

Forbidden Talk: Digital Feminism to End Gender-Based Violence in Kuwait

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Abstract

This article elucidates the complexity of the feminist digital dialogue in Kuwait, focusing on the debate surrounding the effectiveness of the Abolish153 campaign, which targets the honour killing crimes and ending violence against women. I primarily focus on its narration and strategies to address: 1) The ability to mobilise action; 2) The ability to raise awareness; 3) Visibility & virality. The analysis presents multiple socio-political and theoretical implications and strategies of the campaign through a holistic, intersectional examination. Based on online ethnography and observation, the paper points to successful mobilisation, solidarity, and the ability to raise awareness of this campaign. However, the coexistence of different feminist realities and the conspicuous absence of minority voices from the local and national feminist landscape raise critical questions about the efficacy of persistent dominance patterns within elite feminism, especially concerning its representation, alliances, and narratives. The argument presented herein sparks a broader debate within feminist analysis, highlighting the need to include an intersectional approach in contemporary feminist movement analysis. It contends that, beyond the complexity of feminist situation and the diversity of feminist realities, the inclusion of other women's voices—such as those of tribal and stateless women—is essential to the goal of ending violence against women in Kuwait.

Keywords

Digital Activism, Feminism, Kuwait, Intersectional Feminism, Social Movement

1. Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV) persists as a global crisis, with its manifestations deeply embedded in local socio-legal structures. In Kuwait, unequal power relations

between women and men—reinforced by rigid gender roles, social norms, and hierarchies—scribe women to a lower societal status (Al-Kazi, 2011). This structural inequality is codified in laws that offer leniency for violence against women, most notably Article 153 of the penal code, which significantly reduces sentences for so-called “honour killings”. In response to this entrenched patriarchal system, a new frontier of activism has emerged in the digital sphere. This article examines the rise of feminist digital activism in Kuwait, which contributes to a broader understanding of online feminist activist dialogue in the Middle East (AlSahi, 2019; Husain, 2023). Specifically, this study examines the Abolish 153 campaign as a critical feminist case. It details how Kuwaiti feminists have leveraged digital platforms to further knowledge, mobilise support, and advocate for the end of gender-based violence and “honour killing” crimes. The analysis reveals the nature of these crimes and the patterns of digital activism, alongside the challenges associated with their mobilisation and the efforts to raise awareness of legal inequality in Kuwait. By examining the discourses and performances of this movement, this article sheds light on the socio-legal context of GBV in Kuwait. It analyses the critical tools adopted by feminists to advance social and legal reform in a society characterised by male domination in a broad cultural sense, including a legal system where male interests often prevail.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Digital Media as a Tool for Feminist Activism

The proliferation of digital media has fundamentally altered the landscape of social movements, providing new avenues for resistance and advocacy. With the expansion of feminist movements, digital platforms have become instrumental in challenging patriarchal structures and amplifying voices from margins to the centre (Lievrouw, 2023).

These digital experiences have allowed us to understand the complexity of women’s oppression (Baer, 2016), revealing hidden voices and diverse stories that ignite the need for a more holistic research approach. This phenomenon, often termed “digital activism”, involves the strategic use of social media, such as “hashtag feminism”, to share stories of misogyny and violence, thereby raising awareness and fostering solidarity (Baer, 2016; Turley & Fisher, 2018). Campaigns such as #MeToo, #YesAllWomen, and #BeenRapedNeverReported demonstrate the power of digital storytelling to make women’s experiences visible, generating a “ripple effect” that can hold powerful figures accountable (Clark-Parsons, 2021; Mendes et al., 2018). Social media acts as a tool to empower communities and individuals, challenging existing power structures in what Allsop (2016) describes as a “facilitation theme.” Furthermore, scholars such as Gainous & Wagner (2014) frame social media as a shaper of public opinion, capable of directing the flow of information and creating new forms of social capital. This new paradigm facilitates a fundamental shift in how activists communicate, interact, and engage, blurring the lines between personal communication and mass media (Bennett, 2003).

