

Gender Segregation as Social Engineering:
Exploring the Civic Costs in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait

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Gender segregation is a key feature of the political order in a variety of Middle Eastern countries, but especially so in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.² Either by law or by custom, and in varying degrees of strictness, gender segregation in these two countries is pervasive, cutting across schools, universities, hospitals, restaurants, shops, government offices, parks, mosques, health clubs, and buses, among other public places.³ While proponents argue that state-imposed gender segregation safeguards the moral fabric of society, critics argue the opposite—that it blocks the formation of a healthy public sphere and even works to undermine society’s morals.⁴ Yet empirical research is rare: how, if at all, do same-gender vs. mixed-gender environments affect citizens’ moral, civic, and related qualities in deeply conservative societies? Beyond the presumed normative value from a human rights perspective—as well as the economic value of heightened and broader-based female labor market participation—would greater gender “mixing” (in Arabic, *ikhṭilāt*) lead to a healthier public sphere? Why or why not?

This paper uses original empirical data to investigate these questions. As Gregory Gause (2010) has observed, gender segregation is the “third rail” in Saudi politics, and much the same could be said of Kuwait, though to a lesser degree. Public debate is driven less by data than by angry polemic, ideology, and anecdote. As a result, empirical work is much needed. Yet such research can be difficult to carry out, due to the very constraints and taboos discouraging the “mixing” of men and women on which gender segregation policies are based. To circumvent prohibitions and sensitivities surrounding face-to-face “mixing,” I conducted two survey

² Gender segregation is most visible and wide-ranging in the Arab (or Persian) Gulf, but can also be found to varying degrees elsewhere. In most Arab countries, for example, the public school system is gender-segregated by law, and conservatives have called for an end to co-educational public education in more secular Muslim-majority countries as well, such as Turkey and Indonesia. Gender segregation is also making a comeback in US public schools and classrooms; it was common in the US into the 19th century, when it was limited to private and parochial schools (Rich 2014; M. D. Anderson 2015).

³ It is far more pervasive in Saudi Arabia, but still quite prominent in Kuwait, especially outside of central tourist locations.

⁴ For an overview of these debates, see Meijer (2010).

experiments—one each in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, respectively—and supplemented the findings with qualitative fieldwork evidence. Both experiments used the principle of *imagined contact* (Crisp and Turner 2009), which was developed to facilitate research in contexts where actual contact is unlikely, difficult to arrange, or dangerous.

In Medina, Saudi Arabia, the second holiest city in Islam and very conservative, Saudi male college students imagined being interviewed by another male or a female student for a school project. In Kuwait City, Kuwait, less radically gender-segregated but still quite conservative, Kuwaiti male college students imagined working with another male or a female detective on a bank robbery case. The experiments therefore presented differing contexts in which men and women might “mix”—as students in an educational context and as co-workers in the workplace—thus widening the base for generalizability. In the Saudi case, I examined differences in how male subjects reported their moral and civic attitudes, given the gender of the interviewer. In the Kuwaiti case, I assessed how the experience of working with a female colleague—as opposed to a male one—affected male subjects’ moral and civic attitudes tapped directly after the experience.

My argument, drawing from both fieldwork and related theory, is that mixed-gender environments are likely to produce moral and civic dividends for males in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, due to individual-level incentives for impression management.⁵ The basic idea is that gender stereotypes are likely to be especially potent in more conservative and gender-segregated contexts like Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Because males imagine females to be more moral and civic—and I will present evidence that many do—they are motivated to aspire to higher moral and civic standards around females in an effort to impress as well as a fear of social sanction.

⁵ The question of how females may think and behave differently in mixed-gender as opposed to same-gender environments is also an important one, but it is not the topic of this paper, given that much of the public debate revolves around male behavioral consequences.

The result is a set of civic and moral costs directly linked to the gender-segregated status quo in which males and females occupy largely separate spheres of society, rarely interacting outside the family.

It should be clear that the argument conflicts with the claims of conservative pro-segregationists, who expect the opposite—a *worsening* of moral and civic behavior in mixed environments, especially among males and therefore justifying the need to “protect” females in female-only spaces. Perhaps more surprisingly, it also conflicts with the short-term expectations of many reformists, even though it is consistent with their longer-term logic. As I will show with qualitative fieldwork evidence, even many reformists do not expect males as they have been socialized today to behave in any sense “better” around females. This is not a surprising expectation in societies known for their deeply patriarchal norms. Such expectations align with social dominance theory, a powerful alternative to the argument being proposed here, albeit not mutually exclusive to it.

Nevertheless, both experiments provided support for my argument, suggesting that Saudi and Kuwaiti males—despite pessimistic in-region assumptions to the contrary—are indeed motivated to be more civic and moral around females. Strikingly, the data revealed significant increases in attitudes such as tolerance, open-mindedness, support for gender equality, and ethics or law-abidingness associated with imagined interaction with a female, as opposed to another male. The results are all the more striking given the high level of patriarchy in both countries combined with the limited salience of “imagined contact.” Effects would presumably be larger in real-world mixed environments, where incentives for impression management would be more intensely felt.

The research makes several contributions. First, it offers a rare empirical investigation into the civic and moral implications of gender segregation in deeply conservative societies. While research on mixed-gender interactions and environments is not uncommon in Western contexts—particularly given the recent resurgence of gender segregation in US public schools (Rich 2014; M. D. Anderson 2015)—it is almost nonexistent in the Middle East, despite vigorous public debate. Data from highly religious cities such as Medina are especially difficult to obtain, making the Saudi-based findings of this study particularly valuable. Second, the research contributes to a larger literature on social engineering and its implications, since gender segregation regimes in the Middle East are largely state-led or state-sanctioned.⁶ Third, the findings complement a growing body of work seeking to move beyond recognizing the normative value of diversity (including gender diversity) toward identifying its more tangible and potentially positive effects in working groups, businesses, juries, parliaments, and other arenas.⁷ Finally, the research adds to knowledge of gender and politics by suggesting—and experimentally evaluating—causal links between contemporary policies on gender on the one hand and the civic health of the citizenry on the other.

