force. I start by taking a closer look at the government’s projects of urban development and social reform before delving into the Nahda and its influence.

Commercial oil exports had started in 1946 after the end of World War II. They led to increasing oil revenues in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1952, Kuwait became the largest exporter of oil in the Persian Gulf region at that time. That same year, with oil revenues increasing, the state approved a major public-works programme to transform Kuwait’s infrastructure. Through these projects, oil revenues that had previously flowed into the Al Sabah family would now be split between the people and the rulers (Casey 2007: 60). The plans included the replacement of the pre-
oil town with “a new modern cityscape planned and built by the state” (al-Nakib 2013: 8). Al-Nakib points out that oil played a larger role than merely financing urban development. Oil wealth led to a desire among both the state and society to modernise quickly, and the *Nahda* became the main ideological driving force behind it (al-Nakib 2013: 8).

Economic development led to social and political change and the Al Sabah realised, with the *majlis* movement in mind, that they had a need for new and increased political legitimacy (al-Nakib 2013: 8). As the state had not been present in public life before the discovery of oil, they realised that this legitimacy would have to be located in the present and the future, rather than in the past:

“As such, a vital approach to state building in the early oil years entailed the erasure of Kuwait’s pre-oil past and a concomitant emphasis on modernity and progress in state development discourse and practice” (al-Nakib 2013: 8).

Al-Nakib recounts how Amir Abdallah Al Salem Al Sabah’s (r. 1950-1965) 1952 development plan167 was twofold, encompassing both urban development and social progress “driven by a new state ideology of modern planning” (al-Nakib 2013: 9). According to al-Nakib this modernity consisted of urban development, such as new buildings and a good infrastructure, as well as social reform such as housing, education, and healthcare. Rather than denying the past, the state framed its urban planning as pulling Kuwait out of its pre-oil hardship and pushing it into a more prosperous present and future:

“The promise of “progress” [...] needed to be confirmed by the memory of ‘poverty.’ If the past was associated with adversity, then its erasure and replacement with the new and modern – with the state as the principal agent of this modernity – would be easily accepted and indeed welcomed by the public” (al-Nakib 2013: 9).

Through the reforms and development projects, the Al Sabah wanted to consolidate their position as the rulers of Kuwait. Against the poverty of the past they presented themselves as bringers of prosperity, therewith legitimising their rule. With the economic hardship after the collapse of the pearling industry, the trade blockade

---

167 Every five years, the Kuwaiti government adopts a development plan that maps and addresses the economic, housing, demographic and other structural developments and sets out policies for the next 5 years.
between Kuwait and the Najd, and the world economic depression still in mind, it was not difficult for the Al Sabah to convince people of this new course. Official discourse positioned this period as *al-nahda al-umraniyya*: a civilisational awakening, implying that Kuwait before oil was uncivilised (al-Nakib 2013: 10) and focusing on urban reform and social development. Through its development projects, the state projected into society this promissory note of modernity.

During this time of new government development initiatives, and since Kuwait itself did not yet have a university at the time, from the late 1940s onwards young men from merchant families had started to go to Cairo and Beirut to get a university education. There, these young men read the work of Arab nationalist writers such as Taha Hussein, Georges Hanna, and most notably Qasim Amin and had become deeply influenced by their idea of the *Nahda*.

As Arab countries started to gain independence from colonial powers from the 1950s onwards, the movement and ideology of Arab nationalism arose. It aimed to achieve independence from western colonial powers and their influence and attempted to inspire a sense of pan-Arab cultural, linguistic, historical, and political unity. The *Nahda* was a cultural and intellectual renaissance that had begun in the late 19th, early 20th century in Egypt and arrived in Kuwait in the early 1950s through these students from merchant families.

Upon their return to Kuwait these students took it upon themselves to move Kuwaiti society from what they “regarded as a state of backwardness (*raj’iyya*) to a state of progress (*nahda*) and civilisation” (al-Mughni 2001: 53). Central to their idea of *Nahda* was breaking away from customs and traditions and moving forward, using concepts such as *taqaddum* (progress) versus *raj’iyya* (backwardness):

“The latter [*raj’iyya*] was interpreted as being the result of rigid traditions and ignorance, whereas *taqaddum* was equated with scientific knowledge, cultural advancement and democracy. The aim was to modernise Kuwaiti society and end its isolation from the civilised world” (al-Mughni 2001: 53).

---

168 A war erupted between the Najd (in present-day Saudi Arabia) and Kuwait in the aftermath of World War I when Ibn Sa’ud of Saudi Arabia tried to annex Kuwait. Following the war, Ibn Sa’ud imposed a trade blockade on Kuwait between 1923 and 1937.

169 Kuwait University would open in 1966.

170 Egypt, and to a lesser extent Beirut, at that time was the cultural and political centre of the region, which explains why people turned towards Egypt.

171 Qasim Amin (1863-1908) was an Egyptian jurist and one of the figureheads of the *Nahda* movement and an advocate of women’s rights. In 1899 he published the book *Tahrir al-mar’a fi ‘asr al-risala* (The Liberation of Women at the Time of the Prophet).
Chapter 4

The idea of *Nahda* was to move forward, leave the customs and traditions behind, and progress into a new civilizational period. Al-Nakib recounts how the March 1950 issue of *al-Ba’tha* (The Mission)\(^{172}\) magazine, that was founded in Cairo in 1946 by those male students from Kuwaiti merchant families, opened with the statement that Kuwaitis were thirsty for reform and capable of development (as quoted in al-Nakib 2013: 10).

According to al-Mughni, women’s emancipation was central to the idea of *Nahda*, to the extent that its proponents believed there could be no *Nahda* without women’s emancipation. Al-Mughni too quotes *al-Ba’tha* magazine showing that in it, the struggle for women’s emancipation was positioned as a struggle “between knowledge and ignorance, between progress and backwardness, between modern lifestyles and retrograde traditions and customs” (al-Mughni 2001: 54).

The young women of merchant families who, with government support, had been sent to Egypt in the 1950s to attend university also came back to Kuwait with new, Egyptian ways. Their sojourn in Egypt had influenced their way of dress, haircuts, and had sparked interests in Egyptian film and art. Their time in Egypt had also changed how they looked at the position of women in society. During this period, supported by men from the merchant class, women started to speak out for more gender equality, articulating their ideas about issues such as women’s access to education and employment (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 409).

In 1956 four young women from merchant families who demanded the right not to wear abayas outside the house took off their abayas and burnt them in their school yard (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 409). They were then forced by their families to choose between wearing abayas and getting an education or taking off the abaya and dropping out of school. Eventually, they chose the former. Nevertheless, these demands for change did lead to an increasing entrance of women into the public (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 409-410).

Part of the amir’s 1952 development plans were social reforms such as education. With increasing oil revenues, and wanting to stimulate the entrance of Kuwaiti women into the labour force to replace foreign teachers, doctors, and nurses, the government initiated a system of formal education that was free and compulsory for boys and girls from the age of six until intermediary level.\(^173\) Boys and girls could not attend school together, so more girls’ schools were opened.

---

\(^{172}\) Already in the 1950s *al-Ba’tha* had a women’s corner (*rukn al-mar’a*) and Kuwaiti newspapers soon followed (al-Mughni 2001: 57).

\(^{173}\) This is laid down in Article 1 of Law No. 11 of 1965 Concerning Compulsory Education. www.unesco.org/education/edurights/media/docs/5545bf9315a61b02006ae4260e284cc254cf8621b8.pdf. Website accessed 9 February 2015.
The government only provided single-sex education; mixed schools would not come to Kuwait until the 1970s.

The state’s quest for modernity that drove its development plans thus resonated among (at least the elite part of) the population. However, these views did not go uncontested: while some claimed women were endowed with the same capacities as men, others claimed Kuwaiti girls and women should mainly learn about cooking, housekeeping, and childcare. At the same time, the aim of Kuwaiti merchant men, according to al-Mughni, was not full independence for women but merely to ‘modernise’ women’s lives so that they could take up jobs to replace foreign teachers, nurses, and doctors (al-Mughni 2001: 56) and therewith not only participate in public life but also reduce Kuwait’s dependence on those foreign workers.

As Deniz Kandiyoti noted, upper-class educated women entering the labour force threaten the status quo—in this case the privileged position of the merchant class—less than men from the lower classes who move upward on the social ladder (Kandiyoti 1980). The end to seclusion of merchant class women from their own class through their education and labour participation was in the interest of merchant class men. These merchant class men feared that otherwise certain positions would go to men from the emerging classes rather than remain within their own social class (Kandiyoti 1980). As Tétreault and al-Mughni explain, elite Kuwaiti women’s labour participation at this time thus served “their class interests at least as much as their gender interests” (1995b: 410).

Women who did not want to work with men or whose families did not want them to work with men took up jobs as teachers at girls schools—a strategy for labour participation that women still follow today in Kuwait and that Saudi women also used both in the early days of women’s employment and today. With broader job opportunities to choose from, women who did not mind working with men could work in other professions, where ikhtilat did occur.

In short, the state framed itself as the protagonist of a modernity that it contrasted with the country’s national, pre-oil, poor past. Issued into society as al-nahda al-‘umraniyya, this promissory note of modernity of the state, that drove its development plans, interplayed with the view on modernity of (at least the elite part of) the population.
Chapter 4

Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamist groups (1961-1977)

On the one hand, the government services and income distribution of the 1950s to families and individuals through development projects bound Kuwaiti citizens to the rulers. On the other, it stimulated those citizens to aim at opening up even more space and reinvigorated their demands for social and political rights.

Against that background, in the 1960s and 1970s in Kuwait there were differing developments as to women’s participation. There were still calls for women’s ‘emancipation’ from an Arab nationalist perspective. At the same time Islamist organisations started to emerge that opposed women’s increased public participation. It was a period of unprecedented economic growth, and during the 1960s the feminisation of the workforce was started, as was the campaign for female suffrage. Women’s associations were founded, Kuwait University opened its doors (to both women and men, with mixed courses), and calls for gender equality continued in the 1970s with the discussion in the National Assembly of the Equal Rights Bill. The idea of creating public spaces only for women briefly came up in the 1960s and did not go uncontested, to then not return until after the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation in the early 1990s.

Kuwait gained independence from the British in 1961 and Sheikh ‘Abdallah III Al-Salim Al Sabah became amir. Kuwait joined the Arab League in 1961 and became a UN member state in 1963. In line with the aforementioned unwritten accord between the Al Sabah and the merchant families, the social and political rights that Kuwaiti citizens had been demanding were finally laid down in a constitution, which was ratified in 1962, and the National Assembly established (Matthiesen 2013: 104). The constitution guarantees every Kuwaiti national, male and female, the right to an education (article 40) and a job (article 41). The constitution also refers to equality on the basis of for example race and religion (article 29), but not to gender equality.

During this time, as was the case in many other post-independence countries such as Egypt, independence from Britain gave Kuwaitis a new framework for public activism. Women who wanted to speak out or become active in politics could now appeal to a nationalist discourse (González 2013: 9), as women had done elsewhere (for example in Egypt) after independence from colonial power. Arab nationalism became the dominant political ideology. Secular groups, especially Arab nationalist and leftist groups, dominated the opposition in Parliament as well as civil society. The opposition’s wishes included political reform, more individual rights, and the emancipation of women (al-Mughni 2010b: 169).

Simultaneously, in the 1960s Islamist groups gradually gained influence. In
the 1950s, Islamist groups had only played a minor role in Kuwait, when members of the Muslim Brotherhood had fled to Kuwait due to Nasser’s crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood after a Muslim Brotherhood-led attempt on his life in 1954. But since the 1960s, especially the Islamist reformers of the Social Reform Association (Jam'iyya al-Islah al-Ijtima'i or Islah) “campaigned vigorously for strict adherence to Islamic mores and the institution of the Shari'a as the source of legislation” (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72). They called for the prosecution of zina (adultery - sometimes also in the sense of talking to, touching, or being alone with unrelated men), the prohibition of alcohol, the veiling of women, and the segregation of the sexes (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72).

The development of increasing influence of Islamist groups in the 1960s and 1970s was reinforced by the social liberalism of the 1960s as Islamists considered this trend to be responsible for a host of social problems, including alcoholism, youth delinquency, Westernisation, and a breakdown in family structures (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72).

The government at this time, keen to counterbalance the Arab nationalist stream that had been gaining ground in society, encouraged the strengthening of Islamic beliefs in society. Imams gained influence, Friday sermons became more popular, and Islah’s membership increased (al-Mughni 2001: 41). When in 1967 Arab armies were defeated in the Six Day War, the appeal of Arab nationalism declined dramatically. The vacuum was filled by an increased religiosity and mostly by the Muslim Brothers, who had been dominating the Islamist stream in Kuwait.

In 1961, at a time when Islamist groups were gaining influence in Kuwait, the Council of Education decided to restrict employment opportunities for women within ministries to three ministries. Foreign women however would be allowed to work in these ministries (al-Mughni 2001: 59-60).174 Al-Mughni argues that the intention of the Council was to have sex segregation in the workplace. Kuwaiti women, among whom daughters of council members, protested the decision publicly (al-Mughni 2001: 60). Eventually the Council of Education withdrew the decision and in 1962, two merchant-class women took up jobs with the broadcasting station while other women joined the Foreign Ministry (al-Mughni 2001: 60).

174 In her book, al-Mughni recounts of a woman asking whether this implies that foreign women are not sharifa (respectable) and that Kuwaiti women are incapable of preserving their honour (sharaf) in a mixed government environment. Al-Mughni does not specify which ministries they were. During fieldwork I learnt that the Ministry of Awqaf as well as the Ministry of Education have separate offices for women and men. The Awqaf ministry maintains a women’s page that deals mainly with ‘women’s issues’ such as family matters, as well as religious advice and recipes: http://site.islam.gov.kw/woman/Pages/ar/Default.aspx. Website accessed 9 November 2014. There is no such separate page for men.
The young women who had studied in Egypt and who, once in Cairo, had stopped wearing the veil, had to don the hijab upon return to Kuwait if they wanted to work for the government (al-Mughni 2001: 59). Due to their protest, in 1961 the government dropped the condition that a woman should veil if employed by the government (al-Mughni 2001: 59).

In 1963, the Kuwaiti National Assembly convened for the first time to vote (Cleveland 2000: 450). There was no universal suffrage; the first post-independence Electoral Law stipulated that only Kuwait adult men whose ancestors lived in Kuwait before 1920 were allowed to vote (Cleveland 2000: 450). The forum, albeit limited, for public discussion that Kuwait’s National Assembly offered was a unique characteristic of Kuwait during the oil era. While municipal elections had taken place in Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province in the 1950s (Matthiesen 2014) and also in Kuwait, none of the Gulf states offered a platform of national consultation similar to Kuwait’s National Assembly. However, as we have seen above, women were not allowed to vote. So when in 1963 the first Parliament was inaugurated, women protested the withholding of their political rights in a public demonstration where they burned their abayas (Badran 1998: 191). This signalled the beginning of Kuwaiti women’s call for suffrage.

In 1963, inspired by the calls for women voting, women formed their first associations. In that year, the Women’s Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) was formed, providing merchant class women with a meeting space and vehicle for charity work, without challenging the status quo of the position of women in Kuwaiti society (al-Mughni 1996: 33). In 1963 also, the Arab Women’s Development Society (AWDS) was established. Contrary to WCSS, they did engage with issues such as gender equality and women’s rights. Challenging official policies related to women’s issues and consisting mainly of middle-class women, AWDS took up issues such as the restriction of polygamy, women’s citizenship rights, and female suffrage (al-Mughni 1996: 33). All these women’s organisations were organisations by women for women.

By 1965 there were more foreign workers in the country than Kuwaiti nationals: the third national census showed that only 47% of the residents was Kuwaiti (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 405). From the government’s side concerns arose about the influence of this development on the political stability of the country as it regarded these foreign workers as politically dependable.

As we have seen, the government had already in the 1950s started to realise that the development of the oil economy and the modern state required widening

---

175 By the mid 1980s it was estimated that 60% of the population of the country were non-nationals (Cleveland 2000: 452).
education opportunities for women and drawing graduated Kuwaiti women into the labour force. In that way, they could eventually decrease the country’s dependence on foreign labour (al-Mughni 1996: 32-33).176

One of the results of the government’s development plans in this area was the opening in 1966 of Kuwait University.177 The university was not gender-segregated; men and women took courses together. Since there were not yet enough Kuwaiti educators to staff Kuwait University, the professors at that time were almost all Egyptian or Palestinian. It was not until the 1970s that the privately funded British and American primary and secondary schools were founded. As opposed to government primary and secondary schools, the American (ASK)178 and British Schools of Kuwait (BSK)179 were and are mixed.

With more women graduating from university, a demand rose for jobs for women. Education policy by the Kuwaiti government did not have the intention to subvert existing gender roles, but rather to employ women in jobs that were regarded as suitable to their nature. In line with that idea, at first women only worked in education and healthcare (al-Mughni 2001: 63).

Encouraged by the government, merchant-class women started to participate more often in the labour market. Yet, the increased labour participation of merchant class women did not extend to lower class women. With the economic rise, lower class men started to earn a steady income and that reduced the economic need for women to work. Increasingly, they stayed at home. Also, services of these lower class women such as midwifery, sewing, and working as a servant were no longer in demand as middle class women preferred to give birth in hospital, go to a tailor, and employ foreign servants (al-Mughni 2001: 62). The gap between middle class and lower class women widened.

In response to the increasing numbers of foreign workers, the government under amir Sabah al-Salim (r. 1965-1977) developed five-year plans that recommended Kuwaitisation of the labour force by replacing foreign workers with Kuwaiti citizens. The government was thinking along the same strategic lines

---

176 From the 1950s onwards the developing oil economy not only influenced city planning, financed by its revenues, but also the labour market. It caused a large influx of migrant workers: the enormous economic growth attracted many foreign workers, especially from Egypt and India. The government stimulated this mass migration as it was facing a labour shortage for its grand infrastructural projects (Al Sabah 2013: 3). This influx started in the 1950s when the new welfare system expanded so much that many Kuwaitis found it more profitable not to work, and increasingly migrant workers had to be employed (Casey 2007: 61).

177 For more information about Kuwait University, see http://kuweb.ku.edu.kw/. Website accessed 16 April 2015.

178 For more information about the ASK, see www.ask.edu.kw/. Website accessed 16 April 2015.

179 For more information about the BSK, see www.bsk.edu.kw/. Website accessed 16 April 2015.
as the young Kuwaiti men who had suggested the participation of women in the labour force to replace foreign men. In its first 5-year development plan (1966) the government advised the entry of Kuwaiti women into the labour market (feminisation) in order to limit the influx of migrant workers (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 405).

When women started working it depended on them and their family whether to ask for segregation. If they did not want to mix with men, they would for example become a teacher in primary school as these were gender segregated. If she or her family did not object to working with men, she could for example work with a television company. At that time, women did not work in the oil industry as it was considered a man’s job.

Islamist reformers, however, regarded the participation of women in the labour force as tantamount to neglecting family duties (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72). They agreed that there might be a need for Kuwaiti women to work, but only in positions where they neither competed nor associated with men. They were supporters of gender-segregated institutions such as girls’ schools where women could work separate from men and thus serve and compete with women only (al-Mughni 1996: 2001). With Kuwait’s secular groups dominating both Parliament and civil society in the 1960s, this call for gender-segregation in Kuwait at this time never gained enough traction to be implemented at that time.

In 1973, two issues from aforementioned AWDS’s Equal Rights Bill were discussed in the National Assembly: the enfranchisement of women and restrictions on polygamy (Feldman 2011: 92). In the fierce debate that took place in the National Assembly the majority of representatives positioned themselves against the bill. They argued that:

“The liberation of women [...] did not mean wearing miniskirts, driving a car or being a paid worker, in other words, ‘blindly imitating Western women.’ Islam laid down the principles of women’s liberation within a context of respect and dignity” (al-Mughni 2001: 84).

The Bill’s supporters were the nationalists and some liberal-minded merchants whose daughters were involved in the women’s rights campaign. The issue was not voted on as the debate was inconclusive and the Bill was referred to the Legal Affairs Committee of the National Assembly for ‘further study’ (al-Mughni 1996: 33). When a few months later the campaign for the next Assembly began, the women’s issue became a part of the nationalists’ campaign, focusing on women’s political rights and their employment opportunities (al-Mughni 2001: 86).
In August 1976, the amir dissolved the National Assembly, saying it did not work in the national interest because of, as he saw it, endless debates that led to stalled development projects and unapproved budgets (Davidson 2013: 29). He suspended several articles of the constitution, and curtailed freedom of the press as a response to local student demonstrations in support of the Palestinian cause, regional opposition groups in Bahrein, Oman, and elsewhere in the Gulf, and against the civil war in Lebanon in which Syria was intervening (al-Mughni 2001: 40-41).

It is difficult to ascertain to what extent, but since Saudi Arabia at the time was asserting its leadership over the smaller Gulf states, Saudi pressure to dissolve the National Assembly also played a role in the amir’s decision to suspend Parliament (Gause 2010: 39). That same month, Kuwait signed a $400 million arms deal with the Soviet Union, an assertion of independence from the strongly anti-communist Saudis (Gause 2010: 40). Only in 1979 after the Iranian revolution, when the amir expected more support from the Assembly due to doubts about Iran’s intentions in the region and Kuwait, he re-convened the National Assembly (Davidson 2013: 29).

The 1970s also saw an important economic development. Due to the 1973 oil embargo, oil prices went up significantly. From a poor backwater Kuwait became one of the richest states in the world (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995b: 403). Yet, in 1973, Kuwait got a taste of what was to come in 1990. Iraq demanded two of Kuwait’s offshore islands while Iraqi forces occupied a post on Kuwaiti territory. The Arab League and Saudi Arabia responded and Iraq was forced to withdraw from Kuwaiti territory (Gause 2010: 36). Three years later, in 1976, there were renewed border tensions between Iraq and Kuwait. In 1977 Iraq and Kuwait agreed to mutual troop withdrawals and to establish a committee that was to resolve the border issue (Gause 2010: 38).

Against this background, and while other Arab countries had already nationalised their oil industries (and Iran as early as 1951), in 1975 the Kuwaiti government assumed full control of the Kuwait Oil Company. The country was now an important player in the international oil business. As a result, the government wanted to enhance its presence in the central Kuwait City area by designating it as the area where government buildings such as the National Assembly, National Museum, and National Bank would be built. Islamic architecture was on the rise elsewhere in the region too and the Western architects commissioned by the government for the design of the new buildings were instructed to ensure the

---

180 Kuwait Oil Company, see www.kockw.com/sites/EN/Pages/Profile/History/SignificantDates.aspx. Website accessed 20 February 2015.
architecture of the buildings would be Islamic in character (al-Nakib 2013: 20). As such, it perfectly represented “the dual image the state wanted its capital city to project: a deep-rooted past combined with a grand modern future” (al-Nakib 2013: 20).

Here, the state issued a new promissory note of modernity, that of a heritage modernity, rooted in local Islamic heritage. The stress on the deep-rooted, Islamic, past in combination with a modern future is new. Whereas before, the state framed its view of modernity in opposition to Kuwait’s poor pre-oil past, now it invoked Kuwait’s local Islamic past as central to its conception and framing of modernity. It invoked Islam as heritage, not as piety, with its commissioning of new buildings in the style of Islamic architecture. It also fit with the Al Sabah’s strategy of limiting the increasing influence of the Arab nationalists by giving more space to the Islamists. This is reflected in the state’s projecting into society its promissory note of an Islamic heritage modernity.

The islamisation of society: renewal (tajdīd) and the consolidation of Islamist groups (1978-1989)

The year 1979 was a tumultuous one for Kuwait and the Gulf, with the Iranian revolution, the 1979 siege on the Great Mosque in Mecca, the Qatif uprising in Saudi Arabia, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, and the eve of the Iran-Iraq war. These regional developments were a grave cause of concern to the Kuwaiti government. It feared Iranian involvement with its Shi‘i population and that the Iranian revolution might inspire the Muslim Brotherhood to think that their project too could be successfully implemented. For these reasons the Al Sabah, in the late 1970s, early 1980s, gave more space to religious movements – the same strategy the Al Sa‘ud pursued at that time. In particular, the state started supporting the Salafis, to divide the Sunnis (Pall 2014: 65).181

Simultaneously, there was a trend to protect society from outside influences. In 1978, amir Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah (r. 1977-2006) gave a speech in which he stressed his government’s strategy of ‘renewal’ (tajdīd):

---

181 In the aftermath of the 1967 defeat, the Salafis were not yet very influential in Kuwaiti society. Nevertheless, they were present in diwaniyyat to transmit their message and to teach, especially when members of influential merchant families became sympathisers of these preachers (da‘is). In the late 1970s the influence of the Salafis increased because many important members of big families became supporters and because, as explained in the text, the Kuwaiti state started supporting them. In the beginning of the 1980s the Salafi movement became organised, and remained united until the Gulf War. A schism occurred during and after the liberation (Pall 2014: 63-67).
“These days in Kuwait there is a clear movement for renewal (tajdid). [We now have] a new national anthem, a new pledge of allegiance to the nation (rather than to the amīr), and a new cabinet ... And what about religion? The constitution declares Islam to be a source of legislation – so what is new here? The renewal is in the Islamization of the state, in the way that the state will apply religious rules in all spheres ... Renewal means changing the present order into a new order (al-Mujtama’, 16: 390: 4 as quoted in Tétérault and al-Mughni 1995a: 71-72).

_Tajdid_ means the revival of Islam in order to reform and purify society. Jansen (2012) describes that the term _tajdid_ was often used in books dealing with the renewal of the Arab Muslim world in confrontation with the West, for example in the book _The Renewal of Arab Thinking_ (Tajdid al-fikr al-‘arabi) by the Egyptian writer Zaki Mahmud (1905-93). The book argues that “every culture is a collection of techniques, values, beliefs, utensils, etc., and that modern Arab culture should not simply imitate the West but has carefully to select the elements which it wants to take over from the West in order to create a new, cohesive culture that is truly both modern and Arab at the same time” (Jansen 2012).

Declaring the official Islamisation of society so openly, and positioning Islam as piety rather than as for example heritage, which we saw before, shows clearly that the Al Sabah believed it opportune to align itself more evidently with Islam. As we have seen in Chapter 2, the king of Saudi Arabia opted for the same strategy in light of the internal and regional political developments in Saudi Arabia at that time. The policy of _tajdid_ also shows a desire on the part of the Al Sabah to issue into society a new promissory note of modernity, namely that of an enchanted (cf. Deeb 2006), Islamic, Arab modernity: a future that is modern and Islamic and Arab.

The Kuwaiti amir pursued this policy for two reasons. First of all, on a political level the government felt that it had to align itself more closely with Islamists because the strength of the Islamist movement was growing fast. In their protest against the aforementioned constitutional suspension of 1976, Islamists had associated themselves with the (secular) opposition (Tétérault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72). The government hoped, with this realignment, to counter-balance and weaken the secular opposition.

Secondly, on the level of the population and its loyalty to the Al Sabah, the popular adherence to Islamic values and principles suited the interests of the regime (Tétérault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72). The Arab nationalists had called for
democratisation and individual rights, whereas the Islamists propagated *intima’* (belonging), discipline, the preservation of traditional family forms and obedience to political authority. Against the background of the secular Arab nationalists’ demands for democratisation, the amir saw the Islamists as acting in his interest (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 72). The support of the Kuwaiti government for Islamist groups was mirrored in other Gulf states at that time as those governments too attempted to counter the rise of secularists and reformists (Al Sabah 2013: 55).

The vacuum that was created by the suspension of the National Assembly between 1976 and 1981 gave more space to imams and the Islah party’s membership increased. In the 1980s, more women started wearing the hijab. As Islamist groups became more influential in Kuwait in the 1980s, this decade also saw the birth of numerous Islamic groups. In 1981 for example, the Salafi Revival of Islamic Heritage Society (*Ihya’ al-Turath al-Islami*) and two Islamic welfare organisations were licensed by the state. *Ihya’ al-Turath* was founded as a charity but also covered other issues. In the 1981 elections for example, *Ihya’ al-Turath* members ran for Parliament (Pall 2014: 65-66).

Also two Islamist women’s organisations were licensed (al-Mughni 2010b and Badran 1998: 192). One of these was Bayader al-Salam, whose primary activity is the teaching of Islam. In response to its success, which was seen by other Islamic organisations as competition, the Muslim Brotherhood started its women’s committee. Islamist groups had gained the majority in the Kuwaiti National Student Union elections in the late 1970s. While they supported women’s right to vote, they were against women running for political office, showing their awareness of the instrumentalist importance of women’s votes to the Brotherhood’s political ambitions (Badran 1998: 192). Women were expected to vote for male Muslim Brotherhood candidates, thus strengthening the organisation’s political clout, but were not seen as suitable candidates themselves.

In 1982, sheikha Latifa, the wife of the then Crown Prince and prime minister, founded the Islamic Care Society (ICS). In this attempt to control and gain ground in the Islamist field, the state presented its own Islamic alternative to the women’s organisations of the Muslim Brotherhood and Bayader al-Salam (Badran 1998: 192). The ICS fit the ruling family’s agenda of Islamisation (see the amir’s *tajdid* speech of 1978) and stressed the importance of piety and domesticity of women and opposed the extension of political rights to women (Badran 1998: 192). The ICS also fit the Al Sabah’s policy at that time of, as Meshal Al Sabah calls it, divide and conquer: pleasing either the Islamists or the liberals, whichever is politically opportune (Al Sabah 2013: 4). Now it was politically favourable for them
to support the Islamists.

In this changing context, many writings on Islam and women’s rights and duties were published:

“Although there was no consensus as to what place women should occupy in society, most of the religious groups called for a return to traditional female virtues and morality. Women were defined as having moral duties to strengthen family ties, to raise good children and to defend the traditions and customs of society. A body of discourse was generated to justify the importance of women’s domestic role, emphasizing natural differences between men and women to rationalise asymmetrical gender relations in society” (al-Mughni 1996: 34).

These discourses were reflected in Parliament, as it tried to grapple with proposed legal changes in the area of the position of women in Kuwaiti society, in the issue of female suffrage, and in the diwaniyyat.182

In 1981 the voting rights of women came up once more as the government had shown only a slight interest in extending to women the right to vote. A member of Parliament presented a bill amending articles 1 and 19 of the electoral law, which would grant women active though not passive voting rights. The bill was discussed but rejected in January 1982 because many members of Parliament who had been expected to vote in favour of the bill, abstained out of fear that female voting behaviour would strengthen the position of the Islamists in the Assembly (al-Mughni 2001: 143). It had been, after all, women who had voted the Muslim Brotherhood into control of the national Student Union, the Teachers Union, and other voluntary associations.

Like the National Assembly at the time, diwaniyyat, too, were men-only, as prescribed by custom. Six months before the 1990 Iraqi invasion however Rasha Al Sabah, protected by her status as a member of the Al Sabah ruling family, opened her mixed, women-run diwaniyya. Visitors were mainly secular liberals, but Islamists, too, came to participate in the discussions, in which women’s suffrage was central. Rasha Al Sabah’s diwaniyya was one of the first to re-open after the liberation and placed women’s rights at the centre of attention (Badran 1998: 200). Women are not prohibited from organising diwaniyyat, nor is there a

---

182 A diwaniyya is a semi-public meeting place and social structure offering space for visitors to gather and exchange ideas. Most diwaniyyat take place on a set day of the week and people tend to frequent one or two diwaniyyat over a long period of time.
law against mixed diwaniyyat, but in practice this rarely happens.

In 1982, the suq al-manakh (an informal Kuwaiti stock market) crashed, causing a financial crisis in Kuwait. The oil price decreased as a result of the financial crisis. Simultaneously, the Iran-Iraq war had forced Iraq to borrow money abroad to finance its war efforts. Kuwait and Saudi Arabia together supplied Iraq with between $50 and $60 billion worth of wartime assistance (Cleveland 2000: 404). Added to this was the oil glut of the 1980s, and the oil price collapsed. In Kuwait, as we have seen, the desire for women-only public spaces had not developed. But even if it had, due to the suq al-manakh crash and the resulting decline of the oil price, the money would not have been there to finance these women-only public spaces. The women-only spaces that were initiated came from the private sector and as such were privately financed.

However, throughout the 1980s, having contained the threat of the Arab nationalists by giving more space to the Islamists, the government saw itself facing a new challenge: strong and vocal Islamist groups. Within the context of the aforementioned events elsewhere in the region and the world, the government’s policy in the second half of the 1980s became one of containing the Islamists. It attempted to do so by throwing its weight in with the liberals that they hoped might contain the Islamists. During the 1985 National Assembly elections for example, the government gave its full support to the liberals (al-Mughni 2001: 41-42).183

The Gulf War (1990-1991)

Early in 1990, tensions rose between Kuwait and Iraq, following on the events as described in this Chapter’s section on Arab nationalism and the rise of Islamist groups. The 1990 Iraqi military build-up took place against the background of the first intifada, the fall of the Berlin Wall that led to the emergence of the US (Israel’s ally) as the sole superpower in the region, and the break-up of the Soviet Union leading to mass migration of Russian Jews to Israel. Saddam Husayn became the champion of the Palestinian cause. He argued that only Arab military parity with Israel could force the Israelis into making peace with the Palestinians (Cleveland 2000: 463). This gave Saddam much goodwill among Arabs.

After a series of diplomatic incidents in early 1990, in May 1990 Saddam Husayn at an Arab League summit exclaimed that some Arab oil producers were overproducing their OPEC quotas and were therewith waging “a kind of war

---

183 A year later, on 3 July 1986, the amir suspended the National Assembly.
against Iraq” (as quoted in Gause 2010: 96). Then, on 2 August 1990, Iraq invaded and annexed Kuwait. Coalition forces were stationed in Saudi Arabia (Operation Desert Shield) to protect Saudi Arabia’s borders. Saudi Arabia too felt under threat of invasion and together with the US administration it feared Iraqi military action near its important oil fields in the Eastern Province (al-Rasheed 2010: 158). Nevertheless, there never was evidence that Saddam Hussein indeed intended to continue his expansion into Saudi Arabia (Gause 2010: 105).

Iraq occupied Kuwait for seven months, a time during which women from all social strata took on a central role in the resistance against the occupation; they were called samidat (the steadfast) (Badran 1998: 194). Three days after the occupation started, 400-500 women took part in a demonstration that started at the ‘Adaliyah mosque. The women who in the 1960s had burned their abayas to protest their lack of voting rights now wore their abayas for protection and to increase their freedom of movement. Young women who had never worn the abaya before did the same. They all chanted slogans that rejected the occupation of their country (Badran 1998: 194). The women returned to the mosque after the demonstration, where they exchanged contact details and subsequently set up the core of what would become the resistance network during the war (Badran 1998: 194).

“The abaya did not signal a retreat of women to the privacy of the home. On the contrary, the abaya facilitated women’s public roles and movements under siege. The abaya rendered women anonymous, hid their sexual attractiveness, and facilitated the carrying of arms and information. The abaya had no religious or cultural significance, but became a weapon in the defence of women and the nation” (Badran 1998: 195).

The dual role that women took on during the war – that of keeping their families together and of active resisters - would open up new possibilities for women after the war (Gonzáles 2013: 9, Al Sabah 2013) and would encourage Kuwaiti women after the war to continue demanding more rights, such as female suffrage.

The period after liberation (1990s)

In the 1990s, the state’s promissory note of the 1960s and 1970s of modernity rooted in Islamic heritage resonated. With the restoration of historic places such as al-suq al-dakhili in the City area, the Minister of Public Works in 1990 argued
that “the preservation of heritage was a sign of ‘urban progress’ and would enhance Kuwait’s modern image” (al-Nakib 2013: 22). The preservation of the old, juxtaposing the new, would evoke a “counter-modern other at the heart of the modern city” (Dennis as quoted in al-Nakib 2013: 24). Thus, visible in city architecture is the state’s drive to position itself as a proponent and protector of modernity and modernisation while reminding the population of their pre-oil, economically deprived past. Simultaneously, the state encouraged the development of a ‘modernist Islamic discourse’ in society.

The occupation was ended by direct military intervention by United States-led forces, and the Iraqis were ousted in February 1991 with Operation Desert Storm (Gause 2010: 113-114). Around 773 Kuwait oil wells (85% of all) were set ablaze by the retreating Iraqi army, resulting in a major environmental and economic catastrophe. Kuwait’s infrastructure was badly damaged and had to be rebuilt. In March 1991, the amir returned to Kuwait and a three-month period of martial law ensued. On April 3, UN Resolution 687 was adopted, setting forth the terms of a formal cease-fire agreement in the Gulf War. Iraq accepted the resolution on April 6 (Cleveland 2000: 471).

Kuwait faced an economic crisis due to a lack of oil revenues and the need to pay between $16 and $20 billion to the US for operation Desert Storm. The country ran a series of deficit budgets and liquidated foreign investments as damage control (Cleveland 2000: 476). The dire economic situation, the presence of foreign troops, and the government’s financial management and pro-Western outlook led to protests from seculars, liberals and Islamists.

Also, families who had fled to Saudi Arabia – due to intermarriage between Kuwaitis and Saudis many Kuwait families had relatives to whom they could turn during the war – came back after the war. They took with them conservative ideas, that had been strengthened during their sojourn in Saudi Arabia. This influenced Kuwaiti society. Another factor that freed the way for Islamists was that after the liberation, leftists and supporters of pan-Arabism (the propagation of which was one of Saddam’s legitimisations for his invasion of Kuwait) were regarded as suspect. Kuwaiti Islamist groups that previously had only been active in charity and philanthropy started to form political organisations, with the goal of instituting shari’a as the main source of legislation (al-Mughni 2010b). Also, the Muslim Brotherhood’s influence increased after the liberation because they had been instrumental in organising resistance. Islamists’ stance in the post-liberation period was connected to the women’s issue:
“Kuwait’s Islamists framed the invasion and war to fit their own agenda, contending that the events signalled God’s displeasure with the Kuwaitis’ lavish lifestyle. Only by returning to Islam (including the control of women), they argued, could Kuwaitis guard against further divine retribution. This argument resonated with the people and won government support” (Foley 2010: 26).

Kuwaiti Islamists performed well in Parliamentary elections in the 1990s. Saudi Arabia too, where Islamist opposition pre-dated the Gulf war, experienced a strengthening of Islamist opposition that voiced its disagreement with the government after the Gulf War (al-Rasheed 2010: 159).184

In the mid-1990s the Kuwaiti government re-evaluated its relationship with the Islamists, and encouraged the development of a ‘modernist Islamic discourse’ in society (al-Mughni 2010b). This mainly played out with respect to Islamist women’s groups, who articulated new roles for women from an Islamist perspective as well as new political rights for women such as suffrage. Balancing its interests and trying to appease all groups, at the same time the government directed its interests towards liberal groups advocating the separation of religion and state.

The struggle between secularists and Islamists played out on gender grounds (Badran 1998: 203) during this period. This struggle translated into a change in women’s dress, resonated within the educational system, played a part in the labour market as well as women’s organisations, and became clear in the suffrage issue as well as other forms of post-liberation gender control.

While the abaya had been on the decline since the 1960s, during the Iraqi invasion women had, out of a sense of pragmatism, started wearing it again so as to increase anonymity and to ease the smuggling of weapons, medicine, food, and documents (Al Sabah 2013: 32-35). During the 1980s, gradually more women had started to wear the hijab and after the liberation it became more visible in the public space (Badran 1998: 203), reflecting the increasing influence in post-liberation Kuwait of Islamist organisations such as the Muslim Brotherhood. It enabled women’s movement in public rather than indicating a separation from society (Badran 1998: 202-203).

At Kuwait University, the Dean of the Medical Faculty of Kuwait University upheld a university rule that women were not allowed to wear niqabs and gloves in the dissection halls. As a response, and within a year after liberation, explosives

---

184 See Chapter 2.
were set off in protest at the Medical Faculty (Badran 1998: 203). In 1996, Parliament passed a law that required gender segregation at all government post-secondary schools in the country (Tétreault 2001: 213; Badran 1998: 203). The law was enforced in 2001. As only one public university – Kuwait University – exists in Kuwait, it was easier to implement this law than the 2000 law that instituted gender segregation in private post-secondary educational establishments. From then on, classes at Kuwait University were segregated by gender, but students still attended lectures on the same campus.

The new Kuwait University campus Shadadiya in Sabah al-Salem Kuwait University City will have separate areas for women and men, fully implementing the 1996 law. Two separate buildings are being built: one for male students, one for female students, with a river running between the two buildings cutting the campus into two. It is planned that staff can move around freely and that there will be no segregated offices. The campus has been under construction for years and it is unclear when construction will be finished.

As to women’s labour participation, by 1993 women’s labour participation rate had risen to 25% (from 2% in 1965). A large proportion of this percentage were teachers working in government schools, thus working separate from men (Tétreault and al-Mughni 1995a: 73). At the same time, women occupied ‘mixed’ positions such as vice-president of the Kuwait Oil Company and university rector, and in 1993 Nabila al-Mulla became the first female ambassador in the Gulf region (al-Mughni 2010a: 223-24).