It is crucial to note that the broader capacity of digital activism in Kuwait can

be seen as a challenge for outsiders to understand the Kuwaiti digital culture, as consumption and production are very active and interactive through social media. The Kuwaiti digital environment is one of the most interactive spaces for activists of both genders. Thus, the reliability of the feminist ethnographic approach, combined with the online semi-structured interviews, provides an empirical methodological approach to mark feminist stories and their interactive discourse in Kuwait. There is nothing as powerful as hearing a woman who has been described as a feminist, living in a male-dominated culture (Alzuabi, 2016), bringing her experience into live spaces, navigating daily challenges and struggles.

2.2. Gender, Politics and Society in Kuwait

Feminist activism does not occur in a vacuum; it is shaped by specific historical, cultural, and political contexts (Badran, 2009). In Kuwait, the socio-political landscape is complex (Aseri, 2016), marked by a firm reliance on traditions and Islamic doctrines that have historically promoted patriarchy (Al-Mughni, 2010; Al-Sharekh, 2018). Kuwait's feminist legacy is deeply intertwined with its elite classes, where upper-class, educated women pioneered early public reform. While their efforts led to major strides in education and suffrage, these movements maintained an elitist, top-down approach that often left grassroots, intersectional, and class-based issues unaddressed (Alzuabi, 2016; Husain, 2023).

The evolution of feminism and women's empowerment in Kuwait centres around distinct eras and dynamics: **Early Pioneers (1950s-1960s)**: During the post-independence nationalist boom, upper-class (Elite) feminists such as Nouraya Al-Saddani and Lulwah Al-Qatami led early social movements. The public visibility was encouraged by the progressive elite, with prominent women actively breaking away from traditional veiling (Al-Mughni, 2010). **Suffrage and Political Rights (1970s-2005)**: The push for political participation began in earnest in the 1970s but faced significant setbacks due to a rising wave of Islamization in the 1980s. It culminated on May 16, 2005, when they granted full political rights to vote and run for office. However, Alsharekh (2018) highlights the resistance to women's empowerment from a predominantly male parliament, where women's representation remains minimal. The political sphere is a key battleground, as the lack of female representation in critical bodies, particularly in the Women and Family Affairs Committee, directly hampers progress on issues affecting women (Husain, 2023). This political reality forces activists to seek alternative platforms, with emerging digital tools as a crucial space for political discussion and opposition (Al-Sumait et al., 2014; Dashti et al., 2015). **Grassroots Divergence**: Contemporary scholars (Husain, 2023; Kareem, 2019) highlight that the legacy remains split. While institutional feminism focuses heavily on corporate and diplomatic advancements with women holding high percentages of leadership roles in the Central Bank and Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, grassroots or intersectional efforts focus on safety, domestic abuse, and legal reform. For example, the Abolish 153 focuses on protecting women from gender-based violence and abolishing laws that treat women unequally.

3. Methodology

In this study, I employ a qualitative methodology, multiple online ethnographies and a narrative approach as a form of knowledge transmission. The online ethnography approach is identified as a powerful instrument to examine the performance of digital activism for social and legal reform in Kuwait. Grounded in Kuwaiti feminism and the abolish 153 campaign's social media and offline activities, online ethnography addresses social justice, cultural norms and digital harassment, highlighting how Kuwaiti feminists are rediscovering their voices and the complexity of digital challenges (Husain, 2023).

The paper focuses on the Abolish 153 campaign as an in-depth case study, analysing its online and offline footprint across social media platforms, primarily Twitter (now X), and real ground activism to understand its strategies, narratives, and patterns of mobilisation.

Data collection involved systematic observation of selected relevant posts and random archival of public-facing the campaign's digital content, including tweets, retweets, images, and hashtags (e.g., #abolish153, #stopkillingwomen, #whoisnext) associated with the campaign and its key figures. The selected digital ethnography was supplemented by raw data and interviews with feminist activists and campaign founders (Husain, 2023), providing crucial insight into their motivations, strategies, and perceptions of the social movement. The analysis is framed through a critical, intersectional lens, paying close attention to how categories of class, gender, and social status intersect and influence the feminist discourse in Kuwait. The thematic analysis allows a nuanced examination that clarifies not only what is said but also whose voices may be absent from the dominant narrative, assessing the campaign's inclusivity and its broader efficacy.