The paper first provides an overview of gender segregation as social engineering in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. It next presents theory and hypotheses, focusing on the competing predictions of the argument at hand as well as religious conservative and social dominance alternatives. Third, it discusses the survey experiments in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and their results, followed by further insights from qualitative fieldwork and a conclusion.

⁶ For well-known examples from the literature on state-led social engineering, see Weber (1976), Scott (1998), and Smith (2001), and for Middle East-specific examples, see Mitchell (2002), Al-Rasheed (2013), and Jones (forthcoming in 2017).

⁷ For an overview, see Phillips (2014).

Gender Segregation as Social Engineering

State-led gender segregation is prominent in much of the Middle East, albeit to varying degrees. In most countries, for example, public schools are gender-segregated by law, and in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, gender segregation extends well beyond education. As a blueprint for ordering much of society, the origins of gender segregation lie in conservative local customs as well as narrow—and much-disputed—interpretations of religion. Yet it is the state in both countries that has done the most to legitimize and institutionalize gender segregation.⁸ This is not to say that gender segregation goes uncontested, including among certain ruling family members and religious scholars, but rather to emphasize the broad role of the state in maintaining and enforcing it.

It is a testament to the complexity of the issue that Saudi state officials who pushed for institutionalized gender segregation in the 1960s viewed it as part-and-parcel with modernization and progress for women, and many continue to think as much.⁹ As public education spread, it was initially only for males. When King Faisal (r. 1964-1975) sought to introduce education for females, the proposal was vociferously opposed by certain *'ulamā'* and more conservative elements in society—until it was agreed that separate schools for boys and girls would be required by law. Soon thereafter, and despite the fact that in rural areas men had worked alongside women, the 1969 labor law included an article stating as follows: “In no case may men

⁸ It is true that more liberal ruling elites have pushed back against gender segregation in recent years. For example, Saudi Arabia's reform-minded King Abdullah founded the first mixed university in the Kingdom in 2009, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST). Yet such efforts are the rare exceptions amidst a history of laws and regulations since the 1960s institutionalizing and legitimizing gender segregation.

⁹ A large literature addresses gender and politics in Saudi Arabia. This brief history of gender segregation draws collectively from Doumato (1992; 2001), Al-Rasheed (2007, 2013), Le Renard (2008, 2014), and Van Geel (2012), as well my fieldwork in Riyadh in June 2011.

and women mix in places of work or in accessory facilities, or in any other place.”¹⁰ With the growing prominence in the 1970s of the Islamic revivalist Sahwa movement, which opposed a trend toward greater gender “mixing” in cinemas and other areas, pressure grew to expand and better enforce segregation. New rules and regulations were introduced and the Committee for the Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice—the religious police—grew stricter about enforcement.

At the same time, oil revenues made possible the construction of entirely separate male and female spheres, across not only education and the labor market but also places of leisure and consumption (Le Renard 2008; Van Geel 2012). For example, despite regional differences in levels of enforcement, many if not most cafes and restaurants now offer segregated seating areas, often with signs announcing that “unaccompanied women are not allowed.” Parks, museums, and zoos may be gender-segregated by time of access. Among other examples, some government ministries have segregated divisions, there are women-only malls and shops, and there is pressure for women-only hospitals, even though many hospitals and clinics already have separate waiting rooms for men and women. Although variably enforced, the guardian (*mahram*) system facilitates the segregated status quo by preventing interaction between men and women outside the family; women may not carry out a range of everyday activities without the permission of a male guardian (e.g., a brother or father), which may include traveling, marrying, working, and obtaining medical treatment. The official 1990 ban on women driving plays a similar role in preventing unauthorized gender mixing.

¹⁰ The article was replaced in 2005 with a vaguer statement (“When implementing the provisions of this Law, the employer and the worker shall adhere to the provisions of *shari’a*”), which opened up some opportunities for mixed workplaces, but gender segregation continues to be the norm (al-Fassi 2010).

Similar patterns have evolved in Kuwait, where gender segregation is also a prominent, if less extreme, feature of the political order.¹¹ In the 1960s and 1970s, Kuwait was experiencing liberal social trends. With oil creating a need for new employees, women were now allowed to work for government institutions. Although public K-12 schools had always been segregated after kindergarten, Kuwait University was co-ed, some women wore short skirts, and men and women “mixed” in group social outings. However, in the 1990s, the Islamist-leaning parliament proposed banning the mixing of the sexes in classes, libraries, labs, and extracurricular activities at Kuwait University. Despite thousands of students petitioning against it, Kuwait University has been segregated by law since 2001, a strict dress code has been introduced, and private universities have been gender segregated since 2008.

As Nadia Algharabali (2010, 23) has observed in a valuable investigation into how Kuwaiti youth challenge these norms through online chat rooms, “gender segregation is implicit in every aspect of society in Kuwait.” Although it is less visible and consistently enforced than in Saudi Arabia, segregation can now be found, especially outside of major tourist areas, in a number of government offices, businesses, shops, health clubs, cafes, restaurants, and public transportation (with buses having special seating for women and women-only taxi services). Even in families, certain rooms in the home may be designated for men, and girls may not be allowed out in the streets out of a concern they may play with boys. Algharabali describes the result being the emergence of separate male and female subcultures from childhood through adulthood.¹²

¹¹ This brief section on gender segregation in Kuwait draws primarily from Tétreault and al-Mughni (1995), Al Mughni (2001), Al-Sabah (2013), and Shalaby (2015), as well as my fieldwork in Kuwait in April 2016.

¹² However, it is important to acknowledge that the same rules do not necessarily apply to non-national residents and visitors to Saudi Arabia and, especially, Kuwait.

Gender segregation as state-led social engineering is hotly debated in both countries (Al-Rasheed 2007, 2013; Al-Sabah 2013; Meijer 2010; AlMatrouk 2016). For conservative proponents, it is essential; it achieves nothing short of safeguarding the moral fabric of society, the sanctity of the family, and the virtue of daughters, wives, and mothers. It is a cornerstone of what it means to be an Islamic society (Al-Rasheed 2007, 130). Greater gender “mixing” would only lead to a slippery slope of immoral, corrupt, and un-Islamic behavior, especially on the part of males tempted by females. Hence, as Shaykh Sa‘d al-Shithrī in Saudi Arabia has argued, in “mixed gender universities we see lots of evil and corruption.”¹³ In the words of fellow Saudi Shaykh Abd al-‘Azīz bin Bāz, a former Grand Mufti appointed by the King, the mixing of the sexes is “the main path to adultery, which splits society and wrecks morals.”¹⁴ Kuwaiti proponents make similar claims, citing religious sources and precedents as well as local customs, and pointing to Western societies for proof of the social ills linked to greater gender mixing—adultery, high divorce rates, children born out of wedlock, and sexual harassment of women.

