Cyberfeminist resistance against hegemonic and anti-feminism discourses: The case of Kuwait

Abstract

How do Kuwaiti cyberfeminists resist hegemonic and anti-feminism discourses? This paper seeks to answer this question by exploring the contestation between Kuwaiti feminists and their Islamist opponents on Twitter. Viewing cyberfeminism as constructive resistance, I argue that feminism is done and made online by various female actors who do not necessarily self-identify as feminists or activists, constructively and continuously producing new discourses and subjectivities, establishing a salient embodied feminist presence that can trigger a counter-feminist mobilization. In a Twitter Space by the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs on December 23 2021, an anti-feminist discourse portrayed Kuwaiti feminists as alienated from religion and society whilst dismissing violence against women as insignificant. In response, Kuwaiti cyberfeminists attempted to reclaim feminism by framing it within local and national frames through a Twitter hashtag. Resorting to a reverse discourse strategy had some shortcomings, including reinforcing hegemonic discourses and heightening the binary of 'us', feminists, versus 'them', Islamists, which could have been an inevitable outcome of an antagonistic narrative. The findings of this article add to the existing literature on cyberfeminism by exploring a rather understudied context and offering significant insights into feminists' online resistance in socially conservative contexts.

Keywords: Cyberfeminism, constructive resistance, anti-feminism, reverse discourse, Kuwait.

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ملخص

كيف تقاوم النسويات الكويتيات المنخرطات في النسوية الألكترونية الخطابات المهيمنة والمناهضة للنسوية؟ تسعى هذه الورقة للإجابة على هذا السؤال من خلال البحث في النزاع بين النسويات الكويتيات وخصومهن الإسلاميين على تطبيق تويتر. من خلال النظر الى النسوية الألكترونية على أنها مقاومة بناءة ، أناقش كيف أن العديد من الفاعلات يشاركن في عملية تكوين أوممارسة

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النسوية في الفضاء الألكتروني من دون أن يُعرّفن أنفسهن بالضرورةعلى أنهن نسويات أو ناشطات، وهنّ بذلك يقمنّ بتشكيل خطاباتٍ وذواتٍ جديدة على نحوٍ بناء ومستمر، مما يؤسس حضورًا نسويًا متجسدًا بارزًا يمكن أن يُناهَض من خلال تعبئة مضادة للنسوية. في مساحة نقاش على تطبيق تويتر نظمتها وزارة الأوقاف والشؤون الإسلامية الكويتية في 23 ديسمبر 2021 ، صّور خطاب مناهض للنسوية النسويات الكويتيات على أنهن مغتربات عن الدين والمجتمع، في حين قلل من أهمية العنف ضد المرأة، ورداً على ذلك ، حاولت النسويات الكويتيات إستعادة لفظة النسوية عن طريق تأطيرها ضمن الأطر المحلية والوطنية من خلال هاشتاغ على تويتر. كان اللجوء إلى إستراتيجية الخطاب العكسي فيه بعض أوجه القصور، بما في ذلك تعزيز الخطابات المهيمنة وإبراز ثنائية "نحن"، النسويات، مقابل الإسلاميين "هم" ، والتي كان من الممكن أن تكون نتيجة حتمية لسرديةٍ معادية. تقدم إستنتاجات هذا البحث إضافةً الى الأدبيات الحالية حول النسوية الإلكترونية من خلال إستكشاف سياقٍ غير مدروس إلى حدٍ ما وتطرح رؤى مهمة حول مقاومة النسويات عبر الإنترنت في سياقات محافظة إجتماعيًا.

Introduction

This paper is motivated by the following question: how do Kuwaiti feminists resist hegemonic discourses and anti-feminism mobilization in cyberspace? In order to address this question fully, this paper explores a particular case of contestation between the Kuwaiti Ministry of Awqaf (endowment) and Islamic Affairs (abbreviated here as AIA) and feminists in Twitter that took place in December 2021.[i] The Kuwaiti case is significant because it is emblematic of a larger phenomenon and practice of cyberfeminist resistance, engaging with new technologies to challenge power (Daniels 2009; Khamis 2013; Matos 2017; Khamis and Mili, 2018; Tazi 2020), and the global anti-feminist backlash offline and online (e.g., Mellström 2016; Ging and Siapera 2019). By taking Kuwait as a case study, my paper contributes to this burgeoning literature on cyberfeminism by advancing a more nuanced conceptualization of the latter beyond the context of the Arab Spring while exploring the understudied phenomenon of anti-feminist discourse in Muslim-majority countries and feminists' resistance to it.

A rentier state, the Kuwaiti political system is unique among other Gulf countries. Kuwait has a democratically elected National Assembly, a parliament composed of elected political blocs with power (Buscemi 2017). Nevertheless, Kuwait cannot be considered a democracy. The "executive power" ultimately lies in the hands of its "autocratic ruling family [of] Al-Sabah", particularly the Emir (a member of al Sabah family) (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 1). Its hybrid political and constitutional system, combining authoritarianism and aspects of limited democracy (Buscemi 2017), has made Kuwait one of the few GCC states to host a more robust homegrown feminist movement throughout its history (Welborne 2022, 139). Unlike the women's organizations of the past century, the internet has allowed grassroots decentralized feminist activism to emerge in the last few years, with young women from diverse backgrounds practicing cyberfeminism(s).