Data Analysis and Strategy

The primary data were gathered through selected tweets and online interviews with feminist participants. The multi-qualitative methodology provides the most direct approach to gathering detailed and rich data. The narrative and thematic analysis has explored, first, feminists' intentions and what they aim to change through the Abolish 153 campaign; second, the influence of Kuwaiti digital culture on feminist activism practice; and third, the actual and potential effects of feminist digital activism. The collected data from online ethnographic observation between March 2020 and December 2023 of posts and hashtags used for the campaigns was translated into English to avoid language barriers. Online ethnography focuses on the Abolish 153 campaigns' digital actions of images, tweets, and videos, and to validate several themes chosen for the data analysis. Thus, all the empirical research data that have been investigated in this paper are to explore how the revolutionary phase of online feminist activism has taken current shape in a country that has always seen deep-rooted patriarchal culture and how the influence of laws, culture, religion and education affect feminist digital activism; how online media have served as essential platforms for female activists to raise and

share their voices in Kuwait; how feminists activists in Kuwait perceive the online activism; how they navigate through the challenges and struggles; and how these activists have initiated campaigns for the sake of social change.

4. Results: The Abolish 153 Campaign as a Case Study

4.1. The Socio-Legal Impetus: Articles 153 and 182

The Abolish 153 campaign was born out of a direct challenge to Kuwait's penal code, which legally sanctions gender-based violence. Article 153 stipulates that a man who kills a female relative (wife, mother, sister, or daughter) upon finding her in an "unsavoury sexual act" faces a reduced sentence, treating the murder as a misdemeanour punishable by a maximum of three years in jail and a minor fine. This law effectively devalues women's lives based on patriarchal notions of "honour". The legal discrimination is compounded by Article 182, which allows an abductor and rapist to evade punishment by marrying his victim with her guardian's consent. These laws not only reinforce the belief that women are the property of their families but also create systemic barriers to justice (Alsharekh, 2016), rewarding sexual violence and perpetuating cycles of abuse, particularly for vulnerable women from tribal and stateless backgrounds.

4.2. Campaign Origins and Multi-Pronged Strategies

The Abolish 153 campaign was initiated as a grassroots movement by a group of elites and educated women who leveraged their privileged positions to challenge these patriarchal laws. Recognising the complexity of legal reform, their top-down strategy was multi-faceted, combining digital activism with offline advocacy. As one of the founders, Alanoud Al-Sharekh, stated, "I believe that advocacy is the way to change policies and laws. This is of utmost importance when it comes to ending gender-based violence." The campaign's strategies included:



Figure 1. A post from the @abolish153 account clarifying the campaign's multi-pronged approach, which includes raising societal awareness. (Source: @abolish153, Feb 15, 2021)

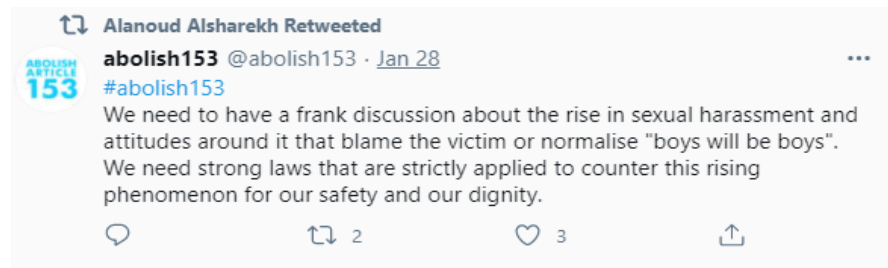


Figure 2. A retweet of the @abolish153 account that clarifies the deeply rooted societal beliefs, which have normalised the harassment by boys. (Source: @abolish153, Jan 28, 2021)

Digital Mobilisation: The campaign used social media to break the taboo surrounding “honour killings” and GBV. Hashtags like #abolish153 and #stopkilling-women were used to create solidarity, disseminate information, and maintain public discourse. The campaign’s Twitter account, @abolish153, served as a central hub for sharing information, challenging societal norms, and coordinating action. See the post below (Figures 1-2).