Just as it is clear to proponents that gender segregation enshrines moral and civic health, it is obvious to critics that it does not.¹⁵ Reformists emphasize global human rights norms surrounding gender equality, as well as alternative religious sources and precedents. Far from supporting a healthy public sphere, gender segregation is viewed as a central obstacle to the formation of one. For example, rarely interacting with females outside the family, males do not come to view females as fellow human beings and equal citizens. Thus, gender segregation does not prevent immorality, corrupt behavior, and sexual harassment; it facilitates these uncivil outcomes by stoking divisiveness and mass sexual frustration. Some research suggests it may

¹³ Quoted in Meijer (2010, 14).

¹⁴ Quoted in Doumato (2001, 166).

¹⁵ For examples of reformist arguments, see Saudi liberal newspapers such as *al-Watan* and *al-Riyad*. Their arguments are also summarized in Meijer (2010).

even be tied to authoritarianism and terrorism (Fish 2002; Thayer and Hudson 2010). Reformers point as well to the economic costs, emphasizing low female labor market participation and the expenses involved in constructing parallel female facilities across so many sectors.

Mixing of the Sexes: Theory and Hypotheses

Despite vigorous public debate, empirical work on gender segregation in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait is limited. In Western countries, by contrast, a growing body of research investigates the role of gender in group settings, ranging from small group and classroom dynamics to large corporations.¹⁶ Particularly relevant may be the debate over the recent resurgence of single-sex education in US public schools (M. D. Anderson 2015; Rich 2014), and this debate is therefore worth a brief review before proceeding to the main argument. In the US, advocates of single-sex education suggest that boys and girls are “hard wired” to learn differently and thus benefit from tailored pedagogical approaches (Gurian, Henley, and Trueman 2001; Sax 2006), though very few brain differences have been found that could support this claim (Lenroot and Giedd 2010). Other arguments point to research showing that boys dominate discussions and receive more attention in mixed gender classes, particularly math and science, and that single-sex education would thus benefit girls and reduce sexism (Lee, Marks, and Byrd 1994). Suggestions are also made that single-sex education could improve the quality of education for low-income minority students (Hubbard and Datnow 2005).

However, these claims are much contested, and many studies lack controls. A U.S. Department of Education (2005) review found some support for the benefits of single-sex schooling, but stated that the results were equivocal, pointing to a “dearth of quality studies.”

¹⁶ For example, research on gender composition and small group dynamics is extensive, examining variables such as decision-making, performance, and interaction styles (Aries 1976; Eagly and Carli 1981; Carli 1989; Fenwick and Neal 2001; Balliet et al. 2011; Schneid et al. 2015; Nikolova and Lamberton 2016).

Likewise, a recent meta-analysis of studies from 21 nations concludes that single-sex education does not provide the advantages claimed by proponents in areas such as academic performance, self-concept, and educational aspiration, when uncontrolled studies are omitted (Pahlke, Hyde, and Allison 2014). Moreover, critics argue that single-sex education makes gender more salient, reinforcing negative gender stereotypes while uncomfortably calling to mind earlier experiences of US racial segregation (Bigler and Eliot 2012). By contrast, mixed gender schooling offers positive opportunities for boys and girls to cooperate and learn together in a supervised environment (Halpern et al. 2011).

While this largely US-based research is clearly relevant, it focuses more on educational achievement, group dynamics, and self-esteem outcomes, rather than moral and civic implications as such, with much of the work addressing schooling.¹⁷ Moreover, it occurs in a cultural context in which mixed environments, far from being taboo, are the norm. Findings may not travel well to highly conservative societies, such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, where gender segregation is far more pervasive. I therefore draw in this section from in-region fieldwork as much as prior research and theory to develop hypotheses. In addition, because much of the debate in the Islamic world centers on expectations about *male* behavior—given the “temptation” of the opposite sex, perceived by gender-segregation supporters to encourage immorality and corruption—I focus on theoretical predictions concerning how males will think and behave in same-gender vs. mixed-gender environments, leaving the important question of female outcomes to future work.

My central argument is that mixed-gender interactions are likely to produce moral and civic dividends for males in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, thus suggesting a set of costs tied to the

¹⁷ There are exceptions, such as work exploring ethics at the group or organizational level. For example, correlational research on the gender composition of corporate boards finds that boards with more women tend to be more engaged in corporate social responsibility (CSR) efforts (Rao and Tilt 2016).

gender-segregated status quo. The argument obviously challenges the claims of conservative segregationists, who see mixed environments as leading to moral and civic corruption. Yet it also diverges strikingly from the expectations of many reformists for the short-term, even though it is consistent with a longer-term reformist logic. As I will illustrate shortly with qualitative fieldwork, for many on the ground, it is surprising to hear that males might behave in any sense “better” around females, particularly in societies known for their strong patriarchal norms and chauvinism. Perhaps that would be the case in the West, many of my Kuwaiti interlocutors suggested, but not here in Kuwait—and if not in Kuwait, then definitely not in Saudi Arabia. A typical expectation was that males, as they have been socialized today, would behave *worse* around women in mixed classrooms, mixed workplaces, and so on, acting in domineering, patronizing ways typical of the larger patriarchal system that relegates women to second-class citizenship.

This popular expectation is roughly aligned with social dominance theory, which emphasizes the maintenance of group-based social hierarchies (Sidanius 1993; Pratto et al. 1994; Pratto, Sidanius, and Levin 2006). Having more power and status relative to women, men should act to maintain and enforce their higher position in the presence of women, the lower status group. In keeping with this expectation, a meta-analysis of 43 studies concludes that men interrupt more than women, especially in intrusive ways that suggest a desire to establish dominance (K. J. Anderson and Leaper 1998). Males have also been found to interrupt females more than females interrupt males (Zimmerman and West 1975; West 1979; Hancock and Rubin 2015). In one study, male students interrupted professors significantly more than female students, a difference that was even greater when the professor was female (Brooks 1982).