In the same period, Islamist groups’ attempts to limit women’s public participation had an unintended consequence: that of the rise of Islamic feminism in Kuwait. The attempted limitations led to some Islamist women confronting Islamist men’s views on the position of women in Kuwaiti society (al-Mughni 2010b: 170). In the wake of Kuwait’s liberation in the 1990s, several prominent activist Islamist women, among them ‘Urub al-Rifa’i and Iqbal al-Mutawa’a emerged. This resulted from Islamist women’s involvement in the Islamist organisations’ women’s committees in the 1980s, as well as their role during the war. They became influential leaders articulating new roles for women from an Islamist perspective (al-Mughni 2010b: 171).

These Islamist activist women looked for ways to reconcile domestic responsibilities with employment, and from that perspective asked the

---

185 For more information about the construction programme of Kuwait University’s Shadadiya campus, see www.kuniv.edu/ku/Centers/ConstructionProgram/index.htm. Website accessed 16 April 2015.

186 For an analysis of the debate surrounding the building of the Shadadiya campus, see Chapter 5.
government to implement the idea of home-based jobs, allowing women to work from home. They also advocated the possibility of part-time employment (al-Mughni 2010b: 179). In both instances, the central issue was the reconciliation between women’s domestic duties and their employment, with home-based and part-time employment suiting ‘the nature of women.’

The war, thus, had increased women’s political and gender consciousness. Their loyalty in defending Kuwait during the war made for a compelling case for their political rights and brought the issue of women’s suffrage back to the forefront:

“In capturing their experience in resistance when they were at center stage, Kuwaiti women likened it to the old seafaring culture of the pre-oil era when women took charge during the long months when men were out on the ships. They projected this indigenous model of participation in the affairs of their society on their vision of a reconstructed Kuwait” (Badran 1998: 199).

Linking their gendered consciousness to the nation, women pressed the point that having played a central role in the resistance and having given their lives for their country, they should now be given their political rights of political participation and representation.

Interestingly, Islamist women who before the war had aligned themselves with their male counterparts against female suffrage had back then claimed aspiring to voting rights for women was part of a programme of Westernisation and had stressed the importance of a woman’s domestic duties. In 1990s post-invasion Kuwait however, these activists challenged the leadership and demanded a fair share in decision-making, arguing they were more than just potential votes. Due to the wartime experience, Islamist women now joined in with liberal women in favour of female suffrage and transcended the secular-Islamism divide of formal politics (al-Mughni 2010b: 175).

After liberation, the amir, at various occasions187 expressed his admiration for the role of Kuwaiti women during the war and stressed the need for more political participation of women (Al Sabah 2013: 36-37). In 1992, Amir al-Jaber gave in to international pressure and allowed for Parliamentary elections. The elections took place in the fall of 1992. Yet, in the run-up to the 1992 elections, there was a lack of support from men for female suffrage. Most Islamists now

---

supported women’s right to vote, but they did not want to allow women to be elected and voted into Parliament. Eventually, women were not allowed either to vote in or run for the 1992 elections.

Women’s right to vote was again brought up in Parliament in 1998, but was voted down by liberals and Islamists (all male) parliamentarians alike (González 2013: 11). The liberals voted against it because they feared it would strengthen voter turnout in favour of the Islamists and the Islamists opposed it for principled reasons. In 1999, the National Assembly again rejected granting women full political rights (Tètreault 2001: 213).

Arguing that lawmakers had abused their constitutional rights and thereby paralysed the decision-making process of the National Assembly, the amir dissolved it in 1999 over a row over 120,000 copies of the Qur’an with a misprint for which MPs held the Minister of Islamic Affairs responsible. In between two Parliaments, the amir issued a total of 60 decrees, one of which gave women full political rights (16 May 1999). The amir declared he had issued the decree out of personal conviction, but Al Sabah (2013: 114) recounts how observers believe it was more out of political opportunism and “as part of the struggle for power between the executive and the ruling family” using the decree as a stand-off between his cabinet and the National Assembly.

The decree was overturned by the newly-elected National Assembly in November 1999 (Tètreault 2001: 204; al-Mughni 2010a: 224). Activist women, protesting the overturning of the decree, organised dozens of demonstrations to try and get their names registered on ballots and to vote (al-Mughni 2010a: 224). The demonstrations had no effect and the women took it to court, where the cases were dismissed due to technicalities. This led to large demonstrations and international attention for the women vote issue (al-Mughni 2010a: 224). Nevertheless, the constitution’s formal commitment to equality encouraged women to continue fighting for their political rights (Tètreault 2001: 204).

Furthermore, Badran (1998: 203) argues that another factor of importance in the stalling of granting women voting rights was the influence of Saudi Arabia. With the role it played in the liberation of Kuwait and in regional politics, the country came with its own pressure on Kuwait. Badran maintains that with its lack of political rights for women (and men) at home, Saudi Arabia did not want its neighbour to grant women political rights because it might inspire their Saudi sisters to demand theirs.

The Islamist opposition won 35 out of the 50 National Assembly seats in the

188 Passive and active voting rights.
1992 elections and later that year passed several laws restricting women’s rights. Parliament also, however, ratified CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women), albeit with the provision that shari’a law was paramount and with reservations to article 7 (women’s right to vote - lifted in 2005) and article 9.2 (their right to passing on their nationality to their children) (Tétreault 2001: 213; al-Mughni 2010a: 224; Al Sabah 2013: 113-114). Strict citizenship laws were implemented, preventing Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaiti men from passing on their nationality to their children. Also, they are not able to pass on their citizenship to their non-Kuwaiti husbands, therewith causing “gender-specific harm” (Badran 1998: 203). Other forms of gender control emerged during this period, such as the creation of a society to promote polygamy (Badran 1998: 203) and the passing of an early retirement bill enabling mothers to spend more time on childrearing, which reaffirmed the gendered role of women as primary caregivers (al-Mughni 2001: 157).

Recent developments (2000s-2013)\textsuperscript{189}

In 2000, a law was passed by Parliament that forces private universities to gender-segregate their classes, in addition to the 1996 law that required Kuwait University to gender-segregate. As opposed to the 1996 law, the 2000 law is still not enforced, in part because of the high investment that is needed to build a separate infrastructure (Carnegie and Fride: 2008). Officially private, international universities in Kuwait such as the American University of Kuwait (AUK)\textsuperscript{190} are thus required by law to segregate but in practice, male and female students do take classes together (although they sometimes self-segregate within the classroom) and mix on the university’s grounds.\textsuperscript{191} The law was adopted for pragmatic reasons, mostly to appease the increasing religious influence after the Gulf War.

During the 2003 Iraq war, Kuwait served as a springboard for the U.S.-led campaign to oust Saddam Husayn. In the Parliamentary elections that were held that same year, both pro-government parties and Islamists did well.

In that same year, another government-sponsored bill that would give women

\textsuperscript{189} I restrict this historical chapter to developments up to and including 2013. I did my fieldwork in 2013 and the discussions in my fieldwork (see Chapter 4) took place within the historical and societal context of Kuwait until 2013. This historical chapter thus lays down the context of respondents’ positions and arguments at that time.

\textsuperscript{190} For more information about the AUK, see www.auk.edu.kw/index.jsp. Website accessed 16 April 2015.

\textsuperscript{191} Interview with Bidur, AUK lecturer, 20 November 2013.
active and passive voting rights did not make it through Parliament (al-Mughni 2010a: 224). But in March 2005, several public demonstrations for women’s right to vote took place outside of the National Assembly (al-Mughni 2010a: 238). Two months later, the amir issued a decree that would allow women to run and stand for elections, and Parliament approved it. Pressure from Islamist parliamentarians in the run-up to the issuance of the decree, however, meant that the law requires female voters and candidates to adhere to the principles and rules of the shari’a. In practice, this means the use of segregated polling stations (al-Mughni 2010a: 239) and an obligation for female parliamentarians to wear the hijab. As in 1999, the decision was perhaps not as principled as might seem.

The benefits for the amir of this 2005 decree granting passive and active voting rights to women were threefold. Firstly, there were the political benefits for him and his regime, because the decree put him on a human rights issue above Parliament, which had categorically rejected this issue (Tétreault 2001: 213). Secondly, the decree deepened divisions among various groups in society: “It was issued less than two weeks after the amir had dismissed the Parliament and called for new elections, requiring candidates to reveal their positions at a time that constituencies were highly mobilised around the issue of women’s rights” (Tétreault 2001: 213). This showed clearly and openly which groups were with, and which were against the amir on this issue. Thirdly, and as in Saudi Arabia, the women’s issue provided the regime with a way to divert attention from other issues, diverting attention away from struggles between the government and the opposition over other issues (Tétreault 2001: 214).

The first elections in which women were allowed to vote and run for office took place in 2006. Recognising women’s leverage in these elections, Islamist candidates such as Walid al-Tabtaba’i, who were vigorously opposed to women’s voting rights, decided to hold events for women to try and win their votes, setting up women-only sections in campaign tents (New York Times 2006a). The presence of women candidates in the election campaign also forced liberals and Islamists alike to acknowledge them while campaigning (González 2013: 11). A total of 253 candidates ran in the elections, including 28 women and more than 340,000 Kuwaitis voted, including around 195,000 women (New York Times 2006b). Eventually, no female candidates won any seats (al-Mughni 2010a: 224). They blamed a lack of preparedness and resources to set up viable campaigns for this and not religious or ideological obstacles. (González 2013: 11). In 2007, al-Haraka
al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya\textsuperscript{192} set up a women’s bureau to be able to campaign well during the elections, especially with the new pool of female voters.

In 2006, a draft bill dealing with maternity leave, social security, and housing that incorporated many of the Islamist women’s demands was put on the National Assembly’s agenda but ended up being withdrawn (al-Mughni 2010a). Central to the bill were home-based and part-time jobs. The central point in the Islamists’ approach was not to increase women’s participation through women-only public spaces but rather through reconciling increased public participation (i.e. through employment) with domestic responsibilities.

A 2008 announcement by the Minister of Higher Education to fully implement the law of segregation at private postsecondary institutions led to a division in the National Assembly between liberal members who opposed this move and conservative members who supported it (al-Mughni 2010a: 13). In February of that year a demonstration against segregation at university took place (*Kuwait Times* 2008). In that same year, Ghada co-founded the organisation The Voice of Kuwait (Sawt al-Kuwait) in response to those parliamentarians who had raised the issue of segregating private schools. Having her youngest daughter still in school and wanting to have the choice to keep her in mixed education, she decided to found an organisation that would argue for mixed secondary education so that parents would have the choice which type of school to send their children to. They centred their argument around the concept of “shared education” (*al-ta’lim al-mushtarak*) rather than mixed education (*al-ta’lim al-mukhtalat*) to emphasise the positive aspects of co-education and circumvent “the negative word of *ikhtilat*.”\textsuperscript{193} The organisation later grew into a movement to raise awareness of the Kuwaiti constitution.

In 2009, again elections took place, and 16 female candidates contested for 50 seats for a four-year term. Four female candidates won their seats and became Kuwait’s first female lawmakers: Dr Massouma al-Mubarak, Dr Aseel al-Awadhi, Dr Rola al-Dashti, and Dr Salwa al-Jassar (*New York Times* 2009).

In 2010 the new labour law was adopted. It does not mention a prohibition on *ikhtilat* in the workspace, but does ban women from working night shifts between 22:00 and 07:00 (Kuwait Labour Law Section 4 Article 22). This excludes hospitals and other care giving facilities where night shifts are requisite, yet the law requires employers to provide women with transportation services to and

\textsuperscript{192} The al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya (abbreviated as Hadas) is the Islamic Constitutional Movement and an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood. The group was founded shortly after the liberation.

\textsuperscript{193} Site visit to the organisation’s office and interview with Ghada, activist and co-founder of Sawt al-Kuwait in Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
from work and to guarantee women’s safety (Kuwait Labour Law Section 4 Article 22). Article 23 of the labour law, in addition, states that it is forbidden to employ women “(...) in jobs that violate morals and that exploit her femininity in violation of public morals. No woman shall be made to work at establishments that provide services exclusively for men.” So while no requirements as to gender segregation are set and article 23 stipulates that while women can work with men, the work environment may not be all-men.194

When a gulf of uprisings went through the region, Kuwait too was not immune to demonstrations. In 2011-2012, “Arab Spring”-like protests took place in Kuwait. In February and March 2011 for example, over a thousand bidun195 staged protests, demanding citizenship, jobs, access to education and healthcare, and other benefits available to Kuwaiti nationals (Davidson 2013: 136).

In December 2011, the amir dissolved Parliament, with new elections taking place in February 2012. The Islamist-led opposition won the majority. During the first half of 2012, they attempted to amend the constitution to make shari’a the rather than a source of legislation. In October 2012, Amir Sabah blocked the proposal.

In the wake of the unsuccessful proposal conservative lawmakers called for the introduction of a morality police to monitor the behaviour of women in public spaces (Foreign Policy 2012). They were, again, unsuccessful. At the same time, a Saudi fatwa that those who mix should be put to death met with much criticism and condemnation in Kuwait:

“Kuwaiti scholars claimed that such an edict could come only from a senile person or someone who wants to sow sedition in the nation by allowing the killing of innocent people. Leading Kuwaiti scholar Sheikh Ahmad Hussain blasted the fatwa, saying that Islam was very strict about killing people intentionally. “Officials need to step in promptly and make the authors of such edicts face legal measures to ensure no innocent people are killed or harmed by those who want to implement the fatwas,” said Dr Ajeel Al-Nashmi, head of the GCC


195 A diverse group of stateless people who at the time of Kuwait’s independence were not given Kuwaiti nationality (bidun jinsiyya - without nationality). Many bidun are born and raised in Kuwait but discriminated against and denied access to education, healthcare and work. For more information about the situation of the bidun see Human Rights Watch (2011), which includes the response of the Kuwaiti government to the report. Some Kuwaiti organisations too press for the rights of bidun, such as Bidun Rights www.bedoonrights.org. Website accessed 8 June 2016.
Religious Scholars League. [...] Kuwaiti scholar Shaikh Ahmad Hussain said, “All the Qur’anic teachings and the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) Sayings stress that killing is not allowed. God said that if you kill a believer, it is like you have killed all people” (Arab News 2010).

In the field of university education, however, mixing remained a contentious issue. The new Kuwait University campus that is being built in the area of Shadadiya will have strictly separate buildings for male and female students. This does not go uncontested: there was a debate about whether or not gender segregation in university grounds should be abolished, while women and men should still sit separately in the classroom (ArabianBusiness 2013). In practice, the Shadadiya campus has been under construction for many years and will not be finished soon.196

In these recent times, we can detect a promissory note of modernity with Islam as identity, to appease religious streams in society (mostly Islamist) through gestures such as the segregation law at university and the restrictions in line with the shari’a that came with the granting of women’s voting rights. This happened not out of considerations of piety (so not an enchanted modern), which was the case during the period of tajdid, but out of considerations of the identity of the country, balancing all streams in society, issuing into society a promissory note of modernity that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity, with Islam as part of that identity, deserving space and accommodation, rather than with Islam being invoked as piety or for pious reasons. Modernity, here, lies in integrating new developments into Kuwait’s existing identity. Part of that identity is Islam. Islam is invoked as part of modern Kuwait in the shape of the Kuwaiti national identity: of the country’s and the population’s roots, as a cultural point of reference, and as part of how norms and values are shaped. And so not as religiosity or as piety (as was the case in Saudi Arabia).

Inventory of ikhtilat and ‘for women only’ public spaces (2013)197

What is most visible in present-day Kuwait is ikhtilat. Areas where women and men do segregate are, as mentioned, mostly initiated in the private sector and

---

196 I will discuss the Shadadiya case in the Kuwait fieldwork chapter.

197 What follows is an inventory based on my fieldwork in Kuwait from September 2013 through December 2013. This section is based on fieldwork and not literature, because a comprehensive overview of women-only public spaces in Kuwait does not exist in the literature.
as such are privately funded. Women-only public spaces, such as beaches and theme parks, are much less visible than in Saudi Arabia. They are mostly organised by separate opening hours or days, or by ‘women-only’ and ‘men-only’ areas or floors, rather than separate buildings. While in Saudi Arabia the government demanded and financed them, in Kuwait, aside from several ministries, neither was the case. Both the practice and visibility of segregation therefore is much less in Kuwait than in Saudi Arabia. What follows below is an overview of places that I visited during my fieldwork that practice this type of segregation.

**Government**

As explained above, the Ministry of Awqaf as well as the Ministry of Education have separate offices for women and men, and Kuwait University gender-segregates its classes. While on fieldwork in the Fall of 2013 I visited the Kuwait Stock Exchange (KSE). It does not have a separate entrance for women and women enter the main trading hall (though only one woman was in the main trading hall when I visited).

Yet, at service counters men and women ‘self-segregate’: while there is no sign requiring the separation of the sexes, men queue on the left and women on the right. Since January 2003 the KSE has a Ladies’ Trading Hall, a spacious room where only women are allowed entry. KSE says that this women-only hall aids the entrance of women into the world of investing in the stock market effectively: whereas previously women would trade through intermediaries now they come and trade themselves. On the website of the Stock exchange this women-only hall is presented as “a step forward” (khatwa mutatawwira) on the part of the administration of the stock exchange “giving women the right” (tu’ti al-mar’a al-haqq) “to manage her own investments” (idarat istithmaratiha bi-nafsiha).

In December 2012, anti-government demonstrations took place in Kuwait City’s Irada square. The demonstrations were called for by Karamat Watan (A Nation’s Dignity), a coalition group of nationalists, liberals, Islamists, Salafis, and Shi’a. On December 12, the coalition on Twitter called for a sleep-over (mabit) in Irada square to stay overnight until the opening of the Parliament in the morning. There would be a separate place for women to take part. In Chapter 5 I will examine the call for the mabit and the arguments regarding ikhtilat and women-only public spaces that were used in the debate around the mabit issue in the

---

198 Site visit to the Kuwait Stock Exchange on 20 October 2013.


200 For more information about the Karamat Watan movement, see their website [https://karametwatan.wordpress.com](https://karametwatan.wordpress.com) and Twitter account @KarametWatan. Website and Twitter account accessed on 23 October 2013.
newspapers as well as among my interlocutors.

**Leisure**

Cultural events such as those organised at the Amricani Centre\(^{201}\) or events at the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya\(^{202}\) are mixed, and the audience does not ‘self-segregate.’ Most restaurants are mixed, as are queues for food courts in malls. All malls are mixed - although about Muhallab mall in Hawally\(^{203}\) the guard said that sometimes they have a no-single-men policy. Other public places such as the Kuwait Towers, the Ras al-Ard Sea Club, the Yacht club, and ‘Uqaila beach are also mixed public spaces.

Cinemas have separate though not women-only seating areas. For example, in the Grand Cinema in the chic Hamra’ mall the first three rows are for bachelors and the rest is mixed.\(^{204}\) All of Kuwait’s Cinescape cinemas, such as the one in the Muhallab mall in Hawally have a ‘bachelors’ section’ and a family section. Women sit in the family section.

Other leisure facilities operate with separate opening hours or days that are only for women. Entertainment City, an entertainment park, is open for families every day except Mondays which are allocated for women. There is no men-only or ‘bachelor’ day. The (commercial) Swimming Pool Complex on Arabian Gulf Street has a time slot for single men and for families but not especially for women.\(^{205}\) Since 2012, Messilah beach also has women-only days on Saturday, Monday, and Thursday. The rest are family days and there are no ‘bachelor’/men-only days. Entertainment City, the Swimming Pool Complex, and Messilah beach are all part of the privately owned Kuwaiti Touristic Enterprises Company (founded in 1976). So is Aquapark, a water park that has mixed days, days for families only, and since 2009 women-only days.

More ambiguous in terms of segregation was the Proud to Be Kuwaiti Festival that took place on 1 February 2014. Visitors had to enter through turn-styles, with two areas right next to each other: the one on the right was for women and family

---

\(^{201}\) Such as the Nuqt Creative Conference ‘Executing Culture Shock’ that I attended 7-9 November 2013 at the Amricani Centre. For more information about the conference, see the event’s website at www.nuqt.me/en/event/kuwait-conference-2013. Website accessed 5 November 2013.

\(^{202}\) Such as the lecture by Najat Sultan of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York City) on the “Sufi Romance of the Deccan: Illustrated Traditions of the Gulshan-o-Ishq” that I attended on 4 November 2013 or the play “Wasmiyah” that I attended on 11 November 2013 at Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya. For more information about Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, see http://darmuseum.org.kw/. Website accessed 12 February 2015.

\(^{203}\) Site visit to Muhallab mall on 14 October 2013.

\(^{204}\) Site visit to Hamra’ mall on 13 October 2013.

\(^{205}\) Site visit to the Swimming Pool Complex on Arabian Gulf Street on 17 September 2013.
only while the one on the left was for single men. However, as soon as one had entered the festival terrain, the whole area was mixed.

Separate seating areas (*kaba’in*) in restaurants in the conservative area of Jahra’ became an issue in the newspapers in the fall of 2013. Most restaurants in Kuwait are mixed although some might have an upstairs family section. Some restaurants, mostly located in the conservative area of Jahra’ but also for example Caesar restaurant in Hawally,\(^\text{206}\) have *kaba’in*, private, one-table seating areas that can be closed off to the outside. A group of Jahra’ residents had demonstrated against the *kaba’in*, demanding the closure of the restaurants. Others did not oppose them. In Chapter 5 I will analyse the arguments that were used in the media around this issue as well as those of my interlocutors.

An example of a women-only *diwaniyya* is that of Dr Aseel al-Awadhi. Today, only a few *diwaniyyat* such as that of Kuwaiti artist Thuraya al-Baqsam\(^\text{207}\) are open to both men and women. During recent elections campaigns however women did visit male *diwaniyyat* and female candidates organised their own *diwaniyyat* (Cofman Wittes 2007).

The only place where I came across strict gender segregation was at commercial gyms such as Champions Gym.\(^\text{208}\) These are women- and men-only. Both attendants and female clients explained to me they wanted the gym to be women-only because only without men around they could feel relaxed and comfortable doing physical exercise and feel free to move their body.

**Commercial sector**

Whereas in Saudi Arabia bank branches are women- or men-only (while headquarters may mix), in Kuwait there are no separate bank buildings for either sex. Some banks however, such as Bayt al-Tamwil and Bank Bubyan, have separate floors for men and women, with the bottom floor being for men and the top floor for women. When visiting the Bayt al-Tamwil branch in the Khaytan area of Kuwait City, employees explained to me that this separation depends on the area of the city the bank is in. For example, the Kuwait City branch of Bayt al-Tamwil does not have separate floors, while in Khaytan, a more conservative area, it does. The female employees explained to me that this is not to cater to them but rather to draw customers from the area and meet their wishes.\(^\text{209}\)

\(^{206}\) Site visit to Ceasar Restaurant on 15 October 2013.

\(^{207}\) I attended Thuraya al-Baqsam’s *diwaniyya* on 24 November 2013.

\(^{208}\) Site visit to Champions Gym on 20 September 2013.

\(^{209}\) Site visit to Bayt al-Tamwil’s Khaytan branch on 15 September 2013.
Kuwait’s pre-oil history is often invoked as an explanation of the visibility of *ikhtilat* in society today, positioning Kuwait as an outward-looking trade nation that was influenced by the cultures and peoples it traded with. In the pre-oil era, its connections with the world beyond the Arabian peninsula and a greater degree of sedentarisation gave Kuwait an open character. Women would run their homes and family affairs and finances during the long absences of the men, who were away from Kuwait pearl fishing or trading overseas. Life away from seclusion seems to have been for lower class women mostly. Lower class women worked, also mixing with men, to supplement the family income. Whereas women of the merchant class could afford to not work and therefore lived more secluded lives.

After the discovery of oil, the Kuwaiti government initiated plans for urban and social development, driven by the ideas of the Egyptian *Nahda*. Through these plans, the state issued into society a promissory note of a modernity that consisted of urban development, such as new buildings and a good infrastructure, in combination with social reform and progress such as housing, education, and health care. Driven by the ideological motor of the *Nahda*, it framed this modernity in contrast with and opposition to Kuwait’s poor pre-oil past.

Central to the idea of *Nahda* was breaking away from customs and traditions and moving forward, using concepts such as *taqaddum* (progress) versus *raj’iyya* (backwardness). Also the *Nahda*’s calls for women’s emancipation resonated in Kuwaiti society, and led men and later also women of the merchant classes to take up an interest in women’s ‘emancipation’ within the broader framework of a ‘renaissance.’ The discourse of this quest for modernity and progress resonated with the people: young Kuwaiti men and women, especially sons and daughters of the elite merchant families, also called for modernisation, to which the position of women in society was central. Oil wealth led to a desire among both the state and society to modernise quickly.

The Al Sabah positioned themselves as the ones who would take the population out of their pre-oil, poor, past and into the modern and developed future through infrastructural and social development programmes. Therewith, the Al Sabah consolidated their rule as the ones who would bring a new affluence. In this way, they framed themselves as the principal proponents, bringers, and negotiators of this modernity.

Oil money did not only influence city planning, but also the labour market, most notably in the 1960s. It led to government policies of Kuwaitisation and
feminisation of the labour market. Islamists reformers argued that there might be a need for Kuwaiti women to work, but only in positions where they neither competed nor associated with men. They were supporters of gender-segregated institutions, but with Kuwait’s secular groups dominating both Parliament and civil society in the 1960s, this call for gender segregation in Kuwait in the 1960s never gained enough support. When women started working, it depended on them and their family whether they asked for segregation. Merchant class women did not mind working with men and labour participation of merchant women was in the interest of men from their class. Thus, female labour participation was more a result of class than of gender interests.

By this time, Arab nationalism had become the dominant stream in Kuwaiti society. The government, wanting to counterbalance this development, now started giving more space to the Islamists. Additionally, with the growing importance of Kuwait in the international oil business, the government wanted to enhance its presence and visibility in Kuwait City. For that purpose, it commissioned architects to design buildings, that were distinctly Islamic in character. Visible in Kuwait’s distinctly Islamic architecture from this time is the state’s drive to position itself as a proponent and protector of modernity and modernisation while constantly reminding the population of their local Islamic past.

The aim was to project into society a promissory note of a modernity that was rooted in a local Islamic past and heritage: an Islamic heritage modernity. The focus on this Islamic past in combination with a modern future is new. Before, the state framed its view of modernity in opposition to Kuwait’s poor pre-oil past. Now, it appealed to Kuwait’s local Islamic past as paramount to its notion and framing of modernity. This is however different from the enchanted modern that we encountered in Saudi Arabia. Islam, here, is positioned as heritage rather than as piety, and so the way in which Islam is embraced into and invoked in the modern is different.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s through its policy of *tajdid* and its urban development and architectural plans the Al Sabah family once more gave off a clear message of how it viewed its future: as modern and Islamic and Arab at the same time. Induced by outside threats (the Iranian revolution, the siege on the Great Mosque in Mecca, and the Qatif uprising) and a fear this would spill over into Kuwait, the Al Sabah thought it timely to align themselves more clearly with Islam. They increased their support for space for Islamist organisations - most notably Salafis in order to divide the Sunnis. A new national anthem, a new cabinet, and a change of the pledge of allegiance to the nation instead of the amir consolidated an appeal to a distinct Arab identity. The policy of *tajdid* thus shows
a wish to issue into society a promissory note of an enchanted (cf. Deeb 2006), Islamic, Arab modernity.

During the course of the 1980s, Islamist groups consolidated in Kuwait, and more women’s organisations emerged. Due to financial circumstances, unlike Saudi Arabia at this time Kuwait did not have the financial means for women-only public spaces even had they wanted to develop these. The state presented its own Islamic alternative to the women’s organisations of the Muslim Brotherhood and Bayader al-Salam. These Islamic women’s organisations focused on women’s rights and duties, and argued for their passive (not active) voting rights.

When the Gulf War broke out, women from all social strata took on a central role in the resistance against the occupation. Within this nationalistic framework, no one, not even Islamists who had previously been opposed to it, seemed to mind women mixing with men. After the war however, claiming the war was God’s punishment of the Kuwaiti people for their loose morals, Islamists achieved success in gender-segregating Kuwait University (1996).

Their role in the war encouraged Kuwaiti women to continue demanding more rights after the liberation, such as female suffrage and a fair share in decision-making, arguing they were more than just potential votes. They thus linked their gendered consciousness to the nation and their role in it during the Iraqi occupation. The war had increased women’s political and gender consciousness.

After the liberation, there was a struggle in society between the liberals, secularists, and Islamists. The government tried to appease all groups by encouraging the development of a “modernist Islamic discourse” (al-Mughni 2010b) and by directing its interests towards liberal groups that advocated the separation of religion and state. This also played out on gender grounds. While in 1996, Parliament voted for gender-segregating Kuwait University, in 1999 the amir issued a decree giving women full political rights. It is unclear whether he did this out of conviction or political opportunism or both. The decree was overturned by the new Parliament later in 1999. The development of a ‘modernist Islamic discourse’ also speaks from Islamist women’s groups, who articulated new roles for women from an Islamist perspective. Islamist women now joined up with liberal women in favour of female suffrage. Their demands materialised in 2005. Importantly, in the 1990s, the state’s promissory note of the period of the 1960s and 1970s of a modernity rooted in Islamic heritage resonated. The restoration of historic places was a sign of progress that was to enhance Kuwait’s modern image.

The struggle between the liberals and the Islamists continues in recent times. For example, while the liberals continue to be opposed to gender-segregating
Kuwait University, Islamists are in favour and welcome the continuation of the building of the new, gender-segregated, Shadadiya campus. In the February 2012 National Assembly elections the Islamists won and proposed to have shari’a as the (rather than a) source of legislation – which the amir, subsequently, blocked. Also there were the restrictions in line with the shari’a that came with the granting of women’s voting rights. These developments happened not out of considerations of piety (so not an enchanted modern) but out of considerations of the identity of the country, balancing all streams in society, issuing into society a promissory note of modernity that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity, with Islam as part of that identity rather than with Islam being invoked for pious reasons. Modernity, then, lies in integrating new developments into Kuwait’s existing identity. Part of that identity is Islam. Islam is invoked as part of modern Kuwait in the shape of the Kuwaiti national identity: of the country’s and the population’s roots, as a cultural point of reference, and as part of how norms and values are shaped. And so not as religiosity or as piety (as was the case in Saudi Arabia).

Today, while women-only public places do exist in Kuwait, in the form of by women-only days or timeslots, or women-only and men-only floors, mixing is the most visible way of public interaction between women and men. As we shall see in the next chapter where I analyse my fieldwork material, *ikhtilat* is labelled as Kuwait’s ‘normality’ by most of the women I interviewed.

In short, in Kuwait’s history we can trace a development of the framing of modernity. In the period of the *Nahda*, modernity was positioned by the Al Sabah in opposition to Kuwait’s pre-oil, poor, past. In the 1960s and 70s, when Arab nationalism was around and simultaneously the influence of Islamist groups rose, the government framed an ‘Islamic heritage modernity,’ by positioning Islam as heritage rather than piety. During the policy of *tajdid* in the late 1970s through 1989, the promissory note of modernity that was projected into society was an Islamic, Arab, enchanted modernity. After the Gulf War, the promissory note of a herigate modernity resonated once more. Today, modernity is framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity. Where Islam is invoked, it is mostly as part of that identity rather than as piety.
Chapter 5 | Kuwait: women on gender-segregated, ‘for women only’ public spaces
In this chapter, I analyse my fieldwork material from Kuwait. First, I go into the conceptualisation of *ikhtilat* (gender mixing), its opposite *man‘ al-ikhtilat* (the lack of mixing between the genders), and *khilwa* in order to demonstrate how these concepts are used in Kuwait and how they reflect common practice in the country.

Second, I examine attitudes towards *ikhtilat*, *man‘ al-ikhtilat* and *khilwa* in the Kuwaiti media and by drawing on interviews with, as in Saudi Arabia, *da‘iyat*, activists, and business women. Through three case studies about the university, a demonstration, and restaurants, I will clarify which arguments are used in Kuwaiti newspapers in order to elucidate the context within which interlocutors express their views and the arguments they use to support these views.

I have chosen these three case studies of the university, a demonstration, and restaurants for three reasons: because they come up most regularly in interviews, because many interlocutors have experience with these spaces, and because each of them received coverage in Kuwaiti newspapers. Subsequently, I will analyse how the issues of *ikhtilat*, *man‘ al-ikhtilat*, and *khilwa* are connected to notions of gender, Islam, and Kuwaiti national identity. In the conclusion of this chapter I will address how this analysis is intertwined with interlocutors’ ideas about modernity and the ‘modern Kuwaiti nation.’

**Disentangling *ikhtilat*, *man‘ al-ikhtilat*, and *khilwa* in Kuwait**

In Kuwait, as opposed to Saudi Arabia, the public debate is not about *ikhtilat* but rather about its opposite: *man‘ al-ikhtilat* or the ban on *ikhtilat*. In my interviews with Kuwaiti activists, business women, and *da‘iyat* I asked after both concepts, *ikhtilat* and *man‘ al-ikhtilat*, as well as *khilwa*. As I will show, in Kuwait, there is not so much disagreement about what *ikhtilat* and *man‘ al-ikhtilat* are. *Khilwa*, however, while unequivocally defined and rejected in Saudi Arabia, is much more contested in Kuwait.

**Defining *ikhtilat***

First of all, activists and business women have a similar conception of what *ikhtilat* is. *Da‘iyat*, on the other hand, have a slightly different view. Activists and business women present *ikhtilat* as ‘normal,’ referring to *ikhtilat* as “normal life”\(^{210}\) and

\(^{210}\) Interview with Shirin, business woman, Kuwait City, 25 September 2013.
as something that “shouldn’t be an issue”\textsuperscript{211} and “has never been an issue in Kuwait.”\textsuperscript{212} These groups of interlocutors say that mixing between women and men is simply the way society has always been organised since the pre-oil days. Often women I interviewed, such as activist Latifa, added a variation along the lines of “It’s easier to define man’ al-ikhtilat, because that’s not normal,”\textsuperscript{213} saying that \textit{ikhtilat} is everywhere in Kuwaiti society and that they don’t have a problem with it.

Secondly, there is the linguistic definition of \textit{ikhtilat} that came up in interviews, the word meaning ‘mixture.’ Khawla, a \textit{da’iya}, explained to me: “\textit{Ikhtilat} in the meaning of the language is to mix. It is the merger of two things.”\textsuperscript{214} Rabi’, a business woman, also explained that in Arabic \textit{ikhtilat} means mixture, and that “different things are present in one place.”\textsuperscript{215} It is the latter that encapsulates part of the meaning of \textit{ikhtilat} in reference to the mixing of women and men in public spaces: the presence of women and men in a specific place.

Third, business women and activists both refer to \textit{ikhtilat} in terms of education. For example, Latifa, an activist who was involved in the campaign and demonstrations for voting rights for Kuwaiti women, referred to co-education when I asked her what, to her, \textit{ikhtilat} is:

“I think... I see co-education as a type of education that is about the boy and the girl thinking together. And I think this is one of the most important aspects of co-education.”\textsuperscript{216}

Latifa here looks at \textit{ikhtilat} from the perspective of boys and girls mixing at school or university. The aim of this \textit{ikhtilat} then is not the actual sitting next to each other, but the process of learning from the other. Latifa teaches English and art history at Kuwait University. As we shall see in the case study of the university, the concept of \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat} is mainly centred around the idea of separate education for youngsters, and therefore it is not surprising that Latifa, in addition to being a university lecturer herself, also looks at \textit{ikhtilat} from the perspective of education. In the university-case, we will see more of this.

Fourthly, activists and business women regard \textit{ikhtilat} as a new term: while

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{211} Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Interview with Latifa, activist, Kuwait City, 19 September 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Interview with Latifa, activist, Kuwait City, 19 September 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Interview with Khawla, \textit{da’iya}, Kuwait City, 22 October 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Interview with Rabi’, business woman, Kuwait City, 10 October 2013.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Interview with Latifa, activist, Kuwait City, 19 September 2013.
\end{itemize}
the practice of *ikhtilat* was always normal in Kuwait, the term itself was unknown to Kuwaiti society and introduced after the Gulf War by religious streams in society. Business woman Sa’diya told me:

> “The religious people did not like the idea of men and women being in the same room or the same campus. So they came up with the word *ikhtilat* and [the idea] that *ikhtilat* leads to sins, in order to segregate the boys from the girls because I think [that] religious people mostly think of women in a very sexual way.”

Here, *ikhtilat* is framed as something that was invented by ‘religious people.’ Da’iyat too say that *ikhtilat* is something linguistic, meaning ‘mixture.’ They maintain that whether or not a certain situation is *ikhtilat* depends on the frequency of contact. The situation at university is *ikhtilat* because boys and girls see each other every day. The situation in hospitals however is not *ikhtilat* because men and women, patients and doctors, do not see each other every day. But when a man and a woman see each other often and get to know each other, that is *ikhtilat*.

Lastly, *ikhtilat* is in the intention. This means that mixing between women and men is no problem as long as there is only formal contact between them, and there is no intention of taking the interaction beyond that formality. Therefore, a man and a woman speaking on the phone for business reasons is fine, as long as there is no intention between the speakers to come to another relation than purely business.

The origin of the practice of *ikhtilat* is clearly set in time. Here the narrative among interlocutors is that men and women have always mixed, with women arranging the affairs of the household on the shore while the men were out trading or pearling for a large part of the year. The women would stay at home and thus had to and were used to dealing with non-related (*ghayr mahram*) men. The origin of the term *ikhtilat* is ascribed to recent developments in the recent history of Kuwait, like Sa’diya did above, and framed as a new phenomenon.

Importantly, as in Saudi Arabia, the basic definition of *ikhtilat* for all interviewees is the coming together of more than one man and woman in a public space. It is this definition that will be used in this chapter.

**Defining man‘ al-*ikhtilat***

When asking after *ikhtilat* and how to define it, interlocutors usually spoke

---

217 Interview with Sa’diya, business woman, Kuwait City, 27 September 2013.
immediately about man‘ al-ikhtilat or the ban on ikhtilat, especially at Kuwait University. As in Saudi Arabia, some interlocutors used various words denoting ‘segregation,’ such as fasl (partition, disjunction), infisal (dissociation, withdrawal), or ‘adam al-ikhtilat (lack of ikhtilat), or various idioms denoting ‘women-only spaces’ such as qism li-l-nisa’ khass (a special women’s space), qism li-l-nisa‘ (a space for women), or qism mukhassas li-l-nisa‘ (a space especially for women). However, the vast majority of my respondents used the term man‘ al-ikhtilat: the ban on ikhtilat.

Interestingly, in the newspaper articles that I analysed for the three case studies, my findings are similar: the term ikhtilat is hardly ever used, while terms such as fasl and ‘adam al-ikhtilat are used sporadically. Most writers use the term man‘ al-ikhtilat.

Interlocutors present the definition of man‘ al-ikhtilat as clear and straightforward. Najat, a business woman, said: “Man‘ al-ikhtilat means not allowing the genders to mix, especially in a public space.”218 This definition was unequivocal across the interviews and included the ban on ikhtilat at Kuwait University and the prevention of mixing between unrelated women and men in other public spaces such as restaurants, hospitals, and malls – all places that are predominantly mixed in Kuwait.

For the origin of man‘ al-ikhtilat, most of the women I spoke with referred to the 1996 man‘ al-ikhtilat law that forbids mixing at Kuwait University. Ghada, an activist, recounted how she grew up without an awareness of the idea of man‘ al-ikhtilat: “We never even knew the word segregation in our family. We were raised always with our cousins, the boys and girls were together all the time. Never man‘ al-ikhtilat was mentioned.”219 Ghada as well as many other interlocutors say that man‘ al-ikhtilat is alien to Kuwaiti society, and that only in Jahra‘, one of the most conservative parts of the country, separate places such as women-only restaurant sections can be found. Man‘ al-ikhtilat, then, is almost always mentioned in relation to the man‘ al-ikhtilat law for Kuwait University. Hamida, a business woman, told me:

“There was a time when the Muslim Brotherhood had an influence on the majlis al-umma [National Assembly]. So they published this man‘ al-ikhtilat law. But when I studied, it was all mixed, all classes.”220

---

218 Interview with Najat, business woman, Kuwait City, 8 October 2013.
219 Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
220 Interview with Hamida, business woman, Kuwait, 22 September 2013.
Here, Hamida refers to the political gain the Muslim Brothers made in Parliament after the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqis and the conservative backlash the invasion and subsequent liberation caused in Kuwait.\textsuperscript{221}

Many interlocutors were surprised when I asked them about the women’s section at Bayt al-Tamwil,\textsuperscript{222} an Islamic bank in Kuwait that has separate floors for men and women, or after the women-only opening times of for example Entertainment City\textsuperscript{223} or Messilah Beach\textsuperscript{224} and said they were not aware of such separate opening times and only-for-women days in Kuwait.

One da’iya, Dr Dina, said ikhtilat was common practice at the time of Muhammad, but that today it shouldn’t be practiced in the way that it is:

“There are places that you cannot separate. The mall. In the time of Muhammad the market (suq) wasn’t separate. But the women were modest (muhtashim), in their dress, their voice, the way they walked. She would go straight home from the suq. Now it is a way to meet the other sex. Not everyone but some people do that. I don’t like that.”\textsuperscript{225}

Dr Dina is in favour of \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat} in malls, despite the fact that at the time of the Muhammad places such as the suq were mixed. The behaviour of people has changed for the worse so \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat} should be implemented, she says.

