

People & Places

Online platform supports women running for office

Mudhawi's List helps women to become 'leaders'

By Chaitali B. Roy

Special to the Arab Times

Women are underrepresented in political office almost everywhere across the world. According to the World Bank's World Development Indicators (2019), on average, women make up only 23% of national parliamentarians. This underrepresentation affects policy choices and thereby potentially reduces women's welfare.

In Kuwait, the amendment in the Election Law No. 35/1962 in 2005, opened the door for female participation in parliamentary and local elections. Five years later in 2009, for the first time, women won, and they managed to win 8 per cent of the seats in a highly contested election. After this, women's presence in Parliament plunged until they were struggling to maintain even a slim presence in the legislative arena. In the current Parliament, only one elected female MP, Safa Al Hashem is in the legislative body, underlying the struggle of women to find a solid footing in political decision making in Kuwait. This year, the parliamentary election in Kuwait is most likely to happen on November 28. The death of HH Sheikh Sabah, a raging pandemic, a badly hit economy, and a steady demand for expulsion of guest workers, the results of this election, in particular, carries long term consequences. To support women running for office, Mudhawi's List, an online platform, has been launched. Mudhawi's List aims at supporting women running for elected office by linking them with volunteers and in-kind donation providers. The platform will back women candidates with essential campaign services and also raise awareness about the importance of women in a leadership position.

Campaigns

"Mudhawi's List is here to help these candidates gain visibility and educate voters on all available options in terms of women running for office. We will also connect those candidates who need help with creatives and volunteers to assist them with their campaigns through a database that the platform compiles," said Dr Alanoud Al Sharekh, women's right activist and co-founder of Mudhawi's List. The project is managed by Leana Al Awadhi.

Even though Kuwaiti women have moved towards modernisation at a greater speed than their counterparts in other Gulf states, there is a significant gender gap in the higher echelons of leadership, especially in politics. There is an available talent pool, with skilled and qualified women, but unfortunately a confidence gap, perhaps even an ambition gap inspired by social conditioning along with a lack of resources that keep them away from public service. Women have the skills and talent to run, but they need help to transfer them into the political realm, and that is where Mudhawi's List hopes to play a part.

"Female candidates lack some of the most basic advantages that men take for granted," shares Dr Al Sharekh, "not just in terms of social bias and access to influence but also in terms of fewer opportunities to practice politics, opportunities that lead to gateway positions that then springboard most men into



Huda Kribani



Athra Al Rifai



Dr Shaikha Bin Jassim



Bibi Ashour



Alia Al Khaled

Some of the candidates on Mudhawi's List

Huda Kribani

Writer, media, political and social activist

"I joined the Madhawi platform, which advocates for women in general and gives them support to bring about positive change, enhances the number of women in leadership positions and strives for equality between the sexes. I believe that Madhawi's List will have a media impact in spreading awareness for the next stage of the role of women and their role in society."

Dr Shaikha Bin Jassim

Professor of Metaphysics at Kuwait University. Thought Leader

"I joined Mudhawi's List because it's motivated by a noble cause that is supporting and empowering women of all backgrounds regardless of their differences. I expect this association to play a strong part in spreading awareness of the importance of supporting women to reach Par-

liament. We are hoping this year women will have a better share in the Parliament as they were so alienated in the past four years. Women felt that they were not represented and I think this year more women are looking up to participate as candidates in the November election."

Athra Al Rifai

Lawyer

"I joined Mudhawi because I needed an incubator to bring out the female candidate in a manner that befits her, and the fact that society has so far not been accustomed to trusting and dealing with the female candidate and providing her support. Mudhawi does this thing with their services, and I hope in the future that there will be women's groups that can be a source of pressure and political power with an impact on the authorities. Mudhawi also presents the candidate in media, and this is something we really need."

leaders. "Through my consultancy Ibtakar, we started to focus more on enabling women to become the leaders they need to be by offering programs to train them on soft skills and campaigning. On one of those programs #EKWIP Empowering Kuwaiti Women in Politics, the participants were inspired by female collectives that support

Alia Al Khaled

Developmental Researcher, businesswoman and columnist

"I was approached by Mudhawi's list as they assist women candidates, providing them with a unique and independent platform to promote and support women running for elected office. Mudhawi's list presented as an additional opportunity to expand my voice as a female candidate running for Parliament, especially encouraging women across Kuwait to speak up, participate in government, and



Dr Alanoud Al Sharekh

believe they can make a difference. I expect help connecting with women to help them find useful resources for their own development and expansion. I think this is not only valuable but essential to our future and the evolution of government and women's role within it."