These social dominance patterns seem especially likely in more patriarchal societies, where the difference in status between men and women is far more pronounced.

Nevertheless, and without denying the reality of gender-based hierarchies in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, I propose and test an alternative argument drawn from differing theoretical foundations, among them impression management, interpersonal contact, social influence, and social desirability. A considerable body of cross-cultural work has found, for example, that interpersonal contact can reduce prejudice toward outgroups, and mixed-gender environments for that reason alone are likely to improve attitudes toward women (Pettigrew and Tropp 2006). But moral and civic attitudes more broadly—that is, well beyond attitudes toward women—are also likely to shift in positive ways, due to incentives for impression management. Impression management refers to a large body of theory and research, inspired by the work of Irving Goffman (1959), which explores how people seek to manage the impressions others form of them—as well as, at times, the impressions they form of themselves. Significant research in social psychology shows that people modify their self-presentations in an effort to create a positive impression, maintain a positive self-concept, or avoid social sanction (Leary and Kowalski 1990).

My argument does not deny incentives for social dominance. What I suggest is that incentives for impression management are also likely to be powerful, and particularly so when it comes to moral and civic behavior in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. First, impression management incentives in general appear stronger in mixed-gender environments, and more so for males. In studies of social interactions, men report greater concern for “making an impression” when interacting with a female compared to a male, and they show greater heart rate and blood pressure increases in brief opposite-sex interactions compared to same-sex ones (Beidel, Turner,

and Dancu 1985; Karremans et al. 2009). One study demonstrated that men suffer some cognitive impairment after a seven minute interaction with a female (Karremans et al. 2009). Self-presentation concerns thus appear heightened for males interacting with females.

But intensifying the impression management motivation and the tendency toward heightened self-presentation concerns for males in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in particular is the fact that males and females are far more foreign and “otherized” than is the case in unsegregated societies. Rarely interacting outside the family, they are more mysterious to one another, and individuals are generally more inclined toward impression management when they are in the presence of strangers whose friendship and goodwill they cannot take for granted (Tice et al. 1995). As a result, Saudi and Kuwaiti males should be especially worried about how they are perceived around a female, as opposed to another “one of the guys” with whom they spend the majority of their waking hours. Casual opportunities to meet and mingle with the opposite sex are also relatively rare, making any one interaction count for more. Given that a mating motive may be activated as well, these impression management incentives should be particularly potent for young, unmarried males.

Second, the *kind* of impression males are motivated to create around females should include a positive moral and civic component, due to widespread assumptions about what women value and what women are like. There are, first of all, relatively consistent and cross-cultural gender differences in the characteristics that men and women say they value (Schwartz and Rubel 2005). Men attribute more importance to power and achievement, while women are more likely to emphasize the importance of universalism and benevolence, which include concepts such as tolerance, understanding, and the welfare of others. These patterns contribute to powerful gender stereotypes: despite significant cross-national differences in social and

cultural context, women have traditionally been seen as soft, warm, communal, empathetic, ethical, conscientious, and open-minded, among other examples of purity and virtue (Williams and Best 1990; Eagly, Mladinic, and Otto 1991; Löckenhoff et al. 2014; Kennedy, McDonnell, and Stephens 2016). Such assumptions about women’s nature and value priorities—a manifestation of the “women are wonderful”¹⁸ effect—should guide impression management efforts for males when interacting with a female, in order to make a good impression by reducing social distance as well as to maintain a positive self-concept.

The US and other Western countries provide ample evidence for these behaviors, with a growing number of studies finding that males are indeed motivated to be more generous and altruistic due to the presence or influence of females. For example, men contribute more to a public good and volunteer more for charitable causes in the presence of a female as opposed to a male audience (Van Vugt and Iredale 2012); if they are CEOs, pay their employees more if they have a firstborn daughter (Dahl, Dezsö, and Ross 2012); and for male legislators, vote in more liberal ways if they have daughters, especially on issues related to women’s rights (Washington 2008). Men also provide more gender-egalitarian answers to questions when interviewed by a female (Huddy and Terkildsen 1993; Kane and Macaulay 1993), a finding that also emerges in a nationally representative sample in Morocco (Benstead 2013).

The pressure for men to convey good moral and civic character around women is likely to be especially intense in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. The main reason is that conservative gender stereotypes surrounding women’s purity and virtue are far more ingrained than is

¹⁸ The “women are wonderful” effect refers to evidence that people link more positive attributes (such as honesty and kindness) to females as opposed to males (Eagly, Mladinic, and Otto 1991; Eagly and Mladinic 1994). However, at the same time, women are typically seen as less competent and less ready for effective leadership, lacking in qualities such as decisiveness and strength. These ambivalent attitudes link to two types of sexism: hostile and benevolent (Glick et al. 2000).

typically the case in more open and liberal societies.¹⁹ Having limited mixed-gender interaction in society that might serve to counter existing stereotypes, Saudi and Kuwaiti men should be particularly likely to subscribe to well-known assumptions about women—for example, that they are soft, warm, communal, and ethical (if also less capable). Such stereotypes are part of state-led social engineering and as such serve to bolster patriarchy by giving men reasons to “protect” and hence limit the freedom of women, as Madawi Al-Rasheed (2013) illustrates in the Saudi context. But they are also likely to make men more anxious about their attitudes and behavior around women when it comes to the areas of conduct that they imagine women are likely to be (stereotypically) judging them, both as women and as mirrors through which the larger nation and society may be evaluating them.²⁰ Men’s impression management motivation should thus be intensified around women, and also directed more specifically toward conveying a positive moral and civic character.