Drawing on the work of Carrie Rentschle and Mona Lilja, I view cyberfeminism(s) as a set of embodied social media practices that constructively resist patriarchal powers and discourses, constituting a salient feminist presence over time. Online practices, including hashtags, blogging, or the circulation of conventional feminist texts-I contend- are no longer limited to a group of elite women's rights activists. Diverse female actors from different socio-economic backgrounds, who may not necessarily self-identify as feminists or activists per se, can perform feminism online. The increasing online anonymity in cyberspace amidst a growing set of challenges further complicates the relationship between the latter and embodiment. In this regard, I argue that the online anonymity of female actors does not erase online and offline bodily, material and emotional dimensions. During the pandemic, Kuwaiti cyberfeminism focused on combating increasing cases of femicides (Al-Mukhled 2021b), constituting a visible and embodied feminist presence and triggering a counter anti-feminist mobilization (see Al-Rawi 2014).

The feminist counter-mobilization occurred in an online seminar organized by AIA. At first, the ministry announced holding an offline lecture titled *alfikr al-nasawi wa khatarih 'al almujtama al-islami'* [The feminist ideology and its danger to the Islamic society]. However, it decided to cancel it after facing pushback from Kuwaiti feminists and women's rights activists supported by a campaign by the liberal-leaning Aljareeda daily newspaper (Aljareeda 2021), moving it to a Twitter space on December 23 2021, simultaneously streaming the discussion on YouTube (Shu'un Islamiya 2021). Utilizing the same tools feminists use to communicate their message, the ministry saw this as an opportunity to deliver their message to a broader audience, including feminists. As I will show in the paper, the lecture incited sentiments of irrational fear towards feminist activists, what I term *feminismphobia*, to misrepresent feminism and strategically use language to convey the ex-communication of Kuwaiti feminists from the religion and society while minimizing violence against women. These accusations can have dangerous ramifications, including triggering a takfiri

discourse against Muslim feminists, as has recently happened with the Jordanian feminist and human rights advocate Hala 'ahid for her involvement in raising feminist awareness, impeding feminists' ability to convince others to pursue social change (Suleiman 2023). In response, Kuwaiti feminists created an Arabic hashtag: *al-nasawiya alkuwaitiya tumathlni* [Kuwaiti feminism represents me], re-tweeting their resistance for days. Their reaction aimed to reclaim their feminist identity, mostly resorting to a reverse discourse strategy (Foucault, 1978). To what extent was this response effective? This is another question addressed in the penultimate section of the paper.

The analysis of the case study under scrutiny consists of two datasets. The first is a transcript of the 90-minute-long Arabic-language AIA's online seminar. The second dataset consists of 47 tweets posted under the above Arabic hashtag manually collected between December 21 to December 28, 2021, after removing ID handles to follow ethical procedures around using social media for research (Townsend and Wallace 2016). I translated both datasets into English verbatim. My method for analyzing the discourse of the Twitter space in question has employed a Critical Thematic Analysis (Lawless and Chen 2018) to identify the recurrent themes of the space and their underlying dominant ideology. Additionally, I have used a frame analysis (Snow and Benford 2000) to guide the interpretation of the tweets' dataset.

Throughout the paper, the analysis is also informed by my online ethnographic observations and interaction with Kuwaiti women activists through Twitter (see Rybas and Gajjala 2007; Danley 2021). My visible presence and use of Twitter as a scholar-activist since 2014 have allowed me to connect with many female activists from the region. An online activist ethnography has enabled me to recruit eight feminists from Kuwait for online interviews after securing ethical approval from my institution. Through my professional experience on social media as an Iraqi activist, I have built a network of connections with female activists from Iraq and other countries. From there, I used a

snowballing method in order to reach the target sample of eight young Kuwaiti female interviewees who identify as feminists. To amplify the voices of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, my sample included five Bedouin [tribal] women [four of whom are Bidoon 'stateless'].[ii] In the paper, I rely on some insights from these interviews conducted between April and June 2022 and follow-up conversations with the study interviewees to reflect on their (dis)engagement with the hashtag under analysis.

My paper first introduces a background on the trajectory of the women's rights movement in Kuwait. Following a theoretical discussion of contemporary cyberfeminism, I analyze the main case studies of this paper: the anti-feminist discourse of AIA's lecture and the cyberfeminist resistance.

From centralized organizations to decentralized activism

The dawn of Kuwaiti women's activism dates to the 1940s when girls' education spread despite the opposition of conservative forces. It was inspired by the cultural movement in Egypt and Bilad al-Sham, spearheaded by male intellectuals who supported women's rights in their writings. During the 1950s, women's rights activism intersected with the revolutionary anticolonial, nationalist and pan-Arab movements. However, it was limited to upper-class women and a few gatherings or newspaper articles (Al-Najjar 2003). Historically, attempting to accommodate both modernity and the "political demands" of tribes and Islamists (Buscemi 2016, 186), the state has strategically co-opted women's rights as a vital tool for its survival (Al-Mughni 1996; 2010).

The oil boom of the 1950s and the 1960s and the country's independence necessitated women's support to decrease relying on foreign labor, opening the doors for women to push for their rights and full citizenship (Al-Mughni 1996; Tétreault 2001). In 1963, the first two women's rights societies: The Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) and The Arab Women's Development Society (AWDS), were founded. Both societies were composed of elite and upper-class women,

with "their efforts to raise women's rights issues [being] hampered by class conflicts and institutional rivalry" (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 2). However, unlike the former, which was mainly working under the auspices of the state and focusing on charitable work, the latter opposed governmental policies towards women, demanding political and social emancipation, including suffrage and gender equality (Al-Mughni 1996; Tétreault 2001).