Bibi Ashour

Specialist in Social Policy and Development

"The presence of women in the political field needs support, and this increases the chances of success and increases confidence in every woman who has the skill and ability to run for political elections. I expect this association to continue supporting Kuwaiti women leaders in various political, economic, social and cultural aspects and to provide all efforts for the development of society, and to be a center that can qualify young women to reach leadership positions in the state."

women in office abroad and suggested we try to do the same in Kuwait. We decided to launch this initiative called Mudhawi's List to coincide with the 2020 elections to be an immediate resource to women candidates."

Mudhawi is a traditional name from the Arabian Gulf region, and it conjures up an image of a wise

woman who is open to embracing all. "We wanted to choose a name that had resonance because we have plans to expand across the GCC in future. At present, there are 12 candidates on the platform, but we are adding more as they announce that they're running," says Dr Al Sharekh.

The team of Mudhawi's List launched three weeks back is made up of Dr Alanoud Al Sharekh and four women from the EKWIP program, Leana Al Awadhi, Iman Dashti, Dalal Boursly and Asrar Hayat. Together and with the help of hundreds of volunteers, they hope to curate a place for women candidates by connecting, informing, engaging and providing resources. "We have started a volunteer group that's helping us with research and planning future posts as we see the platform as an educational tool, with historical posts on women's political rights in Kuwait and facts about women's leadership and political participation," observes Dr Al Sharekh.

Speaking of resources and training offered by Mudhawi's List, Dr Al Sharekh says, "Mudhawi's List is an inclusive platform where we showcase all women running for office, and we hope to continue supporting women through it in municipality and coop elections too. We sum up their CVs and political agenda in an easy to share format that a lot of the candidates then reuse on their own accounts. We also provide them with our database of service providers who offer them free or discounted rates. We have a media plan to promote them further, and though we do not offer training at this stage, we can put them in touch with specialists who may be able to help them in particular areas."

Resources

Fundraising is a challenge for most women candidates, and although Mudhawi's List does not actively fundraise, they do supplement with other resources. "Mudhawi's List connects candidates with in-kind donation providers. We do not actively fundraise at present. One of the main challenges is that women do not have access to the same financial resources of political groups, tribes or special interest groups that men do so they have to raise money to run independently," says Dr Al Sharekh. In an aside, she said, "The government could make elections more fair by introducing a spending cap on campaigns, and by introducing a representational quota system to make it a more level playing field for women."

For a truly representative and equitable government, it is important to have a fair representation of women in public office. And to do that, it is also essential to speed up political literacy. Dr Al Sharekh agrees. "We strongly believe in political participation, and we urge everyone to vote. Mudhawi's List is bridging the knowledge gap by introducing these female candidates to the public and reminding younger women of how hard the generation before them had to fight for their political rights, so they don't take them for granted. We also want to remind women that there are more of them voting than men and that those votes are powerful and should be used to make a difference."

'Internship just opened up so many doors for me'

Women outwit Hollywood bias with help from industry insiders

By Lynn Elber

Kaitlyn Yang knows it's rare for women to work in visual effects but wanted to find out just how much company she has.

Devising an informal survey earlier this year, she painstakingly searched 24,000 LinkedIn entries for female visual effects supervisors in North America. Her tally: 30.

"So you do the math," she said of the tiny percentage that represents. It's not far afield of in-depth research showing women are underrepresented in behind-the-camera positions, including writing, directing and producing, despite recent progress.

A study of the 250 top-grossing films in 2019 by San Diego State University's Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that women comprise 6% of visual effects supervisors, 5% of cinematographers and 19% of writers. A center report on last season's TV shows found similar patterns.

Yang, whose perseverance led to the creation of her own firm, Alpha Studios, is among those succeeding in Hollywood. That's true as well of Layne Eskridge, a former Netflix and Apple TV executive who just launched POV Entertainment; writer Gladys Rodriguez, whose credits include "Sons of Anarchy" and

"Vida"; and Sandra Valde-Hansen, cinematographer for more than a dozen independent films.