Throughout this chapter, to improve readability of the text and analysis, I will refer to \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat} by ‘segregation,’ except where I use the technical term for the 1996 \textit{man’ al-ikhtilat} law.

**Defining khilwa**

In Saudi Arabia, the concept of \textit{khilwa} is clear: it denotes the presence in a closed space of one man and one woman who are unrelated to each other. Saudi respondents unequivocally reject it. In Kuwait, the definition of \textit{khilwa} is clear too. As in Saudi Arabia, it means a man and a woman, together, in a closed space.

\textsuperscript{221} See Chapter 4.


\textsuperscript{223} Entertainment City, part of Touristic Enterprises Company, has a women-only day each Monday. See www.kuwaittourism.com/ar/EntertainmentCity.htm. Website accessed 13 October 2014.

\textsuperscript{224} Messilah Beach, part of Touristic Enterprises Company, has women-only days on Monday, Thursday, and Saturday. See www.kuwaittourism.com/ar/MessilahBeach.htm. Website accessed 13 October 2014.

\textsuperscript{225} Interview with Dr Dina, \textit{da’iya}, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
Chapter 5

A few Kuwaiti interlocutors however do not consider this to be *khilwa*. Activist Zahra, who also works as a lawyer and thus needs to be able to talk to female and male clients privately, said: “I can sit in my office with the door closed with a man and it isn’t *khilwa*. Because anyone can enter.”\(^{226}\) In the law firm where she works, any of her colleagues could enter her office while she is in a business meeting, and so despite the fact that the meeting is behind closed doors she does not see this kind of interaction as *khilwa*.

While Saudi respondents unambiguously reject *khilwa* – in the definition of a man and a woman being together in a closed space – in Kuwait whether *khilwa* is permitted or not is contested. As with *ikhtilat*, activists and business women share the same train of thought, while *da’iyat* have a slightly different point of view.

Among the activists and business women, a minority of activists believes that *khilwa* is never permitted. Interlocutors agree that *khilwa* is not permitted if something illicit happens between the man and the woman. However, for the majority, *khilwa* is not a problem. An activist said: “*Khilwa*, what is it? It is a man and a woman together. They are in work together in a meeting, they are in the car together. This is our life now. It is fine.”\(^{227}\) However, most interlocutors do add that the key to permissible *khilwa* is the intention (*niyya*) of the man and the woman who are in *khilwa*: if the intention is good, the *khilwa* is permitted. As long as *khilwa* is for work and not with the intention of starting relations, it is not regarded as a problem.

For all *da’iyat* however, *khilwa* is impermissible because, they say, Islam does not allow it. The majority of *da’iyat*, such as Dr Jawahir, referred to the devil’s presence:

“A man together with woman, in a closed space, without a guardian (*mahram)*... In that situation, the devil is the third one among them.”\(^{228}\)

A small minority of *da’iyat* however made the exception of work and study as the environment is formal. At the same time these interlocutors agree with being in a car with a driver or in an elevator with a man. Both situations constitute *khilwa* but only take a short time and there will not be the possibility of a relationship occurring.

---

\(^{226}\) Interview with Zahra’, activist, Kuwait City, 3 October 2013.

\(^{227}\) Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.

\(^{228}\) Interview with Dr Jawahir, *da’iya*, Kuwait City, 6 October 2013.
Case studies on *ikhtilat* and *manʿ al-ikhtilat*

In the following section I will take a closer look at three cases, that of segregation at Kuwait University and its new Shadadiya campus, a call for a sleep-over (*mabit*) during a 2012 demonstration in the City area of Kuwait, and the case of closed ‘cabins’ (*kabaʾin*) in restaurants and water pipe (*shisha*) cafes in the conservative area of Jahra.’ The first two cases will mainly shed light on attitudes towards *ikhtilat* and segregation, while the *kabaʾin* case will also illustrate the variety of attitudes towards the question of the permissibility of *khilwa*.

Starting with an overview of arguments used in newspapers and continuing into an analysis of interview material, I will see which arguments interlocutors use in relation to *ikhtilat*, segregation, and *khilwa*, and how they position themselves.

‘For women only’ university education: the Shadadiya campus

I start with the field of university education in Kuwait because it is the first response interlocutors gave me when I asked about *ikhtilat*. Interviewees immediately refer to the 1996 *manʿ al-ikhtilat* law that was meant to implement the separation of young men and women at Kuwait University. The discourse among the women I interviewed in Kuwait, then, is mainly about segregation at Kuwait University. While in Saudi Arabia, the only *mixed* university is KAUST, in Kuwait the only *non-mixed* university will be Shadadiya, the new campus of Kuwait University, which will have a women-only and men-only section. Since despite the *manʿ al-ikhtilat* law requiring gender segregation, Kuwait University, as it is now, is not completely gender-segregated.

Since the arrival of state primary and secondary education, these two levels of education have been gender-segregated into boys’ and girls’ schools. In the 1960s, however, the American School of Kuwait opened its doors, enabling boys and girls to enjoy a co-educational secondary level of education. Similarly, in the 1970s the British School of Kuwait started offering this type of education. When in the 1960s Kuwait University started classes, it too was a co-educational institution. As I explained in Chapter 4, in 1996, in the wake of the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi occupation, the *manʿ al-ikhtilat*-law that gender-segregates Kuwait University was adopted. During my three-month stay at the *Kulliyyat al-adab* (College of Arts) on the Kayfan campus of Kuwait University, it soon became clear to me that while this might sound as if there is a complete separation between male and female students, in practice this is not the case.
Chapter 5

Kuwait University has dormitories for its students. The men’s student housing is located on the Shuwaykh campus, and the women’s student housing on the Kayfan campus. Also, cafeterias on the Kayfan campus are gender-segregated into a men-only and women-only cafeteria. So are the study areas of the Shari’a College’s library. In theory, classes too are segregated. At the Shari’a College, male students attend classes in a building separate from the female students. However, male professors will visit the female section to teach, simply because there are not enough female lecturers for the female section to be self-sufficient in teaching all the courses it wants to offer the female students. In some instances, this problem is solved by CCTV-streaming, in other by a male lecturer teaching female students while being physically present with them in a classroom or lecture hall. Similarly, sometimes a female professor might teach an all-male class.

Despite the law, pragmatism abounds in other instances as well. While lower-level classes are all gender-segregated into male students only and female students only, in upper level classes this is not always the case. Fewer students take these classes and therefore not every semester an all-male group might be available. In that case, these male students are allowed to join the women’s class so that they do not need to delay their graduation and can keep their coursework on track. All lecturers and professors I spoke with indicated that the practice of separating classes significantly increased their workload, as all classes need to be taught twice instead of once in one mixed group, and there are not enough financial resources to appoint more lecturers.

In the courtyard of the Kayfan campus, shaded by palm trees, male and female students gather during the day to eat, relax, chat, and do some work. Interestingly, the courtyard is not gender-segregated but here students always self-segregate: groups of male students and groups of female students will sit apart. During the three months of my stay on the Kayfan campus I never saw mixed groups of students in the courtyard.

While in Saudi Arabia as recently as May 2015 the consultative council (majlis al-shura) voted against the opening of foreign universities in the kingdom over concerns of gender segregation and ikhtilat (Arab News 2015) Kuwait has known co-educational private universities since the early 2000s: the Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST) opened in 2002, the American University of Kuwait (AUK) in 2003, and the Australian College of Kuwait in 2004. Classes at these private universities have always been mixed, but in 2005 a law was passed in Parliament (majlis al-umma) that requires these universities, too, to gender-segregate their classes. Nevertheless, an AUK professor told me that despite this legal requirement AUK classes are still mixed. Administratively, they are
separated, with women-only and men-only class lists, but in practice students attend classes together. In case of a check visit, boys and girls would each sit on one side of the classroom, but on regular days they casually mix in the classroom, this professor said. The professor cited the pragmatic reasons of feasibility (a lack of enough professors to teach double classes) and infrastructure (a lack of a separate infrastructure, which would facilitate gender-segregated classes) for the non-implementation of the law. Events organised at the AUK that are open to the public, such as evening lectures, which I regularly attended during my fieldwork, were also all mixed, with women and men sitting next to each other.

In 2008, when her children started attending Kuwait University, Ghada, an activist, started to feel so strongly about the man‘al-ikhtilat law that she co-founded an organisation, Sawt al-Kuwait (the Voice of Kuwait) to protest against the law and argue for ‘shared education’ (al-ta’lim al-mushtarak). She recounted how she chose to frame the issue in these terms and not use the phrase ‘mixed education’ (al-ta’lim al-mukhtalat) because of the connotation that ikhtilat according to her has “for the religious people” of being forbidden (haram). She also appealed to the Kuwaiti constitution arguing that the man‘al-ikhtilat law is not demanded by the constitution. By 2013, when I interviewed Ghada, Sawt al-Kuwait had evolved into a broader platform that uses innovative ways to promote knowledge of the Kuwaiti constitution in Kuwait. In public campaigns such as this one, demanding that the state provide a mixed state university and abolish the man‘al-ikhtilat law, women made known publicly, to the government, their desideratum vis-à-vis ikhtilat.

In February 2005, a few years before Ghada started Sawt al-Kuwait, Amir Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jabir Al Sabah representing Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad Al Sabah laid the foundation stone of Kuwait University’s new Sabah al-Salem Kuwait University City in the Shadadiya area of Kuwait, more commonly known as the Shadadiya campus. The campus design shows that the new campus will consist of a women-only and men-only side. This was confirmed by a visit to the construction site. A river running between the two sides has been planned, cutting the campus into two. At the time of writing, construction has been under way for well over 10 years. According to some respondents, this is indicative for the disagreement in society regarding the implementation of the man‘al-ikhtilat

---

229 Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013. For more on Sawt al-Kuwait, see also this Chapter’s section on Recent developments.


231 Site visit on 30 November 2013.
University education was a topic of discussion in Kuwaiti newspapers at and around the time I did my fieldwork in Kuwait. In June 2013, independent Member of Parliament Nabil al-Fadl proposed to cancel the *man‘* al-ikhtilat law. In an op-ed in newspaper *al-Watan* he explained his view (*al-Watan* 2013a). He also expressed his annoyance with the liberals of the Kuwaiti National Democratic Alliance, who according to him turned the opposition to segregation into one of the spear points of their election campaign, but now that he and colleagues wanted to put forward a proposal to cancel the *man‘* al-ikhtilat law, they were silent, he argued. Al-Fadl said that despite a lack of support he wanted to try and pass the proposal because the abolition of the law would provide funds for the country as the money that is now spent on segregating Kuwait University could be spent on other things. Here, we see an appeal to Kuwait’s priorities as a nation. Similarly, he writes that segregation “hasn’t prevented the spread of drugs and an increase in sexual crimes and the decline of public morals” and that therefore one cannot make a connection between the two. Those who do this should, in his opinion, also stop allowing their daughters to work in mixed workplaces and shop in mixed malls.

Furthermore al-Fadl claims that it is not *ikhtilat* that leads to the harassment of women and girls but rather, upbringing. Religious people, he says pragmatically, who “see a religious necessity (*amr darura diniyya*)” in a segregated education for their daughters should invest their own money in private universities where there is no *ikhtilat*. He did not gain much support in Parliament for his proposal and the *man‘* al-ikhtilat law remained in force.

Khalid Ahmad al-Tarah responded in *al-Qabas* (2013a) newspaper to Nabil al-Fadl’s op-ed in *al-Watan*, agreeing with his stance regarding cancellation of the *man‘* al-ikhtilat law but using a different argument:

“The decision to ban mixing (*qarar man‘* al-ikhtilat) stands in contrast with the benefit of modern developments (*maslahat al-tanmiya al-haditha*) that Kuwait has seen. It is a decision not in accordance with our lives today because women work in all places commensurate with their status in society and they work in *ikhtilat* with men other than her brothers.”

Here, we see that the writer uses arguments referring to the modernity of Kuwait, its development, and the way in which the lives of Kuwaitis are organised nowadays arguing that segregation does not fit those developments. *Ikhtilat*, on
the other hand, he writes, does suit Kuwait.

A lecturer at Kuwait University, Su‘ad al-Mojel, writes in *al-Qabas* (2013b) that opponents of mixing at her university mainly come from outside the university. Their motives, she says, have nothing to do with education but with claiming that *ikhtilat* “invites the spreading of vice and debauchery and that it is an assault on values and morals.” She also refers to “misuse of public funds,” thereby implicitly saying that the money now spent on a separate infrastructure would be better spent on other things. Furthermore, she argues, there is a need for other “priorities of social reform.” She however does not specify what those priorities are. In conclusion, al-Mojel writes: “The *man‘ al-ikhtilat* decision is the entrance through which backwardness (*takhalluf*) and closed-mindedness (*inghilaq*) of the entire education body enters.” Associating *man‘ al-ikhtilat* with backwardness and closed-mindedness is a clear way to distance oneself from the practice.

The Kuwaiti newspaper *al-Anba’* published a report of a discussion at Kuwait University about the *man‘ al-ikhtilat* law (*al-Anba’* 2013). An unnamed participant in the discussion argued against it by saying that “segregated education (*al-ta‘lim al-munfasil*) leads to delayed graduation of students and the presence of the phenomenon of *buyat*.” This argument refers to the afore-mentioned phenomenon of students sometimes not being able to take certain classes because they’re not offered for their gender, which delays their graduation sometimes by one or more semesters. At the same time this person believes that the separation of the sexes at Kuwait University might lead to an increase in *buyat*, which to them is a disturbing development. *Buyat* is an Arabisation of the English word ‘boy’; it is plural of *buya*, the feminine of ‘boy,’ denoting women or girls whose gender presentation (dress and behaviour) is perceived as masculine. It does not automatically mean lesbian, but denotes behaviour that is seen as potentially ‘leading to’ homosexuality. *Buyat* are perceived as ‘preying’ on other girls and in need of ‘treatment.’

Also against *man‘ al-ikhtilat* is Dr ‘Ayid al-Mana’, lecturer of Political Science at Kuwait University (*al-Anba’* 2013). In the debate he stated that “*man‘ al-ikthilat* did not occur in Kuwaiti society until the ‘gift’ of the Islamic movements after the defeat of the 1967 war and the rise of religious movements.” By refuting segregation as part of Kuwaiti history and framing it as result of the religious revival that entered Kuwaiti society in the 1970s and 1980s, Dr ‘Ayid al-Mana’

---

Chapter 5

opposes the *man‘ al-ikhtilat* law.

Dr ‘Ayid al-Mana’s colleague in the Political Science department Dr Faysal Abu Salib, however is in favour of segregation (*al-Anba‘* 2013). In the debate he referred to a Master’s thesis on male and female Jordanian students and on the negative effects of *ikhtilat* in Jordanian public universities. According to him, this research confirmed that 77% of male and female Jordanian university students find mixing an obstacle to their education. Abu Salib cites “academic problems,” “weakness of religious faith,” “frequent harassment,” “psychological problems by feeling more concerned about the opposite sex” and “economic problems such as spending more money on clothes” as arguments in favour of segregation (*al-Anba‘* 2013).

‘Abd al-‘Aziz Sa‘ud ‘Isa, Geology lecturer at Kuwait University in the newspaper *al-Rai* positions himself a bit more ambiguously vis-à-vis segregation. Principally he is in favour of *man‘ al-ikhtilat*, but pragmatically he is against it:

“I do not reject the *man‘ al-ikhtilat* law but I do reject it if it is implemented as under the current circumstances, especially at Kuwait University where they have to solve study problems of the youngsters and the facilities problems” (*al-Rai* 2013).

Drawing on pragmatic arguments of not having enough teachers to satisfactorily implement the law, the delay in studies that it causes, and a lack of sufficient infrastructure to facilitate women-only and men-only classes, this professor eventually rejects the law – only if all these conditions are in order, then segregation would be good idea.

Now that we have the context of this debate, I will examine the views interlocutors have vis-à-vis the new Shadadiya campus and the arguments they use.

**Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis segregation and *ikhtilat* at university**

Out of the 29 interviews (with 12 activists, 8 business women, and 9 *da‘iyat*) in which *ikhtilat* and segregation at university came up, 15 interlocutors were against segregation at university (7 activists, 7 business women, and 1 *da‘iya*), 7 interviewees justified segregation (3 activists, 0 business women, and 4 *da‘iyat*), and 7 respondents were in favour of segregation (2 activists, 1 business woman, and 4 *da‘iyat*).

**Against segregation at university**

The argument against segregation at university that I heard most commonly
among my interlocutors is that its practice does not suit the character of Kuwait as a country. They say that Kuwait has a history of *ikhtilat*, already from before the discovery of oil when the men were out at sea and the women would run the family’s affairs on the shore. Already in those times, it is argued, women mixed with non-related (*mahram*) men, and so therefore *ikhtilat* is a natural part of the country today. Bushra, an activist, said:

“Any form of segregation is a step backwards. I see the difference in Kuwait University, in my times and the kids’ time now. (...) We were able to sit and discuss and argue together so there was that social intelligence building in terms of how to deal with the other sex. Now, as an employer, I suffer a lot from KU-graduates, both men and women. They are not the same calibre. Their emotional intelligence is zero, they don’t know how to deal with the opposite sex.”

Grounded in ideas about the Kuwaiti nation, Bushra argues that segregation is rolling back on what has been achieved in Kuwait and that *ikhtilat* is normal and part of Kuwaiti culture, Bushra points out the negative effects of the segregation law that she as an employer experiences. She connects her principled argument of segregation not suiting Kuwait as a country with a practical obstacle it leads to in her work. Bushra believes that because the majority of workplaces are mixed, so should education be, so that young women and men can get used to cooperating. Here, ideas about how relations between male and female youngsters should be organised ring through.

The second argument that I heard most was that the law, and in particular its implementation at the new Shadadiya campus, takes up too many economic resources, which should be applied differently. As Najat, a business woman, told me:

“We’ve seen the economic problems that come with it, especially at the university. Trying to segregate means that you need to double the workload on the professor, students are graduating late because they can’t get into the classes that they need, (...) and then they are mixing elsewhere in Kuwait! It make no sense.”

---

233 Interview with Bushra, activist, Kuwait City, 22 November 2013.
234 Interview with Najat, business woman, Kuwait City, 8 October 2013.
Recognising that indeed most public spaces in Kuwait are mixed, Najat does not see the point of separating women and men specifically at university. She and many other women I interviewed believe that Kuwait can make better use of the resources that are now applied to build the new Shadadiya campus. Rather, they say, that money should go towards for example the improvement of teacher salaries and the quality of education. The argument here is that Kuwait, as a nation, needs better rather than segregated education.

Thirdly, one interlocutor said she is against segregation at university because she believes it can lead to homosexuality among young girls, which in her opinion is bad:

“A girl can go through really bad things in a girls university, worse than the girl who is studying at a mixed university, you know? Like the terrible things we hear, such as the homosexuality. That is less the case at a private, mixed university.”

So while some interviewees believe segregation prevents harassment of girls and women by men, Sa‘diya is against segregation because she believes it might lead to harassment of girls and women by other girls and women. Here, ideas about what is and is not acceptable behaviour of women among themselves guides this woman’s view vis-à-vis segregation.

Fourthly, only one interlocutor, activist Marwa, referred to Islam in her argumentation against segregation at university when she said that segregation is not Islamic:

“We cannot make a male and a female society. Even in Islam there isn’t something like that, a separate society (mujtama‘ mafsul). In the old days, yes, boys studied in the mosque and the girls at home, but now, we are in 2013!”

---

235 Interview with Sa‘diya, activist, Kuwait City, 27 September 2013.
236 I have come across this argument in the university case once, and, as we shall see, once in the kaba‘in case. One interlocutor was against women-only days at Messila Beach for this reason: “For 30% the women’s day at Messila beach and Entertainment City is nice. But 70% of it, to be honest, I fear to leave my daughters there on a women’s day. Because sometimes, there are women there whose morals have been completely destroyed. Completely. Some women... They are masculine women...women who imitate men (mustarjilat). When they see a beautiful woman, she tries to... She tries to get to know her and corrupt her thoughts her traditions and customs (adat wa taqalid) and actions. And I am afraid of that. There are no limits (dawabi‘), morally. So I think the women-only days are not good.” Interview with Ruqayya, activist, Kuwait City, 23 October 2013.
237 Interview with Marwa, activist, Kuwait City, 26 November 2013.
In Marwa’s opinion, not only is segregation un-Islamic, it is also outdated and not suitable for present-day, modern life in Kuwait.

Interestingly, half of the interlocutors who are against segregation in principle do say that they believe there should be a choice in the Kuwaiti education system, so that those who do not want to be in mixed education can choose to do so. So while in principle they are against segregation at university, pragmatically they do support it for freedom of choice. At the same time, however, they too are strongly against the use of the nation’s resources to build a new separate university campus. Segregated universities, then, should be realised with private money rather than be publicly funded.

**Justifying segregation at university**

Interlocutors who justify segregation at university mostly argue that the status quo should be maintained, but that the *ikhtilat* that does take place at university may only take place under certain conditions. The conditions under which *ikhtilat*, then, is allowed are when the woman is mature enough, but also if the frequency of the mixing isn’t too high. Shahd, a *da’iya*, said:

“In the university you meet every day. In the hospital, for example, the man and the woman only meet once. But at university there is an opportunity to get to know each other.”

Shahd’s point here is that if women and men meet regularly and can get to know one another, illicit relations between women and men might occur where they should not, and this should be prevented.

Secondly, some support segregation on principle, but at the same time believe that Kuwait’s resources should be put to better use. Implementing the law in the shape of the new Shadadiya campus, these women say, puts too large a financial burden on the country. In this argument, we see a view of what the country does and does not need.

Lastly, but much less so, others such as *da’iya* Khawla, argue that *ikhtilat* should only take place if there is a necessity (*darura*):

“*Ikhtilat* should only happen when there is a necessity. So boys and girls should study separately. But if there is a conference, where

---

238 Interview with Shahd, *da’iya*, Kuwait City, 21 September 2013.
you cannot separate, there can be *ikhtilat*, they can sit at the same table.*

While in Saudi Arabia the Islamic principle of *darura* played a role in arguments against, in justification, and in favour of *ikhtilat*, in Kuwait this was much less the case.

**In favour of segregation at university**

Those interlocutors who are in favour of segregation at university mostly say that even in the West, some universities do not allow mixing. Rahima, a business woman, said:

> “Like in Britain right now, they are segregating a lot of the schools and they see that pedagogically (*tarbawiyah*) and academically it is better for the student. Girls and boys learn in different ways. The examples are different for them. A woman likes to see things, pictures, she likes stories. A man wants information, rules, laws.”

The reasoning is that if even in the West some universities do not mix male and female students, then why would Kuwait. While in Europe mixing at university is normal, it is argued that Kuwait is not Europe and that the mixing that is known in the Western educational system does not suit Kuwait.

In addition, several interlocutors argue that segregation “has nothing to do with forbidden (*haram*) or allowed (*halal*).”

It has rather, they say, to do with giving shy female students the space to speak up in class, which they would not do if there were boys in the class. Segregation is seen as supporting the concentration of the students on their studies rather than their fellow students of the opposite sex, leading to better study results. The idea here is that gender relations are such that male and female students studying together certainly lead to distractions.

**Conclusion**

What is most striking about the university case is that the arguments that are used mostly against, justifying, and in favour of segregation at university are related

---

241 Interview with Rahima, business woman, Kuwait City, 28 November 2013.
242 Interview with Lana, business woman, Kuwait City, 27 October 2013.
to ideas about Kuwait’s nature as a country. The second-most heard argument relates to ideas about relations between boys and girls and the nature of male and female students. The nature of this argument however is different in Kuwait than in Saudi Arabia. In Kuwait fewer interlocutors referred to possible illicit relations between boys and girls in positioning themselves vis-à-vis segregation at university, while in Saudi Arabia this type of argument and reference to the ‘different nature’ of boys and girls came up more regularly. So while there indeed are arguments that are grounded in gender in Kuwait, there is less of a reference to sexuality. Only some da’iyat refer to Islam in their argumentation. They only refer to the principle of darura.

In contrast to Saudi Arabia, where in relation to the university case Islam was the most important source for arguments, most Kuwaiti interviewees used arguments that are related to ideas about the character of the nation, as well as the country’s past and future.

Comparing the types of arguments used in the media debate to those of my interlocutors, we see that here too, Islamic arguments are not used as much as arguments based on ideas about the character of Kuwait as a nation, as well as gender relations. While my respondents draw on pragmatic arguments too, this dimension is a bit more pronounced in the media debate.

Karamat Watan demonstrations: the mabit

Just like other Gulf countries, Kuwait was not immune to anti-government protests during the wave of uprisings in the Middle East in the early 2010s. In December 2012, protests took place against a change by the government in the election law, allowing citizens to vote for only one candidate instead of the previous four. The demonstrations were called for by Karamat Watan (A Nation’s Dignity), a coalition

---

243 At their height, demonstrations in Kuwait attracted about 150,000 protesters. Kuwait has a population of around four million with immigrants accounting for around 69% of that number. December 2012 saw the highest demonstrator turnout in the history of the country.

244 Political parties are not allowed in Kuwait. Instead, so-called alliance blocks are formed, or candidates run as independents. Kuwait has five voting districts. Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah has the power to dissolve Parliament. Under the new electoral system, voters can choose only one candidate in their district. Under the old system, voters elected four candidates. Each of these four votes carried equal weight. The government claims it changed the voting system to ‘one-man, one-vote’ in order to bring it in line with international standards. However, the opposition believes the changes were made to consolidate the government’s influence over Parliament and decrease the chance of the opposition maintaining the majority they had in Parliament. Furthermore, opposition members say that the old system allowed them to form alliances with other candidates and offer reciprocal backing from their constituency.
On 12 December 2012, Karamat Watan called for an overnight stay (mabit) in Irada square until the opening of the Parliament in the morning. Irada square is situated by the National Assembly and as such serves as a location for protests. On its Twitter account, Karamat Watan announced that a separate place for women would be available for the mabit. The group, through this public call, made known their views and demands to the public and the government vis-à-vis women-only public spaces and ikhtilat: women’s participation at the mixed demonstration, with a separate space for them for the mabit. In short, gender segregation applied as a mechanism of inclusion.

By taking the mabit initiative and specifically inviting women to attend (al-Watan 2012) Karamat Watan wanted to make a strong and inclusive statement in protesting the new Kuwaiti election law. Instead, the call led to strong reactions mainly from Islamist and Salafi religious scholars and (former) members of Parliament condemning the call, turning the mabit venture and the presence of women at the demonstration into a political battlefield.

Immediately after Karamat Watan’s December 12 tweet inviting men and women to come to the mabit, where there would be a separate place for women, disagreement on the mabit was vented on Twitter and in the printed media. Both the call for women to come to the mabit as well as the strong responses to it politicised women’s presence in the square. Should they or should they not be physically present during the mabit, and for what reasons? While the liberal members of Karamat Watan called for women to come to the mabit, Islamist and Salafist members opposed women’s participation in the mabit.

The liberal wing of Karamat Watan had sent out the tweet. Islamist former Member of Parliament Dr Jaman al-Harbash reacted on his Twitter account: “The mabit is only for men, and the sit-in in the morning is for everyone,” implicitly stating that an overnight stay does not suit the nature of women.

Another former MP, Walid al-Tabtabai, who used to be a member of the Salafi block, tweeted: “Karamat Watan announced that there would be a separate

245 Interview with Dr Abdulhadi al-‘Ajmi, Dean of History Department, Kuwait University, 20 October 2013.
246 The Square of Popular Will in front of the National Assembly (majlis al-umma) in Kuwait City.
247 @KarametWatan 8 december 2012 18:00
248 @KarametWatan 11 december 2012 20:13
249 The demonstration was against the change in the law and against the making of the change with neither Parliament nor the people having a say in it. Amir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad Al Sabah had changed the law by decree.
250 @AlHerbesh, 15 December 2012 15:21
place for women but it is necessary that the mabit is only for men.”251 In the same tweet, he demanded that Karamat Watan cancel their announcement of the women-only place at the mabit. Islamic preacher Rashid al-‘Alimi said in al-Nahar newspaper: “They [Karamat Watan] call for the sleeping of women outside their houses and then they talk about the dignity of the homeland?” (Q8News 2012), clearly saying that women’s presence at the mabit does not suit the character of Kuwait.

Former MP al-Hayif was quoted in the same newspaper article appealing to shari’a and customs and traditions (‘adat wa taqalid): “The invitation to the mabit for women goes against shari’a fatawa and social consideration” (Sabr 2012). Former MP Fahd al-Khana agreed with Hayif when he said: “The invitation for women to sleep in Irada square and outside their homes is impossible in the shari’a and we invite everyone to reject it because it opens the door to great fitna” (al-Nahar 2012), stating that the overnight stay of women is against Islamic law and would lead to societal chaos. Former vice-president of the National Assembly (majlis al-qarar) Khalid Sultan said in an interview with online Kuwaiti publication Sabr that “Women cannot mix with men or sleep outside their houses” (Sabr 2012). These statements also resonate the Qur’anic verse “wa qarna fi buyutikunna” (Qur’an 33:33), meaning “and stay in your houses.” It is used to support the claim that women should not sleep outside their own home.

The mabit issue thus became an issue that split the coalition of Karamat Watan, with the ‘liberals’ saying women should come and demonstrate and staying overnight, Islamists saying it would be ok for women to protest but not to stay overnight, and Salafis encouraging women to not come to the square to stay over, with some saying that women should not come to Irada square at all. As their statements showed, arguments against the mabit were not limited to religious grounds but rather ranged from appealing to the nature of women, societal restrictions, Kuwaiti customs and traditions, and religious (fatawa and shari’a) reasons. The differences of opinion over this issue became so strong and the debate so heated that the mabit was eventually called off, with the issue even breaking up the demonstration.

Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis segregation and ikhtilat at the mabit252
Some of the arguments used in the media debate resonated in interlocutors’ ways of talking about the mabit issue. Here, we will take a look at 24 interviews

251 @Altabtabie, 15 december 2012 12:48
252 See also Van Geel 2014.
with activists (10), business women (7), and da’iyat (7) in which the mabit came up. A majority of 13 interviewees were against the mabit (5 activists, 1 business woman, and 7 da’iyat). 7 justified the mabit as long as it took place under certain conditions (3 activists, 4 business women, no da’iyat). A minority of 4 interlocutors was in favour of the mabit (2 activists, 2 business women, no da’iyat).

**Against the mabit**

The activists and business women who were against the mabit disagreed with it for two main reasons. Firstly, they were against the mabit as such, whether it took place in ikhtilat or in segregation. Secondly, these respondents were against this issue because they were against demonstrations as such, whether or not they included a mabit.

Ruqayya, an activist who associates herself with the Islamist stream and gives women training on marriage and how to create space for themselves belongs to the first group. She said to me:

> “Society refuses it. That she leaves her femininity (tatanazzal unthataha), that her voice is loud... Society doesn’t welcome something like that and I am with them. (..) Even the men go home when it is late at night, and then in the morning they return.”

Her arguments that society doesn’t accept the sleeping over of women in a public space, that the mabit doesn’t match with how a woman should behave, and that even men don’t sleep in the square for political reasons recurred in other interviews too. Ideas about the type of public presence of women, and what does and does not suit their nature, ring through in this argument.

Another argument that I often heard against women taking part in the mabit, as put forward by Hamida, a business woman, is that it will lead to sexual harassment of women. When women are out at night at such an event, even staying over, there is a great risk, according to Hamida, that men might take advantage of this and sexually intimidate the woman. Hamida added that women shouldn’t sleep outside their homes for any reason. She explicitly says she believes this, not because of religious reasons but because women have family obligations they need to attend to. Her arguments are clear statements about

---

253 Interview with Ruqayya, activist, 27 November 2013, Kuwait City.
254 Interview with Hamida, business woman, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
255 Interview with Hamida, business woman, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
how she looks at the nature of women: they might fall prey to harassment by men, while their commitments and duties lie elsewhere anyway rather than on the Irada square.

Another activist who was against the *mabit*, Zahra’, who owns a law firm and was a member of the Women’s Committee in the Kuwaiti Parliament, is against demonstrations as such:

“\(\text{it is something political. And if you want to achieve that, it can be done in different ways. Like a work strike. And that has stronger economic influence than a mabit.}^{256}\)

Other activists too who were against the *mabit* said that there were other, more effective ways to protest the change in the electoral law, such as writing an article in a newspaper or magazine, and that sleeping outside in Irada square does not help to further the envisaged goal.\(^{257}\) Here, ideas about how change in and for Kuwait as a country should be effected ring through.

Interestingly, none of these activists and business women mention religious arguments to support their standpoint in favour or against the *mabit*. In fact, they explicitly say that it has nothing to do with religion. *Da’iyat*, on the contrary, did.

All seven *da’iyat* who are against this *mabit* extended their opposition to being against any *mabit*, except during the hajj. Dr Salma said:

“\(\text{During the hajj, women go out to stay overnight in Muzdalifa}^{258}\) and Mina.\(^{259}\) And there are tents there especially for men and especially for women. But sleeping outside in Kuwait shouldn’t happen. The living areas are close to the place of the demonstration, maybe a maximum of one hour. So there is no necessity (\(\text{darura}\)) for her to sleep outside her house.\(^{260}\)

During the hajj, there is a sense of higher security than during the demonstrations

\(^{256}\) Interview with Zahra’, activist, Kuwait City, 5 December 2013

\(^{257}\) Interview with Ruqayya, activist, 27 November 2013, Kuwait City.

\(^{258}\) Muzdalifa is the area where, during the pilgrimage (hajj), 49 pebbles are collected by the pilgrim for the stoning of the devil ritual.

\(^{259}\) Mina is the location of the stoning of the devil ritual during the pilgrimage (hajj). It commemorates how the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) stoned the devil that came between him and the command Allah had set him.

\(^{260}\) Interview with Dr Salma, *da’iya* (lecturer at the Shari’a College of Kuwait University), Kuwait City, 28 November 2013.
Chapter 5

in the Irada square. Furthermore, while in Mecca there is a necessity (*darura*) to sleep ‘outside’ because there is no other provision, in Kuwait City a woman’s house is always nearby the location of the demonstration or march, taking away the need to sleep in the square. To support her view, Dr Salma invokes the Islamic principle of *darura*: there is no necessity for a woman to stay out because her own house is nearby.

*Da’iyat* also refer to the nature of women to support a standpoint against the *mabit*: sleeping in the square does not fit with the position of women in Kuwaiti society\(^{261}\) and how they are viewed, nor with their nature. Khawla, a *da’iya* and the head of the women’s section of the Department of Qur’anic Affairs at the Religious Endowments Ministry said:

“If in the demonstration there is violence then I am afraid for my daughter. Women are weak.” \(^{262}\)

Here, they use an argument that the activists too use against the *mabit*: society isn’t used to women sleeping in the public space, and women, as ‘the weaker sex,’ might get hurt if the situation gets out of hand.

As opposed to the activists and business women, *da’iyat* do advance religious reasons to argue against the *mabit*. Some are against demonstrations in the first place, because they are in their opinion un-Islamic:

“I disagree with demonstrations. It is against the shari’ah rulings (*ahkam shar’iyya*) that we have.” \(^{263}\)

Dr Dina was against the *mabit* because she was afraid that when she attends a *mabit*, there will be mingling between men and women. Her fear is that of a slippery slope: if an overnight stay during a demonstration happens, she reasons, next time the woman goes out she might do so without her *hijab*. One thing could lead to another and the woman could step outside the boundaries of the shari’a (*al-dawabit al-shari’iya*), which should be prevented. Another argument with reference to religion against the *mabit* is the Qur’anic verse ‘*qarna fi buyutikunna*’:

\(^{261}\) Interview with Dr Jawahir, *da’iya* (at the Public Committee for Minors and Orphans Affairs), Kuwait City, 3 December 2013.

\(^{262}\) Interview with Khawla, *da’iya* (head of women’s section of the *Wizarat al-awqaf, Idarat shu’un al-Qur’an al-karim* – Religious Endowments Ministry, Department of Qur’anic Affairs), Kuwait City, 4 December 2013.

\(^{263}\) Interview with Dr Dina, *da’iya* (lecturer at the Shari’a College of Kuwait University), Kuwait City, 4 December 2013.
a woman has to stay and sleep in her home – an argument we also came across in the debate about the *mabit* in the newspaper, and that speaks to ideas about the nature of women.

*Justifying the mabit*

Only three women I interviewed – all business women - justified the *mabit*. They did this by saying that the *mabit* could take place under certain conditions:

“Women can participate in the *mabit*. She is participating in something democratic. Something that helps the country. It is her right to participate. She can sleep there without wrong things (*ashay‘ khati‘a*) happening. But she has to be modest (*muhtashima*) in her clothes. And it can’t be mixed. There has to be a small tent for the women, and they can participate there. Only then can she go.”

Only when the conditions of modesty and segregation are met can women participate – and then, Wafa’ said in the interview, it is normal. Another business woman, Shirin, said that women should only take part in the *mabit* if they can be sure that the stated aim will actually be achieved because of her presence.

*In favour of the mabit, regardless of (man‘ al-*)ikhtilat*

Only two activists and two business women said they had no problem with the *mabit* and were in favour of it. They are those interlocutors who would associate themselves with the liberal-minded stream in society. They supported the *mabit* because, they said, politics is as a matter of principle also for Kuwaiti women:

“They use the wording to help them in their opinions how to reach the people to keep the women at home. For us here, for the girls, it is not right culturally to sleep outside the house. For the more restricted people. If my daughter would go there with all her friends and everyone is going there and they are staying late at night, why not?”

Ghada argues in my interview with her that it is not really a matter of sleeping

---

264 Interview with Wafa’, business woman, Kuwait City, 2 December 2013.
265 Interview with Shirin, business woman, Kuwait City, 5 December 2013.
266 Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
at the *mabit* but a case of staying out, overnight, in the square continuing the demonstration into the night. The women would not sleeping, but just sitting down and demonstrating, she says. By framing it as ‘sleeping,’ the religiously conservative people use it as a way to keep the women at home and preventing them from exercising their political rights.

Others argued it is the personal freedom of the woman, suggesting that those who are against the *mabit* should just stay at home and not come: “If you’re against the *mabit*, don’t come! It’s very simple.”

267 Rather than preventing those women who do support the *mabit* to come and stay in the square during the night, Marwa turns that reasoning around and says that it’s those who are against it that should stay at home rather than the women. Taking a pragmatic stance, framing women’s political participation as part of the Kuwaiti nation, as well as turning gendered expectations upside down, these four women look favourably upon a *mabit*, regardless of it being a mixed or segregated overnight stay.

**Conclusion**

In the media debate about the *mabit*, the main type of arguments that was drawn on related to ideas about what is suitable for men and women. Also, Islamic principles were invoked. There was not much of an appeal to the nature of Kuwait. Among interlocutors, the same image of what types of arguments were used appears.

Just as in the university case, most interlocutors’ arguments are grounded in ideas about the Kuwaiti nation. This stands in contrast to the types of arguments used in the debate in the newspapers, where the appeal to Kuwait as a nation was not so prevalent. However, both interviewees and pundits use arguments that are based in ideas about gender.

Furthermore, while pundits do invoke Islamic arguments, among interviewees only *da‘iyat* advance religious arguments and invoke Islamic principles to support their views.

Arguments that are unique to the *mabit* case are those related to political engagement: whether or not demonstrations as such fit Kuwait as a nation, and whether or not women’s political engagement fits Kuwaiti women’s nature – and if so, which way of participation with respect to an overnight stay at a demonstration suits their femininity.

267 Interview with Marwa, activist, Kuwait City, 26 November 2013.
Restaurants: *kaba’in* in Jahra’

Most restaurants and cafes in Kuwait are mixed. Men and women, families, and groups of male and female friends all sit in an open restaurant area. Unlike Saudi Arabia, most cafes do not have a women-only section (*qism li-l-nisa’*) or a family section (*qism li-l-‘alat*). Some, for example in the Suq al-Mubarakiyya (Kuwait’s re-done old suq), do have family sections. In that case, the downstairs seating area is reserved for ‘bachelors’ and all-male groups while the upstairs area of the restaurant is for families and women.

In the Jahra’ area of Kuwait, which all interlocutors classified as the most conservative part of Kuwait, aside from mixed open areas restaurants have ‘cabins’ (*kaba’in*), or one-table seating areas that can be closed off by a door, screen, or curtain. These *kaba’in* exist for the purpose of families having more privacy while out for a meal and so that women who wear the burqa or niqab can take it off and eat comfortably. They also serve groups of women who wish to sit away from the mixed open area of the restaurant, again in order to have more privacy and to be able to remove their burqa or niqab, which they do not wish to do in the open-plan, mixed (*mukhtalat*) area of the restaurant.