As a check on these assumptions, I investigated gender stereotypes in Kuwait focusing on the same study population as that used for the experiments discussed below. Across three different samples of Kuwaiti male university students surveyed in April 2016, evidence was found that males *do* view females as significantly warmer and more truthful, as expected, while they view males as significantly more decisive and powerful, as shown in Table 1.²¹ In my

¹⁹ As Le Renard (2008, 614) shows in Saudi Arabia, conservative Islamic discourses “led to a model of the Saudi woman as pious and virtuous,” which were subsequently legitimized by the state. Al-Rasheed (2013, 25) also documents how Saudi women have been made into “symbols of the piety of state and nation.”

²⁰ As Suad Joseph (2000) argues, the “symbolic equation of women with nation” in Middle Eastern societies, with women seen as icons of the nation and thus bearers of its authentic values and culture, has helped to legitimize patriarchy by suggesting that the preservation of the nation requires keeping women in traditional and stereotypical roles. What I suggest is that it may also mean that men are more concerned about their image and behavior living up to such lofty values when they are around women. On this general subject, see also Kandiyoti (1991), Yamani (1996), and Abu-Lughod (1998).

²¹ This is consistent with broader perceptions of gender and behavior in the region. For example, Benstead, Jamal, and Lust (2015) found in a nationally representative survey in Tunisia that female candidates for office were viewed as significantly less likely to be involved in corruption. Also, the “women and peace” hypothesis suggests that women show greater propensity toward peace and compromise, although findings in the Middle East have not confirmed this (Tessler and Nachtwey 1999; Tessler and Warriner 1997). Nevertheless, in one simulated

qualitative fieldwork, men also routinely expressed belief in these stereotypes. For instance, a male community organizer in Kuwait explained that more women are involved with NGOs and social activism because women are by their nature “more interested in social change,” i.e. positive civic change. Strong gender stereotypes are also reinforced by social engineering influences on physical space; at Kuwait’s College of Basic Education, one of several public institutions of higher education, the shared underground garage marks off the female side of campus with pink pillars and the male side with blue pillars.²²

None of this is to say that women in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait—or elsewhere—actually *are* more moral and civic.²³ The argument laid out here is generally agnostic about real group differences. The point is rather to emphasize that in contexts where men are more likely to *believe* women to be thus, then it follows that men are also more likely to draw on that belief as they engage in impression management efforts around women. Yet it is also important to acknowledge that stereotypical beliefs about moral and civic orientations may have some basis in reality. For example, I conducted a study in the United Arab Emirates of ethical decision-making among students in government high school ($n = 172$), using a general knowledge quiz in which there was an opportunity to cheat and cheating behavior could thus be measured (Jones 2015). The result was a significant and substantively large gender difference: while a full 82% of males in the sample of Arab youth cheated, only 12% of females chose to do so.

Nevertheless, and as mentioned, social dominance is a common-sense and intuitive expectation for male behavior around females in a highly patriarchal society. If females are

negotiation experiment, Jewish-Israeli subjects rated female Palestinian negotiators as warmer and more trustworthy compared to Palestinian males offering the same proposals (Maoz 2009).

²² Personal observation, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

²³ The jury still appears to be out on this question. For example, in the literature on ethical decision-making, evidence for gender differences is mixed, but whenever gender differences appear, it is typically females who are found to be more sensitive to ethical or moral issues (O’Fallon and Butterfield 2005). A vibrant debate also addresses the question of gender and corruption in government (e.g., Esarey and Chirillo 2013).

viewed as lesser creatures, why should males change their attitudes and behaviors at all around them, unless to reinforce their higher status? Given such pessimism, the main purpose of this paper is to test for the more positive moral and civic effects theorized above. Yet, in doing so, it is important to acknowledge that incentives for social dominance and incentives for impression management may not be mutually exclusive. Saudi and Kuwaiti males may dismiss females' intellectual opinions at the same time as they aspire to higher moral and civic standards due to their presence or influence. The question of when and why impression management trumps social dominance, and vice versa, is therefore an important one for future study.

Experimental Evidence

Due to the very regulations and taboos that support state social engineering regimes of gender segregation, experimental research on gender mixing in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait involves a number of challenges. Relatively few opportunities exist for random assignment of individuals to same-gender and mixed-gender groups in the first place, and there are concerns about illegality, cultural and religious sensitivity, and the risk of a smear campaign. To overcome these challenges, I conducted two survey experiments. For the research questions at hand, survey experiments are especially useful; they are far less intrusive than face-to-face lab experiments that directly and visibly mix men and women. At the same time, they constitute a significant improvement over the anecdotal and ideological approaches characterizing much of the public debate over gender mixing in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Both experiments applied the principle of *imagined contact*. Imagined contact is the “mental simulation of a social interaction with a member or members of an outgroup category” (Crisp and Turner 2009, 234). It was originally conceived as a new means of testing the contact hypothesis for reducing prejudice toward outgroups, particularly in situations where actual

contact is dangerous, unlikely, or impossible. Although imagined contact is presumably a weaker stimulus, a recent meta-analysis of over 70 studies (Miles and Crisp 2014) found consistent evidence that imagined contact—just like actual contact—can reduce prejudice and encourage positive intergroup behavior.²⁴

In the survey experiments discussed below, imagined contact was employed to test individual-level hypotheses about the malleability of men’s attitudes, aiming to shed light on the moral and civic implications of state-imposed gender segregation. Each experiment used a voluntary, anonymous paper-and-pencil survey introducing a different context for mixed-gender interaction in the treatment group—the school or the workplace—which was explained in the text introduction to the survey. In control groups, surveys presented an identical scenario, but with a male rather than a female partner. The samples in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait consisted of male university students, for two main reasons above and beyond convenience. First, imagined contact effects are typically higher for youth (Miles and Crisp 2014). Second, the question of gender mixing among the young, in particular, is at the heart of the larger public debate over gender segregation as social engineering. Thus, student samples are not only convenient but also theoretically valuable and relevant. Surveys were administered in December 2016-January 2017.

Dependent variables relating to moral and civic virtue included open-mindedness, tolerance, support for gender equality, and ethics (including law-abidingness). The selection of dependent variables was driven by the theory discussed above as well as in-region qualitative fieldwork, discussed in more depth below. For open-mindedness, responses to two Likert items drawing from the updated dogmatism scale in Shearman and Levine (2006) were averaged:

²⁴ Crisp and Turner (2009) cite evidence that mental imagery can provoke the same kinds of emotional and motivational reactions as real experience (Dadds et al. 1997), since it invokes similar neurological mechanisms to those for memory, emotion, and motor control (Kosslyn, Ganis, and Thompson 2001).

