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## ABSTRACT

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A CASE STUDY OF KUWAITI GIRLS' SECONDARY SCHOOLS  
BEFORE THE IRAQI INVASION OF AUGUST, 1990

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## ABSTRACT

### A Case Study of Kuwaiti Girl's Secondary Schools Before the Iraqi Invasion of August, 1990

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with Muna Al Musalam, Ph. D., Kuwait

The literature in crosscultural and comparative education has generally ignored the issue of gender and the impact of the curriculum on girls and women. The research reported here focuses on the implications of the experimental credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools in Kuwait during the 1980's and describes in detail the facilities and curriculum of these schools before their destruction in the Gulf War of 1990. The findings of this study are then applied to curriculum theory and its relationship to changing societal conditions with particular attention to gender and equal educational opportunities.

A Case Study of Kuwaiti Girls' Secondary Schools  
Before the Iraqi Invasion of August, 1990

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with Muna Al Musulam, Ph.D. Kuwait City

Little did I know when I was invited to visit schools in Kuwait in December of 1988 that I (nor the world) would ever view these schools again -- or at least not in the conditions as they existed before the Iraqi invasion of August, 1990. The purpose of this article and my continued writing about Kuwait is to document and present to readers the life style and culture of Kuwaiti society, including the educational system, before the Gulf War of 1990. It is important to have a record of what Kuwait once was, so that we can comprehend the total destruction that has been wrought upon this Arabic Gulf State, once one of the most liberal and wealthiest of the Gulf Cooperative Council nations.

Since the unprecedented media coverage of Kuwait during the Gulf War it seems now well known that Kuwait is a relatively small, but strategic area of land, bordered on the north and west by Iraq and on the south and west by Saudi Arabia. The Bay of Kuwait that flows out to the Arabian (Persian) Gulf forms the eastern borders of Kuwait where the once beautiful shoreline included beaches, marinas, the major oil refineries and shipping industries of

Kuwait. Before the terrible bombings there were once farms and rich vegetable gardens in the South in the area called Wafra. And the oil refineries, now left perilously burning, are along the coastal area of Ahmadi. Kuwait also boasted fine museums -- in Kuwait City itself, the Kuwait National Museum; and out on Failaka Island, a small antiquities museum where the ancient Hellenistic ruins were preserved for visitor sightseeing. Other national monuments included the famous landmark, the Kuwait Towers. The main tower once housed a fine restaurant and observation platform overlooking the former central city, the marinas, the Emir's palace and other government buildings. The middle tower stored one million gallons of water and the needle-shaped tower controlled the electricity for the surrounding area. We should realize that the wealth of Kuwaiti citizens was demonstrated in the gold "sug" or markets as well as in the oil industry. Crafting gold jewelry was a major manufacturing and artisan industry, as was the sale and distribution of "Persian" or "oriental" carpets and rugs, that are highly valued all over the world.

During my stay in Kuwait in the winter of 1988 I lived with an important and well known Kuwaiti family and visited in the homes of professionals -- educators, school administrators, university faculty, lawyers, government officials, as well as business owners and managers. But this was still a traditional Arabic society and entertaining, mainly in these beautifully decorated homes, was carefully segregated. Women met together only with other women and

their female children and very young boys, under five years of age, -- for family and social occasions -- receptions, weddings, and other social affairs. Men met men in their clubs, rather than in private homes, where the women often had their social gatherings.

### **The Research Project**

My research on the educational system of Kuwait was focused on the experimental credit-hour curriculum of girls' secondary schools. The school curriculum in Kuwait has been based on the Arab States standards. Great emphasis was placed on teaching the value of Islam and the Arabic heritage. Prior to university levels, girls were physically separated from boys and placed in different schools after the age of six. Women taught and administered in the girls' schools. Men taught and administered the boys' schools. I was allowed to visit and spend time ONLY in girls' secondary schools.

Until the 1980's the traditional academic year in Kuwaiti schools -- as in most Arabic States -- ran unbroken from its beginning in the Fall to its end just before the extreme heat of the summer months in June. In this traditional school curriculum, examinations occurred at the close of the school year. Students who failed even one of their examinations at the end of the school year, usually had to repeat the ENTIRE year including every subject, whether they had passed that subject's final exam or not. This often led to a high failure rate with students dropping out of school at early ages because there had been no minimum school

leaving age until recently. But in 1979, Kuwait adopted a new secondary education curriculum based on the credit-hour system in a selected few of its schools both for boys and for girls. This credit-hour curriculum was patterned after the type well known in the United States.