Unlike the university and *mabit* examples, where both had clear designated women-only spaces, *kaba’in* are not necessarily a women-only space. *Kaba’in* are accessible to families, and groups of men or groups of women, but also to couples. For a restaurant owner it is of course hard to know whether the ‘family’ in the *kabina* is really a family or married couple or not, unless the owner would ask customers for their marriage certificate and ID’s. As such, both *ikhtilat* and *khilwa* can occur in the cabin. The issue with the *kaba’in* is not with families or single-sex-groups using the *kaba’in*, but with ‘married couples’ who are, in fact, not married, and thus in *khilwa* in the *kabina*.

Especially since *khilwa* has multiple interpretations and is not unequivocally rejected by all interlocutors, this case provides interesting material to examine how respondents frame *kaba’in* and what are their ideas about and attitudes towards segregation, *ikhtilat*, and *khilwa*.

The *kaba’in* in restaurants and cafes in the area of Jahra’ were discussed in Kuwaiti newspapers during my fieldwork there in the fall of 2013. The *kaba’in* are cabins that are closed but as explained can nonetheless constitute a mixed space or a space in which *khilwa* occurs. In the Kuwaiti newspapers, the restaurants and cafes that had open areas in their establishment as well as *kaba’in* were referred

---

268 Unlike Saudi Arabia, Kuwait does not have a Mutawa’a.
to as ‘mixed cafes’ (maqahi mukhtalata). Residents of Jahra’ who were against the alleged misuse of the kaba’in in these restaurants staged a sit-in on the square of the ‘Aqala al-Zufiri mosque in Jahra’ on 11 and 12 October and 2013, demanding that the authorities close mixed cafes:

“The protestors demanded that the Interior Ministry take immediate action to prevent this phenomenon [of moral violations] which had started to spread widely in some cafes, stressing that these cafes have closed cabins (kaba’in mughaqa) in which immoral practices take place” (al-Nahar 2013).

During the demonstration and in officials’ reactions to it, the solution to the problem of misuse of the kaba’in that was proposed consisted in closing down the cafes. As we shall see later, however, the vast majority of the women I interviewed told me that in their view the solution is not closing down the cafes and restaurants but rather abolishing the kaba’in altogether and allowing fully mixed restaurants only.

On October 12, the day after the first sit-in, al-Siyasa newspaper published an article explaining that the protesting Jahra’ residents’ main demand was the closing of the cafes that they claimed were ‘cafes of corruption,’ labelling ikhtilat between women and men as forbidden (al-Siyasa 2013). The type of interaction between women and men that takes place in the kaba’in in the cafes was seen by the protestors as unsuitable and incompatible with how they believed public interaction between the two genders should be organised.

In the same newspaper article, Member of Parliament Sa’ud al-Hariji is quoted as calling the mixed cafes “a phenomenon from outside (dakhila ‘ala) our society” (al-Siyasa 2013). Rejecting them as a part of Kuwaiti society, al-Hariji argues the cafes should be closed as they are unsuitable to the Kuwaiti nation. His fellow MP Al-Shammary is reported in the article to have said that “cafes in Jahra’ and in other areas pose a moral danger to families” (al-Siyasa 2013), thereby framing the cafes and the kaba’in as facilitating inappropriate ways of interaction between non-mahram men and women.

A day later the newspaper al-Sabah also reported about the demonstration (al-Sabah 2013). It reports that the head of the Committee of Home Affairs ‘Askar al-‘Unayzi, when visiting the site of the demonstration, encouraged the Ministries of Internal affairs, Trade, and Baladiyya (municipality) to quickly close the ‘mixed cafes’ in Jahra’ to preserve the traditions and customs of Kuwaiti society. From al-‘Unayzi’s perspective, the cafes go against the character of Kuwait and are
unwanted in the country. He also said that “those cafes in which men and women mix encourage moral deviance and pose a moral threat to families” (al-Sabah 2013). So al-‘Unayzi too claims that the cafes facilitate a mode of interaction between men and women that should not be permitted.

The Jahra’ branch of the Islah Society according to al-Sabah newspaper issued a statement denouncing the phenomenon of the spread of mixed cafes with kaba‘in in the governorate of Jahra’ (al-Sabah 2013). They cited verse (aya) 104 of Surat al-‘Umran that says “And let there be [arising] from you a nation inviting to [all that is] good, enjoining what is right and forbidding what is wrong, and those will be the successful.” Drawing from the Qur’an, the Islah society’s Jahra’ branch frame the cafes as inappropriate from an Islamic point of view, calling on a Qur’anic verse to support their view. The al-Sabah newspaper reported al-Shammari’s quotes as al-Siyasa did, but added that al-Shammari said that “it is impossible that the government is watching these cafe owners and the dangers these cafes pose to our society that preserves its customs” (al-Sabah 2013). The cafes, in his opinion, clash with Kuwaiti society’s customs.

A few days after the demonstration, on October 15, newspaper al-Watan’s Hasan ‘Ali Karam wrote an article in his newspaper about the sit-in (al-Watan 2013b). Like al-Shammari, he too appeals to Kuwaiti customs and history, only to support an opposite stance, namely in favour of ikhtilat in the cafes:

“Our society during all of its existence was open, women went to the suq and bought and sold and no one talked or heard about effects on honour or chastity” (al-Watan 2013b).

Framing the cafes in a history of openness of Kuwait validates them into the present-day, invoking a historical continuity. ‘Ali Karam continues by saying that those who insist on closing the cafes are “dragging the country backwards (jarr al-balad ila al-wara’) and it will be worse and darker…” (al-Watan 2013b). The writer thus again frames the cafes as part of an openness and progress that is inherent to Kuwait and, in his opinion, needs to be maintained in the present and future.

In short, in these articles, arguments in favour of closing the mixed restaurants with the kaba‘in are mainly based on the need to preserve customs and traditions, to prevent various forms of moral decay, and to maintain a situation that is appropriate from an Islamic point of view. Arguments against the closing of the cafes is that it would draw the country backwards.

The aforementioned newspaper articles about the demonstration all reported mainly about arguments against the kaba‘in and in favour of closing
the cafes. This makes sense because those present at the demonstrations were against the *kaba’în*. Interviewees however paint a broader picture of the *kaba’în* case.

Interlocutors’ positions vis-à-vis segregation and *ikhtilat* in *kaba’în*

Out of the 23 interviews (with 9 activists, 7 business women, and 7 *da’îyat*) in which the *kaba’în* were discussed, 14 interlocutors were against the *kaba’în* and the segregation that they provide and *khilwa* that they enable (6 activists, 5 business women, and 6 *da’îyat*), and 7 interviewees justified the *kaba’în* and the segregation that they provide (3 activists, 2 business women, and 1 *da’îya*). None of the women I spoke with were directly in favour of the *kaba’în*.

Furthermore, the *kaba’în* issue clearly was not as much of a ‘burning issue’ as the university or *mabit* cases were. The issue with the *kaba’în* only came up mid-way through my fieldwork in Kuwait. Many respondents had not (yet) heard about the case when I discussed with them what I had read in the newspapers. Those respondents whom I had interviewed before the *kaba’în* came up in the newspapers, I contacted again to ask them about their views on this particular case.

Most interesting about the *kaba’în* case is the two visions on the *kaba’în* that can be discerned. First, that of the *kaba’în* as closed mixed spaces (in which illicit encounters may occur out of the public eye), and second, that of the *kaba’în* as a form of segregation (which enables families and women to dine out comfortably).

Against the *kaba’în* and the segregation that they provide

Those interlocutors arguing against the segregation situation that the *kaba’în* provide mainly used the argument that they are against it because *khilwa* and illicit relations can happen in them:

“The *kaba’în*... the woman, she can go there with someone (male) who isn’t her husband. And that’s negative.”269

The *kaba’în* provide a closed off space with privacy, where unrelated women and men might meet up without anyone knowing. This should be prevented, and therefore there should be no *kaba’în* in restaurants. Rather, they should be open-seated for everyone. While not mentioned explicitly by any of the interviewees, here, as in Saudi Arabia, the principle of *sadd al-dhara’în* or ‘the blocking of the

269 Interview with Khawla, *da’îya*, Kuwait City, 22 October 2015.
means’ can be detected. This means that actions or circumstances that could lead to committing sins must not be permitted. The *kaba’in* are such a circumstance because unlawful encounters might take place in them. Those women I spoke with who are in favour of *ikhtilat* in restaurants and cafes say that in *ikhtilat* there can never be *khilwa*, whereas in the *kaba’in* there can be. *Ikhtilat*, in their opinion, actually prevents *khilwa*, and accordingly *ikhtilat* is better.

Secondly, one respondent said that *kaba’in* can ‘induce lesbianism’: “Maybe there are lesbians in the *kaba’in*, tempting the girls. So it is not good, these *kaba’in*.270 Shirin’s fear is that women might ‘use’ the *kaba’in* for illicit encounters that are impossible in their homes or in open, mixed public spaces as many families do not and society at large also does not accept two women in a romantic encounter. The *kaba’in*, then, might provide a ‘safe space’ for these women, while, as Shirin makes clear, in her view this is unacceptable behaviour.271

Thirdly, many interviewees are against the *kaba’in* and the segregation they provide not for the space they might give for ‘illicit encounters,’ but because they believe that this type of segregation does not suit Kuwait. These respondents say that the *kaba’in* are characteristic of Jahra’, the most conservative area of Kuwait, and not characteristic of the rest of Kuwait:

270 Interview with Shirin, business woman, Kuwait City, 25 September 2013.

271 In Kuwait, I came across this argument a few times, as I describe in this Chapter. In Saudi Arabia however, ‘inducing lesbianism’ did not come up in interviews as an argument against segregation. One of my Kuwaiti respondents told me what she thought was the background of this difference: “In Kuwait it is a natural thing if you say you want tolerance and openness. Protecting minorities’ rights [here she means the *bidun*] for example...You can talk about it. Not in Saudi Arabia. [...] But the backlash that happened on the Human Rights Watch report...[she means ‘They Hunt Us Down For Fun’ on transgender women]. Who are you to talk about these things and say this is *haram* and this is not acceptable and those people should end up in hospitals to treat their sexual orientation? More subtle, more structured growth of this effort will create awareness. You will see it in less than ten years. Right now, there are already some groups supporting homosexuals and there are already a few people who are publicly vocal and speaking. I had a meeting yesterday with a friend of mine. She runs a psychological counselling group. She needed my help in her management team because there is lots of tension. The whole tension is because her counselling group feels that they should be proactive in terms of protecting the rights of the homosexuals in Kuwait. Most of her clients in that counselling group are homosexual. She thinks the group should have a role. But at the same time she and other people in the management see that Kuwait is not ready for that and that it will create a backlash that will damage the clients, and their business. They know that in the end that backlash will shut down their services that are helping the homosexual clients. So going public does not really help them better serve this population. She was talking and I just was thinking that it is so sad. But at the same time it is beautiful that we have that argument in Kuwait now. We would never have had that argument ten years ago. I could never ever see that argument happening in Saudi Arabia any time soon.” Bushra explains that because Kuwait is more open than Saudi Arabia, while the topic of homosexuality is still a very difficult one to breach and talk about openly in public in a positive way, at least there is a bit of a discussion, and thinking about how to subtly create more openness, without a negative backlash – something that she does not believe will be possible in Saudi Arabia, a much more closed society, in the near future.
“They are tribal (qabaliyya), bedouin (badu). They are more conservative (tahaffuz) than the sedentary population (hadar). Jahra’ is far from all the other areas [of Kuwait], so they are isolated. They are like Saudi Arabia. The wives have to cover their faces, their families go into the kaba’in. They use the kaba’in so the wives can uncover their faces. But I don’t like the kaba’in because bad and dirty things can happen in them.”

The kaba’in, it is argued, are against Kuwait’s customs and traditions (‘adat wa taqalid) and are framed as a backward (mutakhallaf) phenomenon that do not match with what are seen as appropriate ways of interaction between men and women. Furthermore, they enable khilwa and illicit and improper behaviour.

Lastly, some of the women I spoke with who positioned themselves against the kaba’in did so because they were against segregation anywhere in society. Here, segregation is rejected as a matter of principle, regardless of whether or not it is with respect to the kaba’in case or in other instances. Segregation, it is argued, is not part of how they see Kuwait and wish for it to be in the future.

One interlocutor, Dr Salma, a da’iya, was in favour of ikhtilat for herself but argued that the kaba’in should be there so that those women who prefer it can make use of it and feel comfortable when dining out. Dr Salma explained it as follows:

“In the kaba’in, some families, to take their freedom... she needs to take down her niqab to eat, and to drink. And so if she wants to take her freedom, she needs the kabina.”

Dr Salma herself prefers sitting in the mixed area, but realises this is not the case for all women and families and believes that therefore the kaba’in should exist to facilitate going out to restaurants to those women and families who otherwise might not dine out, or would make niqab-wearing women uncomfortable eating. The kabina, then, is framed as part of a woman’s personal freedom and her freedom of choice.

Justifying segregation in the kaba’in
Interlocutors who justified the segregation situation in the kaba’in said that they

---

272 Interview with Rahima, business woman, Kuwait City, 28 November 2013.
273 Interview with Dr Salma, da’iya, Kuwait City, 30 September 2013.
believe that here, segregation can take place on condition that the top and bottom of the *kabina* is open. If that is the case, they reason, no *khilwa* can happen, and therefore no illicit encounters can take place in the *kabina*. As Ruqayya, a *da‘iya* said:

“The *kaba‘in* that we used to have, they were closed at the top and the bottom. They were really a room. A room! So then we said, it has to be open from the top and from the bottom. (...) So that you can see who is inside, so that the waiter can see what is going on in there.””

In the first situation that Ruqayya sketches, the *kabina* constitutes a room, without any means of an outside check on what happens inside. This outside check can take place when the *kabina* is open at the top and the bottom. The *kabina*, thus, is seen as beneficial when there is no opportunity for illicit relations, and should not be used in a way that goes against the Kuwaiti customs and traditions (*‘adat wa taqalid*) that forbid illicit relations.

**Conclusion**

Among interviewees, arguments against the *kaba‘in* and the segregation that they provide are mostly in the realm of the fear of illicit relations and also the facilitation of ‘lesbianism,’ and as such are grounded in ideas about gender. Also, the *kaba‘in* are framed as backward and incompatible with Kuwait’s history, present and future and thus are based on conceptions of the Kuwaiti nation. Those interlocutors who justify the *kaba‘in* and the segregation they provide, do so stating that the condition of open tops and bottoms needs to be met, for the *kabina* to comply with Kuwaiti traditions and customs (*‘adat wa taqalid*). Others say that the *kaba‘in* are, rather, a form of segregation that enables families and women to dine out comfortably.

Interestingly, none of the women I spoke with argued straightforwardly in favour of the *kaba‘in* and the segregation they provide. Those who see the *kaba‘in* as a mixed space are against them, because it might lead to *khilwa*. Likewise, those who see the *kaba‘in* as a form of segregation are against them for the same reason.

---

274 Interview with Ruqayya, activist, Kuwait City, 23 October 2013.
275 This does mean that the (male) waiter might see unveiled women.
Chapter 5

Cases conclusion

An analysis of the positions per category of interlocutor shows that each position (against, in justification, or in favour of segregation) cannot be neatly attributed to one category of interlocutors (activists, business women, or da’iyat). Of the 31 activists, 18 were against segregation, 9 justified it, and 4 were in favour of it. Of the 22 business women, 13 were against segregation, 6 justified it, and 3 were in favour of it. Of the 23 da’iyat, 14 were against segregation, 5 justified it, and 4 were in favour of it. Rather, these numbers show that the view that is represented most strongly, across all three categories of interlocutors, is that of being against segregation. Then, in justification of segregation, and finally, in favour of segregation. I believe this is a reflection of the historical and present form of public interaction between men and women, namely in ikhtilat rather than segregation.

Gender, Islam, and the Kuwaiti nation

In the three cases I examined, we have seen that interviewees draw on a variety of arguments to support their position against, in justification of, or in favour of segregation in these places. We have also seen that while in society the default is ikhtilat, the discourse mainly revolves around segregation, the man‘ al-ikhtilat law, and Kuwait University.

In the university case, we saw a clear representation of the categories against, in justification of, and in favour of segregation. However, it turned out that in the mabit and kaba’in cases, discourse includes positions towards khilwa. All arguments interlocutors use are based on their ideas about roles of men and women in society and sexuality; ideas about the nature and character of Kuwait; and ideas about and experiences with Islamic principles. When taking a closer look, we see that the women I spoke with draw these arguments mainly from underlying notions of Islam, gender, and the nation. Additionally, there is also a sense of pragmatism among interlocutors.

Interviewees’ arguments inform us how they envisage their lives in relation to man‘ al-ikhtilat, ikhtilat and khilwa, and the way in which they regard the participation of women in the Kuwaiti public space as suitable.

Interestingly, arguments that are used by one interlocutor against segregation may be used by another interlocutor in justification or in preference of ikhtilat. This is relevant to the present study in that it plays a role in the dynamics of whether
Kuwait: Women on Segregation

or not segregation can be framed as part of ‘the modern nation’ of Kuwait. In other words, the question is what does and what does not belong to Kuwait as a modern nation.

In that process, gender was the notion that my interlocutors drew on mostly. With the notion of ‘gender’ I refer to ideas about the appropriate roles of men and women in society, sexuality, and the nature of men and women. Sexuality is an important aspect. Some of the women I spoke with opposed segregation because they believe it induces harassment of women by women and lesbianism, framing this as something unwelcome and unsuitable for young ladies and not befitting the natural role of women in society. Girls or women need to be protected from other women who might not be able to restrain themselves. At the same time, potential harassment of women by men can also be a reason to forbid mixing during the mabit.

Similarly, while some argue that politics is also for women and not only for men, and therefore they can attend the mabit if they want to, others claim they should not because it does not suit the nature of women, who should be looking after their family duties. Men and women are seen as having different interests as well as different roles to take on.

Also, while some interlocutors say they are in favour of the segregation in kaba’in because it allows women to take off their niqab and relax, other interlocutors are against it because it might lead to illicit relations.

Finally, some interviewees argue that while they are in favour of man‘ al-ikhtilat as a matter of principle, ikhtilat is permissible if the frequency of the contact is low, so that there is no risk of inappropriate relations occurring. Here, the idea is that women and men should not enter into pre- or extra-marital relations, communicating an idea about sexuality as something that does not belong outside the realm of the sanctioned relationship of marriage.

Secondly, interlocutors often draw on arguments stemming from the notion of the nation, by which I mean their ideas about Kuwait as a nation and what Kuwait should and should not be like regarding the public interaction between women and men. Here, contestation takes place over the character of the country and what is and what is not appropriate for it, whether or not Kuwait is conservative, what the place of segregation and ikhtilat should be.

Many interlocutors said that segregation does not suit the character of Kuwait because of its history of openness due to its pearling and trading activities with India and East Africa in the pre-oil era. Segregation, then, is something new that arrived in Kuwait in the 1990s in the wake of the Gulf war, and framed as something ‘backward’ that is not suitable to the present-day life and realities in
the country and does not fit its historic path.

Another often-heard argument is that the country’s financial resources should be put to better use. Especially with the building of the new Shadadiya campus, an extremely costly project, many oppose this spending even when they are in principle in favour of segregation at university. Their vision of what Kuwait needs and what is good for the country does not involve separating young women and men at university, but is rather connected to providing them with a good education or developing the infrastructure of the country.

The third notion interviewees drew on was that of Islam, though much less so than gender and nation. By the notion of Islam I here mean arguments that invoke Islam or Islamic principles. Some argued that *ikhtilat* is justifiable within the limits of the shari’a (*al-dawabit al-shar’iyya*). The principle of necessity (*darura*) was invoked only twice, with *da’iyat* arguing that *ikhtilat* should only take place if there is a necessity and with *da’iyat* arguing that *ikhtilat* is not *darura*. None of the activists or business women invoked this principle.

Interlocutors did refer to the concept of *khilwa* or seclusion, such as in the *kaba’in* case where some argued that *man‘ al-ikhtilat* should not be allowed since it can lead to *khilwa* and thus forbidden relations. This might sound like a contradiction; however, the idea is that seclusion such as in *kaba’in* cannot be controlled (Kuwait, for example, does not have a religious police like Saudi Arabia has), and therefore offers an opportunity to unmarried and unrelated women and men to mingle and have improper encounters. Others say that *man‘ al-ikhtilat* is un-Islamic and should therefore be forbidden. They want a situation that in their view is compatible with Islam, they believe *man‘ al-ikhtilat* is un-Islamic, and accordingly, should not be implemented. Arguing in favour of segregation, one interlocutor explicitly said she was in favour of it not because of Islam but because it is better for the study results. So it is a contestation over what is and what is not sanctioned or allowed by Islam and how this should take shape publicly.

Some arguments, finally, have a pragmatic dimension. Respondents who are against segregation as a matter of principle do say that there should be women-only places so that those women who want and need those places can have the freedom to use them. At the same time, they pragmatically say that, if you are against the *mabit*, just stay at home.

Arguments used by Kuwaiti women with whom I spoke stem from the same notions as in Saudi Arabia. However, in Saudi Arabia interviewees drew much more on the notion of Islam than in Kuwait. In Saudi Arabia, arguments based on Islam are the heaviest-weighing arguments, both against and in justification of *ikhtilat* for each of the three cases of workplace, university, and hospitals. In
Kuwait: Women on Segregation

Kuwait, on the contrary, the appeal to the country’s history and how segregation does or does not match with Kuwait’s national identity is a much more prevalent argument. Similarly, many Kuwaiti interviewees’ arguments are based on what are seen as the appropriate roles of women in Kuwaiti society, based on that same history and the position of Kuwaiti women therein.

**Negotiating the modern Kuwaiti nation**

In the following analysis, I use the concept of promissory note as explained and operationalised in Chapter 1. I analyse the Kuwaiti state’s promissory note (its projection of modernity) and the desiderata of my interlocutors (the way in which they hold the state to its promissory note) about the modern Kuwaiti nation. This is helpful in comprehending the negotiation of modernity: what promissory note does the state put forward? And in turn, as envisioned by my interlocutors, are *ikhtilat* and segregation part of holding the state to its promissory note? And if so, how are they framed as (not) part of that modern?

**The Kuwaiti state’s promissory note**

The Kuwaiti state, in its infrastructural as well as identity-building projects since the discovery and exploitation of oil, has issued its own image of ‘modernity’ into society. These projects posed questions such as what it meant to be a modern Kuwaiti nation, and a modern Kuwaiti citizen -women and men-, and how relations between women and men in public should be organised. It is important to remember that ideas about how gender relations should be organised are not only part of the nationalist project, but are intimately connected to ideas about modernity and being modern. Here, I return to the state’s connecting its image of a ‘modern nation’ to issues of gender and women.

As we have seen in Chapter 4, the Kuwaiti state projects its answers to these questions onto society through its social and development projects. Supporting the practice of *ikhtilat*, except for schools, the Kuwaiti government did not invest in a women-only infrastructure, but rather instituted policies of Kuwaitisation and feminisation of the labour market. It removed visible remnants of Kuwait’s pre-oil past and highlighted modernity and progress both in state development projects and in discourse (al-Nakib 2013: 8). From the 1970s onwards the state increasingly needed to balance the different streams in society in order to maintain its legitimacy, and aligned itself more clearly with Islam. Building or financing women-only public spaces was not part of this: aside from the 1996
manʿ al-ikhtilat law and the current building of the Shadadiya campus, most women-only spaces, such as the women-only floor in some branches of the Bayt al-Tamwil bank, or women-only days at Entertainment City or Messila beach, are privately owned and funded.

What also became clear in Chapter 4 is that in Kuwait’s history we can trace a development of changing promissory notes of modernity. In the period of the *Nahda* (1945-1960), modernity was contrasted by the Al Sabah to Kuwait’s pre-oil, poor, past. In the 1960s and 70s, when Arab nationalism was around and simultaneously the influence of Islamist groups grew, the government framed an ‘Islamic heritage modernity,’ with a positioning of Islam as heritage rather than piety. During its policy of *tajdid* in the late 1970s through 1989, the modernity that was issued into society was an enchanted, Islamic, Arab, modernity. During the period immediately after liberation, ‘heritage modernity’ resonated. In more recent times, a promissory note of a modernity with a framing of Islam not as piety but as an integral part and perpetuation of an entrenched Arab, Kuwaiti identity was issued into society.

### Interlocutors’ holding the state to its promissory note

As was shown in the previous section, state actors project their conception of ‘modernity’ onto Kuwaiti society through discourse and in development projects, and in the process mainly mixed public spaces came about, as an expression of the state’s promissory note of modernity. How do the holders of this promissory note -my interviewees- hold the state to its promissory note of modernity? Do they demand and view these mixed spaces as ‘modern’ or are in their perspective women-only public spaces and separate opening hours and days also part of modernity or should they be? Which desiderata with respect to the modern Kuwaiti nation do they put forward?

As became apparent through the analysis of the three cases of university, *mabit*, and *kabaʿin*, the women I interviewed mainly drew on notions of nation and gender in their argumentation and not, as was the case in Saudi Arabia, mostly on Islam. While in Saudi Arabia modernity coincides strongly with religion, in Kuwait the centre of gravity of modernity tends more towards an appeal to the country’s identity (*huwiiya*). While Islam certainly is part of that, we saw that Kuwait was mainly framed as an open country, which as a result of its history nowadays presents *ikhtilat* as the default means of public participation of women.

When asked whether Kuwait is a modern country, and how that modernity is defined, interlocutors put forward several characteristics, such as technological advances, infrastructure (i.e. buildings and roads), using the latest gadgets, but
also good education and using the country’s resources sensibly, and maintaining morality. As Hayat, an activist, said to me:

“Modernity (hadatha) is to have a good life, to use technology that makes life better. To have a good education system, good health services, infrastructure, to have good communications with others to get my rights and do my duties. This is what modernity is.”

At the same time, the majority of interlocutors stress that while modernity means leaving the past behind and embracing the future, it does not mean losing one’s identity along that way of progress. Quite the opposite:

“If I just make a copy from another place, from another culture, I don’t think that is modern (hadatha). I never lived in Japan, but I imagine that the Japanese have a balance between taking the new (jadid) and respecting their traditions. So I hope that my country can take from the new things, like the technology, but with respect to our identity (huwiyya), with the understanding of our religion. I am happy with my religion.”

Modernity, thus, lies in integrating new developments with Kuwait’s own existing identity. While according to interlocutors part of that identity lies in Kuwait’s focus on people rather than buildings, education, and openness to the outside world, part of it is also the country’s Islamic identity. Only a small minority of interviewees believe that there should be a separation between religion and state, and frame that as modernity, as activist Bushra did:

“Religion should be separated from the state. That is part of modernity. I might not be a Muslim. We have different religions in Kuwait. So the state cannot impose that on us. They should not. Because imposing delays our natural evolution.”

Bushra feels that a lack of secularism in Kuwait impedes the country’s development. She frames Islam being Kuwait’s state religion as problematic for the many other

276 Interview with Hayat, activist, Kuwait City, 27 October 2013.
277 Interview with Nawal, da’iya, Kuwait City, 19 September 2013.
278 Interview with Bushra, activist, Kuwait City, 22 November 2013.
Chapter 5

religious streams (such as Hinduism and Christianity) of the majority of Kuwaiti inhabitants who are not actually Kuwaiti nationals.

The vast majority of interviewees however believe that there is a place for spirituality in modernity\textsuperscript{279} and that Islam is part of modernity. Dr Salma, a \textit{da’iya}, put it as follows:

\begin{quote}
“Modernity (\textit{hadatha}), I go with it, but the identity and the limits (\textit{dawabit}) that I have, I protect that, I don’t leave them. I take and use all the new (\textit{jadid}) things, whether they come from the East or the West. But not that I drop my identity and my morals and my ways and my religion.”\textsuperscript{280}
\end{quote}

It is interesting to see that Dr Salma does not set her religious affiliation apart, but rather connects it to her identity and morals. Part of holding on to identity and religion is maintaining morals: no pre-marital relations, modest dress (the interpretation of which ranges widely), and only encouraging development that does not lead to moral corruption (\textit{fasad}), because in that there is no modernity:

\begin{quote}
“We have our morals (\textit{akhlaq}), and if we leave those because of modernity then that isn’t modern but going back (raj’iyya).”\textsuperscript{281}
\end{quote}

Here Jumana, a \textit{da’iya}, goes so far as to say that, if the Kuwaiti nation loses its morals, it is the opposite of modernity. The vast majority of women I spoke with merely refer to the religious or spiritual dimension of modernity, some saying that material progress should take place within the limits of Islam.

Additionally, the majority of interlocutors make a distinction between modernisation and Westernisation (\textit{taghrib}). Westernisation is identified by them as becoming the same as Western societies and losing Kuwait’s own identity (\textit{huwiyya}):

\begin{quote}
“Westernisation (\textit{taghrib}) is that the people remove themselves from their religion. But modernity (\textit{hadatha}) has more to do with development (\textit{tatwir}). I hold on to my religion but I go with the new developments. It is about technology, and I still hold on to who I am. To my clothes, to my Islam, and to the identity of my country.”\textsuperscript{282}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{279} Interview with Sa’diya, activist, Kuwait City, 27 September 2013.
\textsuperscript{280} Interview with Dr Salma, \textit{da’iya}, Kuwait City, 30 September 2013.
\textsuperscript{281} Interview with Jumana, \textit{da’iya}, Kuwait City, 25 October 2013.
\textsuperscript{282} Interview with Farida, \textit{da’iya}, Kuwait City, 27 November 2013.
The main difference between ‘the West’ and Kuwait is the system of secularism and people becoming removed from their religion, as Asil explained. ‘The West’ and Kuwait also differ in clothes, food, and morals that interlocutors believe cannot and should not be taken over.

The majority of women I spoke with stress that they consider Kuwait to be a modern country. When asked whether they envision segregation, or ikhtilat, or both as part of modernity, none of my interviewees said that they thought segregation is modern. Sa’diya, an activist, phrased it as follows:

“*Man‘ al-ikhtilat* is new (*jadid*), like the *man‘ al-ikhtilat* in the university, but it is not modern (*hadith*)”

Those interlocutors who place segregation outside of modernity, like Sa’diya, make a clear distinction between that which is new (segregation) and that which is modern. Some interlocutors (only activists and business women) went further and said that segregation is going backwards. Latifa, an activist, said:

“I feel like we’re in the 15th century. We’re in the 21st century and we’re debating students in medicine should study together or be segregated? Really? All this *time* and *effort*? Wasted on this *stupid* discussion. What else can you call it? It’s just *stupid*. And *meaningless*. (...) I think segregation is a modern, fundamentalist technique to further break the society and control it. Because even at the time of the Prophet society was mixed. It was very mixed. A lot of stories talk about Muhammad’s own mixing with women.”

Here, Latifa frames segregation as going backwards, while framing *ikhtilat* as the ‘measuring stick’ of modernity. She also argues that segregation is something modern – but not something positive. She formulates segregation as a modern, fundamentalist thought that is a destructive power that is attacking Kuwaiti society. Interestingly, further along in my interview with her Latifa said that, despite her strong aversion to segregation, women can and do make advancements in segregation. She however does not consider that phenomenon ‘modern.’

A small group of activists, business women, and *da‘iyat* said that there is no
relation at all between segregation and modernity. Hafsa, a da’iya, told me:

“Modernity (hadatha) isn’t about being mixed or segregated. It is in a person’s thinking. It isn’t in a place, or a building. I look at it from the side of morals.”

To Hafsa, modernity is not necessarily about mixing or not, but rather about how someone thinks, whether they are ‘open-minded’ or not and accepting of the world around them. And, importantly, whether or not they lead a morally ‘good’ life, that to her means respecting yourself, maintaining proper distance between yourself and men, and interacting with men within limits.

A similarly small and mixed group of interviewees sees no relation between ikhtilat and modernity. Hamida, a business woman, said:

“There is no relationship between modernity (hadatha) and ikhtilat. Saudi Arabia has no ikhtilat and we do have ikhtilat and we both developed, so there is no relationship.”

Interestingly, Hamida draws a parallel between Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. She views both countries as developed - each in a way that suits the particularity of each country. Saudi Arabia has developed through segregation and Kuwait through ikhtilat, and thus, in her opinion, the outcome of each of these processes -advancement- is independent of ikhtilat and segregation.

Shahd, a da’iya, develops this thought further and says she believes there is no relationship between ikhtilat and segregation and modernity:

“A lot of people in society see that modernity (hadatha) and development (tatawwur) is in ikhtilat. But in my opinion that isn’t right. There is no relationship at all between hadatha and tatawwur, and ikhtilat or segregation. My friend, she stays at home, she isn’t employed, she doesn’t mix with men. But she is very developed (mutatawwira) in her thinking and her way of looking at the world. And so there is no relationship between ikhtilat and hadatha and tatawwur.”

---

286 Interview with Hafsa, da’iya, Kuwait City, 23 October 2013.
287 Interview with Hamida, business woman, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
288 Interview with Shahd, da’iya, Kuwait City, 21 September 2013.
To Shahd, neither *ikhtilat* nor segregation is conditional to or even connected to modernity. To her, it is about whether or not one has and takes the opportunity to develop oneself and to grow. She does not propose a specific desiderata for either *ikhtilat* or segregation but rather advances the idea that there is a need to develop oneself regardless of *ikhtilat* or segregation, and that this development is possible in either.

Only a small minority across the groups of activists, business women, and *da'iya* was of the opinion that both segregation and *ikhtilat* are modern. Nawal, a *da'iya*, said:

“Whether with *ikhtilat* or without it, we can have modernity (*hadatha*). Society thinks that only *ikhtilat* is modern. That is wrong. We can be modern without *ikhtilat*. Sometimes, like in medicine, there is a necessity to have *ikhtilat*. You have to have *ikhtilat*. A woman can see a male doctor if she is sick. It is not forbidden. But, with limits (*hudud*). The aim (*hadaf*) is important.”

Nawal prefers segregation, but she believes that both *ikhtilat* and segregation are part of modernity. While the majority of society might opt for *ikhtilat*, she herself claims modernity by opting for segregation. This is her desideratum.

Only two interviewees framed only *ikhtilat* as explicitly modern. The majority of interlocutors across all three categories of interlocutors said that *ikhtilat* is Kuwait’s ‘normality.’ Ghada, an activist, told me:

“*Ikhtilat* is not something modern. *Ikhtilat* is the natural way of life. The nature of human interaction is men and women, mixed. You cannot segregate them. *Ikhtilat* is normal, how we have always done things in Kuwait.”

Ghada frames *ikhtilat* as part of Kuwait’s history up to today, the way public interaction between women and men has always been organised, and thus it is part of Kuwait’s normality. She sees *ikhtilat* as something normal, natural, the way life is and part of Kuwait’s history and character.

Najat, a business woman, goes even further and says:

---

289 Interview with Nawal, *da'iya*, Kuwait City, 19 September 2013.
290 Interview with Ghada, activist, Kuwait City, 22 September 2013.
“I think that the argument is that we should hold on to who we are. And the counterargument is also that we should hang on to who we are. It is different sections of society arguing with each other, each of which sees themselves as the people who own what it is to be really Kuwaiti, or really Muslim.”

Najat sees both segregation and ikhtilat not as something specifically modern, but rather as a way of holding on to ‘who we are,’ with a struggle over what is ‘authentically Kuwaiti.’ In this specific claim over what is genuinely Kuwaiti, we can discern two different desiderata with respect to the future of the country: segregation as a way of being ‘truly’ Kuwaiti, and ikhtilat as a way of being ‘truly’ Kuwaiti.

Concluding remarks

As we saw in this Chapter’s section on Gender, Islam, and the Kuwaiti nation, respondents’ positions on segregation and ikhtilat mostly link with the notions of the Kuwaiti nation and gender, and to a lesser extent with Islam, as a part of national identity. Interlocutors mostly engage with ideas about the Kuwaiti nation and what its character is and should be. The ideas that interlocutors express relate to the way they envisage the future of women in Kuwaiti society and their participation in public life, and about how to go about reaching that future (through ikhtilat and/or segregation).

Through their desiderata, respondents hold the state to its promissory note of modernity framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, where Islam is invoked as part of that identity rather than as piety. The state frames itself as ‘modern’ and a ‘moderniser’ in a manner that corresponds with the Kuwaiti identity and, as part thereof, with Islam. Interviewees hold the state to that promissory note by expressing their desiderata as to what they believe their community needs - segregation, ikhtilat, or both. These desiderata are centred around ideas about the identity (huwiyya) of Kuwait, which includes the country’s history and historical development of public relations between women and men, its religious identity, and what respondents see as ‘normality’ in Kuwait today.

The state predominantly favours ikhtilat and the desideratum of the majority of interlocutors too is ikhtilat, while other respondents express a desideratum

---

291 Interview with Najat, business woman, Kuwait City, 8 October 2013.
of segregation as a way of holding the state to the modernity it has promised. To them, segregation is what fits the modern Kuwaiti identity, the nation, its gender relations, and the role of Islam therein. So while among my interviewees, both desiderata co-exist and find their expression in positioning and discourses about concrete phenomena with respect to *ikhtilat* and segregation, as we have seen in the university, Karamat Watan, and *kaba‘in* cases, for the majority of respondents, their desideratum is *ikhtilat* as part of Kuwaiti modernity. In the case of Kuwait, as in the case of Saudi Arabia, the perspective of promissory notes and desiderata allows us to view modernity as being negotiated between the issuer of the promissory note (the state) and the holders of the promissory note (my interlocutors), over whether or not women should participate in the public life of the modern Kuwaiti nation and in which way: through *ikhtilat*, segregation, or both.

We saw in this Chapter’s section on Interlocutors’ holding the state to its promissory note that the majority of women I spoke with distinguish between modernity and Westernisation on the basis of secularism and (perceived) moral differences. ‘Westernisation’ is regarded as becoming the same as Western societies and losing Kuwait’s own identity. While ‘the West’ is a point of reference, modernity is not equated to Westernisation but rather has its distinct ‘own-ness.’ Here, we clearly see an alternative modernity (see Chapter 1).

In the promissory note of both the Kuwaiti state and the desiderata of my interlocutors, the religious dimension, while present, is less prominent and important than in case of Saudi Arabia. In the case of Kuwait, the promissory note of the state is framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity. Where Islam is invoked, it is mostly as part of that identity rather than as piety. The women I spoke with frame their desiderata around Kuwaiti national history as well as the Kuwaiti identity and particularity. This includes a religious dimension, but as part of that identity, where Islam is part of national identity rather than as piety, religious legitimisation, and religious rules.
Conclusions

In my dissertation I have examined how modernity is negotiated in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait through discourses about gender, Islam, and the nation that converge in the phenomena of gendered spaces of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*.

Three dimensions were central to this analysis. Firstly, a comparison of the historical development of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and the analysis of the promissory notes of modernity (Wittrock 2000) these two states have issued into their societies. Secondly, a comparison of the views as expressed by my Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti interlocutors in their discourses about the phenomena of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in their societies and the ways in which, through their desiderata, they hold their respective states to their promissory note of modernity. The third central dimension was the negotiation that takes place between the women and their respective states, and whether the outcomes of these processes are different in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Here, I also evaluate whether the theoretical concepts I proposed have been a useful lens through which to approach the subject matter at hand. Finally, I address some recent developments and suggest avenues for further research.

The first conclusion is that historical processes in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have led to different outcomes with respect to the prevalence of women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia as opposed to *ikhtilat* in Kuwait and different promissory notes of modernity. In Saudi Arabia, the 1744 pact between the tribal ruler Ibn Sa'ud and the religious leader Ibn Wahhab, the discovery of oil, the ensuing urbanisation, and then the Sahwa led to first the emergence of women-only public spaces and subsequently their consolidation, financed by oil revenues. It was not until the 2000s, under domestic and international pressure following domestic terror attacks as well as 9/11 that the state not only supported women-only public spaces, but also allowed the development of more *mukhtalat* (mixed) public spaces.

Throughout the period since the proclamation of the Third Saudi state, the Saudi state has always projected into society a promissory note of a modernity that is Islamic: an enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006) in which Islam is invoked as piety and the Al Sa'ud as the guardians of that piety. Women, as culture bearers, from the early days of the Third Saudi State became a symbol of that modernity, both within as well as outside the country. This played out mostly in the area of public participation of women, with at first gender segregation in public spaces...
and its consolidation, and eventually, through both women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*.

While in Saudi Arabia, the outcome of the country’s specific historical circumstances first led to the emergence and consolidation of women-only spaces, and eventually to both women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat*, in Kuwait the development was different. The pact between the merchant families and the ruling family Al Sabah and the history of Kuwait as a trading nation have led to a prevalence of *ikhtilat* (mixing) throughout 20th and 21st century Kuwaiti history as the dominant mode of public participation of women.

Whereas legitimacy of the Al Sa’ud in Saudi Arabia is based on establishing Islamic order, in Kuwait originally the authority of the Al Sabah is established through a social contract with the merchant class. Kuwait’s history is often invoked as an explanation of the visibility of *ikhtilat* in society, positioning Kuwait as an outward-looking trade nation that was influenced by the cultures and peoples it traded with. Its connections with the world beyond the Arabian peninsula and a greater degree of sedentarisation gave Kuwait a more open character.