In 1973, with the formation of the Girl's Club (another upper-class women's rights group), which sided with AWDS' demands, the secular opposition, composed of "nationalist and leftist groups", supported the women's rights movement, posing a threat to the state (Al-Mughni 2010, 169). Consequently, the state started to tighten its grip on women's organizations and activities. State control was compounded by the growing influence of Islamists in the National Assembly and the society (Al-Mughni 1996), impacting the course of the Kuwaiti women's rights movement.[iii] In the 1980s, Islamist women's groups were founded, replacing the more secular ones (Tétreault et al. 2012). In this regard, Tétreault (2001) maintains that the state used Islamization and tribalism as a bulwark to deter secular and liberal opposition. In light of this political atmosphere, there were many failed attempts to push for women's suffrage over several decades.

In 1990, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait was a "transformative event", providing a combination of internal and external factors that helped unite a group of well-educated middle- and upper-class activists of secular, liberal and Islamic backgrounds around the suffrage goal (Shultziner and Tétreault 2011, 2; González 2013.). Although discussing these factors is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting that the new group of activists strategically pressured the government rather than the parliament, which was divided over the issue, to push for women's right to vote until women's suffrage was finally materialized in 2005.

Women's activism took a new turn in the new millennium, away from organizations and associations, when young independent women started to engage in street protests and campaigns for democratization and political reforms (Buscemi 2016). Moreover, the 'Arab Spring' uprisings increased women's visibility online and offline in society as female activists engaged in oppositional politics when they joined the largest protest movement in contemporary Kuwaiti history in 2012 known as *Karamt Watan* [A Nation's Dignity] mobilized by social media sites.[iv] The protest movement was met with a security crackdown. Repressive measures included "detention of protestors, increased censorship over the internet, traditional and social media, stripping nationals of their citizenship and cracking down on freedom of expression" (Buscemi 2017; 267; Human Rights Watch 2015).

Despite such measures, new forms of resistance emerged, with women activists focusing more on their social and legal struggles. For example, in 2015, a group of five "elite" female activists led a campaign to abolish article 153 of the Kuwaiti penal code stipulating lax punishments for the perpetrator of so-called honor crimes, treating the murder as a misdemeanor (Al-Sharekh and AlMukhled 2023). The campaign has continued offline and online, intersecting with growing cyberfeminist activism at the grassroots level, benefiting from social media accessibility and diffusion in society (Buscemi 2017) and making use of online anonymity to evade censorship and suppression (see Khamis 2019).

Cyberfeminism as embodied constructive resistance

In a clear departure from formal organizations, feminism in Kuwait took a new turn as women from different backgrounds started to center their voices in cyberspace, identifying as *nasawiyat* [feminists] or with *nasawiya* [feminism] through practicing cyberfeminism(s). The latter is understood in this paper as a set of practices and processes of "making and doing feminism

online" (Rentschle 2019, 130). These practices include social media blogging, tweeting, hashtags, and distributing feminist texts, which fulfil at least three functions: "mobilization, education, and documentation" (Khamis 2016, 139). The Arabic term *nasawiya*, which translates into feminist and feminism, has become more visible, breaking away from the earlier reluctance of women activists to describe themselves as "feminists", favoring instead "agents of social change" (Buscemi 2016, 189). I have made a conscious decision to use feminism here interchangeably with women's rights activism to echo the new voices of female activists in Kuwait and elsewhere, many of whom choose to identify as *nasawiyat* [feminists]. That said, I conceive feminism as more of an intellectual theory, a vision, and a field preceding and simultaneously intersecting with women's rights movements (Delmar 1994). Hence, the significance of identifying with feminism, and not necessarily as feminists.

Cyberfeminism (s) is an everyday decentralized grassroots activism. It is not monolithic but rather heterogeneous. In other words, it mirrors the multi-layered and diverse feminisms that exist in different contexts offline (Khamis 2019). Cyberfeminism(s) blurs the dichotomy of the "elite" and the "subaltern" (see Gajjala 2002). Doing and making feminism online is not solely restricted to the urban upper-middle class, well-educated women's rights activists. It includes women from diverse "socio-economic and geographic segments and other demographic profiles" inside their home countries or abroad (Khamis 2016, 140). In the Kuwaiti context, previously marginalized groups of the Bedouin and Bidoon activists have joined online feminist activism, challenging the "classist" discourse of the feminist movement in Kuwait and the Gulf more generally (Al-Hashem 2021). They do so individually or collectively by adopting an "intersectional" approach to advocate the rights of more vulnerable women in society, including domestic workers (Bakhsh 2021). For example, a collective account on Twitter known as *Kuwaiti Nasawiyat* [Kuwaiti Feminists] was launched and run by a group of Bedouin feminists to oppose the institutionalized patriarchal

structures of both the government and the tribe (Bakhsh 2021).[v] In 2021, a group of three Bidoon feminists formed a collective Instagram account dedicated to the political, social and legal struggles of Bidoon women.[vi]

In this paper, I, therefore, conceptualize cyberfeminism(s) as a type of constructive resistance which "undermines oppressive forms of power through the construction or enactment of alternatives" (Koefoed 2017, 39). Constructive opposition constructively challenges hegemonic and patriarchal powers-albeit more slowly and quietly, by producing new knowledge, alternative discourses, and new personalities or institutions (Sørensen 2016; Lilja 2020). It can be less direct, confrontational, or overt than non-cooperative forms of resistance, unfold individually or collectively and involve big and small-scale events (Baaz et al. 2021; Lilja 2022a). Although it may not produce immediate and radical change, it opens up future possibilities for social or political transformations (Lilja 2021).

