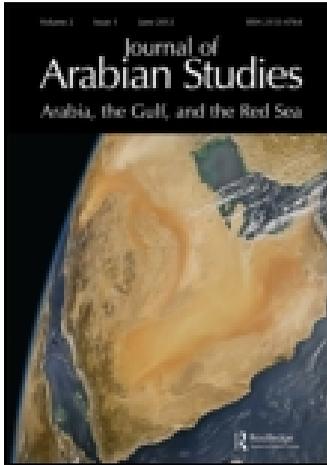


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Empowerment Through the Ballot Box? Women's Suffrage and Electoral Participation in the Saudi Chambers of Commerce and Industry

HENDRIK J. KRAETZSCHMAR

Abstract: This paper explores the enfranchisement and electoral participation of businesswomen in one of Saudi Arabia's most prominent civil institutions, the Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCI). It shows how a confluence of domestic factors, including the determination of businesswomen activists in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the simultaneous presence of a reformist political leadership in Riyadh, Makkah Province, and the Jeddah Chamber itself, led to a breakthrough in the expansion of women's suffrage rights in Saudi CCIs. So far these newly won suffrage rights have had no significant mobilizational effects on female CCI members, either as voters or candidates, due largely to the prevalence of several gender-specific barriers to electoral participation. Operating at different junctures throughout the electoral process, these barriers relate primarily to widely held negative attitudes towards gender equality and their impact on voting behaviours and women's candidacies; they also include the prohibition against/limitations on *ikhṭilāṭ* (gender-mixing) in public buildings and spaces.

Keywords: Saudi Arabia, women's suffrage, elections, civil society, Chambers of Commerce and Industry

1 Introduction

According to the 2011 Global Gender Gap Report, Saudi Arabia is ranked amongst the bottom five countries, alongside Mali, Pakistan, Chad and Yemen.¹ Of course, this is hardly surprising given the regime's conservative approach to gender relations, which is informed by Wahhābī doctrine and evident in gender segregation policies, the treatment of women as legal minors and the lack of women's participation in politics. Slowly, however, change is forthcoming. Over the past decade the number of women in secondary/tertiary education has risen dramatically, their civil rights have been strengthened and legal restrictions on female employment/entrepreneurship have been eased.² There have also been notable strides towards formal inclusion of women in

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¹ Hausmann, Tyson, and Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2011* (2011), p. 9.

² Doumato, "Saudi Arabia", in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Progress amid Resistance*, eds Kelly and Breslin (2010), pp. 425–59; Hamdan, "Women and Education in Saudi Arabia: Challenges and Achievements", *International Education Journal* 6.1 (2005), pp. 42–64; Alturki and

politics and civil society. Although they remain excluded from senior government positions,³ in 2012 the King honoured a prior pledge by appointing thirty female members to the previously all-male Consultative Assembly (*Majlis al-Shūra*).⁴ Moreover, since the mid-2000s, female members have won full suffrage rights for directorship elections in many of the Kingdom's civil associations and have won limited representation on some of their governing boards (e.g. Chambers of Commerce and Industry (CCI), Saudi Council of Engineers and Saudi Journalist Association). In 2011, they also received assurances that by 2015 women would be entitled to run for and vote in municipal elections, a right denied to them in the two previous polls of 2005 and 2011.⁵

Based on field research conducted in Saudi Arabia in 2010–11,⁶ this study explores the introduction in 2005 of women's suffrage in one of the Kingdom's most prominent civil organizations, the CCI. It investigates how businesswomen have fared in elections to their governing boards, as well as the (gender-specific) obstacles they face in making full use of their newly won participatory rights. In doing so, it makes three assertions: firstly, it suggests that the breakthrough in the expansion of suffrage rights resulted from a confluence of domestic factors, including lobbying efforts by businesswomen activists in the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI), as well as the simultaneous presence of a reformist political leadership in Riyadh, Makkah Province, and the JCCI itself. Secondly, it demonstrates that, as yet, the mobilization effects of the newly won suffrage rights on female CCI members have been insignificant and that female members have made only limited use of their voting/candidacy rights. Consequently, businesswomen remain significantly under-represented on CCI directorships. Finally, the paper draws on recent scholarship on women in Arab electoral politics to highlight several gender-specific barriers to electoral participation/success. These barriers involve widely held negative attitudes towards gender equality and their effects on voting behaviours and women's candidacies, but also include the Saudi prohibition against *ikhṭilāṭ* (gender-mixing) in public buildings and spaces. It is suggested that these barriers largely explain the observed disjunction between *legal* suffrage and *formal* inclusion of businesswomen on the one hand, and the lack of any meaningful women's representation on CCI governing boards on the other.

This case study sits at the point where civil society, gender and electoral studies intersect and is of primary empirical relevance. By providing further insight into the internal structures and workings of one of the largest networks of civil institutions in the Kingdom, it contributes to a growing body of research on Saudi civil society, its manifestations and its relation to the

Braswell, *Businesswomen in Saudi Arabia: Characteristics, Challenges and Aspirations in a Regional Context* (2010).

³ In 2013, the Saudi cabinet contained only one junior female minister, appointed in 2009 as Deputy Minister for Education [Doumato, "Saudi Arabia"].

⁴ Established in 1991/1992 the Majlis al-Shūra remains largely a consultative assembly with limited legislative/oversight powers [Aarts, "Maintaining Authoritarianism: The Jerky Path of Political Reform in Saudi Arabia", *Orient* 1 (2011), pp. 30–43]. See also Al-Seghayer, "Saudi Women in the Shoura!", *Saudi Gazette*, 22 Jan. 2013.

⁵ Hertog, "The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia", in *Constitutional Reform and Political Participation in the Gulf*, eds Khalaf and Luciani (2006), pp. 243–7; Jarbati, "Engineers Council Poll: One More Step for Saudi Women", *Arab News*, 28 Dec. 2005; Al-Mayman, "Journalists Elect Board Members", *Arab News*, 23 Dec. 2008; Alsharif, "Saudi King Gives Women Right to Vote", *Reuters*, 26 Sept. 2011; Kraetzschmar, "Electoral Rules, Voter Mobilisation and the Islamist Landslide in the Saudi Municipal Elections of 2005", *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3.4 (2010), pp. 515–33.