While in Saudi Arabia the ruling family supported the development of women-only public spaces, and did not begin to support the phenomenon of *ikhtilat* until later in the 2000s, the Al Sabah positioned themselves more reservedly vis-à-vis segregation from the beginning, leaving public separation of women and men to the private sector. Women-only public spaces and women-only opening hours do exist but are, aside from Kuwait University that is a gender-segregated state university and some ministries, private/commercial initiatives and not state-sponsored.

The Kuwaiti state, just like the Saudi Arabian state, has issued into society throughout the history of the Al Sabah ruling family its promissory note of modernity. Its pathway however is different from that of Saudi Arabia. At first, the state projected into society a promissory note of a modernity that consisted of urban development in combination with social reform and progress. The state framed this modernity in contrast with and opposition to Kuwait’s poor pre-oil past.

Then, the government projected onto society a promissory note of an ‘Islamic heritage modernity’: a modernity that was rooted in a local Islamic past and heritage. The focus was on an Islamic past in combination with a modern future. Unlike in Saudi Arabia, where the past is invoked as piety, in Kuwait it was positioned as heritage that is relevant to today, and so the way in which Islam is embraced into the modern is different.

Through its policy of *tajdid* the state issued into society a promissory note of
an Islamic, Arab modernity, at a time that the Al Sabah believed it opportune to align itself more evidently with Islam. The policy of *tajdid* also shows a desire on the part of the Al Sabah to issue into society a new promissory note of modernity, namely that of an enchanted (cf. Deeb 2006), Islamic, Arab modernity: a future that is modern and Islamic and Arab.

Today, modernity is framed as an “alternative modernity” (Taylor 1998, 2004) around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, with Islam being invoked as part of that identity rather than as piety. Part of that identity is Islam. Islam is invoked as part of modern Kuwait in the shape of the Kuwaiti national identity: of the country’s and the population’s roots, as a cultural point of reference, and as part of how norms and values are shaped. And so not as religiosity or as piety. As such, therefore, it is not an enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006).

My second conclusion holds that while the views as expressed by my Saudi Arabian and Kuwaiti interlocutors about the phenomena of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* in their societies are grounded (albeit differently weighted) in the same notions of gender, Islam, and the nation, they hold the Saudi and Kuwaiti state to their promissory notes of modernity in different ways. Through the cases of the mixed KAUST in Saudi Arabia and the gender-segregated Shadadiya campus in Kuwait, we saw the mirror images of the ‘normality’ in each country. While workplaces in Kuwait have historically been mixed and as such were not regarded as ‘an issue’ in the country, in Saudi Arabia women-only workplaces have been and are a way of integrating women into the labour force and as such are of prime importance in interlocutors’ discourse.

While mixed hospitals are the status quo in both countries, in Saudi Arabia they did not go uncontested in some interlocutors’ discourses, for example by supporting the petition calling for women-only hospitals. In Saudi Arabia, women-only cafes and separate seating areas were the default at the time of fieldwork, while in Kuwait *kaba’in* (separate seating areas in restaurants) are an exception and thus a reason for debate, also among my interlocutors. In Saudi Arabia, demonstrations such as the *mabit* are unthinkable. In Kuwait, demonstrations (also against the government) do take place, but the *mabit* (sleep-over during the demonstration), due to its nature, was debated, also by my interlocutors.

What appeared from my analysis of my interlocutors’ discourses on the cases of universities, the workplace, and hospitals (in Saudi Arabia) and the cases of the Shadadiya campus, *kaba’in*, and the *mabit* (in Kuwait), is that interlocutors’ arguments are, apart from pragmatic considerations, in each country grounded in notions of Islam, gender, and the nation.

In Saudi Arabia, respondents refer more to Islam than in Kuwait. In Saudi
Arabia, the ruling family, due to its historical trajectory, grounds itself and its legitimacy in Islam. It is partly through this notion of Islam that respondents hold the state to its promissory note of the enchanted modern (cf. Deeb 2006). Respondents, in their discourses, desire both women-only public spaces and ikhtilat from the state and frame both as modern. They claim both ikhtilat and women-only public spaces as part of this modernity. Additionally, they frame Islam as an essential part of and sometimes even conditional to modernity: without Islam, one cannot be modern.

In Kuwait, in their arguments interlocutors refer more to the nation, the country’s identity, than in Saudi Arabia. In its recent history, the Kuwaiti state grounds its promissory note of modernity in the nation’s identity. As in Saudi Arabia, in their discourses the Kuwaiti women I spoke with hold the Kuwaiti state to its promissory note of modernity framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, with Islam being invoked as part of that identity. In their discourses, most respondents express a desire for ikhtilat, while some label segregation as ‘backwards.’ While they frame Islam as part of modernity in the sense of being connected to (national) identity (rather than piety), ikhtilat is positioned as ‘normal’ and part of ‘normal life’ rather than as ‘modern’ and part of ‘modernity.’

This leads me to the third conclusion of my dissertation. While in the dynamic of the state issuing its promissory note of modernity onto society and interlocutors holding the state to its promissory note a negotiation can be detected, we also see a clear imbalance of power between the state and interlocutors. Where the state issues its promissory note of modernity and undertakes projects in women-only public spaces and/or ikhtilat, respondents hold the state to its promissory note through their desiderata of more women-only public spaces and/or ikhtilat. These desiderata differ between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. In Saudi Arabia, the desiderata are both women-only public spaces and ikhtilat, whereas in Kuwait it is mostly ikhtilat.

In interviews, respondents all express a clear standpoint on these two phenomena and by doing that, even when their positions reflect the state’s projects in this field, they on the one hand accommodate, and on the other unsettle and challenge the state. They also do this through public campaigns such as the lingerie campaign, the women-only hospitals petition, hamlat baladi (the campaign for women’s right to vote and stand for election), the mabit, and Sawt al-Kuwait (an organisation founded to maintain mixed private schools). They accommodate, by remaining within the field of legitimacy created by the state, and they unsettle and challenge by holding the state to its promises and not letting it do entirely as it pleases.
Here, promissory notes are a particularly helpful conceptual tool. The concept of promissory notes stresses that there are two parties involved that do not have the same power; the issuer (in this case the state) determines the terms (the field of legitimacy), while all the holder can do, in this case the women I spoke with, is hold the issuers to their promissory note. This underscores the imbalance of power that exists between the state and the interlocutors. While the state, especially an autocratic one, has the most power, promissory notes do justice to the respondents’ not being entirely powerless: despite the repressive political system they function in, they do have agency and space to speak, to act and manoeuvre, and to unsettle and challenge.

In addition, the concept of alternative modernities (Taylor 1998, 2004) has been a helpful one, particularly with respect to my fieldwork chapters. I have shown that the women I spoke with distinguish between modernity and Westernisation, yet how Europe and/or ‘the West’ remains a point of reference. There is not a strict dichotomy between the two. Respondents positioned the enchanted modern of Saudi Arabia and the Kuwaiti state’s framing of modernity around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity with Islam being invoked as part of that identity, as different to ‘Western’ modernity, yet at the same time they are in dialogue with and connected to this ‘Western’ modernity.

This brings me to the concept of the “enchanted modern” (Deeb 2006). In Saudi Arabia, we saw that the state frames itself as the pious guardian and keeper of Islam and the country’s Islamic modernity. For respondents too, Islam is in all ways directly part of – and for some respondents even conditional to – modernity and being modern. From those chapters, the enchanted modern speaks clearly. From the two Kuwait chapters of my dissertation however, a different picture emerges. The Kuwaiti state does invoke Islam, but as part of the nation’s identity rather than as piety. Interlocutors in Kuwait also did this. This means that in the case of Kuwait the concept of the enchanted modern is less helpful, and that we must look at it merely as an alternative modernity that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, with Islam being invoked as part of that identity rather than as piety.

The phenomena of women-only public spaces and *ikhtilat* have been a helpful way of studying modernity, with gender and space being anchor points in discourses on modernity. Ideas about how gender relations should be organised are not only part of the nationalist project, but are intimately connected to ideas about modernity and being modern. In both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, discussions about modernity and what it means to be modern unfold, amongst others, via the discourses on the position of women in public life, resulting in two
different alternative modernities (Taylor 1998, 2004): the one, in Saudi Arabia, an ‘enchanted modernity’ and the other, in Kuwait, a modernity that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity. The lens of gendered spaces to study modernity has also been a particularly helpful one. They are at the crossover of notions of gender, Islam, and the nation, framed in the context of modernising projects, and a basic component of discourses about being modern.

Finally, I reflect briefly on the latest developments in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. With respect to Kuwait, much less time has passed between my fieldwork and the time of writing, and so the chapter is mostly up-to-date. In the case of Saudi Arabia, however, much has happened between my last fieldwork visit and the time of writing. For example, female members of the majlis al-shura have been appointed (2013), and more driving protests have taken place (2013 and ongoing from then on) resulting in the granting of women’s right to drive (in 2017, to be implemented in 2018). Active and passive voting rights for women in the municipal elections (2015) have been granted, and the male guardianship system has been loosened (2017). Additionally, women are now allowed into soccer stadiums (2017). At the same time, following some of my respondents on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, much remains to be done and changed.

These recent developments illustrate the importance of studying gendered spaces. The often vehement public debates that take place in Saudi Arabia over the aforementioned recent developments, that I continue to follow but that fall outside the scope of this dissertation, show that nowadays, gendered spaces and participation of women in them are still a locus of debate about gender, Islam, and the nation and conceptions of modernity. Here, we come back to the state’s connecting its image of a ‘modern nation’ to issues of gender and women.

A follow-up study to chart these recent developments would be one avenue for further research. Another area of further research, building on this dissertation, is male perspectives on gendered space. While men are not absent from my dissertation, I have not interviewed them for their positions vis-à-vis ikhtilat and gender segregation. It would be fascinating to do further research into men’s experiences with and opinions about these issues.

In line with the idea of investigating male perspectives, and building on the previous suggestion of studying recent changes, it would be a valuable contribution to the literature to develop a research project that investigates changing notions of masculinity and femininity not only in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait but also elsewhere on the Peninsula.

Another topic for further research that caught my attention during my fieldwork in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is that of the contemporary arts scene.
Conclusions

in the Gulf region. Apart from its economic repercussions and connection to the modern imagery of the state, the arts have a political dimension of dissent and serve as an avenue of gender critique, investigation of which would shed light on political, social, and gendered shifts that are occurring in the Gulf region (Van Geel 2015).

Interestingly, during my time of research the issue of gender segregation also became a topical one in the UK and in the Netherlands. In the UK, these discussions concerned gender-segregated activities at universities (The Guardian 2013a and 2013b). In the Netherlands, debates took place about gender-segregated lectures by Muslim Dutch-Moroccan preachers at the VU University in Amsterdam. In a broadcast of the current-affairs programme Nieuwsuur, these lectures, where men sat in front and women at the back of the lecture room, were framed by the broadcast’s presenter as “a plea against modernity” (Nieuwsuur 2017). Another topic of public debate was the (un)suitability of women-only swimming lessons in the Dutch town of Maassluis (De Volkskrant 2017). Along which lines do these debates take place and what does that tell us about changing ways we look at women’s participation in public spaces, the changing genderedness thereof, and shifting ideas about ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’ in North-Western Europe?
Glossary

*abaya*  
long (often black) cloak that all women in Saudi Arabia are required to wear and some Kuwaiti women choose to wear in the public space

*‘adat wa taqalid*  
customs and traditions

*‘adam al-ikhtilat*  
lack of mixing between women and men

*ahkam shar‘iyya*  
shari‘a rulings

*‘adi*  
normal

*akhlāq*  
morals

*‘alaqat*  
relations

*‘alaqat muharrama*  
forbidden relations

*amr darura diniyya*  
a religious necessity

*ashya‘ khati‘a*  
wrong things

*aya*  
verse

*‘azl*  
isolation

*badu*  
Bedouin

*Baladiyya*  
municipality

*bank nisa‘i mustaqill*  
bank exclusively for women

*Bayadir al-Salam*  
an Islamist women’s organisations whose primary activity is the teaching of Islam

*bayni wa bayna rabbi*  
‘between me and my Lord’ (to denote that religion is a personal matter)

*bidun*  
a diverse group of stateless people who at the time of Kuwait’s independence were not given Kuwaiti nationality (*bidun jinsiyya* – without nationality)

*burqa*  
veil covering the face and eyes

*buyat (sing. buya)*  
an Arabisation of the English word ‘boy’; it is plural of *buya*, the feminine of ‘boy’, denoting women or girls whose gender presentation (dress and behaviour) is perceived as masculine. It does not automatically mean lesbian but denotes behaviour that is seen as potentially leading to homosexuality.

*CPVPV*  
see Hay‘at al-amr bi-l-ma‘ruf wa-l-nahiyya ‘an al-munkar

*da‘i*  
male Islamic preacher
**da’iya (pl. da’iyyat)** female Islamic teachers and preachers who teach religious classes and lectures and explain the Islamic faith to other women

**dakhila ‘ala** from outside

**darura** necessity

**al-dawabat al-shariyya** the rules and moral checks of the shari’a

**din wa dawla** religion and the state

**diwaniyya (pl. diwaniyyat)** a salon; a semi-public meeting place and social structure offering space for visitors to gather and exchange ideas. Most diwaniyyat take place on a set day of the week and people tend to frequent one or two diwaniyyat over a long period of time. They are the most important intellectual and cultural platforms in Saudi and Kuwait society.

**amir** emir, ruler

**faqiha** female teacher who runs Qur’anic schools in Kuwait where reading, writing, and basic arithmetic were taught

**far’ nisa’i** women’s branch

**far’ rijali** men’s branch

**fasad** moral corruption

**fasl** partition, disjunction

**fasl al-jinsayn** separation of the sexes

**fasl bayn al-rijal wa-l-nisa’** separation between women and men

**fatwa (pl. fatwa)** Islamic legal opinion (pl. fatwas)

**fikr jahil** an ignorant, pre-Islamic idea

**fitna** chaos in society; temptation that comes from outside the believer

**ghayr mahram** not a mahram

**hadaf** aim, purpose

**hadar** sedentary population

**hadatha** modernity

**hadith** reports about what the Prophet Muhammad said, did, and approved or disapproved of

**hadith** modern

**hafidh al-’awrat wa-man’ al-ikhtilat** to protect the intimate body parts and ban mixing between women and men in public life
Glossary

**hajiz**
obstacle, dividing wall

**hajj**
the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, which is one of the five pillars of Islam that Muslims are required to perform once in their life

**halal**
allowed

**Hamlat baladi**
‘My Country Campaign’ for active and passive women’s voting rights

**al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya**
(abbreviated as Hadas) is the Islamic Constitutional Movement and an offshoot of the Muslim Brotherhood; the group was founded shortly after the liberation

**haram**
forbidden

**Hay’at al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar**
the ‘Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and the Prevention of Vice.’ The formal short term is Hay’a, which is Arabic for ‘committee.’ They are colloquially also known as the Mutawa’a. They had, amongst other things, the power to enforce ‘proper Islamic dress,’ to arrest unrelated males and females caught socialising, and to enforce store closure during prayer time.

**Hay’a**
see Hay’at al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar

**hijab**
a veil that covers a woman’s hair and neck, and sometimes bosom; a headscarf; sometimes also meaning screen, barrier

**Hijaz**
literally ‘the barrier’; a region in the west of Saudi Arabia where Islam’s holiest cities of Mecca and Medina are located, as well as Jeddah

**al-Hiwar al-Watani**
National Dialogue

**himayat al-bint**
the protection of the girl

**hudud (sing. hadd)**
limits

**huwiyya**
identity

**idarat istithmaratiha bi-nafsiha**
the management of her own investments

**ihitijab**
concealment, seclusion

**Ihya’ al-Turath al-Islami**
Revival of Islamic Heritage Society

**bi-ihtiram**
respectfully

**ihtiram**
respect

**ikhtilat**
mixing between women and men in public spaces
infirad solitude, seclusion
infisal dissociation, withdrawal
inglyhaq closing off, locking; also: closed-mindedness
interfada uprising, rebellion (lit.); an uprising of Palestinians against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip
intima’ belonging
iqsam sectioning
jadid new
Jami’yya al-Islah al-Ijtima’iyya, Islamist reformers of the Social Reform Association (or Islah)
jarr al-balad ila al-wara’ dragging the country backwards
ka’annik jayya min al-fada as if you (f.) are coming from outer space
Kab’a a cubic building that is in the centre of Islam’s most sacred mosque, the Great Mosque in Mecca
kaba’in (sing. kabina) private one-table seating areas that can be closed off to other diners, in restaurants in the area of Jahra’ (Kuwait)
kaba’in mughilaqa closed kaba’in
Karamat Watan A Nation’s Dignity (lit.), a coalition group of nationalists, liberals, Islamists, Salafis, and Shi’a
katatib (sing. kuttab) Qur’anic schools in Kuwait where reading, writing, and basic arithmetic were taught
khadim al-haramayn protector of the two Holy Places (Mecca and Medina)
khatwa mutatawwira a step forward
khilwa a woman and a non-mahram man being together in a closed space
khilwa iliktruniyya electronic khilwa
khitab al-matalib a ‘Letter of Demands’ that was submitted to king Fahd by a group of religious intellectuals in March 1991
khususiyya distinctive character (in this case, Saudi Arabia’s)
Kulliyat al-adab the Faculty of Arts
kuttab informal schools or study circles in the mosque or at home for girls where they learned needlework and basic arithmetic, and memorised passages from the Qur’an (Saudi Arabia).
laki for you
mabit  sleep-over
mahram  a male guardian. Every Saudi woman has a mahram: a male family member (father, brother, husband, son, or paternal uncle) whose permission a woman needs to e.g. work, travel, and study. Non-mahram men are those who do not belong to these categories and are therefore marriageable.

majlis  a representative council
majlis al-shura  consultative council
majlis al-umma  National Assembly
man’ al-ikhtilat  ban on ikhtilat
maqahi mukhtalata  mixed cafes
maslahah  ‘general good,’ ‘public interest’
maslahat al-tanmiya al-haditha  benefit of modern developments

Mina  the location of the stoning of the devil ritual during the pilgrimage (hajj). It commemorates how the prophet Ibrahim (Abraham) stoned the devil that came between him and the command Allah had set him.

mudhakkirat al-nasiha  a ‘Memorandum of Advice’ to the king that was signed and submitted by religious scholars in July 1992

muhafaza (pl. muhafazat)  governorate
muhtashim  modest
mukhtalat  mixed (see: ikhtilat) (a mixed [between women and men] public space)

mukhtassa bi-l-nisa’  especially for women
mukhtassa bi-l-rijal  especially for men
mujtama’ mafsul  a separate society
mustarjilat (sing. mustarjila)  masculine women
mutafattihin  open; permissive
mutakhallaf  backward
mutatawwira (f.)  developed
Mutawa’a  see Hay’at al-amr bi-l-ma’ruf wa-l-nahy ‘an al-munkar
Muzdalifa  the area where, during the pilgrimage (hajj), 49 pebbles are collected by the pilgrim for the stoning of the devil ritual
Nahda a cultural and intellectual renaissance that began in the late 19th, early 20th century in Egypt and arrived in Kuwait in the early 1950s

al-nahda al-‘umraniyya civilisational awakening

Najd a region in the heartland of Saudi Arabia, where the country’s capital Riyadh is located

niqab a veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes uncovered
niyya intention

Najd a region in the heartland of Saudi Arabia, where the country’s capital Riyadh is located

niqab a veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes uncovered

qabali (f. qabaliyya) tribal

qarar man’ al-ikhtilat decision to ban mixing

qawama principle from the Qur’an that makes the husband responsible for the family income and the wife for domestic duties

qism li-l-‘a’ilat family section
qism li-l-nisa’ women-only section, a space for women
qism li-l-nisa’ khass a special women’s space
qism mukhassas li-l-nisa’ a space especially for women

qudra capacity

raji’iyya a state of backwardness, going back

rasmi official

rukn al-mar’a the women’s corner in the 1950s al-Ba’tha magazine

sadd al-dhara’i‘ lit.: ‘the blocking of the means,’ meaning that actions that could lead to committing sins must not be permitted

Sahwa see al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya

al-Sahwa al-Islamiyya revivalist Islamic Awakening movement originating in Saudi Arabia in the 1950s and 1960s

Salafi someone who adheres to the salafiyya

salafiyya orthodox movement within Sunni Islam that believes in a return to the time of the Prophet Muhammad

Sawt al-Kuwait The Voice of Kuwait (lit.), organisation founded to maintain mixed private schools.

sharaf honour

sharif (f. sharifa) respectable

shari’a Islamic law
Glossary

*Shatt al-‘Arab*  
river/waterway formed by the confluence of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers; part of this 200km-long river forms the border between Iraq and Iran; the waterway flows out into the Gulf.

*shisha cafés*  
water pipe cafes

*Al al-Shaykh*  
descendants of Ibn Wahhab and still the country’s leading religious family. The Al al-Shaykh dominate the state’s clerical institutions.

*Shi‘i*  
the second-largest branch of Islam, that holds that Muhammad’s successor should have been ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (rather than Abu Bakr)

*Sunny*  
(adherent of) the largest branch of Islam

*sunna*  
traditions of the Prophet Muhammad

*suq*  
market

*al-suq al-dakhili*  
market in Kuwait

*suq al-manakh*  
informal Kuwaiti stock market

*targhib*  
Westernisation

*Tahrir al-mar‘a fi ‘asr al-risala*  
The Liberation of Women at the Time of the Prophet, the 1899 book by Qasim Amin, an Egyptian jurist and one of the figureheads of the *Nahda* movement and an advocate of women’s rights.

*tajdid*  
the revival of Islam in order to reform and purify society (and Amir Jaber Al Ahmad Al Sabah (r. 1977-2006) government’s strategy of ‘renewal’)

*takhalluf*  
backwardness

*al-ta‘lim al-mukhtalat*  
mixed education

*al-ta‘lim al-munfisil*  
segregated education

*al-ta‘lim al-mushtarak*  
shared education

*taqaddum*  
progress

*tarbawi*  
pedagogical

*tatanazzal unthataha*  
she leaves her femininity

*tatawwur*  
development

*tablir*  
development

*tawaf*  
circumambulation of the Ka‘ba during hajj

*thob*  
a long white robe that Saudi men wear

*tu‘ti al-mar‘a al-haqq*  
giving women the right
‘ulama’ (sing. ‘alim) religious scholars who are part of the official religious establishment

umm al-mu’minin mother of the believers – the way ‘A’isha, Muhammad’s last wife and an important narrator of hadiths, is sometimes referred to

Wahhabiyya a religious movement founded by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab

Wali amri adra bi-amri My Guardian Knows What’s Best for Me; a campaign and petition defending the status quo vis-à-vis the male guardianship system over women in the kingdom.

wa-qarna fi buyutikunna Qur’an 33:33, ‘and stay in your houses’

Wizarat al-awqaf, idarat shu’un al-Qur’an al-karim Religious Endowments Ministry, Department of Qur’anic Affairs (Kuwait)

zina adultery and fornication – sometimes also used for women talking to, touching, or being alone with unrelated men
Literature


278


Rabinow, P. 1975. *Symbolic Domination: Cultural Form and Historical Change in Morocco*, University of Chicago Press.


**Reports**


**Online newspaper resources and media**


——. 2013b. Al-ikhtilat wa-l-radhila: Ayna al-‘alaqa? (Mixing and vice.. where is the relationship?)


Bibliography

Bibliography


Websites
Khadija bint Khuwailid Center at the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce www.jcci.org.sa/JCCI/EN/Specialized+Centers/Khadija+Bint+Khuwailid+Center/About+The+Center/. Website accessed 17 November 2011.
menassat.com/?q=en/news-articles/7388-struggle-being-woman-journalist-
Messilah Beach. www.kuwaittourism.com/ar/MessilahBeach.htm. Website
accessed 13 October 2014.
Nuqat Creative Conference. ‘Executing Culture Shock.’ www.nuqat.me/en/event/
com/pages/US-Saudi-Womens-Forum-on-Social-Entrepreneurship-
Wali amri adri bi-amri (‘My Guardian Knows What’s Best for Me’). www.facebook.
com/232903266768554--/ حملة-ولي-أميري-أدري-بامري-روضه-الإي søf-. Website
accessed 3 June 2010.

Twitter Accounts
@KarametWatan
@AlHerbesh
@Altabtabie

Other resources
1969 Saudi Arabia Labour and Workmen Law (Royal Decree No. M/21 dated 15
November 1969).
www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/Labor_and_Workmen_
www.saudiembassy.net/about/country-information/laws/The_Basic_Law_Of_
2005 Saudi Arabia Labour and Workmen Law (Royal Decree No. M/51 dated 27
Website accessed 13 October 2015.
27 June 2017.
National Unity. www.kacnd.org/eng/first_meeting.asp. Website accessed 12
October 2015.
Academic summary

In my dissertation I investigate gender segregation and *ikhtilat* in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. With gender segregation I mean the strict segregation between women and men in public life, through public spaces that are only accessible to women. *Ikhtilat* is the opposite: the mixing of women and men in public spaces.

Through interviews and participant observation I researched how Saudi and Kuwaiti women speak about gender segregation and *ikhtilat*. Specifically, I looked at what respondents’ opinions about gender segregation and *ikhtilat* tell us about their changing ideas about gender, Islam, and the nation. Furthermore, I examined how interlocutors’ perceptions converge in ideas about how they believe their respective countries should develop, as well as thoughts about progress, westernisation and modernity.

To contextualise my analysis, I also explored the historical processes with respect to the development of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and *ikhtilat* in Kuwait and how these are connected to the *promissory notes* of modernity of the governments of both countries. With *promissory note* I mean the promise of the state concerning the way of development and direction of modernity in the country.

I did my research during the period 2010-2017. I focused on 3 core themes: gender segregation, Islam, and modernity.

The research questions in this dissertation are:

1) What are the different approaches to the concept of modernity in the modernity debate?
2) How did gender segregation and *ikhtilat* emerge in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and how is this a result of state discourses and promises of modernity of the state to society?
3) How do Saudi and Kuwaiti respondents view public spaces that are accessible only for women and how do they look at mixed public spaces, as apparent from their own discourses on these gendered public spaces?
4) Do ideas about modernity as expressed in the negotiation of discourses between the state and respondents in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait differ, and if so, how?
Methodology
I held semi-structured in-depth interviews with Saudi and Kuwaiti women during several periods of intensive fieldwork. To gain a varied sense of possible ideas with respect to gender segregation and *ikhtilat* I interviewed female activists, Islamic preachers and business women in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Additionally, in Saudi Arabia I spoke with female students and young working women. I also held context interviews in both countries. I met most of my respondents through key respondents, gatekeepers, and the snowball effect. I held a total of 142 interviews.

In Saudi Arabia I interviewed 87 women. I also held 13 context interviews with for example a TV personality, a librarian, and an archaeologist. In the framework of participant observation I visited only-for-women public spaces, such as the women-only floor of a shopping centre, banks, businesses, and universities. I also visited women-only religious study groups.

In Kuwait I collected the narratives of 31 women. Furthermore, I held 11 context interviews with for example an artist, a gay young man, and an architect. In the framework of participant observation, aside from all the mixed public spaces that I frequented, I went to activities organised by and for women, such as religious study groups. I also visited only-for-women public spaces such as women-only sections in restaurants, a charity, a floor of a bank, a gym, and several (mixed and segregated) universities.

Theoretical approach: promissory notes and enchanted modernity
In the theoretical framework of my dissertation I trace the development of the theoretical debate on modernity. I take the concepts of ‘alternative modernity’, ‘enchanted modernity’, and ‘promissory note’ (promise) and make them central to the analysis of my fieldwork.

In the classical, universal approach, modernity is characterised as a specific western (European) phenomenon with characteristics such as capitalism, secularism, industrialisation, rationalism and democracy. With his concept ‘alternative modernity’, Charles Taylor (1998, 2004) was the first to introduce the existence of various modernities. The European, supposedly universally accepted model of modernity is now no longer seen as the model of modernity but as one among many. This European model might influence other forms of modernity elsewhere in the world, but modernisation is no longer equalled to Westernisation. Several forms of modernity each have their ownness, while they also influence one another within the power dynamics in the world.

The concept ‘enchanted modernity’ (Deeb 2006) refers to a specific ownness,
Academic summary

namely a modernity with a religious or spiritual dimension. The concept proposes an alternative way of formulating an (Islamic) modernity. Islam and modernity are not just compatible, but go hand in hand: there is dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress. Here, the discursive power of the West should not be underestimated: the West, and the US and Europe in particular, remain points of reference. Not as fixed geographical entities but as cultural representations that are not free from historical power relations. The concept of modernity therefore is not a value-free concept, as it is intertwined with ideas about its universality.

Gender is one of the central modalities through which modernity takes shape and an important component of discourses on being modern. Women have historically played an important role as national and as cultural symbols, and during transitional periods in a country’s development they are often either linked to modernity or to tradition (Moghadam 2003: 105). Often, the woman question is framed in the context of modernising projects, particularly at times of state-building and regime consolidation when questions of gender relations, the position of women and men, and ideas about masculinity and femininity come to the fore. In social transformation, changes in gender relations take place and are reconfigured, with the state becoming the moderator and manager of gender (Moghadam 2003: 105).

Gendered public spaces such as spaces that are only-for-women lie exactly at the intersection of discourse about gender, Islam, and the nation. Through these discourses the state proposes and promises what modernity should look like and the role therein of ikhtilat and public spaces that are accessible only to women. The state gives off its “promissory note” (Wittrock 2000) – its promise of and vision on modernity – and therewith shapes the position of women and men. My interlocutors are the recipients and holders of this promissory note, of this promise, and hold the state to its promise by giving their own vision on modernity. In my dissertation I show which promises of modernity the Saudi and Kuwaiti states make and how my interlocutors keep their governments to those respective promises. Modernity, then, is a negotiation process that takes place through the state making promises, and answers to those promises by respondents in their discourses on women-only public spaces and ikhtilat.

Development of gender-segregated, ‘for women only’ public spaces in Saudi Arabia and the state’s modernity promise
The historical development of gender segregation in Saudi Arabia shows the rise and consolidation of only-for-women public spaces. The basis of how the state is organised in Saudi Arabia is the 1744 pact between the political-tribal leader
Ibn Sa‘ud and the religious leader Ibn Wahhab, who argued for a return to the fundamentals of Islam as he saw them. Their alliance made Ibn Sa‘ud the political and military leader, and Ibn Wahhab the religious leader. This power sharing arrangement influences the way the Saudi state is organised and Saudi society to this day. The members of the royal Al Sa‘ud family are descendants of Ibn Sa‘ud. The Al al-Shaykh, descendants of Ibn Wahhab, are still important religious leaders in the country.

In 1932, the kingdoms of the Hijaz and the Najd were joined into what from then on would be known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1938, oil was discovered. The exploitation of oil and the increasing employment opportunities that came with it in the industrial as well as the governmental sector led to a process of urbanisation. While in rural areas women and men both contributed to the family income, employment in the oil sector led to a rise in salaries. This made it possible for women not to work. Women not working then became a status symbol. Today, the practice of segregation is still mostly an urban and not a tribal phenomenon, practiced among all classes but most frequently in the wealthier and middle-class strata, and is regarded as a sign of wealth.

The increasing oil wealth also led to travel outside the kingdom by Saudis who could afford it. These Saudis mostly went to Egypt for holidays. Men would also leave for Egypt for educational purposes. In turn, these men wanted to marry well-educated women and gradually the demand for girls’ education in Saudi Arabia increased. Religious leaders agreed to this development once the then-king presented girls’ education as a way of making them better Muslim mothers. In the 1960s the first girls’ schools were opened and education was the first domain in which the government opened women-only public spaces. This state project of girls’ education presented the state as a progressive, modern institution and became a sign of modernity, progress, reform, and national development in a way that fit Islam, prevalent ideas about the role of women, and the country’s national distinctive character. The state made a promise of a modernity that fit the Saudi national identity within an Islamic framework: an enchanted modern.

The explosive economic and material development due to the oil revenues from the 1950s onwards reached its height in the 1970s. Fast social developments during this period changed the social structure of Saudi Arabia. In 1979 a group of rebels lay siege on the Great Mosque of Mecca because they were angry at the fast pace of changes and out of protest against the king, who they believed had not done enough to counter these developments. Therefore, they believed, the Al Sa‘ud had lost their legitimacy as Saudi Arabia’s rulers. The incident rocked the Saudi monarchy to its core. The result was an increasing conservatism, where the
royal family tried all it could to preserve its position. This conservatism was mostly aimed at women as culture bearers. Only they would be able to preserve the piety of the nation. Dress became more conservative, and women disappeared from television and swimming pools.

In the 1980s this conservatism was consolidated. The Labour Law required that men and women not work together in the same office. Already in the early 1980s the al-Rajihi bank was the first bank that opened a women-only branch that was only accessible to female employees and female customers. These banks quickly became commonplace. Of course it is very costly to open a double amount of banks, for men and for women. The enormous oil revenues offered a welcome solution to this problem. Other segregated facilities were also financed in this way.

During the Gulf War in the 1990s a group of amongst others religious leaders, academics, and activists had, partly as a counterweight against the presence of American troops, began to speak out against the royal family because they had allowed an army of infidels on Saudi soil. Simultaneously, the Al Sa‘ud had to try and get a grip on a group of progressive dissidents who were calling for reforms that would open up the social and political structures of the country. In the struggle over balancing these different streams in society, the position of women once more became one of the central topics. The Al Sa‘ud used the role of women in society to make symbolic gestures that would confirm its commitment to Islam, for example by maintaining the ban on driving and the preservation of gender segregation in public spaces.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the domestic terrorist attacks on Riyadh compounds in 2003 led to more pressure for reform from outside as well as within the kingdom, also with respect to the position and participation of women. In Saudi society at the time of my fieldwork (2010-2011) there were women-only public spaces in for example education, the labour market, and for leisure and consumption. The King Sa‘ud University in Riyadh for instance has a women-only campus. Religious Studies departments are now accessible to women, separated from men, so that they can become teachers of Islamic education or preachers for women. This enables women to use and challenge the legitimatising religious language of the state and male scholars in order to further their rights. Female preachers are frequently asked to come talk at women-only universities and religious and charitable foundations, or mosques that are reserved to women for that occasion.

The fact that the state opened up the labour market and created study opportunities for women is part of positioning itself as searching for a visible
modernity. Central in this endeavour is the making visible of women in public life – albeit segregated from men. Through these developments the state positions women as building blocks of its modernity, rooted in the Saudi Islamic identity (al-Rasheed 2013: 173), by which the state makes its promise of an Islamic modernity.

Other public places are not physically segregated but are segregated by time of access. Some parks, the amusement park ‘Atallah Happyland in Jeddah, and the National Museum in Riyadh set apart certain times of day or full days for single men, for women, and for families. At the same time, then king ‘Abdallah opened the mixed King ‘Abdallah University for Science and Technology (KAUST) in 2009.

The increasing visibility of Saudi women within and outside the kingdom, for example during press conferences and the king’s trips abroad, is part of the country’s gender politics. Walking a tightrope trying to balance the different streams in Saudi society, the state thus does not only initiate women-only spaces but also supports mixed KAUST-like developments.

Previously, women-only public spaces were the visible sign of the state’s enchanted modern. Within this modernity the participation of women in public life took place in a way that fit the Islamic character of the nation. The increasing participation of women, not only separate from men but also in mixed situations such as during king ‘Abdallah’s trips abroad, was also a way of making Saudi society more accessible to the outside and place it in a slightly gentler light, and by which the Al Sa’ud are wanting to project a modern and enlightened image (al-Rasheed 2013: 40). Where previously merely women-only public spaces were part of this Islamic enchanted modern, the state under king ‘Abdallah made a promise of an Islamic modernity that encompassed not only women-only public spaces but also ikhtilat.

**Saudi respondents on ikhtilat**

Saudi respondents hold their state to its promise of an enchanted Islamic modernity. Respondents say that they see Islam as an inherent part of Saudi modernity. In this modernity, they do wish to see what they label as the good things from the West, for example technological developments, healthcare, education, and clean streets. What they do not wish to see as part of this modernity is what they label as the moral decay that the West knows in the public space: men and women who can easily meet, pre- and extramarital relations, divorce, and sexual intimidation.

To prevent moral decay respondents say that the way in which women and men interact in the public space needs to be regulated. Respondents’ ideas about how this should be realised are their desiderata: their wishes that respondents
hope will be realised with respect to personal and societal transition.

These wishes are expressed in public campaigns and in respondents’ discourses. An example of a public campaign is the campaign to open gender segregated hospitals. Perhaps contrary to what one might expect, hospitals in Saudi Arabia are mixed. This is mostly for practical reasons: there simply are not enough female doctors to make separate hospitals feasible. Nevertheless the wish does exist and was expressed in this public petition.

In my discourse analysis of the three cases of the university, the hospital, and the workplace three different types of wishes with respect to the public participation of women emerged. Respondents justified *ikhtilat*, positioned themselves against *ikhtilat*, or said they were in favour of *ikhtilat*. Those respondents who justified *ikhtilat* said for example that under certain circumstances *ikhtilat* may be condoned (for example if men and women guard their modesty), or when these is a case of necessity (for example in medical emergencies). Those respondents who positioned themselves against *ikhtilat* believe that men and women should not mix in public spaces and that women should take part in public life in women-only public spaces. Respondents who were in favour of *ikhtilat* prefer mixing between women and men in public spaces.

Respondents are not always consistent across the three cases. For instance, an Islamic preacher might justify *ikhtilat* in hospitals, for example because there is a clear necessity because hospitals are mixed, but position herself against *ikhtilat* at university because it is easy for a woman to gain an education at one of the many women-only universities in the country. This shows us that attitudes towards *ikhtilat* are nuanced and ambiguous rather than clear-cut and rigid.

Subsequently I analysed which arguments my respondents used to support their wishes. These arguments, it turned out, fall into four types. These types came up in all three wishes (justify, against, in favour) with respect to *ikhtilat*. The first type of argument was invoking Islamic norms, values, and principles. Secondly, respondents used arguments that were grounded in their ideas about gender. Thirdly, ideas about the nation and how Saudi Arabia should develop as a country were important. Finally, respondents referred to practical opportunities and restraints of segregation and *ikhtilat*.

Islam was the notion respondents referred to most. It is the most prevalent argument both against and in justification of *ikhtilat* in all three cases. With the notion of Islam I mean arguments based on Islamic principles that are derived from shari’ā. Respondents also base arguments on Islamic history and the prevalence of *ikhtilat* in the Great Mosque of Mecca.

The notion of gender and of the identity of the Saudi nation were used equally
often. With the notion of gender I mean arguments that are based on ideas about the societal role of women and men and sexuality. Here, the presumed ‘natural inclinations’ of women and men, such as caretaking professions being particularly suitable for women, play a role. Ideas about the complementarity of men and women, sexuality, gender equality and sexual intimidation also come to the fore in argumentation.

With the notion of the nation I refer to arguments that are based on ideas about what is and is not suitable for Saudi Arabia. With the notion of the nation I also mean ideas about which direction the country should develop into with respect to the public interaction between men and women, and the public participation of women. Here, a negotiation takes place over the character of the country, over whether or not Saudi Arabia is a conservative country and whether or not that is something good, about whether ikhtilat is something normal, about how development should take place and about the concepts of conservatism and progress. These arguments all relate to the notion of the nation and the question whether or not ikhtilat and women-only public spaces are compatible with the contemporary character of Saudi Arabia.

Finally, respondents also use pragmatic arguments. Here, ideas about feasibility, choice, efficiency and the comfort of women come up. For example: in a gender segregated office women can take off their abaya and hijab or niqab because they are only among women and cannot be seen by unrelated men. These four notions do of course not stand alone but are also intertwined with each other.

Contrary to what might be expected, the three categories of desires and wishes concerning the public participation of women run through the different groups of respondents. In short, not all Islamic preachers are against ikhtilat and in favour of segregation, nor are all activists in favour of ikhtilat and against segregation.

Development of ikhtilat in Kuwait and the state’s modernity promise
Originally, Kuwait is a merchant community. Before the discovery of oil, the most important trade commodities were horses, wood, coffee and pearls. Supported by the most important merchant families, Sabah I bin Jaber was elected as the first amir of Kuwait in 1752. This unwritten agreement between the political Al Sabah family and the important merchant families form the basis of the way the state is organised to this day.

Kuwait does not know the gender segregation that Saudi Arabia has. On the contrary: ikhtilat is the norm – the norm that the government has, throughout
its history, propagated and consolidated. The gender segregated public spaces that have come into existence have mostly been financed by the private sector and not the government. At the same time, the government did not stop this development either.

Kuwait’s pre-oil history is often invoked as an explanation for the visibility of *ikhtilat* in society today, positioning Kuwait as an outward-looking trade nation that was influenced by the cultures and peoples it traded with. In the pre-oil era, its connections with the world beyond the Arabian peninsula and a greater degree of sedentarisation gave Kuwait an open character. Women would run their homes and the family affairs and finances during the long absences of the men, who were away from Kuwait pearling or trading overseas. Life away from seclusion seems to have been for lower class women mostly. Lower class women worked, also mixing with men, to supplement the family income, whereas women of the merchant class could afford not to work and therefore lived more secluded lives.