Understood in this way, cyberfeminism(s) can be expanded to include those who may not identify as feminists but with feminist causes (Rentschler 2019), including sexual harassment, raising awareness, and mobilizing others to act (Khamis 2016; 2019). For example, the anti-sexual harassment campaign *lan Askut* (I will not be silent) was launched on Instagram by Shaymaa Shamoo, a young doctor (Osman 2021), calling women to share their accounts and testimonies. Since then, the page has been followed by more than 15 thousand followers. The campaign was inspired by Ascia al-Farraj, a famous Kuwaiti American fashion blogger with millions of online followers on Instagram, who released a video in which she unveiled her fears of being subject to men's car chasing, a "common form of harassment in Kuwait" (Al-Mukhled and Alshammari 2021). The significant number of followers helps to circulate the message faster among a broader audience, moving it across multiple platforms and bringing women from different backgrounds

together around one cause. The campaign pushed for a legal bill against sexual harassment, but it was not passed (Arab Times 2021). Moreover, the campaign itself was contested by my Bidoon interviewees for mimicking the MeToo movement without necessarily speaking to the specificities of the local context. One of my Bidoon interviewees feared that exposing harassers online may backfire should the perpetrator sue their victim, exploiting broad and controversial provisions of 2015's cybercrime law (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Women with anonymous accounts form the backbone of Kuwaiti and, by extension, Arab cyberfeminism(s) (Khamis 2016; 2019). These women resort to pseudonyms or anonymous identities for protection. They can have a considerable or otherwise limited number of followers. They perform feminism online by posting or interacting with feminist hashtags or campaigns. Although primarily invisible (Khamis 2019), their role is nonetheless crucial because their participation contributes to increasing the momentum of cyberfeminism; a notable example is the Saudi women's movement for the right to drive (Khalil and Storie 2020). Online anonymity has certain drawbacks, including the potential to de-legitimize a movement (Khalil and Storie 2020). In this regard, although outside the scope of this paper, it is worth mentioning that the voice feature enabled by Twitter Spaces or Clubhouse has contributed to legitimizing feminists with anonymous identities. Speaking in such spaces has different potentials to writing, enhancing the embodied dimension of cyberfeminism and challenging earlier assumptions that equate anonymity with disembodiment (e.g., Haraway 1985). In other words, online anonymity does not necessarily erase bodily experience from cyberspace. To the contrary, the relationship between embodiment and anonymity can be enhanced. Yoon's (2020) concept of "the digital flesh" helps capture the blurred boundaries between anonymity and embodiment in contemporary social media activism. Instead of viewing online spaces as separate from reality, they should be viewed as "a continuum of reality…[signifying] the continuity between body and the virtual space through emerging

information technologies" (Yoon 2020, 585). A Bedouin feminist told me that she prefers to use "hidden identities" instead of "anonymous" to reflect the fact that she and others are not fake but are "real people" who resort to pseudonyms or anonymity as a compromise as they grapple with increasing online sexist attacks, shaming, bullying and political or social censorship. In this sense, female activists in the virtual world are not just online actors but embodied activists whose activism cannot be separated from the offline socio-political, economic and legal barriers.

The embodied and emotional dimension of Kuwaiti cyberfeminism intensified during the pandemic when Kuwaiti feminists from different backgrounds came together to challenge gender-based violence, which witnessed a spike regionally and globally (Gemen 2021).[vii]In 2021, outrage exploded online and offline after a video capturing a woman yelling in agony in a Kuwaiti hospital in response to the devastating news of her sister's murder by a man was released. "We told you he'd kill her, and he killed my sister. Where is the government?" shouted the woman. It soon emerged that the victim, Farah Hamza Akbar, was abducted from her car with her two daughters and stabbed to death in broad daylight in April 2021. Her abductor and killer then drove her body and the two girls to the hospital before fleeing the scene. Her sister and lawyer, Dana Akbar, shared details about the heinous crime, shockingly revealing that Farah was subject to multiple kidnapping attempts by the same perpetrator. Even though he was detained twice after being reported to authorities, he was "released on bail each time" (Al-Mukhled 2021a). Her rhetorical question, "Where is the government?" highlighted the government's failure to protect her sister and, by extension, other women, exposing the deeply entrenched institutional patriarchy and echoing the distance between female activists and the government. More significantly, the question helped to unite Kuwaiti women, including the Bidoon for whom the government is the main accomplice in their suffering: "Any discourse that supports the government does not represent me", a Bidoon

activist told me. Therefore, it constituted a "moral shock", generating intense emotions and a collective response (Castells 1996; Rahimi 2011).

Kuwaiti women launched an online campaign called *'azaa al-nisaa* [Women's mourning], sharing pictures showing them wearing black clothes, a sign of their grief. The title was influential as it captured the feelings of sorrow and anger inside Kuwait and other countries in the region, where women were simultaneously being killed amid the absence of laws and legal resources to protect their lives. Through this online assembly, women could bring their physical experience to cyberspace and express their emotions of sadness, rage and fear. In doing so, they changed and re-configured the function and purpose of the social media platforms (see Butler 2015), turning them into a virtual mourning ceremony and reinforcing the embodied dimension of cyberspace. When the bodily experience is performed, enacted, and signified online through emotions like these and their movement (Butler 2015; Lilja 2017), it deconstructs the bifurcation of body and mind and the material and discursive (Brophy 2010). In other words, like resisting bodies in public spaces (Butler 2015; Lilja 2017), the emotional dynamics can connect cyberfeminists in the online space, where they voice their struggle.