### **Crosscultural Components and the Gender Issue**

The literature in crosscultural and comparative education has generally ignored the issue of gender. Extensive studies have been mounted in the past decade to assess the comparative growth and development of educational achievement in nations of the western, developed world in juxtaposition to those in the developing sector. (Ramirez, Meyer, Boli-Bennet, et al. 1985.'86'87; World Bank, Fuller and Heyneman, 1986 '87'89) However, the differing aspects of long-term effects of increased education for girls as opposed to boys has not been acknowledged or studied by educators, international relations experts, or other social scientists until very recently. (Benavot, 1989) The research reported here focuses on the implications of the experimental "credit -hour" curriculum in girls' secondary schools in Kuwait over the past ten years. This unique educational innovation (the credit-hour curriculum) in schooling for Muslim students appears to afford greatly expanded opportunities in career development and professional attainment and advancement for girls and women in a rapidly modernizing Arabic society, as well as in a global context.

### **Background of the Secondary Education in Kuwait**

In 1979, Kuwait adopted a new secondary education curriculum based on the credit-hour system in selected secondary schools for both boys and girls. The Ministry of Education's Curriculum Research Center agreed to a pilot plan whereby students were required to take designated core courses, but they could elect other courses and choose a field of specialization as well. These secondary students in the new credit-hour curriculum were provided with academic advisors and given a much more flexible schedule with options and choices. Further, students passed or failed each course and were not retained for an entire academic year if they did not pass every course throughout the school year.

Five years later, the growing credit-hour curriculum had been installed in fifteen Kuwaiti secondary schools. It was then, in 1984, that the traditional curriculum was revised into a two-semester program. To date, the majority of Kuwaiti secondary schools (for boys and for girls) are still organized around the traditional curriculum. But now, the examination sessions for the various subjects occur both in mid-year and at the end of the academic year, so that the entire burden for passing a subject does not fall on one final examination. This has lessened the failure rate to some degree.

### **Purpose and Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the status at the



close of 1988 of the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools in Kuwait and to compare and contrast it with the present forms of the traditional curriculum. Hence, the research questions that were posed were as follows:

What were the views, opinions, and attitudes of various sectors of the Kuwaiti educational community -- i.e. teachers administrators, students, parents -- toward the credit-hour curriculum versus the traditional curriculum?

What had been the impact of the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools on education in Kuwait since its inception in 1979?

What was the special significance of the credit-hour curriculum for girls in rapidly technologizing societies?

The research methodology included: 1, obtaining background information, documents and statistical data from the State of Kuwait's Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Planning, from district school offices and from individual school administrators 2) visiting schools and district school offices, observing classrooms and touring school plants and facilities. 3) interviewing key informants including school administrators, teachers, head teachers, students in girls' secondary schools and parents where available. The methods for this study combined the data derived from these sources in both a qualitative and quantitative approach to respond to the research questions.

## Analysis of the Data

### School Tours and Observations

The investigators spent most of their time in two girls' secondary schools: a girls' credit-hour-curriculum school (Al Manssoureyya) and a traditional secondary school for girls (Jumana). The enrollment of the credit-hour school at the time of this study was 410 students with 93 teaching staff, giving a ratio of 4.4 students to staff. Inside the walled compound were a number of buildings including a large auditorium, gymnasium, and a separate building housing an Olympic-sized, heated swimming pool with showers and exercise rooms. The main building housed standard classrooms, science laboratories, the school library, art workshop with ceramic kilns, a music wing with pianos and separate practice rooms, and a computer laboratory with 24 computers programmed for Arabic and English. Additionally, there was a domestic science wing, and an Industrial Arts wing which included engineering drawing, refrigeration, wood and metal workshops, an electrical wiring workshop where the girls practiced wiring household and other electrical equipment and an auto mechanics shop with model car for the students to work on.

The curriculum of the credit-hour school had required subjects -- Science, English, Arabic, History, Mathematics, Library Research Methods, Religious Studies, and Physical Education. Elective studies included French, Music, Art, Domestic Arts, Computer and Industrial Arts including auto repair, electrical and mechanical

arts, and engineering drawing. An academic adviser was assigned to each student to draw up a coursework plan with the student after consultation with her parents. Each student had a timetable for the courses scheduled and moved from class to class and to the area of the school where the teachers had the specialized equipment to teach the various subjects offered.