Like the Saudi state, the Kuwaiti state has, throughout the history of the Al Sabah, made a modernity promise. However, the path that this promise took is different to Saudi Arabia’s.

The *Nahda* was a cultural and intellectual renaissance that started in Egypt at the end of the 19th, beginning of the 20th century and that reached Kuwait in the early 1950s. Central to the *Nahda* was breaking away from customs and traditions and moving forward. The *Nahda*’s call to women’s emancipation resonated in Kuwait and was taken on by Kuwaiti men and women. Driven by the ideas of the Egyptian *Nahda*, the Kuwaiti government initiated plans for social and urban developments (1945-60). Through these plans, the state made a modernity promise that consisted in urban development such as new buildings and a good infrastructure in combination with social reform and progress such as housing, education, and health care. Driven by the ideological motor of the *Nahda*, the state framed its modernity in opposition to Kuwait’s poor, pre-oil past.

Oil money did not only influence city planning but also the labour market. Government policy of amongst others feminisation of the labour market led to criticism by Islamists who argued it might be necessary for women to work, but not in positions where they would have to work together with men. Parliament however was dominated by liberals and secularists and this call for segregation did not gain momentum.

In future years, the state made an Islamic heritage modernity promise: a modernity that was rooted in a local Islamic past and heritage. By this time (1961-77) Arab nationalism had become the dominant stream in Kuwaiti society.
This happened against the background of the end of the British protectorate over Kuwait in 1961. As with any political ideology that seemed to gain too much traction, the government wanted to offer a counterweight against this development of Arab nationalism. It therefore started giving more space to the Islamists. Additionally, with the growing importance of Kuwait in the international oil business, the government wanted to enhance its presence and visibility in Kuwait City. For that purpose, it commissioned architects to design buildings that were distinctly Islamic in character. Visible in Kuwait’s distinctly Islamic architecture from this time is the state’s drive to position itself as a proponent and protector of modernity and modernisation while constantly reminding the population of their local Islamic past. Islam, in this modernity promise, is positioned as heritage rather than as piety. This Islamic heritage modernity is thus a different modernity to the enchanted modern that we encountered in Saudi Arabia.

In the late 70s and throughout the 80s, through its policy of *tajdid* (renewal) the state issued into society a promissory note of an Islamic, Arab modernity. At this time the Al Sabah believed it opportune to align itself more evidently with Islam, and to position themselves as modern and Arab and Islamic at the same time. The policy of *tajdid* meant the revival of Islam in order to reform and purify society. The government licenced two Islamist women’s organisations. In addition, the government founded its own women’s organisation. Also, in this changing context, many writings on Islam and women’s rights and duties were published. These discourses were reflected in Parliament, as it tried to grapple with proposed legal changes in the area of the position of women in Kuwaiti society, for example on the issue of female suffrage. Induced by outside threats (the Iranian revolution, the siege on the Great Mosque in Mecca, and the Qatif uprising) and a fear this would spill over into Kuwait, the Al Sabah thought it timely to align themselves more clearly with Islam. They increased their support for space for Islamist organisations – most notably Salafis, in order to divide the Sunnis. A new national anthem, a new cabinet, and a change of the pledge of allegiance to the nation instead of the amir consolidated an appeal to a distinct Arab identity. The policy of *tajdid* thus shows a wish to issue into society a promissory note of an enchanted, Islamic, Arab modernity.

In August 1990, the Gulf War broke out when Kuwait was occupied by Iraq. Since Kuwait’s liberation (February 1991), modernity is framed as an alternative modernity around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, where the state invokes Islam as part of that identity rather than as piety. During the Gulf War, women took on an active and important role in the resistance. After liberation, the struggle in society between the liberals, secularists, and Islamists also played out
on gender grounds, for example over women’s dress, the position of women on
the labour market and in the educational system, and – again – women’s suffrage.
Due to their important role in the resistance, women believed they should have
voting and other political rights. Developments such as gender segregating the
new Shadadiya campus of Kuwait University were partly pushed through in order
to limit Islamists’ influence in other areas. The proposal of Islamists to amend the
constitution to make shari’a the rather than a source of legislation was blocked by
the amir. These developments did not come about out of considerations of piety
(so not an expression of an enchanted modern) but out of identity considerations
and searching for a balance between amongst others the various liberal and
Islamist streams in the country. Nowadays, we are looking at a modernity promise
that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity, with Islam as part of that identity rather
than as piety.

Kuwaiti respondents on gender segregation

In Saudi Arabia, both by the state and among my respondents Islam played
an important role in ideas about modernity. In Kuwait, however, this is slightly
different. Kuwaiti respondents stress their country’s identity (huwyya) as the
centre of gravity of modernity. Nevertheless, my respondents do view Islam as
part of that identity. The own, distinct identity has to be part of modernity, and
that identity is Islamic. Kuwaiti respondents position Kuwait as an open country
that as a result of its history now has ikhtilat as the default mode of women’s
public participation.

Just as in Saudi Arabia, respondents in Kuwait express, within their conception
of modernity, different desiderata with respect to the public participation of
women. In Kuwait, as in Saudi Arabia, these wishes and desires are expressed in
both public campaigns and in respondents’ discourses. An example of a public
campaign is the Sawt al-Kuwait campaign (The Voice of Kuwait) that took a stance
against gender segregated private education in response to parliamentarians
who had suggested it.

My discourse analysis of three cases, namely the new and segregated
Shadadiya campus of Kuwait University, a segregated demonstration, and a
segregated restaurant showed that there are three different types of wishes
with respect to the public participation of women. Namely, respondents are
against gender segregation, justify gender segregation, or are in favour of gender
segregation. Those respondents who are against gender segregation believe that
men and women should mix in public spaces. Respondents who justify gender
segregation condone it, for example so that women who do not want to or are
not allowed to mix can take part in public life. Those respondents who are in favour of gender segregation believe that this should be the way for women to participate in public life.

As in Saudi Arabia, respondents are not always consistent across the three cases. For instance, a business woman might be against the full gender segregation at the new Shadadiya campus of Kuwait University, but argue in favour of gender segregation at the demonstration because the nature of a demonstration means men and women are physically much closer – and so it is better to have separate areas to avoid harassment. So also in Kuwait, attitudes towards gender segregation are nuanced and ambiguous rather than clear-cut and rigid.

Subsequently, I analysed which arguments my respondents used to support their wishes and desires. These arguments fall into four categories. These four categories of arguments came to the fore with all three desires (justify, against, in favour) with respect to \textit{ikhtilat}. First and foremost, arguments based on gender came up. The second category of arguments were those grounded in the notion of the nation. Kuwaiti respondents invoked arguments based on Islam considerably less than Saudi respondents. They also used fewer pragmatic arguments than their Saudi counterparts.

Arguments made by Kuwaiti interlocutors are grounded in the same notions as in Saudi Arabia. However, in Saudi Arabia respondents base themselves much more on the notion of Islam than in Kuwait. In the three Saudi cases of the workplace, universities, and hospitals arguments based on Islam are most numerous. In Kuwait, on the contrary, arguments based on gender and on the nation are most prevalent.

In addition, Kuwaiti respondents do not position their desires with respect to the way of public participation of women as modern, but rather as normal. They invoke Kuwaiti history to frame \textit{ikhtilat} as the norm. At the same time, Kuwaiti respondents do claim modernity, but with Islam as identity (informing culture, and norms and values for example) and not as piety. So we can discern an alternative modernity, but not an enchanted modernity.

\textbf{Conclusions: gender segregation, \textit{ikhtilat} and modernity in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait}

In my dissertation I researched how modernity is shaped in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait through discussions on the public participation of women in women-only public spaces and in \textit{ikhtilat}. Here, I would like to draw three conclusions.

First of all, I compared the history of women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia and mixed public spaces in Kuwait and analysed the modernity promises
of the governments of both countries. The historical processes in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have led to different outcomes with respect to the dominance of women-only public spaces in Saudi Arabia and mixed public spaces in Kuwait. These processes also led to different state promises of modernity.

The Saudi state has, since the proclamation of the Third Saudi State in 1932, always made a promise of an Islamic modern: an enchanted modern in which Islam is invoked as piety and the Al Sa'ud as guardians of this piety. In this project, women, in their role of culture bearers, became symbols of that piety, both within the kingdom and outside of it. This mostly played out in the field of women’s public participation, originally through gender segregation in the public space and consolidation thereof, and in more recent times through both women-only as well as mixed public spaces.

Just as the Saudi state, the Kuwaiti government made its modernity promise. The path of this promise however is different than that of Saudi Arabia. Today, this promise is an alternative modernity, that is framed around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity, with the state invoking Islam as part of that identity rather than as piety. As such, the Kuwaiti government’s modernity promise is an alternative but not an enchanted modern.

Secondly, I compared the ideas of my Saudi and Kuwaiti respondents as expressed in their discourses about the phenomena of women-only as well as mixed public spaces in their countries and the ways in which they keep their governments to their respective modernity promises. The ideas and arguments of both my Saudi and my Kuwaiti respondents are (although weighted differently) based on the same notions of gender, Islam, and the nation. Both groups also use pragmatic arguments.

Saudi respondents however referred more often to Islam than Kuwaiti respondents. In Saudi Arabia, the royal family bases its legitimacy on Islam. It is partly through this notion that the respondents hold the state to its promise of an enchanted modern. Respondents wish both women-only as well as mixed public spaces of the state. Kuwaiti respondents refer more often to the nation and the identity of the country in their arguments. In its recent history, the Kuwaiti government bases its modernity promise on the identity of the country. In doing that, it invokes Islam as part of that identity rather than as piety. In their discourses Kuwaiti respondents hold their government to its modernity promise. They mostly wish for ikhtilat as way of public participation of women in the public space.

Respondents express clear positions on the phenomena of women-only and mixed public spaces. By doing that – even when their positions reflect those of
the state – they on the one hand conform to the state, while on the other hand they challenge it. Respondents conform by staying within the field of legitimacy as created by the state. They challenge the state by holding it to its modernity promise and not letting it do entirely as it pleases. Both in Saudi Arabia and in Kuwait respondents do this not only in their discourses but also through public campaigns.

My third conclusion concerns the negotiation that takes places between my interlocutors and their respective states, and whether the outcome of these processes is different in Saudi Arabia than in Kuwait. In the dynamic between the state that makes its modernity promise and respondents who hold the state to its promise, a negotiation can be detected. There is however a clear imbalance of power between the state and my interlocutors: the state has considerably more power than interlocutors have. Nevertheless, respondents do not allow their governments to carry out their modernity promises entirely as those governments wish. By public campaigns such as the calling for gender segregated hospitals in Saudi Arabia and against gender segregated education in Kuwait, as well as in their discourses, interlocutors demand modifications and nuancing of the modernity promises made by their governments.

Word index

*ikhtilat* mixing between women and men in public spaces

**alternative modernity** the existence of different forms of modernity. The European, universal model of modernity is no longer seen as the model of modernity but as one of many. Each for of modernity has its ownness.

**enchanted modernity** a specific ownness of modernity, namely a modernity with a religious or spiritual dimension. There is a dual emphasis on both material and spiritual progress.

**promissory note** a promise of modernity made by the state

**desiderata** wishes with respect to personal and societal change of which respondents hope they will be realised.

**abaya** long (often black) cloak that all women in Saudi Arabia are required to wear and some Kuwaiti women choose to wear in the public space.

**Nahda** a cultural and intellectual renaissance that began in the late 19th, early 20th century in Egypt and arrived in Kuwait
in the early 1950s. Central to the *Nahda* was breaking with customs and traditions and moving forward. The *Nahda* also called for women’s emancipation.

*tajdid* literally: renewal. The policy of *tajdid* meant the revival of Islam in order to reform and purify society.

*shari’a* Islamic law

*huwiyya* identity
Wetenschappelijke samenvatting
(Dutch academic summary)

In mijn proefschrift onderzoek ik gendersegregatie en ikhtilat in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit. Met gendersegregatie bedoel ik de strikte scheiding tussen vrouwen en mannen in het openbare leven, geuit in publieke ruimtes die alleen voor vrouwen toegankelijk zijn. Ikhtilat is het tegenovergestelde: het mengen van vrouwen en mannen in publieke ruimtes.

Door middel van interviews en participerende observatie onderzocht ik hoe Saoedische en Koeweitse vrouwen spreken over gendersegregatie en ikhtilat. Daarnaast keek ik naar wat de meningen van deze vrouwen over gendersegregatie en ikhtilat ons vertellen over hun veranderende denkbeelden over gender, islam en de natie. Verder onderzocht ik hoe deze opvattingen samenkomen in ideeën over in welke richting het land zich zou moeten ontwikkelen en gedachten over vooruitgang, verwestersing en moderniteit.

Ik onderzocht ook de historische processen met betrekking tot het ontstaan van gendersegregatie in Saoedi-Arabië en ikhtilat in Koeweit en hoe deze samenhangen met de promissory note van moderniteit van de overheden van beide landen. Met promissory note bedoel ik de belofte van de staat betreffende de manier van ontwikkeling van moderniteit in het land.

Ik heb mijn onderzoek in de periode 2010-2017 uitgevoerd. De nadruk van het onderzoek ligt op drie kernthema’s: gendersegregatie, islam en moderniteit.

De onderzoeksvragen in dit proefschrift zijn:

1) Wat zijn de verschillende benaderingen van het concept moderniteit in het moderniteitsdebat?

2) Hoe zijn gendersegregatie en ikhtilat ontstaan in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit en hoe is dit een resultaat van staatsdiscoursen en moderniteitsbeloftes van de staat aan de maatschappij?

3) Hoe bezien vrouwelijke Saoedische en Koeweitse respondenten publieke ruimtes die alleen voor vrouwen toegankelijk zijn en gemengde publieke ruimtes, zoals blijkend uit hun eigen discoursen over deze gegenderde publieke ruimtes?
4) Verschillen ideeën over moderniteit zoals geuit in de onderhandeling tussen de discoursen van de staat en van respondenten in Saoedische en Koeweit en zo ja, hoe?

Methodologische verantwoording
Voor mijn dissertatie heb ik gedurende verschillende periodes van veldwerk semi-gestructureerde diepte-interviews gehouden met Saoedische en Koeweitse vrouwen. Om een veelzijdig beeld te krijgen van ideeën ten opzichte van gendersegregatie en *ikhtilat* sprak ik in Saoedische en Koeweit met activistes, islamitische prediksters en zakenvrouwen. Aanvullend sprak ik in Saoedi-Arabië met studentes en jonge werkende vrouwen. Ook hield ik contextinterviews in beide landen. Ik ontmoette de meeste van mijn gesprekspartners dankzij sleutelrespondenten en het sneeuwbaleffect. In totaal hield ik 142 interviews.

In Saoedi-Arabië interviewde ik 87 vrouwen en hield ik daarnaast 13 contextinterviews met bijvoorbeeld een mediapersoonlijkheid, een bibliotheecaris en een archeologe. In het kader van participerende observatie bezocht ik publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen, zoals de alleen-voor-vrouwenverdieping van een winkelcentrum, banken, bedrijven, universiteiten. Ook ging ik naar alleen-voor-vrouwen religieuze studiegroepjes.

In Koeweit verzamelde ik de verhalen van 31 vrouwen. Daarnaast hield ik 11 contextinterviews met bijvoorbeeld een kunstenaar, een homoseksuele jongen en een architecte. Naast alle gemengde publieke ruimtes bezocht ik in het kader van participerende observatie ook activiteiten georganiseerd voor en door vrouwen, zoals religieuze studiegroepjes. Ook ging ik naar publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen zoals delen van restaurants, een liefdadigheidsorganisatie, een verdieping van een bank, een sportschool en verschillende (geregeld en gendergesegregeerde) universiteiten.

Theoretisch kader: moderniteitbeloftes en enchanted moderniteit
In het theoretisch kader van mijn dissertatie traceer ik de ontwikkeling van het theoretische debat over moderniteit. Daarin stel ik de concepten van ‘alternatieve moderniteit’, ‘enchanted moderniteit’ en ‘promissory note’ (belofte, toezegging) centraal voor de analyse van mijn veldwerk.

In de klassieke, universele benadering van moderniteit wordt moderniteit gekarakteriseerd als een specifiek westers (Europese) fenomeen met eigenschappen als kapitalisme, industrialisering, rationalisme, democratie, en, belangrijk voor mijn dissertatie, secularisme. Met zijn concept ‘alternatieve moderniteit’ was Taylor (1998, 2004) de eerste om het idee van het bestaan van...
verschillende moderniteiten te introduceren. Daarmee wordt dit Europese, tot dan toe als universeel aangenomen model van moderniteit niet meer bezien als hét model van moderniteit maar als een van meerdere. Daarbij kan dit Europese model andere vormen van moderniteit elders op de wereld zeker wel beïnvloeden, maar het proces van moderniteit is daarmee niet meer gelijkgesteld aan verwestersing. Verschillende vormen van moderniteit hebben elk hun eigenheid, terwijl zij ook elkaar beïnvloeden binnen de machtsdynamiek in de wereld.

Het concept ‘enchanted moderniteit’ (Deeb 2006) refereert aan een specifieke eigenheid, namelijk een moderniteit met een religieuze dan wel spirituele dimensie. Het stelt een alternatieve manier voor om een (islamitische) moderniteit te formuleren. Islam en moderniteit zijn daarbij niet slechts compatibel, maar gaan hand in hand: er is een nadruk op zowel materiële als spirituele vooruitgang. Ook hier moet de (discursieve) macht van het Westen niet onderschat worden: het Westen, vooral de VS en Europa, blijven referentiepunten. Niet als gefixeerde geografische entiteiten maar als culturele representaties die niet vrij zijn van historische machtsrelaties. Het concept moderniteit is derhalve geen waardevrij concept, aangezien het is verweven over de universaliteit ervan.

Gender is een van de centrale modaliteiten waarlangs moderniteit vorm krijgt en een belangrijke component van discoursen over modern-zijn. Vrouwen hebben door de geschiedenis heen een belangrijke rol gespeeld als nationale en culturele symbolen en gedurende transitieperiodes van een land worden zij vaak gelinkt hetzij aan moderniteit, hetzij aan traditie (Moghadam 2003: 105). De vrouwenkwestie wordt geframed in de context van moderniseringsprojecten, vooral ten tijde van staatsvorming en regimeconsolidatie, wanneer vragen met betrekking tot genderrelaties, de positie van vrouwen en mannen in de maatschappij en opvattingen over vrouwelijkheid en mannelijkheid naar voren komen. Ten tijde van sociale transformatie vinden veranderingen en reconfiguraties in deze genderrelaties plaats, waarbij de staat de moderator en manager van gender wordt (Moghadam 2003: 105).

In mijn dissertatie laat ik zien welke moderniteitsbeloftes de Saoedische en Koeweitse staten doen en hoe mijn gesprekspartners hun overheid daaraan houden. Moderniteit is daarmee een onderhandelingsproces dat plaatsvindt via het doen van beloftes door de staat en antwoorden daarop door respondenten in hun discoursen over publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen en *ikhtilat*.

**Ontstaan van gendergesegregeerde, ‘alleen voor vrouwen’ publieke ruimtes in Saoedi-Arabië en de moderniteitsbelofte van de staat**

De geschiedkundige ontwikkeling van gendersegregatie in Saoedi-Arabië laat de opkomst en consolidatie van publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen zien. De basis van de staatsordening in Saoedi-Arabië is het pact uit 1744 tussen de politiek-tribale leider Ibn Sa'ud en de religieuze leider Ibn Wahhab, die pleitte voor een terugkeer naar de fundamenten van de islam zoals hij die zag. Hun alliantie maakte van Ibn Sa'ud de politieke en militaire leider en van Ibn Wahhab de religieuze. Deze machtsverdeling werkt tot op heden door in de Saoedische staatsordening en maatschappij. De leden van de koninklijke Al Sa'ud-familie zijn afstammelingen van Ibn Sa'ud en de Al al-Shaykh, afstammelingen van Ibn Wahhab, zijn nog steeds belangrijke religieuze leiders in het land.

In 1932 werden de koninkrijken van de Hijaz en de Najd samengevoegd tot wat nu Saoedi-Arabië is. In 1938 werd er olie ontdekt. De exploitatie van de olie en de daardoor toenemende werkgelegenheid in zowel de industriële als de overheidssector leidde tot een proces van urbanisatie. Waar in rurale gebieden vrouwen en mannen beiden bijdroegen aan het gezinsinkomen leidde werk in de oliesector tot een sterke stijging van salarissen. Dit maakte het mogelijk voor vrouwen om niet te werken. Dit werd ook een statussymbool. Tot op de dag van vandaag is gendersegregatie dan ook met name een stedelijk fenomeen dat voorkomt onder alle klassen maar met name in de rijkere midden- en eliteklassen. Hierdoor wordt gendersegregatie gezien als een teken van welvaart.

De toenemende oliewelvaart leidde ook tot reizen buiten het koninkrijk door Saoediërs die het zich konden veroorloven. Deze Saoediërs gingen met name naar Egypte voor vakantie. Mannen vertrokken ook naar dat land voor onderwijs. Deze mannen wilden trouwen met goed opgeleide vrouwen en geleidelijk aan nam de vraag naar onderwijs voor meisjes in Saoedi-Arabië toe. Religieuze leiders gingen akkoord met deze ontwikkeling toen de toenmalige koning meisjesonderwijs presenteerde als een manier om meisjes te vormen tot goede islamitische moeders. In de jaren 60 werden de eerste meisjesscholen geopend en onderwijs was dan ook het eerste domein waarin publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen ontstonden. Dit staatsproject van meisjesonderwijs presenteerde de staat
als een progressieve, moderne institutie en werd een teken van moderniteit, vooruitgang, hervorming en nationale ontwikkeling op een manier die paste bij de Saoedische islamitische identiteit. De staat deed een belofte van een moderniteit die paste bij de Saoedische nationale identiteit binnen een islamitisch framework: een enchanted moderniteit.

De explosieve economische en materiële ontwikkeling dankzij de olieopbrengsten vanaf de jaren 50 bereikte een hoogtepunt in de jaren 70. Snelle sociale ontwikkelingen in deze periode veranderden de sociale structuur van Saoedi-Arabië. In 1979 belegde een groep militanten de Grote Moskee in Mekka omdat zij boos waren over het tempo van de snelle veranderingen en uit protest tegen de koning, die volgens hen corrupt en immoreel was omdat hij de snelle ontwikkelingen niet was tegengegaan. Zij vonden dat de Al Sa’ud daarom hun legitimiteit als leiders van het land hadden verloren. Het incident deed de Saoedische monarchie op haar grondvesten schudden. Het resultaat was een toenemend conservatisme, waarbij het koningshuis er alles aan deed om zijn positie veilig te stellen. Dit conservatisme richtte zich voornamelijk op vrouwen als cultuurdragers. Alleen zij zouden de vroomheid van de natie kunnen waarborgen. Kleding werd conservatiever en vrouwen verdwenen van de televisie en uit bijvoorbeeld zwembaden.


Ten tijde van de Golfoorlog in de jaren 90 was er een groep van onder anderen religieuze leiders, academici en activisten die zich, mede als tegenwicht tegen de aanwezigheid van de Amerikaanse troepen, uit begon te spreken tegen het koningshuis omdat ze ‘ongelovige’ soldaten in het land van de islam hadden toegelaten. Tegelijkertijd moest het koningshuis grip proberen te krijgen op een groep progressieve dissidenten die juist opriep tot hervormingen die sociale en politieke structuren opener zouden maken. In de worsteling tussen (en het omgaan met) deze verschillende stromingen werd de positie van de vrouw wederom een van de centrale onderwerpen. Daarbij gebruikte het koningshuis
de rol van vrouwen in de maatschappij om symbolische gestes te maken die zijn toewijding aan islam bevestigden, bijvoorbeeld door vast te houden aan het verbod op autorijden en het in stand houden van gendersegregatie in publieke ruimtes.

In de nasleep van 9/11 kwam er zowel van buiten als van binnen het koninkrijk een nieuwe roep om hervormingen, ook met betrekking tot de positie en participatie van de vrouw. In de Saoedische maatschappij ten tijde van mijn veldwerk (2010-2011) waren er publieke ruimtes die enkel voor vrouwen waren in bijvoorbeeld het onderwijs, op de arbeidsmarkt en voor ontspanning en consumptie. Zo heeft de Koning Sa’ud Universiteit in Riyadh een vrouwencampus. Ook religieuze faculteiten zijn inmiddels toegankelijk voor vrouwen, gescheiden van mannen, waardoor zij docent kunnen worden in islamitische vakken of predikster. Dit stelt hen in staat het religieuze discours van de staat en mannelijke geleerden uit te dagen en op die manier op te komen voor hun positie in de maatschappij. Deze prediksters worden gevraagd door vrouwen om te komen spreken op vrouwenuniversiteiten, charitatieve instellingen of moskeeën die voor die gelegenheid geheel gereserveerd zijn voor vrouwen.

Dat de staat de arbeidsmarkt opende en studiemogelijkheden creëerde voor vrouwen is deel van het zichzelf positioneren als zoekend naar een zichtbare moderniteit. Centraal daarin is het zichtbaar worden van vrouwen in de publieke ruimte – zij het gescheiden van mannen. Door deze ontwikkelingen positioneert de staat vrouwen als bouwstenen van zijn moderniteit, geworteld in de Saoedische islamitische identiteit (al-Rasheed 2013: 173), waarmee de staat zijn belofte van een islamitische moderniteit doet.


Voorheen waren publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen het zichtbare teken van de enchanted moderniteit. Binnen deze moderniteit vond de participatie van
vrouwen in het publieke leven plaats op een manier die paste bij het islamitische karakter van de natie. De toenemende participatie van vrouwen, niet alleen apart van mannen maar ook in gemengde situaties zoals tijdens de buitenlandreizen van koning ‘Abdallah, was ook een manier om de Saoedische maatschappij toegankelijker te maken voor de buitenwereld en in een iets zachter licht te plaatsen, en waarmee het koningshuis een modern en verlicht beeld wilde projecteren (al-Rasheed 2013: 40). Waar voorheen enkel publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen onderdeel waren van deze islamitische moderniteit deed de staat ten tijde van het koningschap van ‘Abdallah een belofte van een islamitische moderniteit die niet enkel publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen behelsde maar ook ikhtilat.

**Saoedische respondenten over ikhtilat**

Saoedische respondenten houden hun staat aan zijn belofte van de *enchanted* islamitische moderniteit. Respondenten vertellen dat zij islam als inherent onderdeel zien van de Saoedische moderniteit. In deze moderniteit willen zij wél terugzien wat zij labelen als het goede van het Westen, bijvoorbeeld technologische ontwikkeling, gezondheidszorg, onderwijs en schone straten. Wat zij niet terug willen zien in deze moderniteit is wat zij labelen als het morele verval dat het Westen kent in het publieke leven: vrouwen en mannen die zomaar met elkaar kunnen afspreken, buitenechtelijke relaties, echtscheidingen en seksuele intimidatie.

Om het morele verval te voorkomen vinden respondenten dat de manier waarop vrouwen en mannen met elkaar in aanraking komen in het publieke leven gereguleerd dient te worden. De ideeëns van respondenten over hoe dit gerealiseerd dient te worden zijn hun *desiderata*: hun wensen met betrekking tot persoonlijke en maatschappelijke verandering waarvan respondenten hopen dat ze gerealiseerd zullen worden.

Deze wensen uiten zich in publiekscampagnes en in discoursen van respondenten. Een voorbeeld van een publiekscampagne is de campagne voor het openen van gendergesegregeerde ziekenhuizen. Wellicht tegen de verwachting in zijn in Saoedi-Arabië ziekenhuizen gemengd. Dit om praktische redenen: er zijn simpelweg niet genoeg vrouwelijke artsen om aparte ziekenhuizen uitvoerbaar te maken. Desalniettemin bestaat de wens ertoe wel en werd deze publiekelijk in een petitie kenbaar gemaakt.

Uit mijn discoursanalyse van drie casussen van de universiteit, het ziekenhuis en de werkplek bleken drie verschillende typen wensen met betrekking tot de publieke participatie van vrouwen. Respondenten rechtvaardigen *ikhtilat*, zijn
tegen *ikhtilat*, of geven de voorkeur aan *ikhtilat*. De respondenten die *ikhtilat* rechtvaardigen vergoelijken het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen of praten het goed. Respondenten die tegen *ikhtilat* zijn vinden dat vrouwen en mannen niet zouden moeten mengen in publieke ruimtes en dat vrouwen deel zouden moeten nemen aan het publieke leven in publieke ruimtes die alleen-voor-vrouwen zijn. Die respondenten die de voorkeur geven aan *ikhtilat* prefereren het mengen tussen vrouwen en mannen in publieke ruimtes.

Respondenten zijn niet altijd consistent door de drie casussen heen. Zo kan bijvoorbeeld een islamitische predikster *ikhtilat* in ziekenhuizen rechtvaardigen, bijvoorbeeld omdat er een duidelijke noodzaak is om te mengen omdat ziekenhuizen nu eenmaal gemengd zijn, maar is zij tegelijkertijd tegen *ikhtilat* op universiteiten omdat het geen enkel probleem is voor een vrouw om een diploma te behalen aan een van de vrouwenuniversiteiten in het land. Dit laat ons zien dat houdingen van respondenten ten opzichte van *ikhtilat* genuanceerd en ambigu zijn in plaats van zwart-wit en rigide.


Islam was de notie waar respondenten het meeste aan refereerden. Het is het meest voorkomende argument zowel tegen als ter rechtvaardiging van *ikhtilat* in alle drie de casussen. Met de notie van islam bedoel ik argumenten gebaseerd op islamitische principes die voortkomen uit shari'a. Respondenten baseren argumenten ook op islamitische geschiedenis en de aanwezigheid van *ikhtilat* in de Grote Moskee van Mekka.

De notie van gender en die van de identiteit van de Saoedische natie werden even vaak gebruikt. Met de notie van gender bedoel ik argumenten die gebaseerd zijn op ideeën over de maatschappelijke rol van vrouwen en mannen en seksualiteit. Hier spelen de veronderstelde ‘natuurlijke neigingen’ van vrouwen en mannen zoals verzorgende beroepen voor vrouwen en mannen zoals verzorgende beroepen voor vrouwen een rol. Ook spelen ideeën over de complementariteit van vrouwen en mannen, seksualiteit, gendergelijkheid en seksuele intimidatie een rol in de argumentatie.

Met de notie van de natie verwijst ik naar argumenten die gebaseerd zijn
op ideeën over wat wel en niet past bij Saoedi-Arabië en naar opvattingen in welke richting het land zich zou moeten ontwikkelen met betrekking tot de publieke interactie tussen vrouwen en mannen en de publieke participatie van vrouwen. Hier vindt onderhandeling plaats over het karakter van het land, over of Saoedi-Arabië een conservatief land is en of dat al dan niet iets goeds is, over of ikhtilat iets normaals is, over hoe ontwikkeling plaats zou moeten vinden en over ideeën over traditionele opvattingen en de concepten van behoudendheid en vooruitgang. Deze argumenten relateren allemaal aan de notie van de natie en of ikhtilat en publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen wel of niet compatibel zijn met het hedendaagse karakter van Saoedi-Arabië.

Ten slotte gebruiken respondenten ook pragmatische argumenten. Daarbij komen ideeën over uitvoerbaarheid, keuze, efficiëntie en het gemak van vrouwen naar boven. Bijvoorbeeld: in een gendergesegregeerd kantoor kunnen vrouwen hun abaya en hoofddoek of niqab afdoen omdat zij enkel onder vrouwen zijn en niet gezien kunnen worden door vreemde mannen. Deze vier noties staan uiteraard niet altijd op zichzelf maar zijn ook met elkaar verbonden.

In tegenstelling tot wat wellicht verwacht zou worden lopen de drie genoemde categorieën wensen betreffende de participatie van vrouwen in de publieke sfeer door de verschillende groepen respondenten heen. Het is namelijk niet zo dat bijvoorbeeld alle islamitische prediksters tegen ikhtilat en voor segregatie zijn of alle activistes voor ikhtilat en tegen segregatie.

Ontstaan van ikhtilat in Koeweit en de moderniteitsbelofte van de staat
Van origine is Koeweit een handelsgemeenschap. Voor de ontdekking van de olie werd er gehandeld in paarden, hout, koffie en parels. Gesteund door de belangrijkste handelsfamilies werd Sabah I bin Jaber in 1752 gekozen tot de eerste amir van Koeweit. Deze ongeschreven overeenkomst tussen de politieke Al Sabah-familie en de belangrijkste handelsfamilies vormt tot op de dag de basis van de staatsinrichting van het land.

Koeweit kent niet de gendersegregatie van Saoedi-Arabië. Integendeel: ikhtilat is de norm – de norm die de overheid door de geschiedenis heen heeft gepropageerd en geconsolideerd. De gendergesegregeerde openbare ruimtes die wel zijn ontstaan zijn voornamelijk gefinancierd door de privésector en niet door de overheid. Tegelijkertijd werd die ontwikkeling ook niet tegengehouden door de overheid.

Koeweits geschiedenis van voor de ontdekking van de olie wordt vaak genoemd als reden voor de dominantie van ikhtilat in de Koeweitse maatschappij vandaag. In de vertelling van die pre-olieschiedenis wordt Koeweit gepositioneerd als
een handelsnatie met een naar buiten gerichte blik die beïnvloed werd door de culturen en volkeren waarmee de handelsfamilies handel dreven. In de tijd voor de olie gaven de connecties met de wereld verder dan het Arabisch schiereiland en een hogere sedentarisatiegraad Koeweit een open karakter. Vrouwen runden het huishouden, de familieaangelegenheden en de financiën gedurende de lange afwezigheid van mannen die aan het parelduiken of op handelsreis waren. Het waren vooral de lagere klassen vrouwen die werkten, gemengd met mannen, om het familie-income aan te vullen. Vrouwen van de gegoede handelsklasse konden het zich veroorloven een meer teruggetrokken leven te leiden.

Net als de Saoedische staat heeft de Koeweitse staat, door de geschiedenis van de Al Sabah heen, een moderniteitsbelofte gedaan. Echter, het pad dat deze belofte heeft afgelegd is anders dan in Saoedi-Arabië. De Nahda was een culturele en intellectuele renaissance die begon in Egypte aan het einde van de 19e, begin van de 20e eeuw en Koeweit bereikte in de vroege jaren 50. Centraal in de Nahda stond het breken met gewoonten en tradities en vooruit bewegen. Ook de oproep van de Nahda tot vrouwenemancipatie resoneerde in Koeweit en dit werd opgepakt door Koeweitse mannen en vrouwen.

Gedreven door ideeën van de Egyptische Nahda initiéerde de Koeweitse overheid plannen voor sociale en stedelijke ontwikkelingen (1945-60). Via deze plannen deed de staat een moderniteitsbelofte die bestond uit stedelijke ontwikkeling zoals nieuwe gebouwen en een goede infrastructuur in combinatie met sociale hervorming en vooruitgang zoals huisvesting, onderwijs en gezondheidszorg. Gedreven door de ideologische motor van de Nahda frame de staat zijn moderniteit in contrast met het arme Koeweitse verleden van voor de ontdekking van de olie.

Oliegeld beïnvloedde niet alleen stadsplanning maar ook de arbeidsmarkt. Overheidsbeleid van onder andere feminisering van de arbeidsmarkt leidde tot kritiek van islamisten die beargumenteerden dat het misschien noodzakelijk was voor vrouwen om te werken, maar dan enkel in posities waarin zij niet zouden samenwerken met mannen. Het parlement werd gedomineerd door liberalen en seculieren en deze roep om segregatie kreeg geen momentum.

Vervolgens deed de staat een moderniteitsbelofte van islamitisch erfgoed: een moderniteit die was geworteld in een lokaal islamitisch verleden en erfgoed. Tegen deze tijd (1961-77) was het Arabisch nationalisme de dominante stroming geworden in de Koeweitse maatschappij. Dit gebeurde tegen de achtergrond van het einde van het Britse protectoraat over Koeweit in 1961. Zoals tegen elke politieke stroming die te sterk leek te worden wilde de overheid een tegenwicht bieden tegen deze ontwikkeling van Arabisch nationalisme. Daarom begon zij
meer ruimte te geven aan islamisten. Daarbij, met het groeiende belang van Koeweit in de internationale oliehandel, wilde de overheid haar aanwezigheid en zichtbaarheid in het centrum van Koeweit vergroten. Met dat doel voor ogen gaf de overheid opdracht aan architecten om gebouwen te ontwerpen die duidelijk islamitisch van ontwerp waren. Zichtbaar in deze islamitische architectuur was de ambitie van de staat om zichzelf te positioneren als voorstander en beschermer van moderniteit terwijl de bevolking constant herinnerd werd aan haar Koeweitse islamitische verleden. Aangezien islam in deze moderniteitsbeloftes wordt gepositioneerd als erfgoed en niet als vroomheid is dit een andere vorm van moderniteit dan de Saoedische enchanted moderniteit.

In de late jaren 70 en de jaren 80 deed de staat via zijn beleid van tajdid (vernieuwing) een moderniteitsbelofte van een islamitische Arabische enchanted moderniteit. In deze tijd zagen de Al Sabah het als opportuun zich te positioneren als modern en Arabisch en islamitisch tegelijkertijd. Het beleid van tajdid betekende een herleving van islam als manier om de maatschappij te hervormen en zuiveren. Twee islamitische vrouwenorganisaties kregen een licentie van de overheid. Ook richtte de staat zijn eigen vrouwenorganisatie op en werd er veel geschreven over islam en vrouwenrechten. Deze discoursen vonden hun weerklank in het parlement, waar bijvoorbeeld wetsveranderingen op het vlak van vrouwenstemrecht werden voorgesteld. Ook ontwikkelingen buiten Koeweit, zoals de Iraanse revolutie, de belegering van de Grote Moskee van Mekka en de revolte in Qatif, en de angst dat deze zouden overwaaien naar Koeweit leidden ertoe dat de Al Sabah het opportuun achtten zich duidelijker op één lijn te plaatsen met islam. Om de soennieten te verdelen kwam er meer ruimte voor voornamelijk salafistische organisaties. Een nieuw volkslied, een nieuw kabinet en een eed van trouw aan de natie in plaats van aan de amir consolideerden een appèl op een onderscheidende Arabische identiteit. Met het beleid van tajdid deden de Al Sabah een islamitische Arabische enchanted moderniteitsbelofte.

In augustus 1990 brak de Golfoorlog uit toen Koeweit werd bezet door Irak. Sinds de bevrijding (februari 1991) wordt moderniteit geframed als een alternatieve moderniteit rondom de Koeweitse identiteit en specificiteit waarbij de staat zich beroept op islam als deel van de identiteit in plaats van als vroomheid. Tijdens de Golfoorlog namen vrouwen een actieve en belangrijke rol op zich.

Na afloop van de oorlog ontvouwde de strijd tussen secularisten en islamisten zich onder andere op het gendervlak, bijvoorbeeld over kleding van vrouwen, de positie van vrouwen op de arbeidsmarkt en in het onderwijssysteem en wederom vrouwenkiesrecht. Vrouwen vonden dat ze door de belangrijke rol die ze hadden
gespeeld in het verzet nu stemrecht en andere politieke rechten zouden moeten krijgen.

Ontwikkelingen zoals het gendersegregeren van de nieuwe Shadadiya campus van de Universiteit van Koeweit werden onder andere doorgezet om de invloed van islamisten op andere vlakken te dammen. Het voorstel van islamisten om de constitutie aan te passen om shari'a als de enige in plaats van als één van de bronnen van wetgeving aan te houden werd tegengehouden door de amir. Deze ontwikkelingen gebeurden niet uit overwegingen van vroomheid (dus niet als uiting van een enchanted moderniteit) maar op basis van identiteitsoverwegingen en het zoeken naar een balans tussen onder andere de verschillende liberale en islamitische stromingen in het land. Het gaat tegenwoordig dan ook om een moderniteitsbelofte die geframed is rondom de Koeweitse identiteit, met islam als deel van die identiteit in plaats van als vroomheid.

**Koeweitse respondenten over gendersegregatie**

In Saoedi-Arabië speelde zowel vanuit de staat als vanuit respondenten islam een belangrijke rol binnen moderniteit. In Koeweit ligt dit net iets anders. Mijn Koeweitse respondenten leggen de nadruk op de identiteit (huwiyya) van hun land als zwaartepunt van moderniteit. Wel is islam volgens mijn respondenten daar een onderdeel van. De eigen identiteit moet onderdeel zijn van de moderniteit en die identiteit is islamitisch. Koeweitse respondenten positioneerden Koeweit als een open land dat juist als gevolg van zijn geschiedenis nu ikhtilat als default manier van publieke participatie van vrouwen heeft.

Net als in Saoedi-Arabië uitten respondenten in Koeweit binnen hun idee van moderniteit verschillende desiderata betreffende de participatie van vrouwen in de publieke sfeer. Ook in Koeweit uitten deze wensen zich in publiekscampagnes en in discoursen van respondenten. Een voorbeeld van een publiekscampagne is de campagne Sawt al-Kuwait (De Stem van Koeweit) die ageerde tegen gendergesegregeerd privéonderwijs in Koeweit in antwoord op parlementariërs die dit hadden voorgesteld.