Online mobilization extended to public spaces when women protested at al-Irada square, just outside the male-dominated National Assembly building, in black clothes holding banners and posters condemning gender-based violence and demanding changes in discriminatory laws (Al-Mukhled 2021a).[viii] As Lilja (2020) reminds us, constructive resistance can intersect with direct opposition to challenge dominant powers. Occupying public spaces helped to legitimize the cyberfeminists who use anonymous identities online. One of my Bedouin feminist interviewees reflected on the power of offline visibility: "For the first time, people were able to see that we were real, that we did exist. Our anonymous identities can sometimes undermine our effort because

others can see us as fake accounts. When we took into the streets and protested alongside well-known activists, academics, and members of the WCSS, we could prove our presence." The online and offline protests prompted two Islamist MPs to join the protests, promising action on the legal level.[ix] A bill was introduced later to combat violence against women and abolish article 153 of the Kuwaiti penal code about "honor killings" (Al-Mukhled 2021a). However, the draft law has not yet materialized into legislation like the previous bill.

The position of the above Islamist MPs was short-lived and did not translate into action. Al-Mukhled (2021a) describes it as "capitalizing" on women's rage. Further, it was not reflective of the stance of other Islamists towards women's rights. A few months later, the AIA announced its anti-feminism lecture. The following section turns to the central case study of this paper.

The Twitter Space: Feminism is a danger to society

Overview

When AIA cancelled its offline lecture and moved it online, some Kuwaiti feminists I spoke to hailed it as a "triumph" because its cancellation showed the government did not support it, a Kuwaiti feminist and academic told me. Kuwaiti writer Sara Mubarak (2022) had a different position, viewing the cancellation as unfruitful. The lecture was then held on a Twitter Space on December 23 2021, and streamed on YouTube, hosting Dr Mohammed Dhawi al-'saimi, lecturer in the College of Sharia at Kuwait University by his colleague, Dr Mutlaq al-Jasir (Shu'un Islamiya 2021).[x] Dr al-'saimi belongs to the Salafist group of Islamists[xi], "with the strictest position towards women's rights" (González 2013, 13). The lecture's host attempted to ignore the social media campaign against the lecture, obviously minimizing its influence. Instead, he thanked Al-Jareeda newspaper for inadvertently allowing the ministry to share it with a broader audience on Twitter. In other words, by capitalizing on Twitter spaces to host the lecture, record, and upload it on YouTube,

feminists' opponents used similar digital strategies to circulate their counter-mobilization in cyberspace. According to Mubarak (2022), who attended the online discussion, the host did not open the space for the audience to ask questions even though Mubarak and other women requested to speak. Therefore, he and his invited speaker could constitute and control one antagonistic narrative, alienating Kuwaiti feminists from society through "biological essentialism" ideology (Sanders and Jenkins 2022), as discussed below.

Othering through biological essentialism

The space sought to alienate and demonize Kuwaiti feminists and feminism as an idea and social movement from society, Islam, and other women. To achieve this goal, the speaker and the host borrowed their references and examples from a western context, dismissing Muslim women's struggle. Violence and abuse were undermined as "exceptional" or "rare" cases rather than a general phenomenon that must be urgently addressed. Instead, they focused on traditional gender roles for men and women in light of the Shariah, deflecting from the major concerns of women in Kuwait. Western references bolstered the narrative of morality and "cultural authenticity" that feminists allegedly seek to break away from in favor of "westernized" ideals and individual preferences (Abu Raideh 2021, 4). For example, in his opening remarks, the seminar's host contextualized feminism within a purely western context when he stated:

> The story started with the contempt of women in the middle ages in the west, associated with concepts existing in the Nusairi [Christian] religion, where there is a belief that Eve was the one who seduced Adam to eat from the tree and was, therefore, the reason why Adam was forced out from heaven...This has resulted in hatred towards women. Women's contempt is also reflected in the work of the Enlightenment philosophers, who vilify women.

Then, he listed some of these philosophers' names, including Nietzsche and Hegel, briefly citing examples of their misogynistic discourse. Ironically, Islamists' and other conservatives' positions towards the role of women echo some of Hegel's central claims about women and his emphasis on her domestic role within the 'natural' family. Even though Hegel speaks about the differences between the sexes through a metaphysical lens rather than a biological one, he is still criticized for confining women to familial positions and roles (Stone 2010). As Ghabra and Al Shammari (2020) contend, despite the similarities between patriarchal and masculinist structures and discourses in western and middle eastern contexts, they are performed differently in the two contexts. In the latter, they constitute a "deep-rooted collective and overted [sic] system of domination", manifesting themselves at micro and macro levels to control and stigmatize women who do not conform to the traditional gender attributes, norms and roles (Ghabra and Al Shammari 2020, 164). The lecturer's assertion that biological differences between men and women dictate their traits and activities, emphasizing the significance of the 'natural' family and the centrality of women's role in the family institution, immediately invoked a broader ideology of "biological essentialism". This discourse entails that "people do not have socially constructed gender roles or identities; instead, they have biologically immutable sex differences that should be enforced coercively through law" (Sanders and Jenkins 2022, 371). Moreover, anti-genderism (see Kuhar and Paternotte 2017) was promoted when gender was harshly attacked. Concluding the discussion, the host stressed that "They [feminists] have come up with a new thing shared by both male and female, that is, gender, which is a tool for destroying morals because it melts the differences between men and women". He went on to criticize seminars or lectures held in Kuwait around gender.

Emphasizing anti-genderism through the "biological essentialism" ideology was a tool for disconnecting Kuwaiti feminists from other women and the community. Thus, they were portrayed as foes of the 'natural' family, who seek to "corrupt" it by calling for equality despite the

"biological and physical differences" affirmed by the Qur'an and Hadith [prophetic texts]. Islamists and conservative Muslims generally do not accept equality because it defies the idea that males and females complement one another, each having specific roles and rights (Afary 1997; Hashim 1999). Accordingly, women are considered inferior to men (Leila 1992). Such a view finds its roots in a homogenous and "masculinist" reading of religious texts that marginalizes women and reduces them to a source of pleasure and desire (Faraj 2017).

