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# Lifestyle Barriers to Physical Fitness in Kuwait and the Need for a Revision in Public Policies

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## Introduction

Obesity in Kuwait is alarming. Several studies since the late 1980s have shown that around 80% of adults and children are either obese or overweight<sup>2</sup>. Fighting against this epidemic, Kuwaitis are prone to choose the shortest “cut”, namely the [bariatric surgeries](#), and yet the statistics do not seem to have changed and the real culprits of the phenomenon remains ignored. There are two basic factors known to contribute to healthy weight: physical activity and diet, both being not that easy and require careful lifestyle adjustments. The purpose of this paper is to explain the barriers of a healthy lifestyle in the Kuwaiti Society as well as address the need for a revision in related public policies to support a healthier lifestyle in the state.

## Dietary habits

Kuwaitis are generous and social and that is especially clear in their gatherings. Common gatherings in Kuwait include *Chai ithahas* (ladies’ breakfast) and *diwaniyas* (men’s meetings) where they enjoy an

abundant amount of food ranging from humble traditional *machboos* and dates to five-star hotel buffets and catering. Offering food is a way of showing social respect and [keeps the Kuwaiti society culturally alive](#). The general rule is that the guests are expected to “at least taste the food” and the host must “insist” on guests to eat more in order to show hospitality. “Doctor, how can I survive from the pressure if I say I am on a diet!” complained one of my Kuwaiti students when I asked during class what the social factors causing obesity are. Insisting on offering food is not only limited to big and formal gatherings, even in a small-scale friendly dinner, it is not unusual that fellows force whoever is on a weight-loss diet to eat more. Traditional generosity is, therefore, unintentionally a strong cultural element that has a side effect on the health of the Kuwaiti society.

A tremendously high and rising “eat out” trend in the country can be another reason for the population’s weight gain. As mentioned, Kuwaitis are extremely social and like to get together with friends and relatives when possible. Cooking for such gatherings at home is not very common even for those with

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<sup>1</sup> All articles published under “Gulf Insights” series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University, including the terms and terminology used in this publication.

<sup>2</sup> Al-Awadi, F., & Amine, E. K. (1989). Overweight and obesity in Kuwait. *Journal of the Royal Society of Health*, 109(5), 175-177.

Weiderpass, E., Botteri, E., Longenecker, J. C., Alkandari, A., Al-Wotavan, R., Al Duwairi, O., & Tuomilehto, J. (2019). The prevalence of overweight and obesity in an adult Kuwaiti population in 2014. *Frontiers in endocrinology*, 449.

Oguoma, V. M., Coffee, N. T., Alsharrah, S., Abu-Farha, M., Al-Refaei, F. H., Al-Mulla, F., & Daniel, M. (2021). Prevalence of overweight and obesity, and associations with socio-demographic factors in Kuwait. *BMC public health*, 21(1), 1-13.

Elkum, N., Al-Arouj, M., Sharifi, M., Shaltout, A., & Bennakhi, A. (2016). Prevalence of childhood obesity in the state of Kuwait. *Pediatric obesity*, 11(6), e30-e34.

higher incomes and who are capable of having one or more domestic worker who can help in the kitchen. The availability of various local and franchise restaurants, fast-food chains, patisseries, coffee shops, and juice and smoothie bars at every corner and through online apps help in easily facilitating social gatherings with assorted food options. Ordering online from restaurants not only for crowded gatherings but also for individual meals, has rocketed the delivery industry in the last decade. The major food delivery company in Kuwait [made \\$110 million revenue in 2018 increasing revenues by 109% from the year before](#). Ordering high caloric entrees, smoothies, sodas and side dishes- such as French fries and salads with creamy sauces- along with a main dish in a restaurant is the common pattern when dining out. Coffee and a dessert on the side can be expected anytime of the day as well as after dinner. Although the number of “healthy” restaurants increased in the recent years, fast-food restaurants outnumber those. Eating fast food is incredibly common especially among children and youth. All these choices of heavy calories in dietary habits are bending the obesity curve up in graphs.

### *Physical activity*

When eating habits embrace such high-calorie consumption, one must spend energy in physical activity. However, in Kuwait, physical activity level is [low](#) and exercise is not an easy leisure pursuit. There are several reasons keeping people from being physically active in Kuwait. Limitation in outdoor exercise due to climate (and culture for women), body-image oriented use of gyms, and lack of skilled

workforce in the sport industry can be counted among those reasons.

Reaching a record of 53.5° C in 2021 summer, Kuwait is one of the [hottest places on earth](#). Between May and October the weather is not usually safe for outdoor exercise. Additionally, the air pollution in the country puts Kuwait on the [15<sup>th</sup> rank of worst air quality](#) in the world. The dust particles in the air and the frequently occurring sandstorms causes the air to be unbreathable in times and usually unsafe for the respiratory system. If you consider both harsh climate and pollution, citizens do not usually have a chance to do outdoor aerobic exercises such as brisk walking, jogging, or cycling, which are considered the best exercises to develop cardiorespiratory endurance, burn calories, and lose weight. Hence, Kuwaitis must follow their cardio routines at indoor gyms with machines like treadmills, spinning bikes, rowing, and ellipticals.

