

Research

Implications of Harassment Policies on Economic Development: Gender-Inclusive Policy Recommendations from Sunken Voices and Emotions

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: This study explores how anti-harassment policies can reduce inequalities and foster gender-inclusive policymaking in Kuwait, linking these measures to broader economic and social outcomes. It investigates women's experiences of Workplace Sexual Harassment (WSH), the perceived effectiveness of existing policies, and barriers to reporting such incidents.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY/APPROACH: This research has followed a qualitative approach where semi-structured interviews conducted with a purposively selected group of female employees across various sectors. The study employs a four-construct framework to capture lived experiences, offering insights into the emotional, social, and professional impacts of WSH and related policy effectiveness.

FINDINGS: The findings indicate that reporting mechanisms remain in their infancy, with weak implementation of existing laws. Cultural taboos, fear of retaliation, and hierarchical constraints discourage reporting. Alarming, many women who reported harassment lost their jobs shortly afterward.

CITATION: Diab-Bahman, R. and Marafie, D. (2025): Implications of Harassment Policies on Economic Development: Gender-inclusive policy recommendations from sunken voices and emotions. *World Journal of Women and Sustainable Development (WJWSD)*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp.43-56.

RECEIVED: 1 November 2025 / **REVISED:** 4 November 2025 / **ACCEPTED:** 5 November 2025 / **PUBLISHED:** 16 November 2025

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ORIGINALITY/VALUE: This is a unique study that examines Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in workplaces, highlighting the need for inclusive, enforceable, and impartial anti-harassment frameworks in Kuwait.

KEYWORDS: *Anti-Harassment Policies; Workplace Sexual Harassment; Gender-Based Violence; Hierarchical Constraints.*

INTRODUCTION

“In fact, reporting such incidents may bring upon more negative consequences for the victim than the incident itself.” (anonymous/victim of WSH)

Workplace anti-harassment policies are integral to promoting gender inclusion and enhancing economic development. In the context of Kuwait, where gender inclusion in the labour force remains a critical issue, understanding the economic significance of supportive workplace environments becomes essential. Anti-harassment policies not only create a safer and more inclusive workplace but also contribute to broader economic goals by improving employee morale, productivity, and retention (OECD, 2020). These policies can act as key enablers of a competitive and sustainable economy, as diverse workplaces tend to be more innovative, efficient, and adaptable (Kaufman *et al.*, 2021). However, despite the growing awareness of sexual harassment and its detrimental effects on the workforce, Kuwait’s legal framework has yet to fully address or define workplace harassment, which creates a significant gap in gender equality efforts (Spector *et al.*, 2014). Further, Kuwait has been plagued with a steady and significant increase in Gender Based Violence (GBV), further implicating the reporting initiatives and threatening the livelihoods of the victims – particularly females (Al Bahrani, 2023).

Recent studies also show that the prevalence of workplace harassment varies across global regions. For instance, physical violence and sexual harassment are most common in Anglo regions, while nonphysical violence and bullying are reported at higher rates in the Middle East (Spector *et al.*, 2014). Such regional differences reflect the interplay of patriarchy, power dynamics, and socio-cultural influences that shape the experiences of both perpetrators and victims of harassment. Workplace harassment significantly impacts emotional well-being, reducing motivation and overall productivity, which, in turn, impedes the progress of the nation. Women who report such forms of corruption often face retaliation, with some losing their jobs within six weeks of reporting incidents. These challenges highlight the urgent need for a comprehensive national workplace policy on harassment and systematic reporting mechanisms. More distinctly, violence in its various forms, particularly workplace harassment against women, has been on the rise throughout Kuwait (Kaufman *et al.*, 2021).