Additionally, the speaker lashed out against feminism as a concept, claiming that feminism, which he simultaneously associated with capitalism (Mubarak 2022), has transformed from "a suffrage movement to sexual liberation, pushing Muslim women to flee to other countries". Fleeing home was attributed to sexual desires or motives. The claim that feminism was a product of capitalism and the exclusion of the experiences of violence are discursive strategies adopted to construct a new reality through manipulation, deception, and disinformation (see Kenney 2021). Furthermore, reducing feminism to homosexuality, pejoratively labelled as *shudud* [deviation], was intended to slander Kuwaiti feminists by depicting them as perilous to the divinely ordained heteronormative family.[xii] It was further coupled with a negative portrayal of feminists as "despiteful" and "hateful" of women. In his concluding remarks, the host said, "Feminism despises women. I repeat. This ideology that calls for equality in everything had to do so because it views men as more perfect than women. This is an inferior view of the women because *nasawiya* is grounded in contempt of women."

Implementing the above discourses contributed to demonizing Kuwaiti feminists, accusing them of being anti-Islam (see Mubarak 2022). For example, Dr al-'usaimi reiterated that "feminists blindly imitate everything existing in the west", stressing in several instances that "feminism has defied Islamic Shariah...allowing for mocking the prophet...feminism is hostile to religion". As a result, the speaker and his host recommended socially resisting feminism to immunize society against its ills.

It was a menacing accusation -I would argue- inciting hatred against and fear of Kuwait feminists, or what I call *feminismphobia*, through a selective and manipulative discourse. When these emotions stiffen, they lead to "indignation", reinforcing the polarizing narrative of us versus them and shaping the resistance discourse (Alter and Zürn 2020, 749), as explored in the following section.

Kuwaiti feminists' response: Reclaiming feminism as an identity

This hostile atmosphere has prompted Kuwaiti women to respond online, incorporating elements of a reverse discourse strategy to legitimize their presence and struggle by "speaking in [their] own behalf…often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they were demonized]" (Foucault 1978, 101; Towns 2022). Since the announcement of the lecture, an online counter-campaign was launched by Kuwaiti feminists, who collectively tweeted under the hashtag "Kuwaiti feminism represents me". By repeating and highlighting the Arabic word *nasawiya* [feminism], the hashtag heightened the identity of Kuwaiti feminists, re-negotiating their position and attaching new meanings to it (Lilja 2022b, 9). The participants included self-identified feminists with real identities and those with anonymous identities or pseudonyms. Their collective effort in making the hashtag through retweeting their embodied messages, tweeting a new message through the hashtag in question (Sharma 2013, 62), and quoting a message within the hashtag contributed to performing feminism online. In all three cases, the effect of the message can be increased via the circulation process. Although reversed discourses can still re-deploy older meanings, they have a "subversive effect" (Lilja 2008; 118) that requires repetition to maintain the alternative "truths" they seek to establish (Lilja 2008; Lilja 2022b). Hashtags help serve that purpose well.

 As mentioned in the introduction, I drew on a frame analysis (Goffman 1974; Benford and Snow 2000) to understand how women framed their resistance in response to the lecture. Overall, the

frames used were meant to invoke a national discourse rooted in women's struggle and culture-specific context, countering the claim that their struggle was imported from the west. In other words, labelling their feminism as "Kuwaiti" in the hashtag and several tweets helped to distinguish Kuwaiti from western feminism. By reclaiming feminism this way, Kuwaiti female activists indirectly rejected the western lens, creating a sense of pride and belonging to their community. In some hashtag tweets, the diversity of Kuwaiti feminism was heightened. For example, one activist tweeted, "Kuwaiti feminism in all its different forms, perspectives and the diverse approaches of those who belong to it represent me because feminism is a need, not a social facade".

Despite tweets like the above, the hashtag did not appeal to all feminists, particularly the Bidoon feminists. I communicated with three Bidoon activists who participated in my study but did not interact with the hashtag, asking them why they did not. For two Bidoon activists, the hashtag could not represent them or their struggle. One interviewee described the phrase "Kuwaiti feminism" as "exclusionary, capturing a "classist" and "state feminism rhetoric" that excluded "the Bidoon, Bedouin, as well as foreign and domestic workers in Kuwait". A better alternative could have been "feminism in Kuwait", she added.

Similarly, another activist said that "although the hashtag attempted to include all women in Kuwait, it was "general" and "loose". The hashtag was controversial for her because some of the women who used it "marginalize me [the Bidoon] and are not interested in my cause. So how can it represent me?" she exclaimed (personal communication, July 22 2022). Such responses question the argument about the potentiality of reverse discourse to create a "we" inclusive of everyone in one community (see Lilja 2022b). However, because the hashtag was a reactive response to the anti-feminist space, it could be that it was not intended to marginalize others. The third activist I spoke to agreed that the title was problematic. However, it was still "an attempt to defend all women against a group of clerics trying to deprive women- not only Kuwaiti women- of the right to live",

she told me (personal communication, July 22 2022). Some feminists who supported the hashtag reflected on the label a few months later. Another interviewee, a Kuwaiti feminist, lawyer and journalist, told me that the hashtag was not meant to exclude other women from marginalized groups. However, "feminism in Kuwait" or "women's rights in Kuwait" could have provided a more accurate and inclusive description. She explained that it should replace the former from now on (personal communication, February 5 2023).

