



SPECIAL REPORT



Kuwait under lockdown

Photo by Hani Hamza

'Neighborhood Tales'

COVID hammers the uncounted a heart forgot to find in Kuwait

By Chaitali B. Roy
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For Sarah, a young doctor in a COVID ward in Kuwait, the last year was an eye-opener. Sarah played her part in the pandemic working 12-14 hours shift in a Covid ward; she was also exposed to human suffering that she did not know existed in Kuwait. Growing up in Kuwait, a country she knew as rich, she never expected to come across people who were better off in the field hospital where they at least had food to eat at regular intervals.

Sarah's story — A young doctor shares her experience and learnings working in a COVID ward.

"She was shocked that her sick patients, alone without friends or family in a foreign country, with a potentially life-threatening illness, in a field hospital, would still rather be there than in their own apartments, healthy but hungry. Just having meals was enough. She realised some of her patients lived in one-bedroom apartments with 20 other people, so COVID would spread easily. She began to look at the nurses, the hospital porters, the cleaners and wonder about their salaries and their living and working conditions." (An excerpt from Neighbourhood Tales: Kuwait Under Lockdown — a project launched by en.v, a non-profit organisation dedicated to fostering social development and civic engagement in the Middle East)

En.v is a non-profit that mobilises and connects change-makers to effectively and collaboratively address community challenges to foster a more compassionate and resilient society. En.v creates inclusive spaces for community members to come together, share knowledge, and spark collaboration to enhance the impact of the civic sector. Through ongoing data collection and analysis, they develop innovative programming that is responsive to the needs and aspirations of local stakeholders. With Neighbourhood Tales, En.v responded to the need of the hour. Having recognised the historical importance of COVID-19 in the story of the human journey, en.v responded by recording stories, voices, narratives that may have otherwise been lost to posterity. "During the early stages of the pandemic, back in April 2020, we noticed that while there were many attempts to document its impact on people's lives, the story that was being told was singular and monolithic, reflecting only one dimension of a very complex phenomenon," says Layan Al Dabt, Programs Coordinator at En.v. "What was missing in the media and public discourse were diverse experiences, untold stories of misery experienced by ordinary citizens who are perhaps not on the official radar. The narratives deal with loss, insecurity, solidarity and also triumph. According to Layan, "The dominant narrative of shared challenges also erased the unique ways in which COVID-19 and accompanying measures were affecting specific populations and communities, particularly amongst those most vulnerable. That invisibility is what led us to initiate this community-history project and also to renew our vow to listen more intently."

En.v spoke to people who live in the shadows, sometimes forgotten by mainstream media, people from different socio-economic backgrounds, from different cultures and professions whose experience of the pandemic may have differed from the rest of us. So they spoke to individuals like Arash, an Iranian nurse, who self-isolated in a tent after testing positive to protect his

family from catching the virus. They interviewed Noora, a young Bidoon entrepreneur who spoke of the impact of the pandemic on her community, CJay, a Filipino store manager who spoke of how he worked throughout the pandemic, and many others from marginalised sectors of society. "We wanted to capture the diversity of experiences in Kuwait with a focus on those individuals and communities whose experiences are least likely to garner quality and sustained media and policymakers' attention," explains Layan when asked about the selection of sample. "We had also designed a narrator selection criterion to ensure an approximate representation of people across a wide array of demographic attributes, occupations, nationalities, income levels, etc. This is a priority that we carry across all our work — striving towards a whole of society approach that is rooted in the inclusion and collaboration of diverse voices and perspectives in the design of a more equitable and inclusive community — beyond just nationals and non-nationals."