This paper seeks to investigate the role of workplace anti-harassment policies in promoting gender inclusion in policy making and enhancing economic development within the specific context of Kuwait. It examines the current situation by interviewing a few brave women who were

willing to (anonymously) come forward and share their stories of WSH in the workplace and the consequences which followed. As well, the legal and policy landscape within Kuwait is discussed, meanwhile the paper concludes by evaluating the economic significance of supportive workplace environments and provides recommendations for enhancing gender equality and economic growth in the country. Our study contributes to the grand debate of existing literature by highlighting the stories of women from within an Arab context, where most incidents of WSH are not reported due to safety and cultural concerns (Kuwait Times, 2023). It also provides solid evidence which can be used to enhance fact-based decision making to ensure sustainable policy development.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Kuwait's Legal Framework

Kuwaiti labor laws and the Constitution do not include specific provisions addressing sexual harassment in the workplace. Instead, these issues are addressed by second-tier regulatory bodies and criminal law. Under the Penal Code (Law No. 16 of 1960), a generic clause criminalizes acts of sexual harassment involving coercion, threats, or deception, with penalties of up to 15 years' imprisonment if the perpetrator is found guilty. Furthermore, Ministerial Decision No. 177 of 2021 prohibits all forms of sexual harassment in workplaces, including harassment through modern technology. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry contributes to workplace harassment policies by issuing guidelines grounded in criminal law. However, these third-tier guidelines are not necessarily legally binding and apply only to private sector organizations. Their implementation is left to the ethical discretion of individual companies. These guidelines reiterate the criminal law's general stance against harassment without providing specific definitions or rules for enforcement, leaving significant gaps in legal protections. Despite these measures, sexual harassment is a pervasive issue in Kuwaiti workplaces. Many women have reported experiencing harassment but refrain from filing complaints due to cultural and societal pressures, fear of retaliation, and stigma. This reluctance is particularly troubling when the harassment is perpetrated by serial offenders, such as colleagues or supervisors, causing significant psychological and professional stress for victims (Kuwait Times, 2023).

Recent studies also emphasize the link between gender-inclusive policies and enhanced economic performance. For instance, companies that actively promote gender equality and implement effective anti-harassment measures show higher levels of productivity and profitability. In the case of Kuwait, where societal and cultural factors shape the professional experiences of women, workplace policies addressing harassment are not only crucial for ensuring women's rights but also for driving the nation's economic development (World Bank Group, 2018). These policies have the potential to reduce workplace absenteeism, improve job satisfaction, and increase overall organizational performance by mitigating the negative effects of harassment on employees' mental and physical health.

Defining Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment can be subjective and might be measured in feelings of discomfort. Some inappropriate workplace conduct can be subtle and include things like unwanted touching that the harasser tries to disguise as an accident or innuendos. Experts agree that sexual harassment is a type of sex discrimination (Kuwait Times, 2023). It is not recommended to withdraw from the workplace where the harassment occurred, but rather to stand firm and act confidently in front of the harassing manager or colleague, because you are the victim, not the harasser. However, it is often the case that women will very unlikely report such cases due to the conservative nature of the Arabian culture.

In a recent study, bullying and harassment were measured through four core questions in research by (Britt *et al.*, 2021), further enriching the understanding of these behaviours. Definitions of sexual harassment also vary across contexts. Britz (2007) categorizes sexual harassment into verbal, non-verbal, and physical forms. Verbal harassment includes sexual innuendoes, suggestive comments, jokes, propositions, or threats. Non-verbal harassment entails suggestive objects or pictures, graphic commentary, leering, whistling, or obscene gestures. Physical harassment involves unwanted physical contact such as touching, pinching, or coerced sexual intercourse (Britz, 2007).

Despite clear definitions and global recognition of the issue, research on sexual harassment remains incomplete, particularly in understanding the intersection of gender, power dynamics, and workplace harassment. As (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012) highlight, the absence of rigorous qualitative and longitudinal studies has limited scholarly insight into the persistence and complexity of these issues. Furthermore, sexual harassment often lacks adequate legal and institutional attention in many jurisdictions, impeding efforts to create safe and equitable workplaces. Also, the scarcity of data, particularly from the Middle East, makes it nearly impossible to properly examine the topic. Scholars speculate that this is heavily due to cultural norms, which makes reporting such instances a social nightmare for Arab females (Sharafeddine *et al.*, 2024).

The 'Arabs'

The term Middle East, derived from a European perspective, is used to generalise the Arab states. Some use it to refer to the area bounded by the Mediterranean Sea, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Taurus as well as the Zagros Mountains, while others consider it to include the Egyptian, Arabian, and Gulf States. It is dominated by Arab countries, which are composed mainly of Muslim nations such as Iran, Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Afghanistan, and Malaysia, alongside parts of sub-Saharan nations such as Mali, Chad, and Senegal, as well as the Arabian Gulf countries, among others. Arabic is the official and native language for the Middle Eastern states, with Arabs being the dominant ethnic group; however, there are other groups such as Berbers, Nubians, and Armenians (McLaughlin *et al.*, 2012).