⁶ During field trips in 2010–11, several semi-structured interviews were conducted with male/female entrepreneurs, many of whom participated as candidates in CCI elections. All interviews have been made anonymous at the request of the participants.

state.⁷ Indeed, despite their prominence and level of voice within the Saudi body politic, relatively little is known about the country's CCIs.⁸ Furthermore, with its focus on the limited experiences of Saudi women in electoral politics, the study adds empirical knowledge to the emerging literature on gender and political participation in the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It presents new data on CCI elections, including women's candidacies and voter turnout, and a first-hand account of the gender-specific obstacles that female contestants have faced during the election campaign. Both these aspects will prove useful in advancing our understanding of women's participation in regional electoral politics.

Following this introduction, the case study is positioned more broadly within the context of scholarship on women in Arab electoral politics, and more specifically within research on the obstacles/barriers to electoral entry and success. A brief account of the structures, functions and electoral rules governing Saudi CCIs is presented, whilst the core of the paper recounts the enfranchisement of businesswomen within the CCIs and explores the record of, and gender-specific obstacles to, women's participation in past chamber elections.

2 The study of women in Arab electoral politics

The subject of women in Arab politics/society has not only received scholarly attention from a wide range of academic disciplines, including gender and religious studies, political science, sociology and literature, but has also produced an ever-growing body of theoretical and empirical research on the subject. Within this literature, publications on women in Islam, Islamic/state feminism, women's rights and movements, gender/gender relations and social change are prominent, as are those dealing with various aspects of women's empowerment in the economic, social and political spheres.⁹ This latter body of scholarship on women's empowerment in the *political* sphere, and particularly academic output on women in Arab electoral politics, is considered particularly relevant to this case study and is therefore looked at in some detail below.

The point of departure for most scholarship on women in Arab electoral politics is the observation that, despite being granted full suffrage rights in virtually all Middle East and North Africa (MENA) countries,¹⁰ women politicians still face gender-specific barriers to electoral participation that prevent them from making any meaningful inroads into national/municipal assemblies and the directorships of civil associations. Indeed, although women make up over 50% of the population in countries across the region, their representation in these elected assemblies/organizations tends to fall well below this level. In some MENA countries, for instance, female candidates have captured less than 5% of all *elective* seats in recent municipal and

⁷ Recent scholarship on Saudi civil society includes, for example, Meijer and Aarts, *Saudi Arabia Between Conservatism, Accommodation and Reform* (2012); Montagu, "Civil Society and the Voluntary Sector in Saudi Arabia", *The Middle East Journal* 64.1 (2010), pp. 67–83; Matthiesen, *Diwaniyyas, Intellectual Salons and the Limits of Civil Society in Saudi Arabia* (2009).

⁸ For a more detailed treatment of Saudi CCIs, see, for example, Hertog, "The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia"; also Hamilton, "Straddler-Based Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Case of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry", *Thinking Gender Papers* (2010).

⁹ See, for example, Afshar (ed.), *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities and Struggles for Liberation* (1993); Abu-Lughod, *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East* (1998); Moghadam, *Modernizing Women: Gender and Social Change in the Middle East* (2003); Joseph and Slyomovics (eds), *Women and Power in the Middle East* (2001); Nazir and Tomppert (eds), *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (2005).

¹⁰ Saudi Arabia will be the last MENA state to introduce universal suffrage for its 2015 municipal elections.

parliamentary elections, at times not even winning a single seat.¹¹ In others, women's representation tends to be slightly higher (the regional average currently stands at 15.9%), but this is largely the result of affirmative action taken by governments, either through the introduction of legal quotas (reserved seats, candidate quotas) or the appointment of women representatives, wherever such appointments form part of an assembly's mode of constitution.¹²

According to Al-Maaitah et al., Sabbagh, and Zuhur,¹³ one of the principal barriers to women's political empowerment, and more specifically to their electoral participation, is the prevalence of gender attitudes that emphasize the domestic and subordinate role of women in society and view politics as an all-male privilege and an arena unsuited to female involvement.¹⁴ These gender attitudes — which, according to recent survey data, are still widely held in the Arab world¹⁵ — are thought to carry far-reaching consequences for women politicians at the ballot box. For instance, quantitative research by Jamal and Langohr reveals a strong correlation between gender attitudes and women's representation in Arab legislatures, with low scores on gender equality attitudes across the region accounting for much of the poor performance of women in past elections.¹⁶ This finding is also supported by numerous micro-level analyses on the subject that provide more detailed insights into the way negative attitudes towards gender equality translate into concrete challenges to women's electoral participation. Case studies by Al-Otaibi and Thomas, Amawi, Sabbagh, and Lambert show that such attitudes adversely affect female political hopefuls at various junctures in the electoral process, including considerations of electoral entry, the propensity of political parties/groupings to nominate women on their electoral slates and the list positions they are awarded (often at the bottom), as well as the likelihood of voters casting their ballots for female contestants. On this latter point, turnout figures suggest that across the region women contestants not only struggle to mobilize male voters, but also are often equally unsuccessful in rallying female voters behind their candidacies.¹⁷ According to Lambert, Al-Otaibi and Thomas, and AbuKhalil, this lack of solidarity amongst women might be explained

¹¹ Cases include the legislatures of Egypt (2012) and Kuwait (2009, 2012) and the Qatari Central Municipal Council (2007, 2011) [Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Women in National Parliaments*].

¹² Algeria, Jordan and Morocco recently introduced women's quotas, which have led to noticeable increases in the number of female MPs. In Bahrain and the UAE, where MPs are chosen through a combination of direct/indirect elections and appointment, the number of women representatives was increased through royal appointments [International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), *Quota Project: Global Database of Quotas for Women*; Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), *Women in National Parliaments*].

¹³ Al-Maaitah et al., "Arab Women and Political Development", *Journal of International Women's Studies* 12.3 (2011), pp. 7–26; Zuhur, "Women and Empowerment in the Arab World", *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25.4 (2003), pp. 17–38; Sabbagh, "The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation", in *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers*, eds Ballington and Karam (2005), pp. 52–71.

¹⁴ These negative attitudes towards gender equality are often informed by patriarchal structures/values and/or a narrow/conservative exegesis of religious texts [Jamal, *Democratic Governance and Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa* (2010); Soufi, "Parliamentary Democracy and the Representation of Women in Arab Countries", *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 2.2 (2009), pp. 259–62].

¹⁵ Recent *World Attitude Survey* data reveal, for instance, that a majority of men and women in the region continue to believe "men make better politicians" [Jamal, *Democratic Governance and Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, pp. 7–8].

¹⁶ Jamal and Langohr, "The Democratic Deficit and Gender Attitudes: Do Attitudes Towards Women's Roles Actually Affect Women's Rights and Levels of Democracy?", presented at *APSA Annual Meeting*, Aug.–Sept. 2007, pp. 5–12.

