

SOCIAL REPRODUCTION AND CITIZENSHIP ASSETS IN KUWAIT

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Introduction

Social reproduction is comprised of three main components: (1) the biological reproduction of bodies; (2) the care associated with bodies, in terms of childcare, eldercare, healthcare, education, etc.; and (3) the reproduction of national and/or cultural identity and values.[1] Across each component, the household is the primary unit for social reproduction, and women's labor is the propellant.

I. Social Reproduction in Kuwait: A Brief History

In the case of Kuwait, the social reproductive roles of the household are clearly linked to citizenship and enshrined in the Constitution (1962). There it is specified that the family, and not the individual, is the unit of society.[2] Social reproduction is further mediated by the presence of a large population of foreign women. Primarily domestic workers, these women are essential to the reproduction of Kuwaiti households while facing severe restrictions on their own capacity to form a family or household. In 2024, the foreign domestic worker population was estimated at 789,000, with women representing 423,000 of the total.[3]

Like many other nations in the Middle East and North Africa, Kuwait is presently attempting to spur higher levels of female economic participation. And it is succeeding: In 2023, the labor force participation rate of females was 51%, more than twice the 20% average seen across the Arab World.[4] Unfortunately, however, these gains in participation have not been accompanied with changes to the patriarchal and gendered hierarchies which structure the relationship between productive and reproductive labor.[5] Indeed, in Kuwait, strong financial flows linked to citizenship rights continue to bind the society in ways that may serve to privilege women's social reproductive labor above income-generating work outside the household.

Such financial flows are paid through what my co-author Charles Dannreuther and I have conceptualized as citizenship rent.[6] Citizenship rent is comprised of "the financial flows granted through citizenship that move from the state to the citizen in the form of entitlements, employment, and access to state-subsidized goods, labor, and business opportunities." Materially, these rents – be they allocated through public sector wages, entitlements, or subsidies – amounted to USD 75 billion in 2020/2021. The figure represented 71% of the national budget for the year in question.[7]

Historically, citizenship rents constituted one of the key social foundations upon which Kuwait rapidly expanded its national wealth. Purchasing political stability and social peace, citizenship rents lubricated circuits of oil extraction, processing, and exportation. It was also these rents, however, that helped entrench the social and cultural hierarchies that were in place at the time of oil's discovery in Kuwait.

- [1] Bakker, I. (2007). *Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy*. *New Political Economy*, 12(4), 541-556.
- [2] This is not specific to Kuwait but a common formulation in the Gulf states.
- [3] Staff Writer, "Domestic workers make up 26.9% of Kuwait's expat workforce", *Arab Times* (September 2, 2024).
- [4] World Bank Data, *Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15-64) (modeled ILO estimate)*, 2023. Accessed January 7, 2025.
- [5] Peterson, V. S. (2018). *Intimacy, informalization and intersecting inequalities: Tracing the linkages*. *Labour & Industry: A journal of the social and economic relations of work*, 28(2), 130-145; Arslan, A. (2021). *Relations of production and social reproduction, the state and the everyday: Women's labour in Turkey*. *Review of International Political Economy*, 1-23.
- [6] Dannreuther, C., & Langworthy, M. (2024). *Rentier capitalism, social reproduction, and the limits of liberalism: Mapping gendered asset value in Kuwait*. *New Political Economy*.
- [7] Palier, B., Azoulay, R., & Louer, L. (2021). *Kuwait's Welfare System: Description, assessment and proposals for reform*.