According to the WGBH Educational Foundation (established in 2019) (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2021), the Middle East comprises many differing cultures because of variations in history, religion, ethnic identity, nationality, and language, alongside other factors that have shaped those cultures. With the many countries approximately 20 that make up the Middle East, many of them have diverse religions and various ethno-linguistic groups. The Middle East is also home to multiple languages (three major language families), which reflects the ethnic diversity present in this region. The WGBH Educational Foundation also alludes that many of these spoken languages originated from three families: Semitic (Arabic, Hebrew, and Aramaic), Indo-European (Kurdish, Persian, Armenian), and Turkic (Turkish, Azeri) (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2021).

Cultural Implications

In many Arab societies, cultural factors exacerbate the challenges women face when reporting WSH, often leading to negative consequences for the victims. The stigma attached to discussing or reporting sexual harassment is deeply rooted in social norms that place significant emphasis on preserving family honour and societal reputation (Diab-Bahman & Al-Enzi, 2021). As a result, women who do report such incidents risk being blamed for their own victimization. This victim-blaming mentality often suggests that the woman's behaviour, attire, or presence in certain environments is to blame for the harassment, rather than holding the perpetrator accountable. Such cultural attitudes contribute to a pervasive environment of silence and inaction, with many women fearing they will be labelled as troublemakers or “loose” if they come forward (El Feki *et al.*, 2017).

In countries like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where traditional gender roles are commonly practiced, women are often held to strict standards of behaviour with complete disregard to double standards when compared to their male counterparts. Oftentimes, religion is quickly (and conveniently) used to support such claims of double standards, even when the situation calls for a much more complex understanding (Diab-Bahman, 2021). If a woman reports harassment, she may be accused of provoking the incident, leading to societal judgment, which can extend to her family. This judgment can result in personal and professional consequences, including damaged reputations, strained relationships, even honour killing, and job loss (Al Rashidi *et al.*, 2021). In some cases, employers may not take the claim seriously or may retaliate against the victim by creating an uncomfortable work environment, further marginalizing her and discouraging others from coming forward (El Feki *et al.*, 2017). These factors create a cycle of silence and fear that ultimately perpetuates the issue of harassment and prevents any sustainable progress toward gender equality in the workplace.

The situation is further compounded by the lack of proper support structures, such as dedicated reporting channels or female mentors in leadership positions. In workplaces where male dominance is the norm, female employees often feel isolated and unsupported, making it difficult to address harassment or pursue complaints. As well, it has been previously found that even female leaders

oftentimes insinuate that the harassed is largely to blame and may be taking part or enjoying the harassment. Moreover, the absence of legal safeguards or the inadequacy of existing laws in many Arab countries contributes to this issue, as victims feel there is little recourse for justice, leaving them with few options other than to endure the harassment quietly (Marcelline & Marcia, 2014). Ultimately, this culture of silence and victim-blaming not only harms individual women but also complicates the broader societal shift towards greater gender equality.

Economic Implications

According to the extant literature, economic implications of workplace harassment can be profound. Studies have shown that violence against women, including workplace harassment, incurs substantial economic costs due to lost productivity, absenteeism, and increased turnover. In Kuwait, the sociocultural status of women presents additional challenges which further hinder women's participation in socioeconomic development. Implementing robust anti-harassment policies can mitigate some of these challenges by providing a safer and more supportive work environment, thereby encouraging gender-inclusive and fair policies (Numhauser-Henning, 2022).

Furthermore, there are broader economic benefits of gender inclusion as research indicates that increasing women's participation in the workforce can significantly boost national economic growth. Also, it has been found that organizations that proactively address workplace harassment through comprehensive policies and training programs demonstrate a commitment to gender equality, pouting into national goals (Marcelline & Marcia, 2014). Such measures not only protect employees but also promote a culture of respect and inclusion, leading to improved job satisfaction and retention. In the context of Kuwait and the MENA region, implementing effective anti-harassment policies is a critical step toward realizing these economic gains and is essential for driving sustainable economic development.