In the traditional girls' secondary school the enrollment was larger, 640 students with 61 teaching staff, making a ratio of ten to one. This school had facilities similar to the credit-hour school, however this physical plant was ten years younger, so the buildings and equipment were newer. The differences between the two schools were evidenced in the smaller size of the school library (there was NOT a requirement for the library research methods courses, here) and the absence of the auto mechanics workshop and Industrial Arts area with engineering, electrical and metal workshops. Further, in the traditional curriculum school, students remained in their classrooms, while the teachers of the various subjects moved from location to location to lecture to them according to a timetable that was set by the principal and her assistants. Also, the curriculum was prescribed for all students during their first and second year courses. In the third year, a student could then chose between the prescribed Arts or the prescribed Science curriculum. There were two semesters in the traditional school year -- September to January with examinations in January; and then January until June with another

round of final examinations. (Note: the Arabic calendar month names have been transliterated here.)

#### Findings from Interviews With Principals, Teachers and Students

The investigators interviewed principals, assistant principals, head teachers (department heads), teachers and students from these two schools and other girls' secondary schools during this study. Here follows some excerpts and commentary from these interviews that give unusual insights into the status of the credit-hour curriculum versus the traditional curriculum in girls' secondary schools. Principals and other administrators noted in both the credit-hour curriculum and the traditional curriculum students must take and pass the same required subjects, but in the credit-hour curriculum students can make up a failure with an elective course. They went on to say that in the credit-hour system students passing all the examinations and requirements are finished with their classes; however in the traditional system students must remain with the subject through out the entire school year and pass their examinations over the entire year in both first and second semesters.

One teacher pointed out that the credit-hour curriculum was a better background and preparation for university work. "The student learns how to set up her own schedules for coursework. She depends more on outside reading and independent research in the school library so she can fulfill the requirements of the

credit-hour curriculum. In my opinion, in the traditional system the student listens to the teacher lecture and just memorizes the textbook. Students are told what to remember and they repeat it back on the examinations." However, a principal informed us that students can leave the credit hour school for the traditional school. She said in her experience some students could not study in the credit-hour system and had to change over because they just could not deal with the freedom and self reliance needed to persist in this program. "Attendance is important and if a student's attendance is poor she falls behind and drops out."

The students themselves were most articulate and spoke English with amazing fluency. One girl said, "The credit-hour system is good for girls because they can choose their own major from the variety of areas of specialization, while in the traditional system there are only two alternatives. Another girl in the credit-hour program emphasized that if students can choose their own subjects and study independently they are better prepared for the university and do not have so many problems when they get there.

#### Interviews at the Ministry of Education of Kuwait

At the Ministry of Education the investigators were afforded interviews with a number of officials: three directors, two assistant directors and the head librarian. It was interesting to

note that administrative positions in this Kuwaiti ministry were held by both women and men. These officials informed us that at that time there were 15 credit-hour curriculum secondary schools currently (8 girls' and 7 boys') and plans to extend the number due to the interest and growth of these programs in the past ten years. However, they seemed to feel that there was need for both the traditional and the credit-hour systems in the Kuwaiti schools, since it gave students an opportunity for choice. Students in Kuwait could choose to go to any school since attendance is not based on where the child lived. An official minimum leaving age had been enforced and students must remain until they are at least 14 years of age.

Of particular interest to this research were several comments by the Ministry of Education officials about the impact of the credit-hour curriculum on girls. It was noted that enrollments and retention in the girls' credit-hour schools were better than in the boys' credit-hour schools, even though this curriculum had been established for boys before it was for girls. Data from the Ministry indicated that girls were better students than boys. They studied harder and got better grades and seemed more serious about their school work and their grade point averages. One administrator said, " Our girls cannot go out on dates or go about so freely; therefore, girls are not as distracted with outside activities as boys during their secondary school years. Girls in the credit-hour schools become more serious students. They strive

harder to get high grades and win opportunities to obtain higher education degrees."

Following we present numerical data to support these comments from the Ministry of Education officials.