¹⁷ Al-Otaibi and Thomas, "Women Candidates and Arab Media: Challenging Conservatism in Bahraini Politics", *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture* 8.2 (2011), pp. 137–58; Amawi, "Against all Odds: Women Candidates in Jordan's 1997 Elections", in *From Patriarchy to Empowerment: Women's Participation, Movements and Rights in the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia*, ed. Moghadam (2007),

by the fact that in their electoral choices, female voters tend to follow the advice/instructions given by their husbands or other male family members, and/or that many of them harbour similar scepticism about the role of women in politics as some segments within the male population.¹⁸

In addition to these cultural barriers, women also face numerous socio-economic challenges that inhibit them from making full use of their participatory rights in Arab electoral politics. Problematizing the issue of adult literacy and education in the region, Abu Zayd, Sabbagh, and Schmitt-Thiel, for instance, show that high female illiteracy and low education rates not only limit women's political awareness and their overall likelihood of being politically active (with many women not being registered on the electoral register), but also make it difficult for women candidates to reach out to and/or mobilize (female) voters. These and other studies have also noted that women often lack the (economic) resources and financial independence necessary to contemplate entering politics. This is particularly true for women in low-income brackets and with limited social status, whose daily struggle for sustenance and family commitments leave them with neither the time nor the resources to consider any form of political involvement.¹⁹

Here, it is worth noting that — depending on local context — the prevalence/severity of any of the aforementioned obstacles can, of course, vary across time and space, thus accounting for variation in the experiences of women contestants in Arab elections. In the relatively affluent GCC states, for example, female poverty/hardship, illiteracy and/or lack of education are probably less of an issue than in many other regional states and hence are less likely to shape considerations of electoral entry and the prospects of electoral success. In these countries, the focus of enquiry is likely to rest more with key cultural (and institutional) challenges to women's participation. To this can be added variation both in the degree to which culture/religion affect public discourse and official policy on women's political participation across Arab states, and the types of culture-specific challenges women are likely to encounter at the electoral level. The former is manifest in policies on women's suffrage, whilst the latter, more specifically, concerns local differences in culture-specific norms, practices and policies and their impact on women's electoral participation. A case in point is the prohibition against *ikhtilāt* (gender-mixing) in the public realm which, as Van Geel points out, "has become a cornerstone of the Saudi's interpretation of Islam"²⁰ and, as such, official government policy. Strictly enforced in most parts of the Kingdom, it stipulates the physical segregation of men and women in all public buildings and spaces, including schools, universities, government and company offices and malls.²¹ Although conservative

pp. 40–57; Sabbagh, "The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation"; Lambert, "Political Reform in Qatar: Participation, Legitimacy and Security", *Middle East Policy* 18.1 (2011), pp. 89–101.

¹⁸ Lambert, "Political Reform in Qatar", pp. 92–3; Al-Otaibi and Thomas, "Woman Candidates and Arab Media", pp. 139–41; AbuKhalil, "Towards the Study of Women and Politics in the Arab World: The Debate and the Reality", *Feminist Issues* 13.1 (1993), p. 13.

¹⁹ Schmitt-Thiel, "The Role of Women in Transforming Middle Eastern and North African Societies", in *Bound to Cooperate: Europe and the Middle East II*, eds Hanelt and Moeller (2008), pp. 250–72; Sabbagh, "The Arab States: Enhancing Women's Political Participation"; Soufi, "Parliamentary Democracy and the Representation of Women in Arab Countries"; Ballington and Karam, *Women in Parliament: Beyond Numbers* (2005), pp. 39–44.

²⁰ Van Geel, "Whither the Saudi Woman? Gender Mixing Empowerment and Modernity", in *Saudi Arabia Between Conservatism, Accommodation and Reform*, eds Meijer and Aarts (2012), p. 57.

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of *ikhtilat* and the debates surrounding its authenticity in Islam, see Van Geel, "Whither the Saudi Woman?"; Meier, "Reform in Saudi Arabia: The Gender-Segregation Debate", *Middle East Policy* 17.4 (2010), pp. 80–100.

views on cultural/religious concepts such as *ikhṭilāṭ* or *khilwa*²² can be found across the MENA and may indeed find application in the private sphere and/or amongst certain groups in society, the Saudi case is unique in that the prohibition against gender-mixing in public remains official policy and is actively enforced by the authorities. At the electoral level, this prohibition against *ikhṭilāṭ* poses distinct challenges, not only for the administration of elections but also for any women candidate engaged in outreach and voter mobilization activities across the gender divide.

As will become apparent here, many of the (gender-specific) obstacles to women's participation highlighted above have been at play in the Saudi CCI elections, affecting the number of female entrants entering the race and their prospects at the ballot box. Here, as elsewhere in the Arabian Gulf, these obstacles revolve primarily around negative attitudes towards gender equality, as well as their effects on women's access to the informal electoral groups that dominated CCI elections until 2009, and their capacity to mobilize male/female voters in support of their candidacies. However, they also include government prohibitions against *ikhṭilāṭ*, which means that any effective mobilization of the electorally crucial male vote becomes difficult.

3 The CCIs: structures, functions and electoral rules

The Saudi CCIs are part of an emerging civil society that remains dominated by informal, familial and tribal groups/politics and is controlled by a powerful rentier state. Although there has been significant growth during the past two decades in the number of (often state-created) non-profit voluntary organizations, their autonomy of action remains circumscribed by the Saudi government, and their scope for civil engagement limited to the charitable sector and to professional/business interest representation. Activism in any field deemed political is prohibited, and political parties, trade unions and independent human rights organizations all remain banned.²³

Amongst the semi-autonomous civil associations in the Kingdom, the network of CCIs stands out, for both prestige and prominence. Their prominence arises from the fact that the chambers constitute some of the oldest and most established civil institutions, and because of the level of influence/voice they have attained over decades within the Saudi body politic. Representing the 'beating heart' of the private sector economy, CCIs have developed close (i.e. formal/interpersonal) links to numerous government ministries and officials and are formally consulted on pieces of economic legislation.²⁴ Moreover, several chambers — notably those in Riyadh and Jeddah — have been at the forefront of campaigns to reduce the gender gap in business and employment and to empower female entrepreneurs within the CCIs through direct participation in directorship elections. These latter efforts culminated in 2009 with the election of the first female deputy chairperson of the JCCI and were widely hailed in the local press as a significant step towards the empowerment of Saudi women more broadly.²⁵

At present there are over twenty CCIs in the Kingdom, each headed by a governing council and comprising several sectoral sub-committees and businesswomen's centres. Like business syndicates elsewhere, Saudi CCIs perform a host of functions, including the protection/promotion of

²² The notion of *khilwa* refers to "the meeting of one man and one woman in a space where there is no third person present" [Van Geel, "Whither the Saudi Woman?", p. 66].