METHODOLOGY

In accordance with the literature review above, exploring the local women's perspectives on sexual harassment policies requires an investigation of what is currently happening to females who have experienced WSH in the workplace and the implications of reporting such incidents, and to what degree the experience impacted them on a personal level. As well, we investigate the current workplace policies from within organizations as well as generic external policies put in place by the government. In order to satisfy these objectives, this research sets out to explore the sentiments of females in the workplace who have been exposed to WSH in the workplace. It does so through a qualitative study with 12 victims of WSH (females who have answered the call to be anonymously interviewed from both public and private sector) in Kuwait. The development of the initial research instrument, the interview guide/open ended questions, uses the logic of a

restricted phenomenological approach in order to serve its purpose of gaining feedback from a first-person point of view. This selected approach is meant to elucidate the experience as lived by a group of people. (El Feki *et al.*, 2017) notes that a phenomenological study is one that focuses on the description of what people are doing and how they experience what they experience. The sampling is done through purposeful sampling. This philosophy relies on the evidence gathered and puts forth the true picture and nature of society. The quantitative research approach will be adopted, as it will help in predictions and estimations with the utilization of the numerical facts gathered through surveys. Further, this is exploratory research that aims to assess a conveniently selected sample of female employees in Kuwait and their awareness of the topic of WSH. Such data is necessary to support the development and design of related policies in the different work areas in order to minimize stress and unhealthy work environment conditions that may result from such abuse. Also, it provides a basis for fact-based policy making as WSH incidents are rarely reported due to circumstantial factors, leading to less gender-inclusive involvement in sustainable policy development.

Selection of Participants

Participants were selected through purposeful sampling, which is a dominant strategy in qualitative research. El Feki *et al.* (2017) assert that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lie in selecting information-rich cases for in-depth study. In total, 12 brave women who have experienced WSH in different fields were chosen, all of whom were personal contacts. All of the participants are from within the local community in Kuwait and work in either the private or public sector. Table 1 shows information about the demographic profile of the interviewees.

Table 1: Interviewee Information

Code	Sector	Industry	Age (years)
W1	Public	Planning	20-30
W2	Public	Information	40-50
W3	Private	Education	40-50
W4	Private	Education	30-40
W5	NGO	Finance	40-50
W6	Public	Planning	30-40
W7	Private	Telecom	30-40
W8	Private	Real Estate	30-40
W9	Private	Education	50+
W10	Private	Finance	30-40
W11	NGO	Humanitarian	50+
W12	Public	Humanitarian	50+

The development of the initial research instrument uses the logic of a restricted phenomenological approach in order to serve its purpose of gaining feedback from a first-person point of view. Gioia (2021) asserts that in a phenomenological study, there is a need to conduct an analysis of the experience so that the basic elements of the experience that are common to members of a specific group can be identified. A phenomenological study usually expects the researcher to derive meaningful research questions that relate to the lived experience of the individual (Gioia, 2021). In order to conduct this, Gioia (2021) states that it must be done through face-to-face interviews with individuals who have experienced the phenomenon.

In relevance to the literature review, the interview questions were designed based on four main constructs as noted below:

- 1) Effectiveness of WSH policy knowledge & enforcement
- 2) Details of incident(s) (frequency/type/duration) & emotional impact
- 3) Barriers & implications to reporting WSH
- 4) Recommendations

Interview Guide

Accordingly, interviews are divided into five parts. The first part is composed of four demographic questions about the sample, such as age, job title, and sector. The second part is composed of questions about the effectiveness of policies within that particular workplace. The third part asks questions about their personal experience and the emotional impact of WSH, whilst the fourth part asks about barriers and implications which they faced when reporting (or attempting to report) such incidents. Finally, we ask about the participants' input on what could be done to improve WSH policies in the future.