Although the title might not have resonated with all feminists, it sought to challenge the demonization of feminism and the claim that it was imported. For this purpose, activists using the hashtag took pride in that feminism has entered the public discourse, viewing this as evidence of its outreach and impact. For example, one activist posted, "I am extremely proud of the influence of Kuwaiti feminism evidenced by counter-seminars and speeches. I am very proud of every feminist whose presence has threatened all men who now feel the fragility of their authority". Similarly, quote tweeting another tweet with a link to a Friday prayer speech also smearing feminism (Department of Da'waa and Guidance 2021), an activist tweeted: "Kuwaiti women are willfully coming. Influential accounts have spoken about them. So have media outlets, university professors, clerics in mosques, and people on Twitter, in schools and universities. Honestly, this is something to be proud of".

To counter claims that violence against women in Kuwait is minimal, the female activists framed their tweets with references to local cases, including Farah Akbar's murder. According to one tweet, "Kuwaiti women are strong and able to change many things. We remember their position in Farah Akbar's case and how they spoke up in the public sphere". This local frame functioned to reiterate Kuwaiti women's struggle, countering claims about feminists' endeavor to destroy the family or call for sexual liberation. Additionally, they criticized Islamists' denial of violence against women and how they reduced it to an exceptional phenomenon. Even before the seminar, it was anticipated

that violence targeting women would be minimized. Therefore, one activist tweeted, "In the symposium, I hope - for your credibility – that you would mention the names of the female martyrs killed by members of their families. I hope that you would explain to us how they were slain, what sentences they [perpetrators] received, and how were the responses tolerating their crimes". "If you really care about your religion and homeland, put an end to the killing and oppression of women", another woman dared Islamists participating in the seminar. The martyrdom narrative conjured up by the label "female martyrs" had a religious and political symbolism that could further validate women's struggle, framing it within a broader socio-political resistance for social change (Lewis 2019).

When the local frame of gender-based violence was communicated through sarcasm, it was problematic and might have reinforced hegemonic discourses rather than subverting them (see Towns 2022). For instance, one female activist re-appropriated the Arabic term *rijula* (manhood) sarcastically to highlight the Islamists' failure to recognize violence against women or to protect them. In her words: "You should be punishing women's murderers, harassers, and oppressors. Where has your manhood gone?" Despite the sarcastic tone, her question could have re-affirmed rather than defied the stereotypical moral and physical images invoked by *rijula*.[xiii]

The last frame was the "Sahwa" frame, in reference to "The Awakening of Islam" phase in the kingdom between the 1980s and the 1990s "when radical Islamic ideology has spread among the society" (Alhuzami and Bailey 2021, 5). The Sahwa frame was meant to counter-shame Islamists in Kuwait, blaming them for the rise in a fundamentalist exclusionary ideology echoing that of the Sahwa phase in Saudi Arabia. It was another example of a reverse discourse strategy re-articulating the word Sahwa assigning negative meanings to it to contest and ridicule its literal and original sense. The reference was used by Kuwaiti women and Saudis, who were attempting to show solidarity with the former. For example, one Saudi woman tweeted, "I feel sorry for you Kuwaiti

women. We have got rid of the Sahwa. But it has travelled to you. All the solidarity and prayers are with you. You can fight this rotten ideology". The interaction between Saudi and Kuwaiti women activists is not unique to this instance. All my interviewees spoke about drawing inspiration from Saudi online feminist activism and the importance of regional online solidarity in keeping the momentum of feminist activism and solidifying the feminist presence.

Sahwa was also sometimes juxtaposed with "cavemen" to mock Kuwaiti Islamists, implying that their ideas are regressive and fail to cope with societal and cultural changes. Addressing Islamists as a homogenous bloc with a single discourse on women and discrediting them as outsiders enhanced by ridicule through the word "cavemen" runs the risk of re-creating the antagonistic narrative of us versus them, which they attempted to resist. Does antagonism become an inevitable outcome in such an instance? What are the alternatives-if any? In January 2022, Sara Mubarak wrote a detailed and thoughtful response to the seminar, departing from the narrative of 'us versus them'. She found that ignoring her request to comment in the seminar gave her an opportunity to respond in a more meaningful and less reactive manner through writing: "I must admit that ignoring me had upset me at first…but [I was later] reminded that writing can be more powerful than the instantaneous and verbal response, which can convey errors, hastiness, causing a more damaging effect". Although an analysis of her piece is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note her attempt to challenge the speakers' anti-feminist discourse by engaging with different counter-examples from Islamic texts and history, correcting the (mis) and disinformation around the roots of feminism in the West, substantiating violence against women in the country, and emphasizing that feminism is diverse. While it is hard to gauge the effect of such a response in countering and shifting Islamists' position, I contend that the significance lies in the long term in keeping a productive debate around feminism that can potentially appeal to the broader groups in society, particularly women.

Discussion and conclusions

Cyberfeminism(s) is diverse and multi-layered. Understood in this paper as performing feminism through digital making processes, including hashtags or joint accounts, whether by self-identified feminists or those who identify with feminist causes, cyberfeminism(s) can be seen as a particular form of constructive resistance that produces new narratives, figures, or groups. Kuwaiti cyberfeminism(s) obscures the binary between the privileged and the voiceless by allowing young women from different social backgrounds, including the Bedouin and the Bidoon not affiliated with formal organizations, to voice their struggle online. Their participation was vital in shifting the classist discourse associated with the WCSS or elite groups towards a more intersectional discourse centring their experiences, stories, and double oppression, a point that deserves further investigation in future research. Anonymity is a common practice for protection, though it can be emotionally challenging and affect credibility. Despite this, anonymous cyberfeminists play a crucial role in activism, establishing a collective feminist presence. However, online feminist visibility has faced counter-mobilization through an online seminar organized by AIA, promoting gender inequality through ideological discourses and demonizing feminists whilst undermining, overlooking, and downplaying violence against women. In response, Kuwaiti activists framed their struggle locally through a hashtag. Cyberfeminism can have limitations, including fragmentation and the intensification of the binary opposition of 'us versus them'-an inevitable outcome of a hostile narrative by their opponents. Mubarak (2022) attempted to avoid this binary by writing a lengthy article grounded in evidence from multiple sources. Still, the effectiveness of both responses in deterring and countering anti-feminist claims remains an open question. Top of Form

Online (anti)-feminist (counter)-mobilizations have offline consequences beyond street protests.