²³ See The International Centre for Not-for-Profit Law, *NGO Law Monitor: Saudi Arabia.*, at www.icnl.org/research/monitor/saudiarabia.pdf.

²⁴ Hertog, "The New Corporatism in Saudi Arabia", pp. 254–5.

²⁵ Fakkar, "Lama Suleiman First Deputy Chairman of JCCI", *Arab News*, 8 Dec. 2009.

local business interests and the provision of dedicated member services. Institutionally affiliated to the Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MoCI), they also carry out several notary and licensing services on behalf of the Ministry itself.²⁶

All CCI governing boards are selected through a combination of direct elections by the local general membership (two-thirds of all seats) and ministerial appointment (the remaining third), and are based on equal representation of entrepreneurship in commerce and industry.²⁷ Until 2004–05, participation in these elections remained de facto confined to male CCI members, with female members being effectively disenfranchised by holding only limited voting rights (through male agents) and no candidacy rights.²⁸ As is discussed below, this only changed in 2005, with the granting of full suffrage rights to businesswomen in the Jeddah chamber.

Concerning the directorship elections themselves, the following points are important for this analysis. First, with political parties banned, elections are held on the basis of individual candidacies and voting rights, rather than being conferred on individual members, linked to ownership of a Commercial Registration (CR), the holder of which can be an individual shop owner, the board of a family company/corporation or a foreign investor. Although widely used in business syndicates around the world, this arrangement is problematic since it challenges the principle of ‘equality of the vote’ by giving multiple CR holders undue power to affect the outcome of CCI elections.²⁹ Second, since the inception of direct elections, two sets of voting rules have been used in CCI elections. Until 2009, elections were conducted under the so-called block vote, after which the system was changed to that of the ‘limited vote’.³⁰ Here, it is not necessarily the electoral reform per se that is significant; rather it is the manner in which the two voting systems affected the campaign dynamics, and as such the prospects of electoral entry to, and performance of, female contestants in CCI races. Given the provision of multiple votes, the block vote facilitated the formation of informal/tactical groups amongst (likeminded) candidates, which dominated the electoral arena in CCI contests up until its abrogation in 2009. Meanwhile, under the limited vote these incentives for cooperation were no longer given, being replaced by a heightened scramble for votes between fiercely individual competitors. As will be seen, although in different ways, the dynamics unfolding under both voting systems made it difficult for female contestants not only to enter the race, but also to compete successfully against male candidates for a seat on a CCI governing board.

4 Businesswomen in CCI elections: from proxy voting to full enfranchisement

The struggle for women’s suffrage in the CCIs constitutes part of a growing campaign by Saudi activists to advance women’s rights across a host of areas, including personal status matters, employment/education and political participation. However, hampered by the legal/de facto restrictions imposed on political activism and hitherto limited coordination amongst women

²⁶ Hamilton, “Straddler-Based Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia”, pp. 3–4; Law 1400/40/30 on the “System of Chambers of Commerce and Industry and Its Executive Regulations”.

²⁷ Hamilton, “Straddler-Based Gender Reform in Saudi Arabia”, p. 4.

²⁸ Interview with CCI candidate no. 1, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010. See also Akeel, “Women Make Gains Despite Challenges”, *Arab News*, 30 Dec. 2005.

²⁹ In Saudi Arabia, some family conglomerates (Jamjoon, Bin Laden, Olayan) hold hundreds of CRs and thus have an equal number of ballots to cast [Interviews with the deputy CCI chairman, a businessman, and a male CCI candidate, Saudi Arabia, May 2011].

³⁰ The block vote allows voters to cast up to as many votes as there are seats to be elected, whilst the limited vote restricts the number of votes per voter to just one. In both systems, candidates are elected on a plurality basis.

activists/organizations, and differently from in the west, this campaign is still in its infancy.³¹ It is also marked by the rejection of a secular/feminist rights discourse. Instead, most (though not all) rights activists subscribe to a gradualist approach to empowerment which, by drawing on religious scriptures, strives to place women's rights firmly within the parameters of Islam, thereby avoiding the negative connotations widely associated in Saudi society with Western-style 'individualism' and 'female emancipation'.³²

Regarding the CCIs, the history of women's enfranchisement can be traced back to 2004, the year the Riyadh chamber granted its female members the right to vote in, though not stand for, elections to the governing board without the need of a male agent.³³ This was a significant departure from common practice in Saudi CCIs, which until then had effectively barred women from casting a ballot by mandating the need to do so through male agents only. The final breakthrough in women's suffrage rights was achieved a year later at the JCCI which, by permitting women to not only vote in, but also stand for, directorship elections, paved the way for similar moves in chambers across the Kingdom. The decision itself was taken by MoCI just before the 2005 poll and followed some intense lobbying by prominent entrepreneurs and female JCCI members who argued that the election law was gender-neutral, and that hence nothing in the CCI regulations explicitly banned women from running in governing board elections.³⁴

Although it is difficult to claim with certainty, it seems that the confluence of domestic agency at the national, provincial and local levels was very important in producing this Jeddah breakthrough. In countries across the Arab world, as Langohr and Jamal remark, women-friendly policies have mostly been pushed through by reformist autocrats, often against stiff resistance from traditional/conservative segments in society and politics.³⁵ This is also the case in the Saudi context, where demands for women's suffrage fell on receptive ears not only with King 'Abdullah, under whose watch the country has seen the most significant political reforms to date, but also with a reform-minded political leadership in Makkah Province and MoCI. According to my research participants, the significance of these two latter political players in advancing the rights of businesswomen cannot be overemphasized. Indeed, it was the active involvement and support of the late Prince 'Abdul-Mājid bin 'Abdul Azīz, the then governor of Makkah Province (2000–7), that made the establishment of the first businesswomen centre in Jeddah in 2002 possible, and whose support was crucial in convincing MoCI to grant full suffrage rights to female entrepreneurs.³⁶

Of significance too was the vocal support received at that time from within the JCCI governing board and other businessmen in the municipality for women's suffrage rights. True to its reputation as the most cosmopolitan city in the Kingdom (because of its unique exposure to different peoples/cultures during Hajj and 'Umra), local businesswomen found themselves in a position

³¹ Doumato, "Saudi Arabia"; Wagner, "Saudi-Islamic Feminist Movement: A Struggle for Male Allies and the Right Female Voice", *Peace and Conflict Monitor* (2009).

³² Interviews with head of businesswomen centre in local CCI and female CCI candidates nos 3 and 4, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011.