“There is usually only one correct opinion about an issue” (reverse-scored) and “I believe there are two sides to every question, and try to look at both.”²⁵ Tolerance, which could only be measured in Saudi Arabia, was tapped with a four-item index of Likert statements drawn from the work of Woo et al. (2014), including statements such as “I like to hear different people’s views on political issues, even when I don’t agree.”²⁶ For support for gender equality, two items were combined, drawing from Benstead (2013): “Men and women should have equal job opportunities, wages, and salaries” and “In general, social and economic problems would improve if there were more women in government.”²⁷

Ethics (including law-abidingness) was measured with an index of items adapted from the World Values Survey. The index asks respondents how justifiable they find various ethically questionable behaviors. Two of the items were illegal (“accepting a bribe” and “driving over the speed limit”), while the rest were “taking government benefits that you do not need,” “exaggerating on your resume,” and “hiring a family member for a position in a business, when another applicant is more qualified.”²⁸ In the analysis that follows, both the overall index of five items (ethics) as well as a smaller index restricting analysis to the two illegal items (law-abidingness) are discussed.

²⁵ Responses to individual items were coded on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, and then averaged. In pooled data, Cronbach’s α for this index was low, at 0.05, suggesting that the two items may touch on differing aspects of open-mindedness (or dogmatism/closed-mindedness). As a result, mean differences for individual items are also discussed in the results section.

²⁶ The other items were “I enjoy living in a diverse community, with people from different religious backgrounds,” “I enjoy spending time with people from different ethnic backgrounds,” and “I prefer spending time with people of my own nationality” (reverse-scored). Responses to individual items were coded on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, and then averaged. Cronbach’s α for this index was 0.45.

²⁷ Responses to individual items were coded on a scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree, and then averaged. In the pooled data, Cronbach’s α for this index was 0.56.

²⁸ Responses to individual items were coded on a scale ranging from 1 = not justifiable at all to 7 = very justifiable, and then averaged. After data collection, scores were reversed to facilitate interpretation, so that higher scores indicate heightened ethical sensitivity. In the pooled data, Cronbach’s α for the ethics index was 0.47, and for the two illegal items (law-abidingness), it was 0.34.

Medina, Saudi Arabia

One experiment was conducted in Medina, Saudi Arabia, a city in the western Hijaz region. Medina is the second holiest city in Islam after Mecca, where the Prophet's mosque and tomb stand, and as such it is a destination for Muslims on pilgrimage. It is known to be very conservative, and non-Muslims are strictly prohibited from entering the city (though are allowed to enter the outskirts, such as the airport). The survey was administered to Saudi male students at a large public university in the city (n = 191), rotating treatment and control versions.

Following earlier work on imagined contact, male students read a text introduction facilitating immersion into a vivid scenario, in this case an educational context involving an interview for a school project. In the treatment group, students were asked to imagine that "a girl at a nearby school or university would like to interview you for her class project. Her name is Fatima, and she would like to hear your perspective and opinions about a wide range of issues." In order to prevent students from imagining a "Fatima" they might already know, the introduction stated that "You have never met Fatima" and added a generic description for her and her school.

The wording was identical in the control group, except that the student was male, named "Ahmad," and male pronouns were used. Throughout the survey, questions were introduced as if Fatima or Ahmad were asking them in the context of a real interaction (e.g., "Fatima replies, 'Thank you. Here are some actions that people sometimes do. How justifiable do you, personally, think they are?'"") The scenario ended with "Fatima" or "Ahmad" thanking the student for the interview and leaving.

Kuwait City, Kuwait

An experiment was also conducted in Kuwait City, the capital of Kuwait, which contains the majority of the country's population. Although still very conservative, Kuwait City is less conservative than Medina, and Kuwait itself is relatively more open and liberal than Saudi Arabia. While Saudi Arabia does not have an elected parliament, for example, Kuwait does, even though it has limited powers and women only recently won the right to vote in 2005. The survey was offered to male university students ($n = 198$), alternating between treatment and control versions. Students surveyed came primarily from a large public university, with some additional students surveyed at a smaller and nearby Arab private university. As in Saudi Arabia, male students were immersed into a scenario involving interaction either with a female or another male. However, instead of an educational context for the interaction, the surveys immersed students in a workplace context, and tested for effects immediately after the simulated workplace interaction took place.

Adapting from the work of Katherine Phillips and colleagues on diversity, decision-making, and collaboration (Lloyd et al. 2013; Phillips 2003; Phillips, Liljenquist, and Neale 2009), the surveys had subjects imagine solving a mystery. All students were instructed to "Imagine you're a detective investigating a crime. Suppose someone broke into a bank last night about 3 AM and stole thousands of Kuwaiti dinars in two black briefcases. The police have three suspects." To facilitate engagement, students were presented with three short suspect bios, along with clues such as the suspect's whereabouts at the time of the crime, and asked which suspect was most likely responsible.

In the treatment group, students then read as follows: "Now, suppose you're preparing for your first meeting with another detective. The other detective is Maryam. She is a woman who

has been working the same number of years as you as a detective. She has studied the same materials on the three suspects above, and has also selected a suspect for further investigation. Together, you and Maryam will put all the pieces together and solve the crime.” The students were instructed to describe why they chose the suspect they did, answer a few other questions about their reasoning, and then read as follows: “Your meeting with the other detective, Maryam, was a success. After discussing several possibilities, you agree on which suspect to investigate, and you solve the crime together.” In the control version, the wording was identical, except the other detective was a male and named “Fahad.” After the scenario, dependent variables were assessed.

Results and Discussion

As expected, the treatment and control groups at each research site were balanced in terms of demographics, as shown in Table 2. The table also shows that age, religiosity, and income were balanced when the samples are pooled. The treatment group in Kuwait contained 102 students, while the control group included 96 students. For Saudi Arabia, the treatment group included 94 students and the control group included 97 students. No students opted out (likely due to the break from class provided by the short survey). Comparing demographics for the two research sites shows that the two sites did not differ significantly on either self-reported income or religiosity. However, Saudi students were somewhat younger than the students who were surveyed in Kuwait. The mean age of Saudi students was 19.7, compared to 21.7 years old in Kuwait.