The open-ended, semi-structured interview questions are designed to measure workplace harassment and policy effectiveness based on the works of Britt *et al.* (2021) and Spector *et al.* (2014). The questions are split into four main constructs, focusing on the effectiveness of WSH policy knowledge and enforcement, details of incidents (including frequency, type, and duration) and emotional impact, and barriers to reporting WSH. The semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with qualifying and willing respondents who have been exposed to WSH in the past in their workplace. These interviews aim to explore employee experiences and perceptions in greater depth. The development of the interview guide questions within the scope of their relevant research constructs is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Research Constructs

CONSTRUCT	SOURCE	QUESTIONS
Policy Effectiveness	(Spector <i>et al.</i> , 2014)	5
WSH Details/Emotional Impact	(Al Bahrani, 2023)	2
Reporting Barriers	(Britt <i>et al.</i> 2021)	4
Recommendations	(Al Rashidi <i>et al.</i> , 2021)	2

Analysis

As defined by Spector *et al.* (2014), research evokes original and valuable knowledge through the commencement of a systematic process with which the users of the research are gratified, where the research methodology explains the process of conducting the research. A descriptive research design assessed by thematic analysis was adopted in the study, as it explores and explains the characteristics of an individual, group or circumstances. It is an efficient technique for deriving answers for the identified problems.

Using the thematic analysis approach and, in particular, Gioia's Methodology (Gioia, 2021), which shows how the data collected is linked to the insights gained, the data was organized into first-order concepts and second-order themes. In filtering the 1st-order analysis, quotes from the interviewees are codified to look for similarities and differences in order to label data into concepts. Then, the 2nd-order analysis is conducted to relate the established concepts from the first order into theory using emergent themes. Upon examining the qualitative data collected, some key themes became clear. Speaking to the selected interviewees, it revealed key insight on some of the main perceptions, thoughts and obstacles to what people understand. A summary of the key findings reiterated frequently by these women is depicted in table 3.

Table 3: Summary of Findings

Construct (Second Order)	Findings (First-Order)
Effectiveness of WSH Policy Knowledge and Enforcement	- Microaggressions are not part of any workplace KPI and usually go undetected. - Most women did not know their WSH policy; no employee handbook was provided in most cases. - Only one woman in the banking industry (regulated by internal/external bodies) received a handbook with limited WSH content and no consequences specified. - There were no clear procedures for reporting WSH incidents. - Reports were primarily verbal, made to HR personnel (usually female but not senior HR managers). - HR responses were dismissive, and some insinuated that the women instigated the incidents. - Legal consultation yielded unclear answers, with lawyers demanding evidence.

<i>Construct (Second Order)</i>	<i>Findings (First-Order)</i>
Details of Incidents & Emotional Impact	- Not all aggressors held senior positions. - All women confronted their aggressors and repeatedly asked them to stop but to no avail. - Women blocked aggressors on all platforms available to them, but no organizational measures were implemented to monitor or restrict such platforms. - Majority of incidents were caused by one harasser and lasted for more than 3 months - Majority endured harassment at least 3 times a week through different communications/ gestures from the aggressor. - Most felt several negative sentiments, using words to describe their feelings as embarrassed, confused, scared, agitated, anxious, and non-stop worry. - All females felt unsafe at workplace and outside of workplace - All females reported not being able to concentrate at work even when the predator was not around
Barriers to Reporting Harassment	- Reporting was done verbally to female HR managers or representatives, none of whom were known to be senior decision-makers. - HR did not take reports seriously and often suggested avoiding the aggressor, implying shared blame. - Only one woman confided in her significant other, who was a non-Arab partner, reflecting cultural and social constraints. - 7 of 12 women interviewed made formal claims, with more than one incident report submitted. - Within 4–8 weeks of making formal claims, 6 out of these 7 women were fired without formal reasons, violating legal requirements. - Dismissals after formal reporting discouraged other women from taking similar actions or even testifying with others who have reported incidents. - Majority of women who asked other women who they know who have been through similar experiences by the same person/workplace to testify REFUSED to do so out of fear of society/culture/family/termination.

RECOMMENDATIONS

WSH policies require substantial improvements to ensure a more comprehensive and enforceable framework. In Kuwait, the Ministry of Commerce and the Public Authority for Manpower issued a decision in September 2021 banning sexual harassment and discrimination in the private sector workplace by U.S. Department of States in the year 2021. However, in practice, these policies are not being effectively implemented, and significant cultural barriers continue to prevent women from reporting workplace harassment. Social stigma, fear of retaliation, and workplace hierarchies discourage victims from coming forward, limiting the impact of existing legal protections (Marcelline & Marcia, 2014). Expanding the definition of WSH to include psychological harassment and other non-physical forms of misconduct is necessary, along with mandating third-party reporting mechanisms to ensure impartial investigations. Research highlights that the development of workplace sexual harassment policies is increasingly critical in the Middle East, as gender diversity in the workforce grows (Marcelline & Marcia, 2014).