³³ Anon., "Saudi Businesswomen Made History Yesterday by Casting Their Votes for the First Time in the Board Election of the Riyadh Chamber", *Arab News*, 30 Nov. 2004.

³⁴ Interviews with a former CCI chairman, an appointed CCI board member and female CCI candidates nos 2 and 5, Saudi Arabia, May 2011. See also Ghafour, "JCCI Gives Businesswomen Full Ballot Privileges", *Arab News*, 17 Sept. 2005.

³⁵ Langohr and Jamal, "The Improvement of Women's Rights in the Arab World: The Importance of Governing Authorities", in *Governance in the Middle East and North Africa: A Handbook*, ed. Kadhim (2012).

³⁶ Interviews with head of businesswomen's centre in local CCI and female CCI candidates nos 1, 2 and 3, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011.

whereby they could draw on critical backing in their struggle for enfranchisement from prominent male members of the Jeddah business community. Cases in point include former JCCI chairmen ‘Adil Faqīh (2003–05) and Ṣalīḥ al-Turkī (2005–09) who both lobbied strongly for greater female involvement within the chamber,³⁷ and prominent businessmen and JCCI board members Muḥammad al-Faḍl and Muḥammad Jamīl, both of whom considered the possibility of selecting businesswomen on their ticket for the 2005 elections and encouraged female members more broadly to register their candidacies with the election commission. Importantly, this encouragement was expressed prior to the eventual decision taken by MoCI to revoke the status quo of male-only suffrage. Whilst hard to verify, it is likely that this outspoken support at the heart of the Jeddah chamber for women’s suffrage rights — together with consent from ‘high above’ — greatly facilitated MoCI’s decision to open governing board elections to female candidacies.

5 Businesswomen voters and candidates: performance and obstacles

How have Saudi businesswomen fared in CCI elections since the extending of full suffrage rights in 2005? As Table I indicates, the record of women’s participation in these elections has so far been rather subdued, with only a limited number of businesswomen making use of their newly won participatory rights. For instance, available figures on turnout show a significant discrepancy between numbers of eligible/registered and actual female voters. In some chambers businesswomen seem to have stayed away from the polling stations altogether, whilst in others only a fraction of eligible female voters cast a ballot, as, for instance, in Jeddah and Riyadh.

It is evident then that female CR holders have thus far stayed away from CCI elections, despite the considerable efforts made at the time by businesswomen activists/candidates in chambers across the Kingdom to mobilize the female vote and the prospect of electing women candidates onto hitherto male-only governing boards. Certainly, there was excitement in some quarters of the business community, not just amongst women entrepreneurs, about the expansion of suffrage rights, and there was no shortage of effort by activist businesswomen themselves to highlight the importance of the female vote in the press, and to educate women about, and mobilize them around their hard-won participatory rights through talks/workshops at businesswomen’s centres across the Kingdom.³⁸ But as the above figures indicate, these efforts have, as yet, failed to translate into any significant mobilization of the female vote in CCI elections across the country (Table I).

With regard to women candidacies, Table II shows that since 2005 businesswomen have put themselves forward as contestants in a handful of CCIs only, and that in consecutive elections their numbers have dwindled rather than risen. Again the evidence available is limited, but it appears that since being granted full suffrage rights, women candidates have only run for seats on the boards of the Jeddah, Eastern Provinces, Makkah and Riyadh chambers. In two other chambers, Yanbu’ and Madinah, businesswomen initially registered their candidacies, but subsequently withdrew for reasons discussed below. In 2013, businesswomen have put themselves forward as contestants in only six of more than twenty extant CCIs. Of these six chambers, businesswomen won seats on the JCCI governing board only: two in 2005 and one in 2009. Furthermore, there is little indication that women’s appetite for electoral participation has increased since

³⁷ Interviews with female CCI candidates nos 1 and 2 and a former CCI chairman, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011. See also Anon., “Faqeeh Wants Businesswomen to Take Active Part in JCCI”, *Arab New*, 29 May 2009.

³⁸ Interviews with female CCI candidates nos 1 and 2, Jan. 2010 and May 2011. See also Al-Jasseem, “Election Workshop for Women”, *Saudi Gazette*, 29 June 2008; Zawawi, “Focus, Unite and Win over Men’s Trust”, *Saudi Gazette*, 6 May 2008.

Table I: Female turnout figures in selected CCI elections.

CCI election	Eligible/registered voters			No. female voters		No. all voters	
	Total	Women voters	% women	Total	% registered women	Total	% women of all voters
Jeddah, 2005	21,000	1,400	6.7	~100	7.3	~4,000	2.5
Eastern Province, 2006	12,000	~417	3.5	42	10.1	4,200	1.0
Madinah, 2006	3,300	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Riyadh, 2008	41,000	~2,750	6.7	~85	3.1	n/a	n/a
Qasim, 2008	5,000	n/a	n/a	0	0.0	508	0.0
Yanbu', 2008	n/a	n/a	n/a	93	n/a	1,600	5.8
'Ar'ar, 2009	788	n/a	n/a	0	0.0	188	0.0
Eastern Province, 2009	15,000	~500	3.4	~60	12.0	8,650	0.7
Jeddah, 2009	~30,000	~1,600	5.3	~160	~10.0	6,414	2.5
Makkah, 2009	5,000	~800	16.0	n/a	n/a	2,000	n/a
Tabuk, 2009	4,365	n/a	n/a	0	0.0	691	0.0
Hā'il Province, 2010	3,331	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1,216	n/a

Source: Figures obtained through Saudi-based contact from CCIs across the country and various local press reports, including from *Arab News* and *Saudi Gazette*.

2005. If anything, the available figures highlight a significant decline in the number of women's candidacies, which is particularly noticeable in the JCCI where their numbers have tumbled from seventeen candidates in 2005 to a mere seven in 2009.

In acknowledging the relatively recent enfranchisement of female CCI members, two tentative conclusions can be drawn from the above figures. First, the electoral fortunes of businesswomen in CCI contests are so far not keeping up with their growing involvement in the Saudi economy and their recent successes in challenging gender-specific regulatory obstacles to women in employment/business. Over the past decade, Saudi women have emerged as entrepreneurs in a wide range of business sectors, holding a sizeable stake in the local economy and offering important employment opportunities for the growing number of highly skilled female entrants into the labour market.³⁹ In Jeddah in particular, businesswomen have also been at the forefront of attempts to strike down gender-differentiated business regulations and other gender-specific obstacles to conducting business in the Kingdom, in some cases with remarkable success. For instance, lobbying efforts by businesswomen and their male backers with the Saudi government have helped to scrap the requirement for female-run enterprises to hire male managers (*mudīr*), have eased restrictions on *ikhthilāt* in business settings and expanded business opportunities for women into sectors previously unavailable to female entrepreneurs (e.g. retail and construction).⁴⁰ But despite these advances in the field of business, female entrepreneurs remain woefully

³⁹ Doumato, "Saudi Arabia"; Alturki and Braswell, *Businesswomen in Saudi Arabia*.