II. Gendered Biases of Social Reproduction and the Law

The legacy of early decisions around citizenship rents have proven remarkably lasting. Their patriarchal contents are visible in a number of areas. Via legal and administrative arrangements, Kuwaiti women's claims to citizenship rents remain conditional on adherence to gendered subordination. Salient of course are restrictions on intergenerational transmission of citizenship rights: In Kuwait, women cannot independently convey citizenship (or claims on citizenship rents) to their children. Important as well are provisions enforcing the male headship and guardianship of the household. Government payments for marriage, housing and children, for instance, are primarily allocated to the male household head. Also factoring in is the state's strict regulation of care labor and management of a care workforce comprised predominantly of female migrants. Through all these mechanisms, income in Kuwait is partially decoupled, via citizenship rents, from activity in the labor market. Inasmuch as rent access for Kuwaiti women (and their children) hinges upon marriage to a Kuwaiti man, these mechanisms also dictate that the welfare of women is tied to the acceptance of social and cultural hierarchies.

Through citizenship rents, the Kuwaiti state shows that it still committed to ensconcing a patriarchal society structured upon dual cleavages: the differential rights of men and women and the differential rights of citizens and non-citizens. And while the regulation of citizenship rent flows may allow the Kuwaiti state to limit the dilution of claims to national oil wealth, it does through entrenching a system of social reproduction that discriminates on the basis of gender and country of birth.

The consequences of the state's discriminatory logics are significant and wide-ranging. Most immediately, the state's policies work at cross purposes to efforts aimed at removing gendered biases from the labor market. They also facilitate the exploitation of foreign domestic workers. Lastly, as recent policy changes to Kuwaiti Nationality Laws show, the state's discriminatory policies is leaving many Kuwaiti women in a position of profound legal peril.

III. A Patriarchal Crackdown on Citizenship in 2024

Through Article 8 of 1959's Nationality Law, foreign women were allowed to become Kuwaiti citizens through marriage. However, over ensuing years, the law was amended to attach time parameters to citizenship acquisition via marriage. As of 1966, the threshold that needed to be cleared was five years or marriage. In 1987, the mark was extended to fifteen years, after which point a married women would qualify for citizenship by ministerial decree.

In August 2024, the Kuwaiti National Assembly dismissed legal precedent and proceeded to abolish existing guidelines for acquiring citizenship. The legislature also retroactively nullified all citizenships granted by ministerial decree before commencing an extensive citizenship review campaign. According to the Ministry of Interior, this campaign resulted in the cancellation of over 35,000 citizenships between August 29, 2024, and 16 January 2025.

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■ [8] Staff writer, "Kuwait to revoke citizenship of 5835 people." *Middle East Monitor*, January 18, 2025.

Upon the passage of Decree 116/2024 on December 23, 2024[9], the Assembly's crackdown on naturalization began to expressly target those made citizens through marriage. Because Kuwaiti women cannot extend their citizenship to their spouse or children[10], the Decree Law is de facto aimed at foreign women married to Kuwaiti men.[11] Like the National Assembly's August intervention, Decree 116/2024 too contains retroactive application. As such, it threatens to denaturalize any woman who acquired citizenship through marriage after 1987. To date, more than 32,000 women have been subjected to citizenship reviews under the Decree Law's terms.

Per Decree no.17 of 1959, revocation of naturalized citizenship is predicated on the determination that the individual might 'seriously undermine the economic or social structure of the State.'[12] Though this would seem a high bar to clear, the government's interpretation that (acquired) citizenship "rests on loyalty and belonging, not personal benefits and gains" leaves revocation an open possibility for many. This became painfully apparent during the first month of 2025, a time during which an estimated 2,500 individuals were stripped of their citizenship, over 99% of whom were women. In many cases, the women affected by Decree 116/2024 are being rendered stateless, without any nationality. Clearly, marriage is no longer an avenue to acquiring or retaining citizenship.

IV. A Rent Control Logic at Work

The policy changes introduced since August of last year illustrate a clear attempt by the Kuwaiti government to protect the value of citizenship – and restrict the flow of citizenship rent. Given the dominant hierarchies in the country, it is unsurprising that these efforts have sought to protect the asset value of citizenship through targeting foreign-born women. That the democratically elected National Assembly body is leading the campaign reveals the primary function of this legislature: to protect and circumscribe access to the nation's financial wealth.