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**Table 1.:Enrollments in Girls' Credit-Hour Secondary Schools**

Academic Yr.	No. of Schls.	No. of Students
1983	4	37
1985	6	796
1987	8	1130
12/ 1988	8	4629

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### **Results of the Study**

The first research question in this study asked what were the views, opinions and attitudes of various sectors of the Kuwaiti educational community toward the credit-hour curriculum versus the traditional curriculum. The results of the data from interviews, observations and statistics on the growth of enrollments and retention point to the current success of this new curriculum. Positive aspects were as follows:

students were less apt to fail and drop out;

students could set their own pace; coursework plans were responsive to individual differences;

students were being prepared for the freedom and self-reliance needed to succeed at the university level;

one's success or failure did not depend solely on results of examinations at the end of the academic year;

students had more incentive to learn since they could choose some of their own subjects as electives;

students' records of achievement were built up over four years (more or less) of coursework;

the credit-hour curriculum is more flexible for both students and teachers.

Some negative aspects cited by the respondents were:

the freedom and emphasis on self discipline to study and to make choices is stressful for some students so they leave the credit-hour curriculum and return to the traditional system which seems less demanding to them;

the credit-hour curriculum calls for many more teachers and the training of knowledgeable academic advisors due to its philosophy of choice and its organization;

the credit-hour curriculum generates more and various course offerings, calling for a more diverse teaching staff with specialized expertise in a wider range of subjects and electives;

therefore, the credit-hour curriculum is much more expensive



as an educational endeavor than the traditional curriculum.

The second research question asked what had been the impact of the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools on education in Kuwait since its inception in 1979. The results of this study indicated that before the Gulf War there had been a considerable impact on secondary education in Kuwait due to the implementation of the credit-hour curriculum. This is seen in the fact that the number of girls' credit-hour schools had grown from one in 1979 to eight in 1988/'89; the number of girls enrolled in credit-hour programs grew from 37 in 1983 to 4629 in 1988. (See Table 1).

Further, in 1984, five years after the inception of the credit-hour curriculum, its influence spread to the traditional curriculum schools, initiating a permanent change in the traditional curriculum from a year-long program for required subjects to a two semester organization. Since 1984 all Kuwaiti secondary schools organized under the traditional curriculum then had two semesters with examinations twice a year, rather than only once a year at the close of the school sessions. This re-organization is clear evidence that Kuwaiti educators recognized the detrimental effects of the inflexibility of the traditional system with its high failure rates and extensive "educational wastage." Yet, the girls' credit-hour schools were receiving more enrollments and enjoying a higher retention rate than the boys.'

**Table 2: Enrollments in Kuwaiti Schools 1986/87 with Focus on  
Secondary Schools**

(from the Kuwait Central Statistical Office, 1988)

Total Enrollment for the 1986/87 academic year was:

606 schools; 26,756 teachers; 364,412 students

This included:

**ENROLLMENT IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KUWAIT**

Total No. of All Secondary Students	=	88,264
No. of Boys Enrolled in Credit-Hour Schools		2914
No. of Girls Enrolled in Credit-Hour Schools		3276

**ESTIMATED ENROLLMENT OF BOYS/ GIRLS IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS**

Boys Enrolled	35%
Girls Enrolled	65%
Total Enrollment in Credit Hour Curriculum	7%
Total Enrollment in Traditional Curriculum	93%

(The above information was extrapolated from Kuwait Ministry of Education Data and Reports, 1988 by the researchers.)

### Discussion

In this study of the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools in Kuwait before the Gulf War, an attempt was made to report what the researchers observed and experienced in the educational enterprise of this once rapidly developing, affluent Arabic Gulf state. At that time, backed by the financial wherewithal from oil production revenues, educational administrators sought to provide their Kuwaiti girls and boys with the finest, most highly technological facilities and educational expertise grounded in advanced curriculum theory. Educators expressed these sentiments in writing and verbally, fully realizing that such directions might lead to troublesome dysfunctions in the society for both men and women.