⁴⁰ Despite these advances, women face numerous ongoing gender-specific obstacles in employment/business. These include restrictions on their mobility (ban on driving, lack of public transport) and the professions they can enter, prohibitions against gender-mixing in the workplace and the requirement to obtain permission from male guardians to work [Ibid.].

Table II: Female candidates and board members since 2005 in selected CCIs.

CCI	Year	Elections			Governing board	
		Total candidates	Women candidates	Women winners	Appointed women	Total women
Abhā	2009	26	0	0	0	0
Al-Bāha	2008	16	0	0	0	0
Al-Gurayyat	2009	n/a	n/a	0	0	0
Al-Hasā	2009	20	0	0	0	0
Al-Jouf	2009	15	0	0	0	0
Al-Majma'a	2011	14	0	0	0	0
Al-Zulfi	2007	12	0	0	0	0
'Ar'ar	2009	10	0	0	0	0
Eastern Province	2006	(53) ^a 46	6	0	0	0
	2009	36	(4) 3	0	2	2
Hafr Albatan	2011	15	0	0	0	0
Hā'il Province	2010	16	0	0	0	0
Jeddah	2005	72	16	2	2	4
	2009	63	7	1	2	3
Madinah ^b	2006	34	(2)	n/a	n/a	n/a
	2006	25	0	0	0	0
Makkah	2008	(64) 29	(4) 1	0	0	0
	2009	51	5	0	0	0
Riyadh	2008	(44) 27	3	0	0	0
Tabūk	2009	19	0	0	0	0
T'ā'if	2006	18	0	0	0	0
Qasīm	2008	27	0	0	0	0
Yanbu'	2008	(13) 12	(1)	0	0	0

^a Numbers in brackets refer to female candidacies before the withdrawal/disqualification of some.

^b Elections scheduled for 13 May 2006, but postponed by MoCI.

Sources: Figures obtained from numerous local Saudi press reports, including from the *Arab News* and *Saudi Gazette*.

under-represented on the governing boards of the local syndicates that are meant to represent and defend their sectoral interests towards the Saudi government.

Second, unlike other parts of the Arab world where governments have used affirmative action to increase women's representation in state institutions, MoCI has thus far opted not to use its power of appointment to rectify the on-going under-representation of female entrepreneurs on CCI governing boards. Indeed, MoCI did not act on calls in 2005 by some businesswomen to introduce a women's quota for CCI elections,⁴¹ nor has it since used its powers to increase their presence on the chambers' governing bodies beyond the JCCI and the Eastern Province Chamber of Commerce and Industry (EPCCI).⁴² This seems to suggest that MoCI has taken a cautious approach towards women's empowerment in the commercial sector, selectively supporting the inclusion of female board members wherever the local business community appears receptive towards this step, but showing little readiness to do so in the more conservative CCIs.⁴³

How, then, is one to understand the hitherto poor representation of businesswomen candidates in CCI elections and on their governing boards? One way is to analyse the obstacles they

⁴¹ Al-Hakeem, "Saudi Female Candidates Call for Chamber Seat Quota", *Gulf News*, 19 Nov. 2005.

⁴² See Table II.

⁴³ Apparently, when asked by MoCI, most CCI boards rejected the inclusion of appointed female members. Interview with female CCI candidate no. 1, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010.

encounter in nominating themselves as contestants and during the election campaign. In any competitive election, there are many variables that determine who runs for office and how, and who comes out a winner and who loses. Many of these variables are inherently gender blind; that is, they shape the nature of electoral entry and prospects of victory, regardless of whether the political hopeful is male or female. Amongst others, and all other factors being equal, these include a country's party/election laws, the popularity/credibility of the contestants, the availability of sufficient resources to run a competitive campaign, and the necessary know-how and past experiences related to the art of electioneering.

According to my research respondents, many of the variables noted above resonate with the experiences of contestants in past CCI elections; most of them confirmed that questions of funding, popularity and levels of familiarity with the electoral process all play into a candidate's electoral fortunes. However, the same research participants also noted that these broader determinants of electoral entry/success are often accompanied by a distinct set of problems that have blighted CCI elections ever since their inception and that have adversely affected the fairness/competitiveness of the electoral process. Key amongst these problems are widespread instances of vote buying, the absence of a legal cap on campaign spending (enabling the better-off to pump millions of Saudi *riyals* into their campaigns) and the presence of large family-run business conglomerates in many of the country's chambers which, by virtue of their elevated voting power (with some holding CRs in the hundreds) and extensive links to local business partners, are able to exercise disproportionate sway over the electoral process.⁴⁴ Whilst benefiting some candidates, mostly those sponsored by big family enterprises, there are many others whose electoral fortunes are impeded by these electoral conditions. These include the resource-poor(er) contestants, the electoral novices and the lone business owners (holding single CRs), none of whom are able to match the campaign machinery (company headquarters, staff and resources) and capacity for mass mobilization (trade/business links) available to the 'heavyweight' candidates in the race. This demographic of contestants also includes many of the female candidates who have put themselves forward since 2005, and who share with their male counterparts similarly tight financial constraints and limited experience with, and knowledge of, running a successful campaign.⁴⁵

These challenges apart, businesswomen candidates are faced with yet another set of distinctly gender-specific and culture-bound obstacles to electoral participation. These relate to social norms/attitudes that shape a nation's perceptions about gender roles and relations, and thus the personal status/rights women enjoy in society. In the Saudi context, these perceptions are rooted in a mix of patriarchal values and the strictures of Wahhabi Islam, in which women are prescribed a position subordinate to men in society and politics, and must confine themselves to the domestic sphere as daughters, wives and mothers. At the level of governance, these gender conceptions are expressed in judicial/administrative structures and regulations that prohibit *ikhṭilāṭ* in public and the work place, treat women in law as legal minors, enforce full-cover veiling for women outside the home and limit the professions in which they may work.⁴⁶ Certainly, under the current reformist King, Saudi women have experienced a gradual loosening of gender-specific restrictions, particularly in the fields of education, business and employment,

⁴⁴ Interviews with deputy CCI chairman, a former CCI chairman, a male CCI candidate, a local businessman and female CCI candidates nos 1 and 5, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011. See also Al-Hakeem, "Businesswoman Complains of Vote buying", *Gulf News*, 30 Nov. 2005; Fakkar and al-Tamimi, "Veterans Emerge Favorites to Retain Seats on JCCI board", *Arab News*, 15 Oct. 2009.