Government oversight remains crucial, as fluctuations in reported incidents often reflect systemic workplace issues rather than actual declines in harassment cases. While official policies prohibit retaliation, many employees remain hesitant to report incidents due to the absence of effective enforcement and societal pressures discouraging public disclosure (Al-Munajjed, 2010). Employers must be legally obligated to provide clear and accessible reporting mechanisms, supported by independent oversight bodies to ensure transparency. Additionally, ensuring protection against retaliation is critical, as fear of professional and social repercussions discourages victims from seeking justice. Studies indicate that strong legal safeguards against retaliation lead to meaningful improvements in workplace safety and employee trust in institutional frameworks (Marcelline, & Marcia, 2014). Moreover, internal investigations should be documented and accessible to affected employees, promoting confidence in the system. Without stronger enforcement mechanisms and cultural shifts, workplace harassment policies will remain largely symbolic, failing to provide meaningful protection for employees.

LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

Significant research gaps remain in relation to WSH, particularly in the Arab world where plenty of double-standards between genders exist. Due to the dearth of research on the matter, as well as the limited and scarce data available due to numerous complications of reporting such sensitive incidents, there is only limited evidence that the research that is being conducted is being used to influence policy/practice on the issue. It is clear from the findings that underreporting remains a major challenge, hindering a comprehensive understanding of the issue. This study further highlights that anti-harassment policies play a crucial role in advancing inclusive work environments, yet their effectiveness is often compromised by cultural taboos and organizational reluctance to address WSH openly. The lack of robust data collection and victim-centered research in the MENA region exacerbates these challenges, making it difficult to assess the long-term economic and social impacts of WSH. Future research could benefit from incorporating qualitative insights from a bigger pool of victims across diverse sectors, contributing to the broader discourse on workplace safety, emotional well-being, and sustainable gender-inclusive economic growth in Kuwait.

CONCLUSION

This study highlights the critical role of workplace sexual harassment (WSH) policies in promoting gender inclusion and enhancing economic participation in Kuwait. Findings reveal that existing policies are insufficiently enforced, with cultural barriers, social stigma, and organizational reluctance discouraging reporting. Women experience significant emotional, professional, and social consequences due to WSH, while current legal and institutional frameworks often fail to

provide effective protection. Strengthening policy implementation, expanding definitions to include non-physical harassment, and introducing independent reporting mechanisms are essential for creating safer and more inclusive workplaces. Addressing these gaps not only protects employees but also contributes to broader economic and social development, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive, culturally sensitive, and enforceable WSH policies in Kuwait.

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BIOGRAPHY



Dr Diab-Bahman is an Assistant Dean (School of Business) and sustainability specialist from Kuwait, with a research focus on SDG attainment & social policy. She has authored four books which explore differences amongst cultures and their impact on sustainability in various fields. She is also a newspaper columnist, with a dedicated column specializing in addressing the need for change towards sustainable development. She has recently received the prestigious ‘Sustainability Pioneer’ award from the WASD, has been recognized as a Forbes Middle East ‘Top Mentor’, and received the ‘Pandemic Hero’ award for her academic & social efforts in Kuwait. She is also a top female researcher in the realm of social sciences in Kuwait, leading with one of the country’s highest indexed scores. As well, Dr Diab-Bahman has a proven track record as a proactive member of society, partaking in many volunteer projects and NGOs which aim at empowering women and youth.



Dalal Marafie has worked in the World Bank Group for 7 years as a project analyst (private sector development consultant). She has developed an extensive network of professional contacts within the business and government circles. Her dedication to these venues has resulted in the state of Kuwait becoming one of the top 10 countries in reforms measured by the Doing Business Report 2020. Currently, Dalal is working in the World Bank as a consultant for enhancing the business environment in Kuwait and the GCC countries. Her work has had a great impact on Kuwait and supported the Ministry of Commerce and Kuwait Direct investment promotion authority.