The contestation between Kuwaiti feminists and conservative Islamists has resurfaced in subsequent events, including political attacks on the Women's and Gender Studies Research Unit at Kuwait University, prompting women academics to respond in a statement (EL-Tohamy 2022), the government's cancellation of a women's yoga retreat after backlash by conservative Islamists and clerics (The National News 2022), and the circulation of a "values document" signed by conservative candidates, prior to the 2022's National Assembly elections. The signatories called for implementing strict Islamic laws, including gender segregation in public spaces (Omar, 2022). At the time of writing, outrage by Kuwaiti civil society groups and activists was expressed over Article 16 of a new draft law on the formation of the National Electoral Commission, requiring women to abide by the Shariah rules and provisions to be able to exercise their right to run and vote (Alarab 2023).

The offline impact of cyberfeminism(s) can be short and long-term. The former pertains to more tangible and concrete policies and regulations, such as the "family protection" law. The latter includes less informal consequences, including keeping a lively feminist discourse or moving the feminist discourse from the realm of cyberspace to that of mainstream media or TV drama (see Radionisaa 2022). I concur with other scholars (Doaiji 2017; Khamis 2016; 2019) that more abstract outcomes can be far more crucial than short-term concrete ones. It is a long journey and process. Herein lies the essence of constructive resistance.

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[i] Twitter is now called X. See X logo officially replaces Twitter's famous bird on mobile app, building headquarters (cnbc.com). However, throughout the paper, I use Twitter because the events analysed here took place before Elon Musk bought the app and rebranded it to X.

[ii] The tribal Bedouin [bedu] "constitutes around 60 percent of the Kuwaiti national population, though the Kuwaiti census does not give specific information based on such social designations" (Al-Nakib 2014, 14). Refer to Al-Nakib (2014) for a historical discussion on the dichotomy of The ḥadar/sedentary (urban) versus bedū/ nomadic (tribal) in the Kuwaiti local discourse. The Arabic word Bidoon means 'without', "and 'bidoon jinsiyah' means 'without citizenship'. The term Bidoon in Kuwait refers to the stateless group of people who were not given Kuwaiti nationality and citizenship for different reasons" (Abu Sulaib 2020, 134). For a discussion of these reasons, refer to Abu Sulaib (2020). No accurate statistics are available regarding the Bidoon people in Kuwait. As of 2016, governmental figures estimate that there are 92,000 Bidoons. However, this number is contested by Kuwaiti human rights activists and academics (Abu Sulaib 2020).

This sample is part of a larger sample of participants from Iraq, Yemen, and Saudi Arabia, who participated in my Leverhulme-funded research project on cyberfeminism in the four countries.

[iii] Political Islamists in Kuwait are not monolithic. They can be categorised into the Salafists, Muslim Brotherhood, and Islamic-oriented tribal Islamists (Maktabi 2017), as well as Shia Islamists (Gonzalez 2013). There are further divisions within each group. Although they share a similar patriarchal worldview, they differ in their interpretations and how they approach women's rights and issues according to the surrounding context, circumstances, and their self-interests (Maktabi 2017).

[iv] Preceded by smaller protests in 2006 and 2011 against "corruption scandals", *Karamt Watan* reflected people's outrage at the dissolution of the National Assembly and unpredicted changes in the electoral law (Buscemi 2016; 198)

[v] نسويات كويتيات (@naswya4) / Twitter

[vi] نساء البدون ♡ (@bedoon_women) • Instagram photos and videos

Based on my interviewees with the three activists who launched the account, I understand that this collaboration could not sustain for several reasons, including censorship.

[vii] In November 2020, following a series of murders and media attention towards domestic violence, the Kuwaiti parliament passed the family protection law (AlSharekh and AlMukhled 2023). However, many of its articles have remained ink on paper (Al-Mukhled 2021).

[viii] Farah Akbar's murderer was sentenced to death in December 2022. See Kuwait: death sentence for man who killed woman who refused his advances – Middle East Monitor.

[ix] The two MPs in question belong to the Muslim Brotherhood branch.

[x] [د. مطلق الجاسر (@Dr_Mutlaq) / X (twitter.com)](#)

[xi] The lecturer is of a Salafi background. See [د. عدنان الهذال on Twitter: " يذكره الشيخ د. دعاء عظيم ويسير على من يسّره الله تعالى له،](#)

[@dr_alosimi .. محمد ضاوي العصيمي، من أهل الدعوة السلفية الصحيحة النقية والذي لم تُغيره الأيام ولم يُغيره الإعلام، نسأل الله لنا وله الحق والثبات](#)

[https://t.co/uBvV49elWA" / Twitter](#)

[xii] To this end, the host spoke about French philosopher Simone De Beauvoir and her book The Second Sex, describing

it as a masculine book aiming at "getting rid of femininity", seen as natural and inherent in alignment with Islamic

Fiqh. Moreover, he mentioned her "suspension from her teaching position in 1943 after encouraging girls to practice

Shudud". This selective and superficial reading of De Beauvoir's text and life was meant to widen the gap between

Kuwaiti society and feminists.

[xiii] Refer to Gilmore (1990) for the discourses of manhood in the Middle East.

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