⁴⁵ Interviews with female CCI candidates nos 1, 3 and 5 and an appointed CCI board member; Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011. See also Wahab, "EP Chamber Elections: Women Still at a Disadvantage", *Arab News*, 18 Dec. 2009.

⁴⁶ Doumato, "Saudi Arabia".

alongside a more general ‘de-taboo-ization’ of the issue of women’s rights in public discourse.⁴⁷ In practice, however, many of these tentative steps towards gender parity have met stiff resistance from more conservative/tribal quarters in society, not least with regard to women’s involvement in domestic politics.⁴⁸

Within the CCI framework, this anti-suffragist backlash has been evident at all levels of the electoral process, shaping considerations of electoral entry, voting intentions/behaviour, the nature of electioneering and prospects of election victory. For one, it is likely to help explain the low numbers of female voters/candidacies in past elections, particularly in the more conservative corners of the Kingdom. Indeed, many businesswomen adhering to prevailing societal norms may themselves have hesitated to partake in electoral politics, since this would bring with it public exposure as well as prospects of gender-mixing on CCI directorships. This hesitancy might also have been reinforced by pressures from family/community members and religious scholars to refrain from electoral participation. Although limited, there is evidence in support of these assertions. For instance, in recent JCCI and EPCCI elections, prominent conservative ulema and chamber members rallied against the participation of businesswomen, labelling their candidacies as an assault on female chastity and attempting to capture conservative majorities on the chambers’ governing boards to prevent further ‘erosion’ of the status quo. Both chambers also received formal complaints from members of the public, asserting that *ikhṭilāṭ* on CCI governing boards was in violation of Shari‘a.⁴⁹

Moreover, during the Yanbu‘ chamber’s poll in 2008, the only female candidate in one of the electoral groups was forced to withdraw her candidacy when it became apparent that her presence on the list endangered the electoral prospects of her fellow male contestants; similarly, in the Makkah Chamber of Commerce (MCCI) elections that year, three of the original four women contestants dropped out of the race, citing the lack of social/family support for their candidacies.⁵⁰

The Yanbu‘ example highlights yet another barrier to electoral entry that aspiring female contestants have had to overcome, particularly in CCI elections run under the block vote. As noted earlier, this voting system facilitated the development of *informal* electoral groups which dominated CCI elections during the 1990s and early 2000s and functioned as de facto gatekeepers to elected office.⁵¹ Empirically, this ‘gatekeeper function’ was evident from the fact that throughout this period very few independent candidates succeeded in winning seats on CCI governing boards, since for the most part they either went to all members of one electoral group or to representatives of several such groups. Although further research on this matter is required, it appears that the success of electoral groups over independent candidates was based largely on their ability to pool votes between contestants and on their composition, which often consisted of representatives of the larger business conglomerates in the locality.⁵²

⁴⁷ Doran, “The Saudi Paradox”, *Foreign Affairs* 83.1 (2004), pp. 35–51; Doumato, “Saudi Arabia”.

⁴⁸ Anon., “Saudi Arabia’s Top Cleric Condemns Calls for Women’s Rights”, *The New York Times*, 22 Jan. 2004; Anon., “Saudi Clerics Warn Against Calls for Increased Rights for Women: Campaign Denounced as Anti-Islamic”, *Ottawa Citizen*, 13 Sept. 2003.

⁴⁹ US Govt, “Religious Conservatives, Tribal Members and One Female Incumbent Win Jeddah Chamber of Commerce Elections Amid Press Reports of Vote Buying”, 15 Oct. 2009; Jawahar, “Women Let Down by Female Voters in Chamber Elections”, *Saudi Gazette*, 13 Jan. 2010; Anon., “Women’s Participation in Chamber Poll Antagonizes a Few in Eastern Province”, *Arab News*, 14 Nov. 2009; Fakkār, “Conservatives Prep for JCCI Elections”, *Arab News*, 9 Aug. 2009.

⁵⁰ Sheqdar, “Ministry Suspends MCCI Election”, *Arab News*, 22 Oct. 2008; Al-Sheikh, “SMS Campaign Forces Woman Out of YCCI Race”, *Arab News*, 19 Nov. 2008.

⁵¹ On the predominance of electoral groups until 2009, see, for example, Akeel, “All Eyes on JCCI as Historic Voting Begins Today”, *Arab News*, 26 Nov. 2005; Anon., “ACCI Gets New Board after Vote Riven by Clashes”, *Arab News*, 3 Jan. 2002.

For businesswomen seeking elected office, the predominance of these electoral groups proved challenging, for whilst they offered the most promising electoral route to a chamber's governing board, few were actually willing to offer female contestants a place on their slates. Indeed, apart from Jeddah, where in 2005 several businesswomen were invited to join some of the rival groups, female contestants failed to gain inclusion in any of the electoral groups that dominated CCI elections between 2005 and 2009, including those in Riyadh, the Eastern Province and Makkah.⁵³ Consequentially, female political hopefuls had to think about running either as independents or as part of all-women electoral groups, as happened on two rare occasions during the 2005 JCCI and 2006 EPCCI elections.⁵⁴ However, neither of these alternative routes proved electorally rewarding since, of all the women contesting elections under the block vote system, the only two success stories involved female entrepreneurs who had been invited to join one of the pre-existing electoral groups: Nashwa Taher and Lama Suleiman. They had run under the umbrella of the pro-reform *Le-Jeddah* group, which, by including several top Jeddah businessmen, carried the most mobilizational power and proceeded to win all seats in the 2005 poll.⁵⁵ Highlighting the importance of such group affiliation for women contestants, Taher acknowledged at the time that "... you need the support of the men, so when you run within a party of men, they can represent you in male meetings, they will also defend you and your cause in the presence of other men and voters".⁵⁶ To this she and other female candidates added the fact that this group membership was vital in providing female candidates with the numbers of (male) votes necessary to carry them through to election victory. One of them commented that

When you are in a group, you know you are getting votes of others. I am getting the votes of Saleh Al-Turki, I am getting the votes of Mohamed Al-Fadl, I am getting the votes of Lama Suleiman. I am getting the votes of other people, because we are a group and they believe in us as a group....⁵⁷

Nevertheless, the possibility — albeit slim — of female hopefuls joining male-led electoral groups, and thus of being carried by their (male) support base, ceased to exist with the introduction of the limited vote in 2009. As noted above, under the new rules the number of votes per CR holder was reduced to just one. Whether intended or not, the consequence of this reform was a fundamental change in the nature of CCI election campaigns, with limited cooperation amongst candidates being replaced by a heightened scramble between contestants for a CR holder's single vote. According to several of the female research respondents, this new voting system not only led to increased instances of vote buying, but was detrimental to the electoral fortunes of female contestants, who stood few chances of mobilizing the necessary (male) support to run a successful campaign on their own.

