

Abolish 153 campaign founder speaks out: Provision form of indirect, structural violence against women

**ABOLISH
ARTICLE
153**

Sheikha Lulu Al-Sabah, founding member of the Abolish 153 campaign, spoke to Kuwait Times about the movement, its goals and progress. Here are some excerpts:

Kuwait Times: What is Abolish 153 and what is the main goal of this campaign?

Sheikha Lulu Al-Sabah: The main objective of this campaign is to raise awareness about and ultimately abolish Article 153 of the Kuwaiti penal code, which allows for the killing of mothers, daughters, sisters and wives based on honor. While lobbying for changing the law in Kuwait, the campaign hopes to form coalitions across Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Arab countries where similar laws exist and transform the Abolish movement into a regional demand.

Kuwait Times: To what extent is honor killing prevalent in Kuwait? Is it true that it has a reduced sentence?

Sheikha Lulu: Many people believe that we have far fewer cases than in other Arab countries such as Jordan. However, there has been a 20-year campaign in Jordan to report these cases in the crime section of the newspapers, which means that such cases are better reported than they are in Kuwait. This campaign was spearheaded by award-winning journalist and human rights activist Rana Al-Husseini, who spoke at our symposium at the American University of Kuwait (AUK) in November.

Kuwait has signed a number of significant human rights conventions and treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (1966); the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979); and the Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). There are many laws that exist in

lawmakers in their decision to assist us. Therefore, conducting a survey in Kuwait around attitudes to Article 153 will help us both in terms of data and numerical evidence.

Domestic violence

Kuwait Times: Why do you think domestic violence is widespread in Kuwait despite a high degree of education, along with the fact that women have obtained many civil rights and reached high vocational positions?

Sheikha Lulu: We live in a patriarchal environment, where several laws exist that are highly discriminatory towards women. When a system legalizes the dominance of one gender over another, violence in society becomes inevitable. A man can beat his wife for disciplinary purposes, and if the wife contacts the police, they cannot and will not interfere. Until last year, when they passed a law to protect abused children, health workers had to send children back to their abusive parents with bruises and scratches on their bodies. The problem is that child abuse, domestic violence and honor killings are not discussed within society. It is a place where taboo topics are swept under the carpet. These are serious problems that need to be addressed on a community level and at a judicial level.

- Article 153 is both unconstitutional and against Islamic sharia law
- No country can call itself progressive in the 21st century with such a law
- When a system legalizes the dominance of one gender over another, violence in society becomes inevitable
- Education is the most important thing, because we are fighting a mindset
- Our campaign hosts an annual exhibition in Kuwait on May 16 to raise awareness and fundraise for our cause

Kuwait Times: Why this particular time to talk about this Article?

Sheikha Lulu: Despite obtaining our political rights in Kuwait in 2005, there are no female MPs in parliament. Maybe there would have been a push to abolish this law earlier if we had more female representation. This Article suddenly garnered attention because we started this campaign in late 2014. The campaign commenced with an awareness campaign through social media channels and incorporated a variety of activities to increase our outreach. These activities include art exhibitions, lectures, panel discussions, fundraising dinners and outreach programs within local communities.

The fundamental belief behind the Abolish 153 campaign is that violence against women, and violence legislation, are ultimately cultural products, and therefore our advocacy and lobbying work must be accompanied by activities that culturally

challenge the rhetoric of violence and provide an alternative dialogue. Our aim is to create a safe environment where mothers, daughters, sisters and wives are legally protected from all forms of violence, and raise awareness around the existence of these violent practices and the legislation that sanctions them.

Kuwait Times: The law identifies the fine value in the old Indian rupee currency. What is the equivalent value in dinars?

Sheikha Lulu: Article 153 was added to Kuwait's penal code in 1960. At that time, it was the equivalent to KD 225. At current conversion rates, it is KD 14. I find it very disturbing that there is a monetary value placed on a woman's life.

Kuwait Times: What is the similarity of this Article in the Kuwaiti penal code with other countries in the Arab world?

Sheikha Lulu: Tunisia and Lebanon abolished this law, while Syria and Morocco amended theirs. Other countries that have such a law include Algeria (Article 279), Egypt (Article 237), Iraq (Article 409), Jordan (Article 340), Libya (Article 375), Oman (Article 252), United Arab Emirates (Article 334) and Yemen (Article 232).

Double standards

Kuwait Times: What made you decide to start this campaign? What provoked you?

Sheikha Lulu: I grew up in Kuwait, and as a young woman, I was very angered by the double standards that exist in this region. I have always strongly believed in gender equality. Dr Alanoud Al-Sharekh made me aware of the existence of this law and its ramifications. I was eager to get involved as I understood that we cannot raise girls in this country while such violent laws exist, nor can we protect girls and women by building shelters until this law is abolished.