The Neighborhood Tales project kicked off in March 2020, soon after the initial government lockdown was imposed in Kuwait, and by June, the project had commenced their interviews, which were carried out till mid-September 2020. This period was fraught with challenges in Kuwait and the world. The pandemic was unfolding, and in its wake came death and economic and social misery. The researchers and interviewers made up of activists, researchers, and community organisers worked in the field, meeting people, recording testimonies, subjective perspectives and experiences that offer insights into situations and lives that are usually ignored. When asked if their staff on the ground found it challenging to do what they did, Layan responds, "We definitely faced a few challenges, with conducting the project during the early stages of the pandemic and also being online and unable to gather. We were also still learning to navigate the pandemic and the collective fear, uncertainty and loss that unfolded with it, which we were really careful not to retrigger and approached with a lot of responsibility and compassion. This was especially important given that this was an untraditional community history project, which was capturing a living moment not from our past — but our current reality, and which continues to threaten the lives, safety, security and wellbeing of our community, including our narrators, and interviewers and their loved ones. That said, the experience of reflecting on and connecting across our stories was definitely emancipatory, and in most cases, cathartic for narrators and also interviewers."

Neighbourhood Tales: Kuwait Under Lockdown helps document the oral histories of marginalised communities who witnessed firsthand the impact of the pandemic. These narratives help place the pandemic and the ensuing events in the ongoing stream of history — they provide the reader with a sense of belonging and reflect the experience's universality. "Through our interviews and narrative analysis, we found that, despite the variety of experiences, a few key themes repeatedly emerged across interviews," explains Layan when asked about the project conclusions. "These included the role of community networks, mental health, financial safety nets, and the narrator's socio-economic status in Kuwait as central to enabling individual and com-

munity resilience. What was almost universal across each interview was that irrespective of spiritual practice, there was a commonality amongst people who tapped into faith to find meaning, balance and gratitude amid despair." In the future, 'The Neighbourhood Tales' will form a repository of stories and knowledge to understand the pandemic's impact better and help civil society engage with and debate the policies of exclusion practised in the country. The project outcome will play a critical role in our understanding of the pandemic and its impact on different socio-economic sectors.

Last year, Kuwait imposed draconian and divisive lockdown policies that affected thousands. The findings of the Neighbourhood Tales project reveal that the most vulnerable, who were financially at risk, or who had limited access to food and housing bore the brunt of the pandemic and economic fallout in Kuwait. Many private sector enterprises were unable or unwilling to pay employees during the lockdown and for months after. Many people are still not getting paid their total salaries, despite working full time for months. Moreover, many migrant workers here are the primary breadwinners for their families back home. They generally live paycheck to paycheck, so entire communities were affected. Some individuals providing for their families were unable to deal with their tragic circumstances and took their own lives — resulting in a rising number of suicides. Many people took advantage of the government-sponsored amnesty program to return home but left behind money that was owed to them (pending salaries, indemnity) because their employers could not or would not pay them. These people are now back home, more impoverished than they were when they first came here, with large amounts of debt and pending payments to be made to their recruiters. Many people living in Kuwait for a long time, sometimes for generations, have been significantly affected by the rising xenophobic rhetoric directed towards expatriates and specific nationalities and have begun to question their futures in this country. With their livelihoods threatened by both the economic standstill and restrictions on public transport, the growing informal sector in Kuwait came to a halt, leaving individuals without salaries, jobs or a safety net. says Layan when asked about the impact of the lockdown on Kuwait's most vulnerable.

When questioned about the project finding regarding Kuwait's handling of the pandemic, and how it reflects on the loss of income, food, housing security and access to healthcare Layan shares, "When a group of peoples' experiences are essentially invisible, and when issues are not fixed or addressed because the people involved are seen as marginal or unimportant, it affects the whole system. This is true for how the pandemic was handled in Kuwait. The areas that were kept under total lockdown were the areas predominantly populated by low-income migrant workers, not the ones that had the highest number of cases — and the impact it had there was terrible, as most people have no savings or social safety nets. They were left to fend for themselves with no work or salaries for five months. This invisibility also affected the way people were treated in quarantine, the distribution of aid, and access to food and services (for instance, undocumented workers or those who do not live at the official

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editor's choice