Offline Advocacy and Lobbying: Feminist activists understood that digital presence alone was insufficient. They transitioned from online “rehearsal” to offline action, engaging in direct lobbying with members of the Kuwaiti parliament and relevant committees to push for legislative change. See the post below (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Activists from the Abolish 153 and Eithar Kuwait initiatives are meeting with members of parliament, demonstrating the campaign’s strategy of direct political lobbying. (Source: @abolish153, Dec 31, 2020)

Media Engagement: The campaign actively engaged with local media outlets, including Alqabas and Kuwait Times, to amplify its message and reach a broader domestic audience.

International Alliances: A key strategy was building a network of international support. The campaign engaged with foreign embassies (including those of Australia, the UK, the US, and Canada) and international organisations like the United Nations to apply external pressure for reform. See the post below (Figure 4).



Figure 4. The Australian Ambassador to Kuwait engage in a formal discussion on gender-based violence, posting from her personal Twitter account with the feminist founders of the @abolish153 campaign. Retweet (Source: @AAbolish153, Jan 16)

Art Activism: To engage the public on a sensitive topic without alienating them, the campaign utilised art as a primary medium. Annual art exhibitions featuring the work of young Kuwaiti artists were held to confront the issue through cultural awareness, creating new narratives and fostering dialogue (Figure 5).



Figure 5. A post from the @abolish153 account clarifying the campaign's multi-pronged approach, which includes raising societal awareness and cooperating with official bodies to enact change. (Source: @abolish153, Feb 15, 2021)

4.3. Impact and Achievements: Shifting the Discourse

While Article 153 has not yet been repealed, the Abolish 153 campaign has achieved significant success in other areas. Its most profound impact has been breaking the culture of silence surrounding GBV in Kuwait. The “forbidden talks” about violence and misogyny have transformed into a progressive public discussion. This shift in discourse contributed directly to a major legislative victory. As Al-Sharekh noted, the campaign strategically shifted its focus: “We have shifted towards pushing for the domestic violence law... And in August 2020, that domestic violence law, called the Family Protection Law, was finally passed in Kuwait.”

This law established a national committee, shelters, a hotline, and emergency protection orders to tackle domestic violence. The success was a direct result of sustained pressure from civil society, combining digital activism with street protests where hashtags like #whoisnext and #silenceiscrime moved from the screen to the streets. The campaign also gained significant international legitimacy, receiving the “Best Social Change Campaign” award at the 2019 Arab Women of the Year Awards in London. Campaign member Shaikha Al-Nafisi noted the importance of this recognition: “This award gives us more recognition and legitimacy when talking to ministers, members of parliament and decision-makers” (Husain, 2023). See the post below (Figure 6).



Figure 6. The Australian Ambassador to Kuwait acknowledges the passage of the Family Protection Law and explicitly credits civil society for its hard work, citing the @abolish153 campaign. (Source: @AusAmbKuwait, Aug 19, 2020)

4.4. Backlash and Resistance

The campaign’s visibility has inevitably attracted significant backlash from conservative elements within Kuwaiti society. The very notion of “feminism” is often challenged. This resistance is evident in the political sphere, where the appointment of an all-male Women and Family Affairs Committee in parliament was met

with both criticism and ridicule on social media. One user humorously suggested renaming it the “committee for the exclusion of women”. This backlash extends to direct attacks on female activists and politicians. Former MP Salwa Al-Jassar spoke of being subjected to “rumours, bullying, including insults and abuse”, highlighting the immense public pressure faced by women in public life. In a more extreme example, a conservative former MP suggested that feminists should be sent to “rehabilitation centres so they remember their role”, illustrating the deep-seated hostility towards the movement’s goals. See the post below (Figure 7).



Figure 7. An example of the hostile backlash faced by feminist movements, where a former MP suggests feminists require “rehabilitation.” This highlights the intense cultural and political resistance to gender equality advocacy in Kuwait.