Kuwait Times: Are there any other people in this campaign?

Sheikha Lulu: Alanoud Al-Sharekh, Sundus Hamza, Sheikha Al-Nafisi and Amira Behbehani. All their bios are on our website www.abolish153.org

Kuwait Times: We know that education is an integral tool to disprove such ideas. What are your plans to raise awareness?



Artworks displayed during an art exhibition that the Abolish 153 campaign held recently at the JAMM Art Gallery in Dubai.

Sheikha Lulu: Education is the most important thing, because we are fighting a mindset, a way of thinking. To reach the women that are most affected by this law, we will initiate a social outreach program that will target female tribal leaders. We will visit these women in their own communities in the outer districts and empower them to educate their communities about this law and its implications.

Kuwait Times: In every country there is a mix of contradictions. We see, for example, in Kuwait, a contradiction in the law that could threaten the lives of many innocent women, while on the other hand, the government is keen to burnish the role of women in the society and highlight it to the world!



Sheikha Lulu: It is for this reason that our campaign hosts an annual exhibition in Kuwait on May 16 to raise awareness and fundraise for our cause. Last year we held an exhibition at the Contemporary Art Platform on May 16 to mark 10 years since women obtained their political rights. This year we will host our exhibition at the FA gallery on May 16 and it will include artists from Egypt, Libya, Jordan, Syria and Iran. We also hosted an exhibition at the JAMM Art Gallery in Dubai in late April, which included works by seven Kuwaiti artists among others from the GCC.

Kuwait Times: What has the Abolish 153 campaign achieved so far? Are you progressing?

Sheikha Lulu: Yes, we have seen some progress. We have a number of MPs, judges, lawyers and activists on our side and this

will help us enormously in our fight to abolish this law.

Kuwait Times: Tell us about your latest fundraising exhibition in Dubai.

Sheikha Lulu: Abolish 153 hosted an art exhibition at the JAMM Art Gallery in Dubai from April 28 to May 8 to fundraise for the campaign. The exhibition included 40 artworks in various media by 11 emerging artists from the GCC and Iran. The seven Kuwaiti artists include photographers Maha Al-Asaker and Farah Salem, as well as artists Thuraya Lynn Al-Jasem, Zahra (Zouz the Bird) Al-Mahdi, Amani Althuwaini, Deena (Machina) Qabazard and Tarek Sultan. Other artists included Iranian painter Mehdi Darvishi, Bahraini multimedia artist Zuhair Alsaedi and Iraqi artist Musa Al-Shadeedi. Fifty percent of the proceeds from the sales benefited the campaign.

Kuwait Times: Of all the artworks that we noticed in the exhibition, an illustration by Zahra Mahdi indicates the depth of understanding and the ability to get the message across. Can we hope to see more Arab artists become peaceful pressure tools that change history, as some artists did in the West?

Sheikha Lulu: Yes, I do believe this to be true. The works by Kuwaiti artist Zahra Al-Mahdi (aka Zouz the Bird) were very strong. She created three pregnant bodies with price tags attached, underlining the right of women to control their own bodies, sexuality and reproductive organs. I believe that art is an effective medium to instigate social change, especially in environments where taboo topics are swept under the carpet.

Issues such as gender inequality, domestic violence, murder, adultery, etc can be portrayed in what appears to be a 'safe field' (art), yet it allows for conversations, increased awareness and serious debate. We are using art to question the status quo. By hosting exhibitions with artworks that tackle the issue of honor killing, we create a valid reason to have this issue brought up in the media. As such, art is a tool to reach our goal of abolishing these laws across the GCC and beyond.

Kuwait Times: Are you satisfied with the results of the last fundraising drive?

Sheikha Lulu: We were very happy with the turnout and the exhibition. We hope that the next two exhibitions will be more successful in raising awareness and funds for our campaign. We are grateful for the artists who contributed to these exhibitions.



An artwork by Kuwaiti artist Zahra Al-Mahdi.

Kuwait that violate the conventions that Kuwait has signed. Article 153 is both unconstitutional and against Islamic sharia law. This legislation is a form of indirect and structural violence against women.

No country can call itself progressive in the 21st century with such a law. We believe that even one case is one case too many. Unfortunately, we do not have access to the exact number of reported cases per year. We do know that this Article was used successfully in court in 2011. We will be conducting a survey to gauge attitudes across various segments of the society. We are missing empirical evidence to support abolishing this law, which would help influence

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