Beyond the simple lack of campaign 'know-how' and/or the availability of sufficient resources and business contacts, there are several reasons for this dearth of competitiveness. Part of the fabric of Saudi society, they again relate to prevailing attitudes towards, and the

⁵² Interviews with deputy CCI chairman, a former CCI chairman and female CCI candidate no. 2, Saudi Arabia, May 2011.

⁵³ Ibid. and interviews with deputy CCI chairman, a former CCI chairman and female CCI candidates no. 1 and 2, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011. See also Al-Sheikh, "SMS Campaign Forces Woman Out of YCCI Race"; Krane, "Voters Reject Women Candidates in Dammam Chamber of Commerce Election, Saudi Arabia", Associated Press, 2006.

⁵⁴ Anon., "Candidates in Chamber Polls Hope to Blaze Trail for Saudi Women", *Agence France Presse*, 12 Nov. 2004; Wahab, "Women Pessimistic about EP Chamber Polls", *Arab News*, 4 Nov. 2009.

⁵⁵ Interviews with female CCI candidates nos 1 and 2, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011.

⁵⁶ Quotation taken from Zawawi, "Focus, Unite and Win over Men's Trust".

⁵⁷ Interview with female CCI candidate no. 1, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010.

rules governing gender roles/relations in the Kingdom, and the way in which barriers are raised against successful outreach and voter mobilization activities for women candidates. This, of course, begins with the more fundamental challenge of overcoming conservative gender images and of enticing male voters to contemplate casting a ballot for female contestants. But it also includes more tangible barriers, such as the prohibition against/limitations of *ikhṭilāṭ* in the public domain which, by denying women candidates physical access to all-male gatherings/public spaces, precludes any effective face-to-face interaction with, and campaigning for votes amongst, most of the CCI voters. For example, in CCI elections much of the critical last-minute lobbying for votes takes place during polling days, with separate days being allocated for male and female voters. It is common practice during these days for candidates and their teams to erect tents outside the polling station, where they receive supporters before escorting them to the entrance of the voting area, in the hope that this will ‘seal the deal’. Women candidates can do this during the designated female voting day, but must rely on male relations/staff to undertake this vital last-minute lobbying for them on the male polling days, which, as several contestants remarked, was a distinct disadvantage.⁵⁸

Certainly, women candidates have attempted to compensate for this lack of direct access to male voters (1) through extensive use of alternative means of communication (including telephony and online media); (2) by lobbying the wives and daughters of prospective voters and (3) through efforts to mobilize the female vote itself.⁵⁹ So far, however, it is open to question as to whether this latter strategy in particular can make up for capturing a sizeable slice of the male electorate. Not only are there still far fewer female than male entrepreneurs in Saudi Arabian CCIs and even fewer willing to cast a ballot, but because — to judge by experiences elsewhere in the GCC — those who do vote will not necessarily place women’s solidarity above all other voting considerations.

6 Conclusion

Saudi Arabia has made some (frustratingly slow) progress towards reducing the gender gap over the past decade, particularly in business and education, but also in the realm of domestic politics. As of 2013, women have gained full suffrage rights in numerous associational elections and have won inclusion in the country’s Majlis al-Shūra and participatory rights in the upcoming municipal elections of 2015. And despite being limited in numbers, women have participated in several associational polls, even winning seats on the governing boards of some civil organizations. This is no mean feat for the advancement of women’s political rights in a country that remains governed by the twin pillars of Islamic scripture and a monarchical regime that provides few meaningful avenues for citizens to participate in politics.

The obvious question remains, of course, whether the attainment of suffrage rights will signal a more substantive breakthrough in women’s *political* rights and help transform their role in the Saudi body politic. In the longer term, the potential for doing so is certainly present, given that future elections will offer improved opportunities for women’s rights activists/candidates publicly to challenge existing gender attitudes and show the country that women politicians are as qualified and able as their male counterparts to join in the policy-making process. At present, however, this optimistic assertion has yet to materialize. Indeed, if past electoral experiences, CCI and otherwise, are anything to go by, transforming hard-won suffrage rights into successful

⁵⁸ Interviews with female CCI candidate no. 5. See also US Govt, “Allegations of Vote Buying and Sorcery on Eve of Jeddah Chamber of Commerce Elections”, 10 Aug. 2009.

⁵⁹ Interviews with female CCI candidates nos 1, 3 and 4, Saudi Arabia, Jan. 2010 and May 2011.

participation by women in future municipal, and possibly even national-level elections, will remain a formidable challenge. This is not only due to the novelty of these rights and the inexperience of women voters and candidates at future polls, but because of the resistance to any formal inclusion of women in domestic politics, particularly amongst some ulema and conservative/tribal anti-suffragist segments in society.

As highlighted above, these forces have lobbied strenuously, and with some success, against women's participation in CCI elections, and have managed to capture majorities on some of the chambers governing boards, including the JCCI in 2009.⁶⁰ They have also shown their electoral muscle in past municipal elections, easily beating their less well-organized pro-reform rivals in towns and cities across the Kingdom. In the 2005 municipal poll, for instance, they managed to capture most, and even in some cases all, of the elective council seats in the capital Riyadh, the eastern cities of Dammam and Qatif, the western municipalities of Jeddah, Makkah, Medina and Taif, and the northern city of Tabuk.⁶¹ The proven electoral potency of these conservative forces and their negative views about the role of women in politics therefore constitute the most immediate challenge to women's electoral participation, a challenge that if not met by successful cooperation and better organization amongst the country's pro-reform forces may ultimately lead to a roll-back, rather than an expansion, of women's participatory rights.

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⁶⁰ See, for example, Fakkar, "Conservatives Prep for JCCI Elections"; US Govt, "Religious Conservatives, Tribal Members and one Female Incumbent Win Jeddah Chamber of Commerce Elections".

⁶¹ Kraetzschmar, "Electoral Rules, Voter Mobilisation and the Islamist Landslide", p. 526; Menoret, "The Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia 2005: First Steps on a Democratic Path", *Arab Reform Brief*, pp. 4–5.

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