Uit mijn discoursanalyse van drie casussen, namelijk de nieuwe gesegregeerde universiteitscampus Shadadiya, een gesegregeerde demonstratie en een gesegregeerd restaurant, bleken onder mijn respondenten drie verschillende typen wensen te leven met betrekking tot de publieke participatie van vrouwen. Namelijk, respondenten zijn tegen gendersegregatie, rechtvaardigen gendersegregatie, of zijn voor gendersegregatie. Die respondenten die tegen gendersegregatie zijn geloven dat mannen en vrouwen juist zouden moeten mengen in de publieke ruimte. Respondenten die segregatie rechtvaardigen
vergoelijken het of praten het goed, bijvoorbeeld zodat vrouwen die niet willen of mogen mengen toch deel kunnen nemen aan het publieke leven. Respondenten die voor segregatie zijn vinden dat dit de enige manier van participatie van vrouwen in het publieke leven zou moeten zijn.

Net als in Saoedi-Arabië zijn respondenten niet altijd consistend in de drie casussen. Zo kan een zakenvrouw tegen de gendersegregatie van de nieuwe Shadadiya campus van de Universiteit van Koeweit zijn, maar voor segregatie bij de demonstratie, omdat wegens de aard van een demonstratie vrouwen en mannen fysiek veel dichterbij elkaar zijn – en dat het dus beter is twee aparte delen te hebben om lastigvallen te voorkomen. In Koeweit zijn de houdingen van respondenten ten opzichte van gendersegregatie dus genuanceerd en ambigu in plaats van zwart-wit en rigide.


Daarbij komt dat Koeweitse respondenten hun wensen met betrekking tot de manier van participatie via segregatie en/of *ikhtilat* niet als modern maar als normaal positioneren. Zij beroepen zich hierbij op de Koeweitse nationale geschiedenis waarin *ikhtilat* de norm was en is. We zien ook hier dus wel een alternatieve moderniteit maar niet een *enchanted* moderniteit.

**Conclusies: gendersegregatie, *ikhtilat* en moderniteit in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit**

In mijn dissertatie heb ik onderzocht hoe moderniteit wordt vormgegeven in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit via discussies over de participatie van de vrouw in de maatschappij in publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen en *ikhtilat*. Daaraan
verbind ik drie conclusies.


De Saoedische staat heeft sinds de uitroeping van de Derde Saoedische Staat altijd een belofte van een islamitische moderniteit aan de maatschappij gedaan: een enchanted moderniteit waarin islam wordt aangehaald als vroomheid en de Al Sa’ud als hoeders van deze vroomheid. Vrouwen als zijnde cultuurdragers waren in dat project een symbool van deze vroomheid, zowel in het land zelf als naar het buitenland geprojecteerd. Dit speelde voornamelijk op het vlak van publieke participatie van vrouwen, aanvankelijk door gendersegregatie in het publieke leven en de consolidatie daarvan, en in recentere tijden via zowel publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen als gemengde publieke ruimtes.

Net als de Saoedische staat deed de Koeweitse staat zijn moderniteitsbelofte. Het pad van deze belofte is echter anders dan dat van Saoedi-Arabië. Vandaag de dag is deze belofte een alternatieve moderniteit die wordt geframed rondom de Koeweitse identiteit en specificiteit, waarbij de staat zich beroept op islam als deel van die identiteit in plaats van op islam als vroomheid. Als zodanig is de Koeweitse moderniteitsbelofte van de staat dan ook geen enchanted moderniteit.

Ten tweede vergeleek ik de opvattingen van mijn Saoedische en Koeweitse respondenten in hun discoursen over de fenomenen van publieke ruimtes alleen-voor-vrouwen en gemengde publieke ruimtes in hun landen en de manieren waarop zij hun overheden aan hun respectievelijke moderniteitsbeloften houden.

De opvattingen van zowel mijn Saoedische als mijn Koeweitse respondenten zijn (hoewel met verschillend gewicht) gebaseerd op dezelfde noties van gender, islam en de natie. Ondanks deze overeenkomst houden zij hun overheden op verschillende wijzen aan hun moderniteitsbeloften.

moderniteitsbelofte op de identiteit van het land. Daarbij beroept zij zich op islam als deel van die identiteit in plaats van als vroomheid. In hun discoursen houden Koeweitse respondenten hun overheid aan die moderniteitsbelofte die zij framet rondom de Koeweitse identiteit en specificiteit. Zij wensen voornamelijk *ikhtilat* als manier van publieke participatie van vrouwen.


De derde conclusie betreft de onderhandeling die plaatsvindt tussen mijn respondenten en hun respectievelijke staten en of de uitkomst van deze processen anders is in Saoedi-Arabië dan in Koeweit. In de dynamiek tussen de staat die zijn moderniteitsbelofte doet en de respondenten die de staat aan deze belofte houden kan een onderhandeling gezien worden. Er is echter sprake van een onevenwichtige machtsverdeling: de staat heeft beduidend meer macht dan respondenten. Desalniettemin laten respondenten hun overheid haar moderniteitsbelofte niet geheel invullen zoals zij dat voor zich ziet. Door publieke campagnes zoals voor gendergesegregeerde ziekenhuizen in Saoedi-Arabië en tegen gendergesegregeerd onderwijs in Koeweit, alsook in hun discoursen, dwingen zij modificaties en nuances af.

**Leeswijzer**

*ikhtilat* het mengen tussen vrouwen en mannen in publieke ruimtes

*alternatieve moderniteit* het bestaan van verschillende vormen van moderniteit. Het Europese, universele model van moderniteit wordt niet meer gezien als hét model van moderniteit maar als een van meerdere. Verschillende vormen van moderniteit hebben elk hun eigenheid.

*enchanted moderniteit* een specifieke eigenheid van moderniteit, namelijk een moderniteit met een religieuze dan wel spirituele
dimensie. Er is een nadruk op zowel materiële als spirituele vooruitgang.

**promissory note** belofte van moderniteit gedaan door de staat

**desiderata** wensen met betrekking tot persoonlijke en maatschappelijke verandering waarvan respondenten hopen dat ze gerealiseerd zullen worden.

**abayya** lange, vaak zwarte overjas die alle vrouwen in Saoedi-Aрабië buitenshuis dienen te dragen en die sommige Koeweitse vrouwen kiezen te dragen in het openbaar.

**Nahda** een culturele en intellectuele renaissance die begon in Egypte aan het einde van de 19e, begin van de 20e eeuw. Centraal stond het breken met gewoonten en tradities en vooruit bewegen. Ook riep de **Nahda** op tot vrouwenemancipatie.

**tajdid** letterlijk: vernieuwing. Het beleid van **tajdid** betekende een herleving van islam als manier om de maatschappij te hervormen en zuiveren.

**shari’a** islamitisch recht

**huwiyya** identiteit
Popularised summary

In the West, many are often intrigued, if not even a little obsessed, with the position of ‘the Muslim woman’. Some believe she is suppressed, for example when she wears a headscarf. Of course suppression occurs in the Muslim world, just as it does in the West. But in general, the position of women is much more nuanced than most people think.

The past 8 years I did research on the position of women in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. To be more precise: I researched the segregation between women and men in public life. In the Netherlands we are for instance used to men and women studying together and working together in the same office space. But in Saudi Arabia, there are separate women’s universities and women-only banks, where women can study and arrange their financial affairs without having to come into contact with men. In Kuwait however, mixing between women and men is the norm. I was mostly interested in the question: how do women themselves feel about this? Would they rather mix with men, or do they prefer to live in segregated worlds?

Of course this question touched upon broader themes, and I also addressed those. To name the most important one: what about modernity? Are there differences between Westernisation and modernity? Can one be modern and religious? And can a society be modern while segregating women and men?

The answers to these questions are nuanced, but the general conclusion is illustrated nicely by Fayza, an activist from Riyadh:

“If I become like a Westerner, I lose my identity. Modernity is not the property of the West.”

Here, Fayza differentiates between Westernisation and modernity. She says that modernity is not just the property of the West. That might surprise us, and we may think: but Westernisation and modernity are the same thing, aren’t they? We are western, and modern? We will see that the women I spoke with make a clear distinction between Westernisation and modernity. In their opinion, modernity is possible without being or becoming western. We will also see where these differences lie exactly, according to the women whom I interviewed.

Anthropologist Lila Abu-Lughod takes things one step further than Fayza. She wonders how (in which way) one shapes modernity if one does not want to
adopt the western blueprint:

“Europe was modern; the East was not. How might one become modern when one was not, could not be, or did not want to be Western? Women have had a prominent place in the debates and struggles over this question.”

The position of women is an important measuring stick with which many in the West measure whether or not they find someone (or a country) modern. This because often women, all across the world, are still seen as national cultural symbols – much more so than men. By looking at the position of women in a certain country, one believes to be able to know how that country is doing, also in terms of modernity. Especially when a country goes through significant social, cultural, economic or political changes in a short period of time (like in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait after the discovery of oil), this discussion plays up. In these discussions, women often become a bargaining chip and are either linked to tradition, or to modernity. Because the position of women is so important in that conversation about national identity, managing the position of women often becomes a government task, also with respect to the participation of women in public life. It is exactly for this reason that researching gender segregation and the way in which the state and respondents talk about this phenomenon is so interesting. We will see that exactly in this area ideas are formed about what, if not western, this modernity should look like.

This leaves the question why I decided to look at these two neighbouring countries? Good question, because of course I also could have researched other countries. However, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait make for a beautiful comparison for several reasons. In many ways (economically, historically) they went through similar processes. Nevertheless, in Saudi Arabia gender segregation has become the dominant norm. In Kuwait on the other hand, mixing between women and men is the normality. A fascinating difference. And therewith (academically) a very relevant topic for research.

Writing a popularised summary is not common practice in the academic world. I nevertheless chose to do so. This for the reason that it is my deep wish to

---

contribute to knowledge and understanding of the Middle East in the Netherlands, particularly with respect to the position of women. And while I have warm feelings for academia, most people are reached in other ways.

First of all you will read a bit about the history of both countries. I sketch this historical context to be able to understand why gender segregation came about in Saudi Arabia, and why nowadays men and women in Kuwait mix in public life. Subsequently, I delve into the conversations I had with my 118 female respondents, to leave you with my conclusions and some remarks on the societal relevance of my research. Lest me to say that I am very much open to chatting to anyone who might have any questions after reading this summary. Enjoy the ride!

Saudi Arabia’s history
In the country that we now know as Saudi Arabia, the tribal leader Ibn Saud and the religious leader Ibn Wahhab made an alliance in 1744. With this agreement, the political and military power came to lie in the hands of Ibn Saud, and the religious support of that power came to lie with Ibn Wahhab. To this day, the legitimacy of Saudi Arabia’s current royal family the Al Saud is based on this agreement. While the Al Saud have over the last decades increasingly taken religious power away from these official religious scholars, who are often ideological or even biological descendants from Ibn Wahhab, these scholars nevertheless remain an important cornerstone of the legitimacy of the Al Saud.

When in 1932 oil was discovered in Saudi Arabia, very quickly a process of urbanisation ensued. People moved from the countryside to the city to work in the oil industry. Salaries rose and women not working became a sign of wealth, and with that a status symbol. Up to this day gender segregation in Saudi Arabia is mostly a phenomenon among the wealthier strata of society.

The increasing wealth also led to the elite going to Egypt in the 1950. Egypt back then was the centre of the Arab world. Families would go there for tourism, and men to gain an education. Subsequently, these men wished to marry women with a similar level of education. This meant that it would have to be possible for girls to go to formal schools in Saudi Arabia – allowing girls to go abroad to study would only get going decades later. At first, religious leaders opposed this development, but when the king presented girls’ education as a way of making them better Muslim mothers they agreed. From then onwards also families from the lower classes started sending their daughters to school. Education was the first public space in which women and men were segregated.

This state project of girls’ education presented the state as progressive and modern and girls’ education became a sign of modernity, progress, reform and
national development in a way that fit the Saudi national identity. The state made a promise of modernity that fit the country and Islam.

The explosive economic and material development due to the oil revenues reached a height in the 1970s. Fast social developments during this period changed the social structure of Saudi Arabia. In 1979 a group of rebels lay siege on the Great Mosque of Mecca because they were angry at the fast pace of changes and out of protest against the king, who they believed was corrupt and immoral because he had not done enough to counter these developments. Therefore, they believed, the Al Saud had lost their legitimacy as Saudi Arabia’s rulers. The incident rocked the Saudi monarchy to its core. To this day, it has been the most threatening moment to the Saudi royal family and the unity of the country.

The siege was put down, but the result of the turbulent incident was an increasing conservatism and leniency towards the conservative religious streams in society, as a way for the Al Saud of preserving its position. This conservatism was mostly aimed at women as culture bearers. Only they would be able to preserve the piety of the nation. Dress became more conservative and women disappeared from television and swimming pools.

In the 1980s this conservatism was consolidated. The Labour Law required that men and women not work together in the same office. Already in the early 1980s the al-Rajihi bank was the first bank that opened a women-only branch that was only accessible to female employees and female customers. These banks quickly became commonplace. Of course it is very costly to open a double amount of banks, for men and for women. The enormous oil revenues offered a welcome solution to this problem. Other segregated facilities were also financed in this way.

It would take until the early 2000s for the Saudi government to support not only segregated public spaces for women, but also mixed public spaces. The terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the domestic terrorist attacks on Riyadh compounds in 2003 led to more pressure for reform from outside as well as within the kingdom, also with respect to the position and participation of women. Walking a tightrope trying to balance the different streams such as Islamists, Salafis, and liberals in Saudi society, the state now does not only initiate women-only spaces but also supports mixed public spaces. For example, in 2009 the king opened Saudi Arabia’s first mixed, co-educational university in Jeddah. Also today, as with girls’ education in the 1960s, these developments are presented as progress and modernity within the Islamic pious identity of Saudi Arabia.
Kuwait’s history

Kuwait’s history is different to that of Saudi Arabia. In Kuwait the Al Sabah family made an agreement with the country’s important merchant families in 1752. The Al Sabah were to be the political leaders and the merchant families would be in charge of the country’s trade such as imports and exports. The ‘division of labour’, thus, was clear. In addition, the political leaders do not claim religious authority and their leadership is not based on religious legitimacy. This unwritten agreement between the political Al Sabah family and the important merchant families forms the basis of the organisation of the state up to this day.

Kuwait has a long history as a trade nation. It gave the country an open and outward-looking character and many respondents invoke this history as an explanation for the norm of mixing between women and men. Women would run their homes and the family affairs and finances during the long absences of the men, who were away from Kuwait pearling or trading overseas. The most important trade commodities at this time were wood, coffee, horses and pearls. Lower class women worked, also mixing with men, to supplement the family income, whereas women of the merchant class could afford not to work and therefore lived more secluded lives.

In 1938 oil was discovered in Kuwait. At this time Kuwait was a British protectorate. Kuwait and Great Britain founded the Kuwait Oil Company to exploit the oil. In the period after the discovery of oil the Al Sabah mostly stimulated urban development, in combination with social reforms and progress. They presented this modernisation to the population in opposition to Kuwait’s poor, pre-oil past. In that story, it was the Al Sabah that were the ones capable of pulling the country out of poverty and of letting her population profit from the oil wealth. In this period, especially from the 1950s onwards, breaking with old customs and traditions was central. Also developments with respect to women’s emancipation, blown over from Egypt, resonated in Kuwait and were picked up by Kuwaiti men and women.

In 1961 Kuwait became independent from the British. Arab nationalism became the dominant political ideology. Arab nationalism was a pan-Arab nationalist wave that flourished in many Arab countries after independence from the colonial rulers. It was seen as an ideology that would bring dignity, unity and justice. Also in Kuwait Arab nationalism became popular.

At the same time the 1960s in Kuwait were a period of unprecedented economic growth. The government decided that therefore it was necessary women worked (more) as well. The government policy of feminisation of the labour market led to criticism from Islamists who argued that while it might be
necessary for women to work, they should only be allowed to do so in positions where they do not mix with men. Parliament however was dominated by liberals and secularists and this call for segregation did not gain enough support.

Nevertheless the Islamists gradually gained influence in the 1960s. As with any political stream that seemed to gain too much traction, the state wanted to counterbalance the influence of the Arab nationalists, that had also been growing. Therefore it started to stress Kuwait’s Islamic identity. Against that background, in the 1960s through to the 1970s at state level the notion of an Islamic heritage modernity gained momentum: a modernity that was rooted in the local Islamic past and heritage. Heritage was positioned as relevant to today. The government, for example, commissioned the development of new buildings in the style of Islamic architecture.

In the 1970s and 1980s the Al Sabah thought it opportune to align themselves more openly with Islam. With its policy of ‘renewal’, as they called it, they advocated change and modernisation. This modernisation was to take shape within and Islamic, Arab framework and boundaries. The policy of renewal meant the revival of Islam in order to reform and purify society. The government licenced two Islamist women’s organisations. In addition, the government founded its own women’s organisation. Also, in this changing context, many writings on Islam and women’s rights and duties were published. In Parliament, legal changes were proposed with respect to for example female suffrage. The Al Sabah adopted a reserved attitude with respect to gender segregation and left it to the private sector.

During the 1990-1991 Gulf War, women took on an active and important role in the resistance. After liberation, the struggle between secularists and Islamists unfolded anew. Amongst others this struggle played out on gender grounds, for example about women’s clothing, the position of women on the labour market and in the educational system and, again, women’s suffrage. Women believed that because of the important role that they played in the resistance against the Iraqi occupation they should now be given voting and other political rights. At this time, developments such as gender segregating the new Shadadiya campus of Kuwait University were partly pushed through in order to contain the influence of the Islamists in other areas.

Today there are for instance some bank branches that have separate women-only floors, or an entertainment park with a women-only afternoon. However, these are all commercial initiatives in the private sector. In the government sector, only some ministries are gender segregated. Modernity is now shaped around the Kuwaiti identity and particularity. Islam is invoked as part of that identity rather than as piety. This means that Islam is viewed as a cultural reference point and
regarded as part of the roots of the country and its population, rather than as religious devotion.

**Respondents**

An important part of my research are the Saudi and Kuwaiti women whom I interviewed. I wanted to find out whether women do or do not agree with segregation or, put differently, whether they felt more comfortable with mixing or with gender segregation. I was also curious to learn about what their opinions would tell me about the direction into which Saudi Arabia and Kuwait may develop. Do women want to work segregated from men at the office? Or would they rather be able to sit next to each other in the university’s lecture room and study together? Do women believe their country is westernising, or rather that it is modernising? And what is the difference between the two?

My research shows that the women I spoke with do not see Westernisation and modernity as the same thing. But then, what does this modernity look like, if not western? Is my respondents’ modernity different to the secular, western modernity as we know it in Europe? How does this relate to Islam, and the way of interaction between men and women?

To come to an answer to all these questions I spoke to 118 women between 2010 and 2013. From Reem the activist to journalist Mona, from artist Manal to business woman Nailah, and from children’s bookshop owner Maali to basketball player Lina. All women I spoke with were either activists who worked on changing the position of women, female Islamic preachers who explained the Islamic faith to other women, or business women with their own company. These three categories of women give a broad overview of society, namely the religious field (female Islamic preachers), the social field (activists) and the economic field (business women). I also chose these categories of women because I expected each category to judge segregation differently. I expected activists and business women to be against segregation and Islamic preachers in favour of segregation. Reality turned out to be more nuanced than that.

Besides interviewing women in both countries I held 24 context interviews with for example an architect, an artist, and an archaeologist so as to gain a broader insight into the societies I was studying. Importantly, I also visited, amongst others, women’s religious study groups, women-only universities and cafes where only women are allowed entrance. In that way I found out how gender segregation works in practice and which impact it has on daily life.

In the two countries, there are very different ways of thinking about gender segregation.
Saudi respondents

In Saudi Arabia I asked women how they thought about segregated workplaces and offices and about segregated universities. I also asked the about hospitals, because perhaps surprisingly hospitals in the kingdom are mixed. Because of the physicality of medical examinations one might expect hospitals to be segregated. But they’re not. Female doctors examine male patients – but always with a female nurse in the examination room so that the doctor is never alone with a man. Not everyone agrees with mixing in hospitals. During the time of my fieldwork a petition was started calling for women-only hospitals. However, practical objections such as too few female doctors mean such desires cannot be realised.

The first thing I found very interesting was to notice that my Saudi respondents did not speak about ‘segregation’ but rather about ‘mixing’. Segregation is the norm in Saudi Arabia, and as such it actually is not very surprising that respondents talk about that which diverts from the norm: mixing between women and men in public.

Among my respondents I discovered three different ways of approaching the topic of mixing. Part of my respondents turned out to justify mixing. They were not strictly against or in favour of mixing, but for example accepted it under certain circumstances. For instance, when mixing was necessary and unavoidable (like in a hospital) they would justify it. Another group of respondents was against mixing. These women believe that men and women should not mix in public spaces, and that women should only participate in public life through women-only public spaces. Other respondents prefer mixing. They would rather have women and men mixing in public than segregating them from each other.

I found it striking that (contrary to what I expected) the three ways of looking at mixing ran right through the three categories of women whom I interviewed (activists, Islamic preachers, business women). So it was not the case that for example all Islamic preachers are against mixing and in favour of segregation, or all activists in favour of mixing and against segregation.

In addition, respondents are not always consistent throughout the three cases. For example, an Islamic preacher might justify mixing between women and men in hospitals, because there is a clear necessity to mix as hospitals are mixed in Saudi Arabia. At the same time, she might be against mixing at universities because it is no problem for a woman to get a degree at one of the women-only universities in the country. This shows us that respondents’ attitudes towards mixing are nuanced and flexible rather than firm and rigid.

The conversations about mixing and segregation were a beautiful way of looking at ideas about progress, development and modernity. Some women
believe that only mixing between men and women is a modern phenomenon. Others say that only segregation is part of modernity. However, the most interesting surprise coming out of my research in Saudi Arabia is that most women said that they thought both gender segregation and mixing between women and men should be part of modern Saudi Arabia. This so that women who do not want to or are not allowed to mix can work or study and develop themselves – separate from men.

In addition, according to my interlocutors this modernity consists in technological developments, scientific discoveries and material progress. But, respondents argue, all this should take place within an Islamic framework. Islam should be part of modern Saudi Arabia, they say. They are of the opinion that a modern Saudi Arabia should be a religious and pious country. Modernity, then, has a material and a spiritual dimension. I thought it was very interesting to discover that the majority of women whom I interviewed made a distinction between Westernisation and modernity. In their view, Westernisation consists in copy-pasting whatever blows over from America or Europe: food, fashion, way of speaking, and morality.

Fayza, an activist from Riyadh, told me the following:

“I think Westernisation is adopting another culture. For example, I go to Holland, and on the façade it all looks really nice. And without having a deep understanding, I adopt the culture. But it isn’t part of my roots. That isn’t modernisation. That’s Westernisation. Modernisation is taking your own culture and developing it from within. And I think that is much more powerful because then I don’t lose my identity. As a Saudi, as a Muslim. If I become like a Westerner, I lose my identity. Modernity is not the property of the West.”

Most of my respondents rejected the secularism of the state that they see ever-present in the West. Some of the women I spoke with however did agree with a separation of ‘mosque and state’. Zayneb, another activist from Riyadh, told me:

“We are Muslims. So Islam is part of everything. Also the government. The religion informs the decisions. And I don’t have a problem with that. But the official religious scholars.. I do think that they should be outside of the government. So that they don’t say what the government wants them to say.”
Zayneb’s quote is fascinating because she separates two important things. While she does agree with religion influencing politics, at the same time she says this should *not* happen through the official religious scholars. She argues that these official scholars will only say what the political leaders want them to say. So in fact she takes away a lot of weight from the official religious scholars, and therewith undermines the fundament of the Saudi state. Namely, that the official religious scholars legitimise the political leaders.

Some respondents, like the activist Hanan from Jeddah, draw the line of this religious dimension much further. She told me:

> “Of course Islam is part of modernity. The idea of modernity without religion is an ignorant idea.”

While most respondents indicate that Islam is part of modernity, Hanan takes it a step further and says that modernity without religion is ignorant. By saying that she also invokes the period of ignorance before the arrival of Islam. The word ‘ignorance’ here is a charged term, because it refers to the darkness in which humanity found itself before the light came to the world through the arrival of Islam.

Finally, many respondents associated Westernisation with the possibility of having a relationship before or outside or wedlock, with moral degeneration and a fear of losing norms and values. Layla, a business woman from Jeddah, said:

> “In my opinion Westernisation is... you know, in the West women can have relationships before marriage. And to them personally and to society, that’s fine, they accept it. But I... I don’t want this to happen in my country. It is not modern at all. And it doesn’t suit Saudi Arabia. Really, I don’t accept this and I don’t want it. It is a bad influence for my children. I don’t want my children to become Western-minded. I don’t accept that my son has a girlfriend and that he goes out with her and has sex with her. It’s unacceptable.”

The women I interviewed clearly distinguish between Westernisation and modernity. They do this on the basis of ideas about Islam, gender, and the direction into which they believe the nation and the country should develop. In the case of Saudi Arabia, modernity is seen as fundamentally different to Westernisation. Modernity consists in progress, that is to take place from within the own character of the country and within the limits of Islamic piety. Respondents say that they see
Islam as an inherent part of Saudi modernity. In this modernity they do want to see what they label as the ‘good things’ from the West, for example technological development, healthcare, education and clean streets. What they do not wish to see in this modernity is what they label as the moral degeneration of the West in its public life: women and men who can just meet up, extramarital relationships, divorce and sexual intimidation. Gender segregation as well as mixing between women and men can be part of that Saudi Islamic modernity.

Kuwaiti respondents
Contrary to Saudi Arabia, in Kuwait mixing between women and men is the normality. There are some women-only public spaces, such as gyms where only women are allowed to exercise or the women’s floor in a bank and a weekly women-only day at the beach. But all in all, mixing is the norm.

The Kuwaiti women whom I spoke with told me something different about segregation than Saudi women. I interviewed women in the same three categories (activists, female Islamic preachers and business women) as in Saudi Arabia. I asked them what they think about some of the segregated public places that do exist in their country. We mostly spoke about cabins that exist in some restaurants for families (married couples with children) or groups of women\(^2\), about the segregated space for women during a demonstration against the government in 2013, and about Kuwait University’s new campus (called Shadadiya) that will have a separate men’s and women’s side. Precisely because segregated, women-only public spaces are quite rare in Kuwait I was curious to find out how women feel about this phenomena. Do they think these developments are desirable, or not?

I discovered three different ways of looking at segregation among the women whom I interviewed. Part of my respondents was against gender segregation. They saw gender segregation as something that does not fit the Kuwaiti identity and national history. Besides, they brought up a pragmatic argument: they’re simply used to mixing with men. One or two respondents believed that gender segregation stimulates homosexuality and that therefore it is wrong to separate women into women-only public spaces. Only a few women whom I interview stated that segregation is unislamic.

\(^2\) Restaurants in the conservative area of Jahra in Kuwait City also have cabins, besides an open, mixed seating area. Cabins are seating areas consisting in one table, and that can be closed by a door, screen or cloth. In this way families get to enjoy more privacy when they go out for a meal and women who wear a niqab or burqa can remove it so as to feel more comfortable while eating and drinking. Groups of women who want to be seated separately also like cabins. These women experience more privacy and they can remove their niqab or burqa, something they do not want to do in the restaurant’s mixed area.
Another part of the women I spoke with justified gender segregation. They weren’t necessarily in favour or against segregation, but accepted it. These respondents say that it’s just a simple fact that there are women who do not want to or are not allowed to mix and that these women too should have the opportunity to participate in Kuwait’s public life. At the same time they didn’t think that there should be more segregated public spaces in Kuwait. There were also respondents who in principle were in favour of segregation but who at the same time said that the money the government would spend on creating segregated spaces is better spent on other things, such as education or the country’s infrastructure.

Finally, some respondents were in favour of gender segregation. These women did not want to mix with men and therefore like the fact that there are separate public spaces that are only for women.

Just as in Saudi Arabia, respondents weren’t always consistent throughout the three cases. For example, a business woman might be against gender segregation at the new Shadadiya campus of Kuwait University, but in favour of segregation at the demonstration. This because due to the nature of a demonstration men and women are physically much closer to each other than at university – and that therefore it is better to have two separate sides in order to prevent harassment of women. Thus, in Kuwait attitudes of respondents towards gender segregation are nuanced and ambiguous rather than inflexible and rigid.

Also in Kuwait, conversations about mixing and segregation were an interesting way of investigating ideas about progress, development and modernity. The majority of the Kuwaiti women I spoke with said that mixing and not segregation should be part of modern Kuwait. None of my respondents believed segregation to be a modern phenomenon. I found it interesting to find out that the women I interviewed labelled mixing as ‘normal’ and not specifically as ‘modern’. Like Ghada, an activist from Kuwait City phrased it:

“Mixing is normal. It is how we have always done things in Kuwait.”

Nevertheless, also Kuwaiti women distinguish between Westernisation and modernity. To them, modernity consists in technological progress, having a good infrastructure such as building and roads, the latest gadgets, but also good education and a sensible use of the country’s natural resources. They also stress holding on to morality as an important part of modernity. Like Hayat, an activist told me:
“Modernity (hadatha) is to have a good life, and to use technology to make your life even better. To have a good education system, health services and infrastructure. To have good communications with others and to get and fulfil my rights and perform my duties. That is what modernity is.”

At the same time the majority of respondents stressed that modernity means leaving the past behind and embracing the future but that it does not mean losing one’s own identity on that road of progress. In fact, it means the opposite. Islamic preacher Nawal explained it to me as follows:

“If I simply copy another place, another culture, then I don’t think that is modern. I never lived in Japan, but I imagine that the Japanese have a balance between integrating the new and respecting their own traditions. So I hope that my country can embrace all sorts of new things, like technology, but with respect for our identity and particularity. With respect for and understanding of our religion; I am happy with our religion.”

Modernity thus lies in integrating new developments into Kuwait’s existing identity. Part of that identity is Islam. Islam, they say, should be part of modern Kuwait in the shape of that Kuwaiti national identity: of the country’s and the population’s roots, as a cultural point of reference, and as part of how norms and values are shaped. And so not necessarily as religiosity or as piety (as was the case in Saudi Arabia).

Conclusions
It might be difficult to imagine that all women agree with the following conclusions. It is important to bear in mind that I do not speak about the Saudi or the Kuwaiti woman, but about the 118 women whom I interviewed and followed. Nevertheless, it is possible to draw several general conclusions.

In both countries we saw that women name and claim a modernity that is different to a western modernity. Namely, in Saudi Arabia the desire exists for a modernity in which both material progress and Islam and religious piety play a role. According to my respondents, both segregation and mixing can be a part of that.

In Kuwait on the other hand, interlocutors desire a modernity in which material progress and Islam as part of their Kuwaiti identity have a place. By
that they mean Islam as a cultural point of reference, as part of the roots of the country and of individuals’ roots, and that it helps shape norms and values. So not necessarily Islam as religiosity or piety. Mixing between women and men is labelled as ‘normal’ rather than as specifically part of modernity.

As opposed to what might be expected, my research shows that above all in Saudi Arabia by far not all women are against segregation. On the contrary: only a small group of women I spoke with explicitly preferred mixing. Yet, both mixing and segregation is seen as part of the modern Saudi Arabia. In Kuwait however mixing is rather labelled as normal and not specifically as modern, because throughout history it has been the way of interaction in public between men and women.

The most important conclusion from my research is that modernity can occur without Westernisation. Just as two branches of a tree can develop differently if they find themselves on the east or west side of the tree, yet still remain part of the same tree, a society can shape modernity differently when on the eastern or western part of the globe.

**Societal relevance**

Here I would like to make several remarks about the societal relevance of my research and about what we can learn from my research in a broader sense.

The results of my research turn traditional power relations in western thinking upside-down. The current idea that religion (Islam in particular) and modernity cannot go together is contradicted by my respondents. They also challenge the idea that ‘our’ western secular notion of modernity should be embraced elsewhere in the world, should ‘they’ wish to become ‘modern’. My research results do not tally with these popular notions within western ‘progress-thinking’. Rather, my results show that Islam at least by my respondents is seen as an inherent part of (and sometimes even conditional to) a modernity, either as piety, or as part of identity. What we can take away from this, is that being religious and being modern can go hand in hand and do not exclude one another, at least in the experience of my respondents. Therewith we question our own paradigm from which we look at Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and the position of women in these two countries. This helps us to gain a more fitting and correct insight into the realities of women’s lives in these countries.

The women I interviewed claim modernity and give their own substance to it. That substance is context-related. With that I mean that the substance that respondents give to modernity is connected to historical developments in their countries and their own relationship to and interpretation of those developments.
My respondents show us that modernity as a term, concept and experienced reality is not reserved for the West alone. Thus, we could try and look beyond our own terminology and way of viewing the world and instead open ourselves up to own formulations, in this case of the women I spoke with, and attach value to that.

Some of the Kuwaiti and Saudi women who participated in my research do not question gender segregation but rather embrace it. As we ourselves live in a mixed society, it might be a bit of a challenge to empathise with this. But also when women speak out in favour of segregation they act out their own agency, however much this might go against our own ideas about how women and men should interact with each other in public life. I here propose to, with empathy and understanding, look at the solutions my respondents have found. This asks of many of us to actively adjust our inner image of these women. This is about taking someone else’s experiences and way of looking at the world seriously – a way of looking at the world that for many in the West might be difficult to understand but can be as true as one’s own truth.

At the same time it is important to not confuse these insights about modernity and the public participation of women in Saudi Arabia in particular with another development in contemporary Saudi Arabia, that in the West is often interpreted as modernisation. For example, driving for women, allowing women into soccer stadiums, and the relaxing of dress requirements are presented by the royal family and interpreted by some in the West as modernisation. Without wanting to downplay the real positive effects these changes have for Saudi women and their enthusiastic reactions to these developments, in my view, these developments are also part of a smart PR-campaign of the Saudi government to position itself in a gentler light. In that campaign, women play a central role – partly because the Saudi government is very much aware of the interest among many in the West for the position of Saudi women. However, what happens simultaneously with these changes is the consolidation of an autocratic political establishment. By giving the population just that little more societal breathing space and with the same developments making the West believe that the country is indeed modernising, the royal family also strengthens its grip on the country and its population. Because in the meantime political space is shrinking, political and religious dissidents are arrested and convicted, serious human rights violations take place, and there is no foreseeable end to the war in Yemen.

Interestingly, during the time I was doing my research gender segregation became a hot topic in the Netherlands and in the United Kingdom (UK). In the UK the discussions were mostly about gender segregated events at universities. In the Netherlands, the debates were amongst others about women-only swimming
lessons in Maassluis and about gender segregated lectures by Dutch-Moroccan Muslim preachers at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In a broadcast of the programme *Nieuwsuur*, lectures in which most men were seated at the front and women at the back of the lecture hall were framed by the programme’s presenter as a “plea against modernity” (*Nieuwsuur* 2017). The underlying assumption seems to be that integration into Dutch society and this way of attending a lecture (not in strict gender segregated spaces but in a pragmatic variation) do not go together in contemporary Dutch society. However, the question that perhaps is more central to this way of attending a lecture is not how one can separate or segregate from society, but rather the question how one can participate as a Muslim. Actually asking those and related questions, and really listening to their answers can give us a more real insight into the actual experiences of these students.

With my research, and particularly with this popularised summary thereof, I hope to have given a multi-coloured image of the opinions and ideas of Saudi and Kuwaiti women themselves about their public participation. It is also my hope that the historical contexts which I’ve analysed give an insight into the how and why of the coming into being of women-only, gender-segregated public spaces (mostly in Saudi Arabia) and mixing between women and men (mostly in Kuwait). Additionally, I hope that my research has given insight into different ways of looking at and claiming modernity (versus Westernisation). But above all I hope that I have succeeded at taking you, the reader, with me into this fascinating world.
Publiekssamenvatting
(Dutch popularised summary)

In het Westen zijn velen regelmatig geïntrigeerd, ja zelfs geobsedeerd, door de positie van ‘de islamitische vrouw’. Sommigen denken dat ze wordt onderdrukt en achtergesteld, bijvoorbeeld wanneer ze een hoofddoek draagt. Natuurlijk komt onderdrukking in de islamitische wereld voor, net als in de westerse wereld trouwens. Maar over het algemeen ligt de positie van de vrouw oneindig veel genuanceerder dan de meeste mensen denken.

De afgelopen 8 jaar heb ik onderzoek gedaan naar de positie van vrouwen in Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit. Om specifiek te zijn: ik heb onderzoek gedaan naar de scheiding tussen vrouwen en mannen in het openbare leven. In Nederland zijn we gewend dat mannen en vrouwen bijvoorbeeld samen kunnen studeren en werken in dezelfde ruimte. Maar in Saoedi-Arabië zijn er onder andere speciale vrouwenuniversiteiten en vrouwenbanken, waar vrouwen studeren en hun geldzaken kunnen regelen zonder met mannen in aanraking te komen. In Koeweit echter is het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen de normaliteit. Ik was vooral geïnteresseerd in de vraag: wat vinden vrouwen daar nou eigenlijk zelf van? Willen ze liever mengen met mannen, of willen ze liever in gescheiden werelden leven?

Natuurlijk raakt deze vraag ook aan bredere thema’s, en ook die heb ik geadresseerd. Om de belangrijkste alvast te noemen: hoe zit het met moderniteit? Zijn er verschillen tussen verwestersing en moderniteit? Kun je modern én religieus zijn? En kun je als samenleving modern zijn en tegelijkertijd mannen en vrouwen segregeren?

De antwoorden daarop zijn genuanceerd, maar de algehele conclusie wordt mooi samengevat door Fayza, een activist uit Riyad:

“As ik net als een westerling word, verlies ik mijn identiteit. Moderniteit is niet het eigendom van het Westen.”

Fayza maakt hier een onderscheid tussen verwestersing en moderniteit. Ze zegt namelijk dat moderniteit niet alleen het bezit is van het Westen. Daar kijken we misschien van op, en denken wellicht: maar verwestersing en moderniteit zijn toch hetzelfde? Wij zijn toch westers, én modern? We zullen zien dat de vrouwen met wie ik heb gesproken juist een duidelijk onderscheid maken tussen verwestersing
en moderniteit. Dat moderniteit volgens hen ook kan zónder westers te zijn of worden. We gaan ook zien waar volgens de vrouwen die ik interviewde dat onderscheid 'm dan precies in zit.

Antropologe Lila Abu-Lughod gaat nog een stapje verder dan Fayza. Zij vraagt zich af hóe (op welke manier) je vormgeeft aan moderniteit wanneer je niet de westers blauwdruk wil overnemen:

“Europa was modern, het Oosten was dat niet. Hoe kon men modern worden wanneer men niet westers was, niet kon zijn, niet wilde zijn? Vrouwen hebben een prominente plaats gehad in de debatten en worstelingen over deze vraag.”  

De positie van de vrouw is namelijk een belangrijke meetlat waarlangs velen in het Westen meten of we iemand (of een land) modern vinden. Dat komt vaak omdat vrouwen wereldwijd nog steeds nationale culturele symbolen zijn, veel meer dan mannen. Aan de positie van de vrouw meent men dus af te kunnen lezen hoe een land ervoor staat, ook op het gebied van moderniteit. Zeker wanneer een land in korte tijd grote veranderingen doormaakt op sociaal, cultureel, economisch of politiek vlak (zoals Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit na de ontdekking van de olie) speelt deze discussie nóg sterker. Vrouwen worden dan speelbal: ze worden gelinkt óf aan traditie, óf aan moderniteit. Omdat de positie van de vrouw in dat gesprek over die nationale identiteit zó belangrijk is, wordt die vrouwenpositie ook vaak een overheidstaak. Ook wanneer het gaat over de participatie van de vrouw in de publieke ruimte. Juist daarom is het onderzoeken van gendersegregatie en de manier waarop de staat én respondenten daarover praten zo interessant. We zullen dan ook zien dat júist op dat vlak opvattingen over hoe die moderniteit er dan wél uit moet komen te zien duidelijk worden.

Dan nog de vraag waarom ik uitgerekend naar deze twee buurlanden heb gekeken? Goede vraag, want natuurlijk had ik ook naar andere landen kunnen kijken. Toch zijn deze twee landen om meerdere redenen prachtig vergelijkingsmateriaal. In veel opzichten (economisch en historisch bijvoorbeeld) lijken ze namelijk op elkaar. Toch is in Saoedi-Arabië segregatie de overheersende norm geworden. In Koeweit daarentegen komt segregatie nauwelijks voor en is het mengen tussen vrouwen en mannen de normaliteit. Een fascinerend verschil dus. En daarmee een (academisch gezien) uiterst relevant onderzoeksobject.

Het schrijven van een publiekssamenvatting is niet gangbaar in de academische wereld. Toch heb ik dat gedaan. Het is namelijk mijn diepe wens om bij te dragen aan kennis en begrip van het Midden-Oosten in Nederland, en met name de vrouwenzaak. En hoewel ik de academische wereld een buitengewoon warm hart toedraag, bereik je in de praktijk de meeste mensen toch langs andere wegen.