The losses being afflicted on thousands of women at our present juncture speak to the extreme verticality of Kuwait's social hierarchies. Structured upon gender and migratory status, these hierarchies function to minimize the costs that the state and its natural-born citizens must foot for social reproductive labor. Through policy, social reproductive tasks are outsourced to different categories of foreign women, none of whom can make significant claims upon the state. Domestic workers imported from the east must accept small wages and limited rights. The foreign spouses of Kuwaiti men, even if naturalized, must accept legal precarity and contingent access to citizenship assets.

■ [8] Staff writer, "Kuwait to revoke citizenship of 5835 people." *Middle East Monitor*, January 18, 2025.

[9] This Decree modified the original Amiri Decree No. 15 of 1959.

[10] As set out in the 1959 Law, Article 2.

[11] Note that the children of mixed marriages, provided the father is Kuwaiti, do retain citizenship rights under Decree 116.

[12] Abbas, A. (2025). "Kuwait Committee to Revoke Another 5800 Citizenships." *IMI Daily* January 18, 2025.

V. Conclusions and Policy Recommendations

Recent upheavals around citizenship rights in Kuwait can be best understood through the perspective of citizenship rent. The concept allows us to see how denaturalization reflects the gendered nature of the country's rentier capitalism—and how the asset values provided by citizenship are underpinned by the labor of certain classes of women.

Lawmakers have said that women stripped of their citizenship via Decree 116/2024 will retain their jobs and pensions (where applicable). Be that as it may, it should be clear that what is at stake centers upon the matrix of social reproduction, citizenship and the distribution of national wealth. The Decree has little concern for the biological or caring labor women have performed: Their children, as the children of Kuwaiti men, after all, are to remain citizens. Clearly, the law is not about limiting economic participation, either, as the women impacted are allowed to retain their jobs. Rather, at issue here is the protection of the asset value of citizenship through minimizing potential claimants to the asset that is citizenship. In essence, an attempt to ensure the social reproduction of a nation and its identity and values by excluding many of those responsible for it.

A few policy recommendations can be made to address the gendered and patriarchal hierarchies of Kuwait's citizenship rent flows. First, Kuwaiti women must be granted the right to pass on citizenship to their spouses and children. Doing so will equalize the citizenship asset values which accrue to men and women, respectively. Operationally, enacting such a change will require amendments to Article 2 of the Nationality Law. Kuwaiti women and external rights organizations have lobbied for changes to the law for many years without success. Nevertheless, this is where the fight must continue to be waged going forward. Second, the government should immediately revoke Decree 116/2024. In doing so, it will once again stand behind the family as the critical entity in the populace and uphold citizenships granted under the full-terms of the law for nearly forty years. This would signal that family values, and not citizenship asset values, drive state policy.

More than two dozen countries around the world limit women's citizenship rights, including Qatar, Lebanon, and Somalia.[1] Their examples indicate that the phenomenon of patriarchal rent flows is far from unique to Kuwait or the wider family of oil rentiers. Rather, we are witnessing a broader trend affecting all asset dominated economies.

In this context, citizenship rent provides an integral point of access for understanding the role governments play in determining the value and distribution of national wealth. Citizenship rent may also represent one of the key causal linkages connecting wealth inequality to authoritarianism. As inequality has intensified across the world, rightwing populists have found political success through pitches centered on the protection of national assets and the buttressing of traditional social hierarchies. This is observable in democratic and non-democratic polities alike.[2] In focusing in on social reproduction, we can better understand the causes and effects of the right-wing's rising tide. We can also better understand why the sustainability of rentier capitalism rests on such fragile and discriminatory grounds.

[13] Batha, E (2023). "The 'sexist' nationality laws that leave children stateless." Context June 13, 2023.

[14] Richard Wike, Moira Fagan and Laura Clancy "Global Elections in 2024: What We Learned in a Year of Political Disruption" December 11, 2024.