### Influences on the Secondary School Curriculum: A Changing Society

There is another important issue underlying the development of the credit-hour curriculum versus the traditional curriculum in Kuwaiti secondary schools. The educational officials who re-designed the traditional curriculum and implemented the credit-hour curriculum during the 1980's were influenced by the changing nature of the Kuwaiti society -- a society moving away from the conservative Islamic folk culture to a post-modern, highly technological nation-state. They were moving away from an educational system that had been pattern after the colonial model (the British system), where the aim was to offer a curriculum to

differentiate between pupils on the basis of academic ability so as to prepare them for selective entry into higher education for government service. (Holt, 1988) This "qualification" model may once have been appropriate to Kuwaiti citizenry. But as affluence and growing desires for wider educational opportunity for all Kuwaiti youth became feasible objectives for both parents and educators, a "graduation" model, a curriculum that prepares most of the students for matriculation and successful graduation, was now more appropriate. (Holt, 1988)

Using a crosscultural analogy, W. A. Reid and Maurice Holt (1986) have pointed out:

In America at the turn of the century and in Scandinavia in the post-Second World War period, the tradition of secondary education, which until then had an essentially college-preparatory character, underwent substantial modification to adjust it to an approaching era when extended secondary education would be a universal prerequisite of full citizenship. (emphasis this writer) Reinterpretation of the tradition brought modifications of structure to enable schools to become more inclusive and progressive in their enrollments and less segmented in their structures. American high schools moved to a unit-based curriculum with equivalence between subjects, and in Scandinavia an integrated common curriculum was adopted. (Reid and Holt, 1986, p.94)

This seemed to be the curriculum evolution that was taking place in the secondary schools of Kuwait with the implementation and growth of the credit-hour curriculum during the decade of the 1980's. Not only was this Muslim society witnessing "an approaching era when extended secondary education would be a universal prerequisite of full citizenship" for MEN, this was also becoming a mandate for WOMEN!

### **The Gender Issue**

Another question that this investigation of the status of the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools raised was: What was the special significance of the credit-hour curriculum for girls in rapidly technologizing societies?

The investigators determined that the credit-hour curriculum in girls' secondary schools had made an impact on education for girls in Kuwait over the past decade. It was evident that girls, especially under the credit-hour curriculum, were staying in school for more years and hence, graduating from high school in larger numbers than boys and applying for higher education in greater numbers than boys. (Our discussions with faculty at the College of Education of Kuwait University also confirmed this assertion.)

For example, Table 2, displaying enrollments in Kuwaiti secondary schools, revealed that although the credit-hour curriculum had been very successful in the estimation of Kuwaiti educators, the

programs actually enroll only 7 percent of all secondary schools students. And enrollment figures at that time showed that more girls were attending credit-hour secondary schools than boys; but additionally only 35 per cent of students in secondary schools were boys. Girls outnumber boys at the secondary school level by two to one, indicating that many more boys dropped out of school than girls. This data has powerful implications for university enrollments, as well.

We postulate that in this changing Muslim society the credit-hour curriculum in the girls' schools offered female teen-agers a better opportunity to remain in school, go on to higher education and careers, and hence feel more fulfilled as individuals.

#### Concluding Remarks

We conclude this article with the following quotation. We feel it acquires haunting conn<sup>t</sup>ctions now that war has brought such terrible destruction to the people of Kuwait. From a beautifully illustrated book published just a year before Iraq's invasion of Kuwait titled, **TRADITIONS: The Folklore of Women and Children in Kuwait** (Wells and Al Batini, 1989) the authors described the Kuwait City that existed before August, 1990:

Looking along Arabian Gulf Street (Kuwait City) with its futuristic skyline, impressive State buildings and speeding, air-conditioned limousines, it is hard to believe that along this same seafront not so long ago

women came to wash their clothes, rinse their hair or anxiously await the return of their husbands on the pearling and trading dhows. Perhaps never before has a country undergone such rapid change in so short a time as Kuwait since the discovery of oil. The changes have not merely been in the physical infrastructure and technological advancement, but in the lives of the people themselves. Today, girls in Kuwait are in full-time education from age of four to eighteen. Many then go on to college or university and take up work in a range of fields from medicine to computing. In their sophisticated clothes, driving their own cars, running job, household and family, it is hard to imagine the lives their ancestors led. ( Preface,p.4)

Therefore we predict that even in strongly patriarchal societies, such as Kuwait, as secondary and higher education become expected and a norm for girls; women will be highly valued as important sources of skilled and professional workers for the nation-state. Although cultural mores and traditions reinforce the persistence of gender inequalities in the job market, women are changing the economic, social and political institutions of developing societies. The destruction that major conflagrations bring to humanity worldwide will serve to accelerate these movements.

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