Actually, the fitness centers in Kuwait are wide spread and their number is [increasing](#). Fitness centers for male and female, yoga and Pilates studios, freelance personal trainers, and gyms in some hotels provide citizens and expats a variety of options for exercise. Although the memberships to the fitness centers are relatively high, ranging from 300 KD to 3500 KD annually, they give access to almost every exercise, facility and equipment that can be found in the west. There is also a growing trend in the society of “gym culture” thanks to social media influencers who cause young people to have the tendency to follow an exercise routine in gyms with an increasing interest in getting in shape and for the sake of a “perfect body” rather than being healthy. I observed the preferences of exercise types for young

women to be more of cardio style walking and biking in the gym, while for young men to be weightlifting for muscle strengthening. Yet these young people seemed to be unaware of that these two types of exercises [should be combined in weekly terms](#) to achieve a healthy physical activity routine.

Another reason why Kuwaitis are not losing weight while there are quality fitness clubs with high membership numbers available in the country is hidden in the 7P of the service marketing mix, one of which is “people” namely coaches and trainers in fitness centers. Personal trainers (PTs) from diverse nationalities rotate between gyms in Kuwait, sometimes for very short terms, which may cause disconnection and lack of follow-ups with their clients. Language barriers might also affect the connection between the trainer and the client. Although most of the young Kuwaitis speak English, at least at beginner level, the conversation may lose some necessary information when both parties are weak at the spoken language. Skillful workforce is crucially important for the process of fitness. Wrong recruitment choices of PTs may lead clients to make wrong choices themselves. Steroid use, for example, is tremendously high in Kuwait particularly among men. Serious health issues were [reported in the country](#) due to the use of steroid derived hormones that were taken with the advice of PTs. Moreover, PTs have the tendency to tailor programs for "customer satisfaction" rather than for what the person actually needs. Kuwaitis need weight loss before any weightlifting exercise and sometimes the PTs' job requires convincing the clients to start with fat-burning aerobic exercise.

### *Concluding remarks on public policies*

The social environment and lifestyle of Kuwaitis are challenging their well-being and dietary habits and the physical inactivity is blatantly causing the obesity epidemic to grow in the country. The Kuwaiti Government is currently considering programs aiming to address the obesity issue. For example, Kuwait's Public Authority for Food and Nutrition is working with stakeholders to implement some activities to promote active and healthy lifestyles, such as partnerships with local food companies to reduce added sugar and salt in juices and snacks and community awareness campaigns. In 2009, a [National Physical Activity Plan](#) was designed to increase awareness about the physical activity in the country. Then, a 2013-2017- [National Program for Healthy Living](#) was created to promote the well-being of the society. In a voluntary [report](#) on United Nations Sustainable Development Goals in Kuwait, malnutrition and obesity were noted as challenges that require attention. Finally, Kuwait Public Policy Center released the 2015-2020 [Health Policy Paper](#) in which unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyle are stated among the major health issues.

However, as stated in the National Physical Activity Plan, the Sustainable Development Report and the Health Policy Paper, lack of qualified technical personnel and expertise in key roles and lack of governance mechanisms causes challenges in implementing these health policies effectively. Although the Health Policy Paper recommends enhancing the health workforce and claims that 62% of doctors and 94% of nurses are from overseas, it does not mention the mezzo level prevention- oriented workforce

who are dieticians, coaches, personal trainers, PE teachers, and other specialists. Here, the need for integrating the education of health and exercise workforce in Kuwait's higher education system appears strongly. Because these mezzo level staff are those who can fight against inactivity and obesity in the field, they therefore may prevent the obesity and related disease like diabetics and CVDs before they occur.

Actually, the issue can simply be solved in a few years by training the local specialists in the universities. There are bachelor programs of Physical Education in UAE, Bahrain, and Oman, educating students to have the skill set for being physical education teachers and coaches. Surprisingly, focusing on engineering and business education, none of the Kuwaiti universities offer such programs and they miss an approach on what the country needs as human capital. On the other hand, considering opening exercise and sport related programs in universities would resonate with the latest Kuwaitization approach of the government. In this plan, members of the parliament often state the importance of recruiting Kuwaiti citizens instead of immigrants to work in institutions. Kuwaiti graduates of those programs hence might be placed in public and private health-related mezzo level positions helping to improve the overall health by contributing to the gym culture and eating habits of the society in a daily life basis.

Furthermore, another measure would be integrating the sport management system with the governance of national education and urban planning. Kuwaiti children may need some extra mandatory physical education (and nutrition) classes in their

curricula and an advisory board might adjust the exercise standards for the school kids. Although the mentioned policy papers address the need for such an action, there is no evidence any action was taken recently. Another recommendation, which might require more public funding, is to develop a sport facility plan. Bearing in mind that Kuwaitis need cardiorespiratory exercise -that is continuous exercise for more than 20 minutes, urban planning authorities may design parks and recreation areas suitable for such an exercise, particularly for those who cannot afford gym memberships. Designing shaded walking routes to parks by planting trees (as in Fintas Garden, Al Ahmadi) might sound expensive at the beginning but it might be a sound investment for the health of the future generations. After the Qatar World Cup 2022 when the region's interest to sport and sport events is assumably increased, integrating serious sport policies to public health and workforce education in the higher education system along with the design for exercise-friendly urban transformation are deemed of significance.

#### **About the author**

E. Esra Erturan-Ogut is a professor of sport sciences. She had her PhD in sports management in 2010 from Gazi University, Turkey. She has been a visiting scholar in Germany, Deutsche Sporthochschule in Cologne and in the Georgia State University, Atlanta, US. From 2017 to 2021, she worked as a full-time faculty in American University of the Middle East in Kuwait. Currently, she is a faculty in Fenerbahçe University, Istanbul. She has published several journal articles in well-known quality

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