I now move to the results, aiming to evaluate the argument presented above positing positive moral and civic effects due to gender mixing against religious conservative and social dominance-style alternatives. Table 3 shows differences in means for open-mindedness, support

for gender equality, ethics (and law-abidingness), and tolerance. Results appear for the Kuwait experiment, the Saudi experiment, and also for data pooled from both studies.

It is immediately clear that in no case does interaction with a female lead to significantly *worsened* moral and civic attitudes in these areas. The findings therefore disconfirm the expectations of religious conservatives. However, an important caveat must be mentioned. Some conservatives view attitudes such as open-mindedness, tolerance, and support for gender equity as themselves manifestations of moral lassitude. In this very limited and extremist sense—and with the important exception of results for ethics and law-abidingness, which cannot be equated with “liberalism,” “godlessness,” or “Westernization”—the findings may also be interpreted as confirming some of the worst fears of the religious conservatives when it comes to gender mixing. In other words, gender mixing may well be a liberalizing force.

At the same time, the results generally challenge the expectations of social dominance theory, which suggests that higher-status males should think and behave in more rigid, closed-minded and patronizing ways that maintain and enforce the patriarchal status quo. Males were apparently not motivated to throw their weight around when interacting with females; they were *not* less tolerant, less open-minded, less supportive of gender equality, and less ethical. As I will show below, this conflicts with the expectations of many on the ground who, although they support gender de-segregation in the longer-term, do not anticipate moral and civic benefits for males in the short-term.

By contrast, the findings provide considerable support for the argument presented above, especially in Kuwait City but also in more conservative and patriarchal Medina. In both cities, males who imagined interaction with a female expressed significantly greater levels of open-mindedness, compared to those who imagined interaction with another male. An examination of

the individual items reveals that the increase in open-mindedness was primarily driven by responses to “There is usually only one correct opinion about an issue” (reverse-scored). As predicted, both Saudi and Kuwaiti males were apparently hesitant to express such fundamentalist dogmatism around a female, but found it more acceptable when thinking about how a fellow male might react.

In Kuwait, imagined interaction with a female also led to significantly higher ethics, relative to an all-male context for interaction. Thus, after they imagined interacting with a female, males judged ethically questionable acts to be *less* justifiable, perhaps feeling chastened or else worried about what females might think of such behaviors. When restricting analysis to law-abidingness (“accepting a bribe” and “driving over the speed limit”), the positive effect of gender mixing remained significant. Likewise, after interaction with a female, Kuwaiti males expressed greater support for gender equality, including stronger agreement that women should have equal job opportunities, wages, and salaries and also that more women in government would lead to improvements in social and economic areas.

In Saudi Arabia, the results were striking for tolerance, and particularly in the context of an extremely conservative city that non-Muslims are prohibited from entering.²⁹ Those who imagined interaction with a female expressed significantly higher levels of tolerance, compared with those who imagined an all-male interaction. An examination of individual items shows that the overall effect was particularly driven by responses to the item, “I enjoy living in a diverse community, with people from different religious backgrounds,” suggesting that males are especially worried about appearing as intolerant fundamentalists around females. This is understandable given that it is Saudi females who experience more religious restrictions on their freedom. Results for ethics and support for gender equality were non-significant. However, the

²⁹ The items related to tolerance were not administered in the Kuwait study due to time limitations.

mean differences were in the hypothesized direction for gender equality and also for law abidingness. In addition, for the pooled data, which combines data from the two research sites, significant increases appear for gender equality and law-abidingness as well as open-mindedness.

Taken together, these findings provide substantial support for the argument in this paper, and far more so than religious conservative and social dominance-based alternatives. Rather than corrupting the public sphere—or reinforcing patriarchal social dominance—gender mixing had a positive effect on moral and civic attitudes such as open-mindedness, tolerance, support for gender equality, and ethics and law-abidingness. Effects were more consistent in Kuwait, perhaps due to greater engagement with the “solve a mystery” workplace scenario, but still considerable in Saudi Arabia, arguably more of a “hard case” for the argument. Effect sizes hovered around a third of a standard deviation, averaging at 0.34 in Kuwait and 0.32 in Saudi Arabia (Cohen’s *d*), and would presumably be larger in the context of real interactions.

Further Analysis

Further analysis revealed overall differences across the Saudi and Kuwaiti samples, evidence related to causal mechanisms, and interaction effects. First, regardless of the gender of the imagined interaction, male students in Kuwait were significantly more supportive of gender equality compared to Saudi male students.³⁰ The Saudi sample also judged ethically questionable acts as significantly less justifiable compared to the Kuwait sample. Neither difference is entirely surprising; Kuwait is known to be more liberal on gender equality, while top-down religious moralizing is higher in Saudi Arabia (and Kuwait lacks any “religious

³⁰ Nevertheless, and consistent with the findings from Lussier and Fish (2016) concerning lower support for gender equality among self-identified Muslims, this study also finds rather low support for gender equality, compared to the other attitudes measured. For example, in the pooled data, the overall mean scores for open-mindedness, ethics, and law-abidingness, were all significantly above 4, the midpoint of the 7 point scale ($p = .00$ for all measures). In the Saudi sample, the overall mean score for tolerance was also significantly higher than the midpoint ($p = .05$). Yet the overall mean score for gender equality in the pooled data was significantly *below* the midpoint ($p = .00$).

police”). However, these findings are not based on nationally representative samples, and the context of the imagined scenarios differ, so must be interpreted with caution. The samples did not differ significantly in terms of self-reported religiosity.

In addition, the Saudi study collected evidence related to causal mechanisms. A matrix of gender stereotypes appeared in the survey after the simulated interaction, allowing an analysis of how males in the sample viewed males and females more generally. Table 1 shows that, as was the case for the earlier samples of Kuwaiti male university students, these Saudi males also viewed females as significantly warmer and more truthful, while they viewed males as significantly more decisive and powerful. These results are consistent with the causal mechanisms proposed in this paper, which suggested that males aspire to higher moral and civic standards around females because of pronounced gender stereotypes.