Allereerst leest u iets over de ontstaansgeschiedenis van beide landen. Ik schets deze historische context om te duiden hoe en waarom gendersegregatie is ontstaan in Saoedi-Arabië, en er in Koeweit juist gemengd wordt tussen mannen en vrouwen in het openbare leven. Vervolgens ga ik in op de gesprekken die ik heb gevoerd met mijn 118 vrouwelijke respondenten, om daarna af te sluiten met mijn conclusies en een aantal opmerkingen over de maatschappelijke relevantie van mijn onderzoek. Rest me nog te zeggen dat ik er méér dan open voor sta om met iedereen in gesprek te gaan wanneer er na lezing van dit stuk nog vragen leven over de inhoud ervan. Veel leesplezier!

Geschiedenis van Saoedi-Arabië
In het land dat we nu kennen als Saoedi-Arabië sloten in 1744 de tribale leider Ibn Saoed en de religieuze leider Ibn Wahhab een alliantie. Met deze overeenkomst kwam de politieke en militaire macht in handen van Ibn Saoed, en de religieuze ondersteuning van die macht kwam bij Ibn Wahhab te liggen. De legitimiteit van de huidige koninklijke familie van Saoedi-Arabië, de Al Saoed, is tot op de dag van vandaag gebaseerd op deze afspraak. Hoewel de Al Saoed de afgelopen decennia steeds meer religieuze macht hebben weggehaald bij deze officiële religieuze geleerden, die vaak ideologische of zelfs biologische afstammelingen van Ibn Wahhab zijn, blijven deze religieuze geleerden een belangrijke hoeksteen van de legitimiteit van de Al Saoed.

Toen in 1932 olie werd ontdekt in Saoedi-Arabië ontstond er al snel een proces van urbanisatie. Mensen verhuisden van het platteland naar de stad om te gaan werken in de olie-industrie. Er werd meer verdiend, en het niet-werken van vrouwen werd een teken van welvaart en daarmee een statussymbool. Tot op de dag van vandaag is gendersegregatie in Saoedi-Arabië vooral een verschijnsel in de welgesteldere lagen van de bevolking.

pas tientallen jaren later op gang komen. Religieuze leiders lagen eerst dwars, maar gingen akkoord met meisjesonderwijs toen de koning meisjesonderwijs presenteerde als een manier om meisjes te vormen tot goede islamitische moeders. Vanaf toen stuurden ook gezinnen uit lagere klassen hun dochters naar school. Het onderwijs was in de jaren 60 daarmee de eerste openbare plek waar vrouwen en mannen gescheiden werden.

Dit staatsproject van meisjesonderwijs presenteerde de staat als progressief en modern en meisjesonderwijs werd een teken van moderniteit, vooruitgang, hervorming en nationale ontwikkeling op een manier die paste bij de Saoedische islamitische identiteit. De staat deed een belofte van een moderniteit die paste bij het land en de islam.

De explosieve economische en materiële ontwikkeling dankzij de olieopbrengsten bereikte een hoogtepunt in de jaren 70. Snelle sociale ontwikkelingen in deze periode veranderden de sociale structuur van Saoedi-Arabië. In 1979 belegerde een groep militanten de Grote Moskee in Mekka omdat zij boos waren over het tempo van de snelle veranderingen, en uit protest tegen de koning die volgens hen corrupt en immoreel was omdat hij de snelle ontwikkelingen op met name het sociale vlak niet was tegengegaan. De rebellen vonden dat de koninklijke familie haar legitimiteit als de leiders van het land had verspeeld. Het incident deed de Saoedische monarchie op haar grondvesten schudden. Tot op de dag van vandaag is dit het meest bedreigende moment geweest voor de Saoedische koninklijke familie en de eenheid van het land.

De moskee werd ontzet, maar het resultaat van het turbulente incident was een toenemend conservatisme en toegeefelijkheid aan behoudende religieuzen, als manier voor het koningshuis om zijn positie veilig te stellen. Dit conservatisme richtte zich voornamelijk op vrouwen als cultuurdragers. Alleen zij zouden de vroomheid van de natie kunnen waarborgen. Zo werd kleding conservatiever en vrouwen verdwenen van de televisie en uit bijvoorbeeld zwembaden.


Het zou tot na de millenniumwissel duren tot de Saoedische overheid naast

**Geschiedenis van Koeweit**

In Koeweit verliep de geschiedenis anders. Daar sloot de Al Sabah familie in 1752 een overeenkomst met de belangrijkste koopmansfamilies van het land. De Al Sabah zouden de politieke leiders worden en de handelsfamilies zouden zich richten op de import en export van het land. De rolverdeling was dus helder: de politieke leiders claimen geen religieuze autoriteit en hun leiderschap is niet gebaseerd op religieuze legitimité. Deze ongeschreven overeenkomst tussen de politieke Al Sabah familie en de belangrijkste handelsfamilies vormt tot op de dag van vandaag de basis van de staatsinrichting van Koeweit.

Koeweit heeft een lange historie als handelsnatie. Het gaf het land een open karakter en naar buiten gerichte blik, en veel respondenten zien daarin een verklaring voor het vele mengen tussen vrouwen en mannen. Vrouwen runden het huishouden, de familiaaangelegenheden en de financiën gedurende de lange afwezigheid van mannen die aan het parelduiken of op handelsreis waren. De belangrijkste handelswaar was hout, koffie, paarden en parels. Het waren vooral de vrouwen uit de lagere klassen die werkten, gemengd met mannen, om het familie-inkomen aan te vullen. Vrouwen van de gegoede klasse konden het zich veroorloven meer teruggetrokken levens te leiden.

In 1938 werd olie ontdekt in Koeweit. Koeweit was in die tijd nog een Brits protectoraat. Koeweit en Groot-Brittannië richtten de Kuwait Oil Company op om de olie te exploiteren. In de periode na de ontdekking van de olie stimuleerde de koninklijke familie vooral stedelijke ontwikkeling in combinatie met sociale hervormingen en vooruitgang. De koninklijke familie presenteerde deze modernisering aan haar bevolking in tegenstelling tot het arme Koeweit van voor de olie. In dat verhaal was de koninklijke familie degene die in staat was om het
land uit de armoede te trekken en het volk te laten profiteren van de oliewelvaart. In deze periode, vooral vanaf de jaren 50, stond het breken met oude gewoonten en tradities centraal. Ook ontwikkelingen op het vlak van vrouwenemancipatie, overgewaaid vanuit Egypte, resoneerden in Koeweit en werden opgepakt door Koeweitse mannen en vrouwen.

In 1961 werd Koeweit onafhankelijk van de Britten. Het Arabisch nationalisme werd de dominante politieke ideologie. Het Arabisch nationalisme was een pan-Arabische nationalistische golf die bloeide in veel Arabische landen na onafhankelijkheid van de koloniale overheersers. Het werd gezien als een ideologie die waardigheid, eenheid en rechtvaardigheid zou brengen. Ook in Koeweit werd het Arabisch nationalism populair.

Tegelijkertijd waren de jaren 60 in Koeweit een periode van ongekende economische groei. De overheid besloot dat het daarom nodig was dat ook vrouwen (meer) gingen werken. Dit overheidsbeleid van feminisering van de arbeidsmarkt leidde echter tot kritiek van islamisten die beargumenteerden dat het misschien wel noodzakelijk was voor vrouwen om te werken, maar dan alleen in posities waarin zij niet zouden samenwerken met mannen. Het parlement werd gedomineerd door liberalen en seculieren en deze roep om segregatie kreeg onvoldoende steun.

Toch wonnen de islamisten in de jaren 60 geleidelijk aan invloed. Zoals tegen elke politieke stroming die te sterk leek te worden wilde de overheid tegenwicht bieden aan de groeiende invloed van de Arabisch nationalisten. Daarom begon zij de islamitische identiteit van Koeweit te benadrukken. Tegen die achtergrond ontstond begin jaren 60 tot in de jaren 70 op staatsniveau de opvatting van een islamitische erfgoed moderniteit: een moderniteit die geworteld was in het lokale islamitische verleden en erfgoed. De focus lag nu op een islamitisch verleden in combinatie met de toekomst. Erfgoed werd gepositioneerd als relevant voor vandaag de dag. Zo liet de overheid nieuwe gebouwen bouwen in de stijl van islamitische architectuur.

In de late jaren 70 en de jaren 80 vond de koninklijke familie het gelegen om zich nog openlijker met islam te identificeren. Met haar beleid van ‘vernieuwing’, zoals de koninklijke familie het noemde, stond zij verandering en modernisering voor. Maar die modernisering diende wel plaats te vinden binnen islamitische, Arabische grenzen. Dit beleid betekende een herleving van islam als manier om de maatschappij te hervormen en te zuiveren. Twee islamitische vrouwenorganisaties kregen een licentie van de overheid en ook de staat richtte zijn eigen vrouwenorganisatie op. Ook werd er veel geschreven over islam en vrouwenrechten. In het parlement werden bijvoorbeeld wetsveranderingen op
het vlak van vrouwenstemrecht voorgesteld. De Al Sabah waren terughoudend
over segregatie, en lieten dat over aan de private sector.

Tijdens de Golfoorlog van 1990-91 namen vrouwen een actieve en belangrijke
rol op zich in het verzet. Na de bevrijding ontvouwde de strijd tussen secularisten
en islamisten zich opnieuw. Dit gebeurde onder andere op het gendervlak,
bijvoorbeeld over kleding van vrouwen, de positie van vrouwen op de arbeidsmarkt
en in het onderwijssysteem en wederom vrouwenkiesrecht. Vrouwen vonden dat
ze door de belangrijke rol die ze hadden gespeeld in het verzet tegen de Irakese
bezetting nu stemrecht en andere politieke rechten zouden moeten kunnen
krijgen. Ontwikkelingen zoals de gendersegregatie van de nieuwe campus van
de Universiteit van Koeweit werden onder andere doorgezet om de invloed van
islamisten op andere vlakken in te dammen.

Vandaag de dag zijn er wel sommige banken die een aparte vrouwenverdieping
hebben, of een pretpark met een alleen-voor-vrouwen-middag. Echter, dit zijn
allemaal commerciële initiatieven vanuit de private sector. Van staatswege
werken alleen enkele ministeries gesegegeerd. Moderniteit wordt nu vorm
gegeven rondom de Koeweitse identiteit en eigenheid. Daarbij wordt een beroep
gedaan op islam als onderdeel van die identiteit, in plaats van als vroomheid. Dat
betekent dat islam een cultureel referentiepunt is, en gezien wordt als deel van
de wortels van het land en de bevolking, in plaats van als godsdienstige devotie.

**Respondenten**

Het belangrijkste in mijn onderzoek zijn mijn Saoedische en Koeweitse
gesprekspartners. Ik wilde weten waarom vrouwen het wel of juist niet met
deze scheiding eens zijn, met andere woorden: of ze zich meer thuis voelen bij
mengen of bij segregatie. Ook was ik nieuwsgierig naar wat hun mening ons zou
c kunnen vertellen over de richting waarin Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit zich zullen
ontwikkelen. Willen vrouwen zelf gescheiden van mannen werken op kantoor?
Of willen ze juist samen met mannen in de collegezaal kunnen zitten? Vinden
vrouwen dat hun land verwesterst, of juist dat het modern wordt? En wat is dan
het verschil tussen die twee?

Uit mijn onderzoek blijkt dat verwestersing en moderniteit door deze
vrouwen niet gezien wordt als hetzelfde. Maar hoe ziet die moderniteit er dan wél
uit, als deze niet westers is? Is de moderniteit van mijn respondenten anders dan
de seculiere, westerse moderniteit zoals we die in Europa kennen? Hoe verhoudt
zich dat tot islam, en de verhoudingen tussen mannen en vrouwen?

Om dit te weten te komen sprak ik tussen 2010 en 2013 met 118 Saoedische en
Koeweitse vrouwen, van Reem de activist tot journaliste Mona, van kunstenares
Manal tot zakenvrouw Nailah, en van kinderboekenwinkeleigenaresse Maali tot basketballspeelster Lina. Alle vrouwen die ik sprak waren activistes die zich inzetten voor verandering van de positie van de vrouw, islamitisch prediksters die het geloof uitleggen aan andere vrouwen, of zakenvrouwen met een eigen bedrijf. Deze drie categorieën vrouwen geven een breed beeld van de maatschappij, namelijk het religieuze veld (islamitische prediksters), het maatschappelijk middenveld (activistes) en het economische veld (zakenvrouwen). Ook koos ik voor deze categorieën vrouwen omdat ik verwachtte dat deze vrouwen per categorie anders tegen gendersegregatie aan zouden kijken. Ik vermoedde dat activistes en zakenvrouwen tégen segregatie zouden zijn en de islamitische prediksters vóór. Dat bleek genuanceerder te liggen.

Naast de gesprekken die ik had met vrouwen hield ik 24 context interviews met bijvoorbeeld een architecte, een kunstenaar, en een archeoloog om meer inzicht te krijgen in de maatschappelijke context. Ook ging ik in beide landen op bezoek bij onder andere religieuze studiegroepjes van vrouwen, vrouwenuniversiteiten en cafés waar alleen maar vrouwen mogen komen. Op die manier kwam ik erachter hoe gendersegregatie er in de praktijk uit ziet, hoe het werkt, en welke impact het heeft op het dagelijks leven.

In de twee landen wordt er op een heel verschillende manier gedacht over gendersegregatie.

Saoedische respondenten
In Saoedi-Arabië vroeg ik vrouwen hoe zij dachten over gescheiden werkplekken en kantoren en over gesegregeerde universiteiten. Ook vroeg ik ze naar ziekenhuizen, want verrassend genoeg zijn ziekenhuizen in het koninkrijk gemengd. Je zou misschien verwachten dat door de lichamelijkheid van medisch onderzoek juist ziekenhuizen gesegregeerd zouden zijn. Maar niets is minder waar. Zo onderzoeken vrouwelijke artsen mannelijke patiënten – maar dan wel altijd met een verpleegster in de behandelkamer zodat de arts nooit alleen is met een man. Niet iedereen is het eens met het mengen in ziekenhuizen. Zo was er tijdens de periode van mijn onderzoek een petitie in het land om ziekenhuizen die alleen voor vrouwen toegankelijk zijn voor elkaar te krijgen. Maar praktische obstakels zoals te weinig vrouwelijke artsen staan zo'n project in de weg.

Het eerste wat ik erg interessant vond om te merken is dat mijn Saoedische gesprekspartners niet spraken over ‘segregatie’ maar juist over ‘mengen’. Segregatie is de norm in Saoedi-Arabië, en op zich is het dus niet zo gek dat zij juist spreken over datgene wat afwijkt van de norm: het mengen.

Ik ontdekte bij mijn respondenten drie verschillende zienswijzen ten
Publiekssamenvatting

aanzien van mengen. Een deel van de vrouwen die ik sprak bleek het mengen te rechtvaardigen. Ze waren niet zozeer voor of tegen mengen, maar accepteerden het door de omstandigheden. Bijvoorbeeld omdat het mengen noodzakelijk was en écht niet anders kon (zoals in een ziekenhuis). Een ander deel van mijn respondenten was ronduit tegen mengen. Deze vrouwen geloven dat mannen en vrouwen niet zouden moeten mengen in publieke ruimtes, en dat vrouwen deel zouden moeten nemen aan het publieke leven in publieke ruimtes die enkel voor vrouwen toegankelijk zijn. Andere respondenten gaven de voorkeur aan mengen. Zij willen liever dat mannen en vrouwen in publieke ruimtes kunnen mengen dan dat ze gescheiden zijn van elkaar.

Ik vond het opvallend dat (in tegenstelling tot wat ik verwachtte) de drie manieren van tegen mengen aankijken dwars door de drie categorieën vrouwen die ik interviewde (activistes, islamitische prediksters en zakenvrouwen) heen liepen. Het was dus niet zo dat bijvoorbeeld alle islamitische prediksters tegen mengen en vóór segregatie zijn of alle activistes vóór mengen en tegen segregatie. Daarbij zijn respondenten niet altijd consistent door de drie casussen heen. Zo kan bijvoorbeeld een islamitische predikster mengen tussen vrouwen en mannen in ziekenhuizen rechtvaardigen, bijvoorbeeld omdat er een duidelijke noodzaak is om te mengen omdat ziekenhuizen nu eenmaal gemengd zijn, maar is zij tegelijkertijd tegen mengen op universiteiten omdat het geen enkel probleem is voor een vrouw om een diploma te behalen aan een van de vrouwenuniversiteiten in het land. Dit laat ons zien dat houdingen van respondenten ten opzichte van mengen genuanceerd en ambigu zijn in plaats van zwart-wit en rigide.

De gesprekken over mengen en segregatie waren een mooie manier om ideeën over vooruitgang, ontwikkeling, progressie en moderniteit te bekijken. Sommige vrouwen vinden namelijk dat alleen het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen een modern verschijnsel is. Anderen zeggen dat juist alleen segregatie onderdeel van moderniteit is. Echter, de grootste verrassing in mijn onderzoek in Saoedi-Arabië was dat de meeste vrouwen vonden dat én gendersegregatie én het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen deel moet zijn van het moderne Saoedi-Arabië. Bijvoorbeeld zodat vrouwen die niet willen of mogen mengen toch kunnen werken of studeren en zichzelf kunnen ontwikkelen - maar dan dus wel gescheiden van mannen.

en vroom land hoort te zijn. Moderniteit heeft dus een materiële en spirituele dimensie. Ik vond het heel interessant om te ontdekken dat de meerderheid van de vrouwen die ik interviewde een onderscheid maakte tussen verwestersing en moderniteit. Verwestersing is volgens deze respondenten het kopiëren-en-plakken van wat er dan ook uit Amerika of Europa overwaait: eten, kleding, manier van spreken en moraliteit.

Fayza, een activiste uit Riyad, vertelde me het volgende:

“Verwestersing is het overnemen van een andere cultuur. Stel je voor. Ik ga naar Nederland, en aan de oppervlakte ziet het er allemaal heel leuk uit. En zonder dat ik de cultuur echt begrijp neem ik deze over. Maar die cultuur is geen deel van mijn wortels. Dat is geen modernisering. Dat is verwestersing. Modernisering is dat je je eigen cultuur neemt en die van binnenuit ontwikkelt. Ik denk dat dat veel krachtiger is, want dan raak je je eigen cultuur niet kwijt. Dat zeg ik als Saoedische, en als moslima. Als ik net als een westerling word verlies ik mijn identiteit. Moderniteit is niet het eigendom van het Westen.”

De meeste van mijn respondenten verwierpen ook het secularisme van de staat die zij als alomtegenwoordig zien in het Westen. Maar een paar vrouwen die ik sprak waren het eens met een scheiding van ‘moskee en staat’. Zayneb, een andere activiste uit Riyad, zei tegen mij:

“Wij zijn moslims. Dus islam is deel van alles. Ook van de overheid. Religie informeert de beslissingen. En ik heb daar geen probleem mee. Maar de officiële religieuze geleerden, die zouden wel buiten de overheid moeten staan. Zodat ze niet zeggen wat de politieke leiders willen dat ze zeggen.”

Zayneb’s uitspraak is fascinerend omdat zij twee dingen uit elkaar haalt. Weliswaar vindt ze dat islam de politiek mag beïnvloeden, maar dat mag vervolgens niet gebeuren door de officiële religieuze geleerden. Volgens haar zeggen die namelijk toch alleen maar wat de overheid wil. In feite haalt ze daarmee heel veel zeggenschap weg bij die officiële religieuze geleerden, en ondergraait ze daarmee het fundament van de Saoedische staat. Namelijk dat de officiële religieuze geleerden de politieke leiders legitimeren.

Sommige respondenten, zoals de activiste Hanan uit Jeddah, trekken deze religieuze dimensie nog verder door. Zij zei tegen mij:
“Natuurlijk is islam deel van moderniteit. Het idee van moderniteit zonder religie is een onwetend idee.”

Hoewel de meeste respondenten aangeven dat islam een onderdeel van moderniteit is, gaat het voor Hanan een stap verder en is moderniteit zonder religie onwetend. Daarmee doelt zij ook op de periode van onwetendheid voor de komst van de islam. Het woord ‘onwetendheid’ is hier een beladen term, omdat het wijst naar het donker waarin de mensheid verkeerde voordat het licht werd aangedaan door de komst van de islam.

Ten slotte associeerden veel respondenten verwestersing met de mogelijkheid van een relatie voorafgaand of buiten het huwelijk, met ‘morele degeneratie’ en met een angst voor het verliezen van normen en waarden. Layla, een zakenvrouw uit Jeddah, zei:

“Voor mij is verwestersing... weet je, in het Westen kunnen vrouwen relaties hebben voor het huwelijk. En voor hen persoonlijk en voor de maatschappij is dat prima, dat wordt geaccepteerd. Maar ik... ik wil niet dat dit in mijn land gebeurt. Dat is helemaal niet modern. Het past niet bij Saoedi-Arabië. Echt, ik accepteer dat niet en ik wil het niet. Het is een slechte invloed voor mijn kinderen. Ik wil niet dat mijn kinderen verwestersen. Ik accepteer niet dat mijn zoon een vriendin heeft en met haar uitgaat en seks met haar heeft. Dat is onacceptabel.”

De vrouwen met wie ik sprak maken dus duidelijk een onderscheid tussen verwestersing en moderniteit. Zij doen dit op basis van ideeën over islam, genderverhoudingen en de richting waarin zij vinden dat de natie en het land zich zou moeten ontwikkelen. In het geval van Saoedi-Arabië wordt moderniteit gezien als fundamenteel anders dan verwestersing. Moderniteit bestaat uit vooruitgang, die mag plaatsvinden vanuit het eigen karakter van het land en binnen de grenzen van islamitische vroomheid. Respondenten vertellen dat zij islam als inherent onderdeel zien van de Saoedische moderniteit. In deze moderniteit willen zij wél terugzien wat zij labelen als het goede van het Westen, bijvoorbeeld technologische ontwikkeling, gezondheidszorg, onderwijs en schone straten. Wat zij niet terug willen zien in deze moderniteit is wat zij labelen als het morele verval dat het Westen kent in het publieke leven: vrouwen en mannen die zomaar met elkaar kunnen afspreken, buitenechtelijke relaties, echtscheidingen en seksuele
intimidatie. Zowel segregatie als mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen kunnen deel zijn van die Saoedische islamitische moderniteit.

Koeweitse respondenten

In tegenstelling tot Saoedi-Arabië is in Koeweit het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen de normaliteit. Er zijn wel wat alleen-voor-vrouwen publieke plekken, zoals sportscholen waar alleen vrouwen mogen komen, een vrouwenverdieping in een bank en een wekelijkse vrouwenstranddag. Maar al met al is mengen de norm.

Koeweitse vrouwen die ik sprak vertelden mij dan ook iets anders over segregatie dan Saoedische vrouwen. Ik interviewde vrouwen in dezelfde drie categorieën (activistes, islamitische prediksters en zakenvrouwen) als in Saoedi-Arabië. Ik vroeg ze hoe ze denken over sommige van de gescheiden plekken die er wél zijn in het land. We spraken vooral over cabines voor getrouwde stellen met kinderen of groepjes vrouwen in sommige restaurants², over de afgescheiden plek voor vrouwen tijdens een demonstratie tegen de overheid in 2013, en over de nieuwe campus van de universiteit van Koeweit die een apart mannen- en vrouwendeel krijgt. Juist omdat gesegregeerde plekken vrij zeldzaam zijn in Koeweit was ik benieuwd naar hoe vrouwen daarover dachten. Vinden ze dat een wenselijke ontwikkeling, of juist niet?

Ik ontdekte drie verschillende manieren om tegen segregatie aan te kijken onder de vrouwen die ik sprak. Een deel van mijn respondenten is tegen gendersegregatie. Zij zien segregatie als iets wat niet past bij de Koeweitse identiteit en de geschiedenis van het land. Daarnaast is er een praktisch argument: ze zijn het gewoon gewend om te mengen met mannen. Een enkeling gelooft dat gendersegregatie homoseksualiteit stimuleert en daarom verkeerd is. Slechts enkelken refereren aan islam en zeggen dat segregatie onislamitisch is.

Een ander deel van de vrouwen die ik sprak rechtvaardigt gendersegregatie. Ze waren niet zozeer voor of tegen segregatie, maar accepteerden het. Deze respondenten zeggen dat er nu eenmaal vrouwen zijn die niet willen of mogen mengen en dat ook deze vrouwen de kans moeten hebben deel te nemen aan het Koeweitse publieke leven. Tegelijkertijd vinden zij niet dat er meer gesegeerde

---

² Restaurants in de conservatieve wijk Jahra in Koeweit Stad hebben naast een open, gemengd zitgedeelte ook cabines. Cabines zijn zitruimtes van één tafel, die afgesloten kunnen worden door een deur, scherm of doek. Zo kunnen gezinnen meer privacy hebben wanneer ze uit eten gaan en kunnen vrouwen die een niqab of burqa dragen deze af doen en comfortabel eten en drinken. Groepjes vrouwen die apart willen zitten vinden cabines ook fijn. Deze vrouwen ervaren dan meer privacy, en ze kunnen hun niqab of burqa af doen, iets wat ze niet willen in het gemengde deel van het restaurant.
plekken zouden moeten komen in Koeweit. Ook zijn er vrouwen die uit principe voor segregatie zijn maar tegelijkertijd zeggen dat het geld dat de overheid kwijt zou zijn aan een gescheiden infrastructuur beter aan andere dingen besteed kan worden.

Ten slotte zijn sommige vrouwen vóór gendersegregatie. Deze vrouwen willen niet mengen en vinden het fijn dat er gescheiden plekken zijn voor vrouwen.

Net als in Saoedi-Arabië waren respondenten niet altijd consistent in de drie casussen. Zo kan een zakenvrouw tegen de gendersegregatie van de nieuwe Shadadiya campus van de Universiteit van Koeweit zijn, maar voor segregatie bij de demonstratie, omdat wegens de aard van een demonstratie vrouwen en mannen fysiek veel dichterbij elkaar zijn – en dat het dus beter is twee aparte delen te hebben om lastigvallen te voorkomen. In Koeweit zijn de houdingen van respondenten ten opzichte van gendersegregatie dus genuanceerd en ambigu in plaats van zwart-wit en rigide.

Ook in Koeweit waren de gesprekken over mengen en segregatie een mooie manier om ideeën over vooruitgang, ontwikkeling, progressie en moderniteit te bekijken. De meerderheid van de Koeweitse vrouwen die ik interviewde vond dat juist mengen en niet segregatie deel moet zijn van het moderne Koeweit. Geen van mijn respondenten vond segregatie modern. Ik vond het interessant om erachter te komen dat de vrouwen die ik sprak het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen als ‘normaal’ benoemden, en niet als specifiek modern. Zoals Ghada, een activist uit Kuwait City het zei:

“Mengen is normaal. Het is hoe we de dingen altijd al hebben gedaan in Koeweit.”

Toch maken ook Koeweitse vrouwen een onderscheid tussen verwestersing en moderniteit. Moderniteit bestaat volgens hen uit technologische vooruitgang, goede infrastructuur zoals gebouwen en wegen, de laatste gadgets, maar ook goed onderwijs en verstandig gebruik van de natuurlijke bronnen van het land. Ook het vasthouden van moraliteit word genoemd als een belangrijk onderdeel van moderniteit. Zoals Hayat, een activist tegen mij zei:

“Moderniteit is het hebben van een goed leven, en het gebruik van technologie om je leven nóg beter te maken. Het hebben van een goed onderwijsysteem, gezondheidszorg en infrastructuur. Het hebben van goede communicatie met anderen en mijn rechten en plichten kunnen halen en voldoen. Dát is wat moderniteit is.”
Tegelijkertijd benadrukt de meerderheid van de respondenten dat moderniteit inhoudt dat je het verleden achterlaat en de toekomst omarmt. Maar het betekent niet dat je op die weg van voortuitgang je eigen identiteit uit het oog moet verliezen. Juist het tegenovergestelde. Islamitisch predikster Nawal legde mij dat als volgt uit:

“Als ik simpelweg een andere plek kopieer, een andere cultuur, dan vind ik dat niet modern. Ik heb nooit in Japan gewoond, maar ik stel me zo voor dat de Japanners een balans hebben gevonden tussen het nieuwe integreren en het respecteren van hun eigen tradities. Dus ik hoop dat mijn land allerlei nieuwe dingen kan omarmen, zoals technologie, maar met respect voor onze eigenheid. Met respect en begrip voor onze religie; ik ben blij met onze religie.”

Moderniteit ligt dus in het integreren van nieuwe ontwikkelingen in Koeweits bestaande identiteit. Deel van die identiteit is islam, en het geloof moet volgens de Koeweitse vrouwen die ik sprak dan ook onderdeel zijn van het moderne Koeweit. Maar dan wel als deel van die Koeweitse nationale identiteit: van de wortels van het land en de bevolking, als cultureel referentiepunt, en als deel van hoe waarden en normen worden vormgegeven. En dus niet per se islam als religiositeit of als vroomheid (zoals in Saoedi-Arabië het geval is).

**Conclusies**

Het is misschien moeilijk voor te stellen dat alle vrouwen het met de volgende conclusies eens zijn. Ik spreek dan ook niet over de Saoedische of de Koeweitse vrouw, maar over de 118 vrouwen die ik heb geïnterviewd en gevolgd. Toch vallen er zeker een aantal globale conclusies te trekken.

In beide landen zien we dat deze vrouwen een moderniteit benoemen en claimen die anders is dan een westerse moderniteit. Namelijk, in Saoedi-Arabië leeft de wens naar een moderniteit waarin sowel materiële vooruitgang als islam en religieuze vroomheid een rol spelen. Volgens mijn respondenten kunnen zowel segregatie als mengen daar deel van zijn.

In Koeweit wensen gesprekspartners juist een moderniteit waarin materiële vooruitgang en islam als deel van hun Koeweitse identiteit een plek hebben. Daarmee bedoelen ze dat islam een cultureel referentiepunt is, dat het deel is van de wortels van het land en van individuen, en dat de waarden en normen mede vormgeeft. En dus niet per se islam als religiositeit of als vroomheid. Het
mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen wordt daarbij benoemd als ‘normaal’ in plaats van als specifiek deel van moderniteit.

In tegenstelling tot wat misschien verwacht zou worden, blijkt uit mijn onderzoek dat vooral in Saoedi-Arabië lang niet alle vrouwen die ik sprak tegen segregatie zijn. Integendeel: slechts een kleine minderheid van de vrouwen die ik sprak gaf de expliciete voorkeur aan mengen. Toch wordt zowel mengen als segregatie gezien als deel van het moderne Saoedi-Arabië. In Koeweit daarentegen wordt het mengen juist benoemd als normaal en niet specifiek als iets moderns, omdat het door de geschiedenis heen de manier van publieke omgang is geweest tussen mannen en vrouwen.

De belangrijkste conclusie uit mijn onderzoek is dan ook dat modernisering prima kan plaatsvinden zonder verwestersing. Zoals twee loten zich heel anders kunnen ontwikkelen als ze aan de oost- of aan de westzijde van een boom groeien, maar toch onderdeel blijven van dezelfde boom, zo kan ook een samenleving moderniteit anders vormgeven wanneer het ligt op de oostelijke of westelijke helft van de wereldbol.

Maatschappelijke relevantie
Graag plaats ik hier nog een aantal opmerkingen over de maatschappelijke relevantie van mijn onderzoek en over wat we in bredere zin uit mijn onderzoek kunnen leren.

De resultaten van mijn onderzoek zetten traditionele machtsverhoudingen in westers denken op z’n kop. De gangbare opvatting dat religie (met name islam) en moderniteit niet samen zouden kunnen gaan wordt tegengesproken door mijn respondenten. Ook het idee dat onze seculiere opvatting van moderniteit elders op de wereld omarmd zou moeten worden, willen ‘zij’ ook ‘modern’ worden, komt in mijn onderzoek op scherp te staan. Deze populaire opvattingen binnen het westere ‘vooruitgangsdenken’ stroken niet met mijn onderzoeksresultaten, die juist laten zien dat islam in ieder geval door mijn respondenten wordt gezien als inherent onderdeel van (en soms zelfs als voorwaardelijk aan) een moderniteit, hetzij als vroomheid, hetzij als deel van identiteit. Wat we hieruit mee kunnen nemen is dat religieus-zijn en modern-zijn prima samen kunnen gaan en elkaar zeker niet uitsluiten, in ieder geval niet in de beleving van mijn respondenten. Daarmee bevragen we ons eigen paradigma van waaruit we naar Saoedi-Arabië en Koeweit kijken, en naar de positie van vrouwen in deze landen. Dit helpt ons een beter en meer kloppend inzicht te krijgen in de realiteit van vrouwenleven in deze landen.

De vrouwen die ik heb geïnterviewd claimen moderniteit en geven daar een
eigen invulling aan. Die invulling is context-gerelateerd. Daarmee bedoel ik dat de invulling die respondenten geven aan moderniteit verbonden is aan de historische ontwikkelingen in hun landen en hun eigen verhouding daartoe en interpretatie daarvan. Mijn respondenten laten ons daarmee zien dat moderniteit als term, concept, en ervaren realiteit niet is voorbehouden aan het Westen alleen. We zouden dus kunnen proberen voorbij onze eigen terminologie en zienswijze te kijken en open te staan voor eigen formuleringen, in dit geval van de vrouwen met wie ik heb gesproken, en daar ook waarde aan hechten.

Sommige van de Koeweitse en Saoedische vrouwen in mijn onderzoek stellen gendersegregatie niet ter discussie, maar omarmen het juist. Daar we zelf in een gemengde maatschappij leven is dit wellicht wat lastig in te voelen. Maar ook wanneer vrouwen zich uitspreken vóór segregatie geven zij blijk van hun eigen agentschap (agency) en handelingsbekwaamheid, hoe zeer dit wellicht ook in gaat tegen onze eigen opvattingen over hoe vrouwen en mannen met elkaar om zouden moeten gaan in het openbare leven. Mijn voorstel is om met enig inlevingsvermogen en begrip te kijken naar oplossingen die mijn respondenten hebben gevonden. Dit vraagt van meniggeen om haar of zijn innerlijke beeld van deze vrouwen actief bij te stellen. Het gaat dus om het serieus nemen van de ervaringen van een ander, en hun manier van naar de wereld kijken, die wellicht voor veel mensen in het Westen moeilijk te begrijpen is maar net zo waar is als de eigen waarheid.

Tegelijkertijd is het belangrijk deze inzichten over moderniteit en de publieke participatie van de vrouw in met name Saoedi-Arabië niet te verwarren met een andere ontwikkeling in het Saoedi-Arabië van vandaag, die in het Westen regelmatig geïnterpreteerd wordt als modernisering. Zo worden autorijden door vrouwen, het toestaan van het bezoeken van voetbalwedstrijden door vrouwen, en het versoepelen van kledingvoorschriften voor vrouwen gepresenteerd door het koningshuis en geïnterpreteerd door sommigen in het Westen als modernisering. Zonder iets af te willen doen aan de reële positieve effecten die deze veranderingen hebben voor Saoedische vrouwen en hun enthousiaste reacties op deze ontwikkelingen is dit mijns inziens ook deel van een slimme PR-campagne van het Saoedische bewind om zichzelf in een iets zachter daglicht te stellen. In die campagne staan vrouwen centraal – mede omdat men zich zeer bewust is van de interesse die onder velen in het Westen leeft voor de positie van de Saoedische vrouw. Maar wat hiermee óók gebeurt is het consolideren van een autocratisch bewind. Door de bevolking négé wat meer maatschappelijke ademruimte te geven, en met diezelfde nieuwe ontwikkelingen het Westen te doen geloven dat het land moderniseert, verstevigt tegelijkertijd de grip van het
Publiekssamenvatting

koningshuis op het land en de bevolking. Want in de tussentijd wordt de politieke ruimte steeds kleiner, worden politieke en religieuze dissidenten zonder pardon opgepakt en veroordeeld, vinden ernstige mensenrechtenschendingen plaats, en komt er geen einde aan de oorlog in Jemen.

Interessant genoeg werd gendersegregatie tijdens de periode dat ik mijn onderzoek deed óók een hot topic in Nederland en in het Verenigd Koninkrijk (VK). In het VK gingen de discussies hierover vooral over gendergesegregeerde activiteiten op universiteiten. In Nederland waren er debatten over onder andere alleen-voor-vrouwen zwemlessen in Maassluis en over gendergesegregeerde lezingen door islamitische Nederlands-Marokkaanse predikers aan de Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam. In een uitzending van het programma Nieuwsuur werden deze lezingen, waarbij de meeste mannen voorin en vrouwen achterin de collegezaal zaten, door de presentator van het programma geframed als “een pleidooi tegen de moderniteit” (Nieuwsuur 2017). De onderliggende veronderstelling lijkt hier te zijn dat integratie en deze manier van het bijwonen van een lezing (geen strikte gendersegregatie in aparte ruimtes maar een pragmatische variant) in de hedendaagse maatschappij niet samengaan. Echter, wat wellicht veel meer centraal staat in deze manier van bijwonen van een lezing is niet de vraag hoe men zich kan afscheiden of segregeren van de samenleving, maar juist de vraag hoe men kan participeren als moslim. Die en aanverwante vragen daadwerkelijk stellen, en daadwerkelijk luisteren naar de antwoorden kan ons veel meer werkelijk inzicht bieden in de reële beleving van deze studenten.

Met mijn onderzoek, en met name met deze publiekssamenvatting, hoop ik een duidelijk en veelkleurig beeld te hebben gegeven van de opvattingen van Saoedische en Koeweitse vrouwen zelf over hun publieke participatie. Ook is het mijn hoop dat de historische contexten die ik daarvoor geschetst heb inzicht geven in het hoe en waarom wat betreft het ontstaan van alleen-voor-vrouwen publieke ruimtes (met name Saoedi-Arabië) en het mengen tussen mannen en vrouwen (met name Koeweit). Verder hoop ik dat mijn onderzoek inzicht heeft geboden in verschillende manieren van kijken naar en claimen van moderniteit (versus verwestersing). Maar bovenal hoop ik dat ik u, lezer, met plezier mee heb kunnen nemen in deze fascinerende wereld.
About the author

Annemarie van Geel was born in Breda, the Netherlands, on 23 June 1981. She graduated from secondary school in Breda in 1999 and in Peterborough, United Kingdom (UK) in 2000. She completed her undergraduate degree at University College Utrecht (UCU), the international Honours College of Utrecht University. She majored in Social Science at UCU while completing her minor in Religious Studies at Cambridge University’s Faculty of Divinity (UK). She graduated from UCU in 2003 with a cum laude Bachelor of Arts degree in Social Science. After graduation, Annemarie went on to complete her Master of Philosophy (MPhil) degree in International Relations at Cambridge University, focusing on Middle East politics.

Subsequently, she studied Arabic for several years at Utrecht University, the American University in Cairo and Birzeit University in Palestine, as well as with private tutors in Damascus (Syria) and San’a’ (Yemen). During this time, she also undertook voluntary work, travelled the region extensively and in Yemen conducted a research project on the position of women.

Prior to embarking on her PhD fellowship, Annemarie worked for the Clingendael Institute, Amnesty International and the Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World (ISIM). In 2009, she launched her own business, Faraasha Middle East Training & Advisory, working as an independent trainer and consultant on Middle East affairs in the public and private sectors.

Annemarie started her PhD research in 2011. During her research, she was a Visiting Fellow at the King Faisal Institute for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, and a Visiting Researcher at Kuwait University’s Faculty of Arts. She also developed and taught undergraduate courses at UCU and Webster University Leiden and delivered guest lectures at other universities in the Netherlands and abroad. Additionally, she very much enjoys disseminating her research to a broader audience outside of academia, for example in the media.

Annemarie continued her Faraasha Middle East Training & Advisory work alongside her PhD research and has gone back to this full-time after completion of her dissertation. Based on her research for her dissertation, she is writing a non-fiction book for a broad audience on the position of women in Saudi Arabia.
Saudi Arabia is among the most gender segregated countries in the world. In Kuwait, on the other hand, women and men generally mix freely in public spaces. This book shows how different historical processes have led to these present-day contrasting situations. Based on intensive fieldwork, ‘For Women Only’ looks at Saudi and Kuwaiti women’s own experiences with gender segregation and mixing in public spaces. It charts whether or not they agree with these practices in their countries, and why. The book shows that women’s arguments are connected to ideas about Islam, gender and the nation, and the way in which they believe their countries should develop. ‘For Women Only’ demonstrates that debates about gender segregation and mixing are intimately connected to ideas about progress, development, and ‘modernity’. It explains how Saudi and Kuwaiti women view ‘modernity’ as different from ‘Westernisation’, and what this means for the position of women in present-day Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Annemarie van Geel completed her PhD dissertation at the Radboud University Nijmegen, the Netherlands. During her PhD fellowship she developed and taught various undergraduate courses at University College Utrecht and Webster University Leiden. Additionally, she very much enjoyed disseminating her research in the media. Annemarie is currently working as an independent trainer and consultant on Middle East affairs in the public and private sectors.