5. Discussion: The Paradox of Elite Activism and the Question of Inclusivity

The success of the Abolish 153 campaign presents a paradox. On one hand, it is a powerful example of how a strategically organised, elite-led movement can leverage digital media and international networks to effect tangible legal change, as seen with the passage of the Family Protection Law. The campaign’s founders effectively utilised their “network power” and privileged positions to gain access to policymakers, media, and international bodies—a strategy that proved potent. This aligns with theories that view social media as a tool for empowering individuals to challenge existing power structures (Allsop, 2016) and shaping public opinion (Gainous & Wagner, 2014). On the other hand, this research reveals a critical limitation: the issue of inclusivity. The online ethnographic analysis shows that the campaign’s public face, narrative, and language are dominated by privileged, educated, bilingual women. The frequent use of English in social media posts, while effective for international outreach, risks alienating the very victims

the campaign aims to protect—many of whom are from tribal and stateless backgrounds where Arabic is the primary language and digital literacy may be limited. This creates a social divide, reflecting a pattern of “performative activism that is pleasant on the surface but fragile and fragmented deep inside.” This raises crucial questions about feminist representation. While the campaign leaders cite safety concerns for not publicising survivors’ stories, the conspicuous absence of these voices from the movement’s narrative is problematic. For example, in this case study, the context of Kuwait revealed a diverse, complex, and divided culture with varied backgrounds. To better understand and measure the success of feminist campaigns, it is essential to explore intersectionality within the diversity and inclusion of feminist digital activism practices (Sandoval & Garcia, 2014). The intersectional approach acknowledges the binaries in Kuwait’s culture as revealed in the literature and that everyone has their own unique experiences, whether related to privilege or discrimination and oppression, and considers anything that marginalises people: gender, race, class, physical ability, etc. (Miguel & Gugerty, 2005). In the current theoretical framework, the study highlights the boundaries of feminist digital activism in relation to political and religious power, and the limitations of its influence on women from different classes, races, and ethnicities in Kuwait.

As feminist scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (2013) noted, “If you see inequality as a ‘them’ problem or ‘unfortunate other’ problem, that is a problem.” The dominance of an elite perspective risks creating policies that are not fully attuned to the specific needs and lived realities of the most marginalised communities. Activist Shaikha Bin Jassem voiced this concern directly, stating, “It is well known that tribal women are among the women who are most exposed to issues of violence, oppression and honour crimes. The absence of their voices in this campaign is a mistake.” This critique underscores the necessity of an intersectional framework that considers how overlapping categories of class, race, and legal status shape women’s experiences of violence.

6. Conclusions: The Path Forward

This article has demonstrated how digital media has become a vital arena for feminist activism in Kuwait, with the Abolish 153 campaign serving as a prominent example of mobilisation against gender-based violence. The campaign has successfully broken taboos, raised national and international awareness, and contributed to a significant legislative victory with the passage of the Family Protection Law. It exemplifies how digital tools can facilitate new feminist narratives, move conversations from online to offline action (Buscemi, 2023), and exert pressure on political institutions. However, the study also highlights the inherent complexities and limitations of the current feminist movement in Kuwait. The dominance of elite voices, while effective in certain respects, has led to a non-inclusive, top-down approach that shadows the experiences of the most oppressed women. For the movement to achieve its ultimate goal of ending all forms of violence against

all women, it must evolve. The path forward requires a conscious and strategic effort to incorporate an intersectional lens. This means actively creating platforms to engage marginalised voices, including those of tribal and stateless women, whose experiences are essential for crafting effective and equitable policies.

Lasting change requires more than just repealing discriminatory laws; it demands a fundamental shift in the deeply ingrained social norms and cultural beliefs that sustain patriarchy (Wodak, 2015). While digital activism is an instrumental tool, its success cannot be measured solely by legislative wins or international awards. True success will be realised when the movement is representative of, and responsive to, the needs of all women in Kuwait. Policymakers and civil society leaders must work to facilitate these inclusive dialogues and ensure that protective measures against violence are not only passed but are also effectively implemented and accessible to every woman, regardless of her background.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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