The four share a key credit: Each had an industry internship through the Television Academy Foundation, the charitable arm of the academy that administers the prime-time Emmy Awards.



In this image provided by Joel Lip-ton, Sandra Valde-Hansen poses for a portrait. Women of color who work behind the camera in fields including writing and visual effects are finding career support, including from the Television Academy Foundation and its internships. (AP)

For Valde-Hansen, the internship provided the experience of working alongside veteran cinematographer Alan Caso, who'd been part of the acclaimed series "Six Feet Under."

Getting to learn from the man "who created the look of that show, that very cinematic look. I thought, 'Oh, this is better than getting into college,'" she said. "The internship just opened up so many doors for me."

Program

The program offers 50 paid, eight-week summer internships on Los Angeles TV productions to college students nationwide.

"We couldn't be prouder to have helped launch the careers of these exceptional women. They are a testament to the foundation's crucial work," said Madeline Di Nonno, chair of the foundation's board of directors.

As the onetime interns have progressed in their fields, they've gained hard-won insights about Hollywood and the obstacles to women and people of color. Yang, who uses a wheelchair because of spinal muscular atrophy, faces other challenges. In recent interviews, the women discussed their experiences and how the industry can evolve.

Bias can be subtle, or not. Rodriguez recalled a stretch in

which she worked as a writer's assistant on shows with primarily white male writing staffs.

Men in jobs comparable to hers were "invited to play Ping-Pong, but they wouldn't invite me, or they would invite them to after-work drinks and I wouldn't get invited," she said. "I was definitely not part of the boys club, so that excluded me from certain opportunities," such as developing story ideas.

Eskridge has found that older writers can be uncomfortable with an executive who is younger and Black. That appeared to be the case with a sitcom creator she ushered into her office for a first meeting.

"Maybe he thought I was an assistant, but when I closed the door and sat down he realized I was Layne," she said. "He was so flustered. And I think we sat there for about two minutes while he tried to gather himself. And then he eventually said he needed to call his agent and that he wasn't going to take the meeting."

Yang, who became more public-facing after starting her company, found she wasn't what some expected.

One man "was very surprised that I attended USC film school, in a way that was almost questioning if my resume was made up," she said. "I was like, 'You want to see my stu-

dent loans?'"

Women are well-represented at the USC School of Cinematic Arts: This fall, they're 56% of students, the school said.

Valde-Hansen said she owes a debt of gratitude to Florida-based cinematographer Tony Foresta, who took her on as his assistant when nobody else would.

"I remember walking into the (equipment) rental houses and they (film crew customers) would literally come up to me and say, 'Oh, I've worked with another woman camera assistant before...' like I was an alien," she said. "It was unnerving at times. I was so thankful to have this one person who saw me, unlike anyone else."

After Rodriguez completed her internship, she worked on CBS' "Cold Case," created and produced by Meredith Stiehm.

Mentor

"It's not that she gave me a leg up, more that she saw me and she didn't dismiss me," Rodriguez said. "I'll read your stuff if you're writing." Rodriguez recalled, "I think Meredith empowered her, and she was giving back to

me by empowering me."

A female colleague told Valde-Hansen recently that a director wanted to hire her for a project, but the producer thought the budget was out of her league - although there was a relatively small gap between it and other projects she'd worked on.

"This has happened to me. Why? Why is that story happening, when a white man makes a movie for \$500,000, it does really well, and then suddenly he's handed an \$80 million Marvel movie," Valde-Hansen said. "That has to change." Rodriguez says that when studios complain that they can't find diversity among writers, she has lists at the ready.

"It starts at the top, with execs realizing they have to do the work to look for writers of color, hire writers of color and give people chances," she said. "Just like they would take a chance on a white director or a white writer."

Eskridge recalls a few times when she was the "highest-ranking person of color in the building, and I'm not a president or part of the C-suite. That shows you that's a problem."

Yang wants the industry to think diversity for every aspect of production.

"The more down the credits you move, it's still the same old, same old. And I don't want to be the first one of the few," she said. (AP)