Finally, although no significant interaction effects appeared in the Kuwait sample, one important interaction was significant in the Saudi sample as well as the pooled data, and that related to religiosity. Interactions between the mixed-gender treatment and religiosity were significant for open-mindedness ($p = .04$) in the Saudi sample, and for open-mindedness ($p = .09$) and support for gender equality ($p = .05$) in the pooled data. In all cases, the general pattern was clear, with higher levels of religiosity weakening or reversing the overall positive effects of gender mixing.³¹ For example, while the “somewhat” and “not” religious males in the pooled data showed higher support for gender equality when the imagined interaction was with a female, the most religious males showed the opposite pattern, as shown in Figure 1. For the very religious, gender mixing appeared to *reduce* support for gender equality. These findings

³¹ Increases in religiosity were also negatively related to support for gender equality in both the Kuwaiti and Saudi samples (as well as the pooled data).

therefore provide some support to social dominance-based arguments with respect to a subset of the population that reports the highest level of religiosity.

Insights from Qualitative Fieldwork

Further insights emerge from qualitative fieldwork. In this section, I draw from conversations with students and staff, both male and female, at several universities during three weeks of fieldwork in Kuwait in April 2016.³² Because my argument is broadly aligned with the reformist agenda, I focused on clarifying the reformist logic. What do those on the ground see as the costs of state-imposed gender segregation—or the benefits of de-segregation and greater gender mixing—and why? The findings complement the experimental results in several ways. First, they directly link mixed environments with the dependent variables tested. Second, they provide evidence for the causal mechanisms proposed, particularly impression management but also interpersonal contact and social influence. Third, they reveal an important and popular alternative perspective, roughly aligned with social dominance theory, on the likely effects of gender mixing in the short-term.

First, students and staff frequently mentioned the dependent variables studied above as benefits of greater gender mixing: open-mindedness, tolerance, respect for women's equal status, and good behavior. As a Saudi female student at Arab Open University explained, "The more you create separation between the genders, the more you create barriers and stereotypes," which contribute to closed-mindedness.³³ She added that "separation creates this idea of sexualizing

³² I relied primarily on an ethnographic approach, building knowledge on the basis of informal conversations in cafeterias, faculty offices, courtyards, and hallways. Given the sensitivity of the gender segregation issue, most individuals preferred not to be named, and all such requests for anonymity have been honored. I spoke with approximately 45 individuals during the period of fieldwork as well as in the context of follow-up Skype conversations. I also drew more generally from over fifteen months of combined fieldwork between 2010 and 2014 in the United Arab Emirates, where gender segregation is also prominent.

³³ Conversation with Saudi female university student, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

the gender at a very young age, because you ask, well why are we separate? And then the fear comes [of depravity, immorality, and corruption, should one find oneself in a mixed environment].” A Kuwaiti male student who had spent time in a mixed private school reflected that “We broke that traditional [pro-segregation] attitude, because we didn’t do anything wrong! Our families were more open after that, people were more open-minded.”³⁴ A Jordanian professor with experience teaching in both Saudi Arabia and Kuwait agreed with these sentiments, and emphasized tolerance and respect for women’s equal status in particular. With greater gender mixing, she said, “The boys would learn to think of girls less as sexual objects, and more as other human beings.”³⁵

Students and staff also connected gender segregation as social engineering to broader problems, well beyond relations between the sexes. For example, a former Kuwait University student and now medical clinic director said, “Listen, if you are unable to accept someone of the opposite sex, how can I trust you to be open-minded when analyzing a blood test? You might be closed-minded about the possibilities there too. And the sexual frustrations are very dangerous. That is reflected in the attitudes—youth are angry, aggressive, hormones are up. They don’t react well with colleagues, or patients.”³⁶ He rattled off a number of negative outcomes he said were linked to gender segregation regimes, ranging from low work ethic and achievement motivation to drug use and religious extremism.

A high-level administrator and professor at Kuwait University emphasized the costs of state-imposed gender segregation to the country’s effort to build a stronger knowledge economy.³⁷ “When you segregate,” he said, “you kill culture, and you make it boring. There is

³⁴ Conversation Kuwaiti male student, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

³⁵ Skype conversation with Jordanian professor, April 2016.

³⁶ Conversation with Kuwaiti male university alumnus, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

³⁷ Conversation with Kuwait University administrator and professor, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

no joy, no energy, no creativity with gender segregation. With mixed environments, [youth] actually want to be in the school setting, on campus, they see each other as friends, as partners, as real world people, they really interact. They want to contribute.” He explained how he tried to circumvent rigid gender segregation laws by arguing that, rather than entirely separate campuses, a single classroom could still count as “segregated” as long as boys and girls are on opposite sides of the room. Nevertheless, he said, “you can’t control what you can’t control.” Gender mixing happens regardless of such laws, and “when you insist on too much segregation, you get a perfect storm”—for intolerance, incivility, low student engagement, and other negative outcomes.

Since state-imposed gender segregation at the university level is a relatively recent phenomenon in Kuwait—with Kuwait University segregated since 2001 and private universities segregated since 2008—many could recall the days of mixed campuses. Several instructors noted a worsening of behavioral problems, especially for boys. For example, a staff member at Kuwait University said “[The boys] are much better behaved in mixed classes. I have seen this myself.” She said group cheating and aggressiveness seemed to worsen in all-male classes after segregation. A professor at the American University of Kuwait said she thought that boys were more prepared, contributed more to classroom discussions, and took notes more diligently when mixed with female classmates, whereas many adopted more of a “whatever” attitude about their education after segregation.³⁸

A number of students and staff also emphasized the impression management incentives discussed earlier. For example, the Kuwait University administrator quoted above, when defending his support for de-segregation, claimed that “It’s the nature of the genders. They learn from each other. Put the genders together, they try to behave the best around each other.” The

³⁸ Conversation with Kuwaiti female professor, Washington, D.C., US, March 2016.

male student who had attended a mixed private school added that he thought he worked harder as a result of it; as he put it, “why would I want to impress another guy?” A Kuwaiti female student also remarked that “if they want us, they will have to change,” suggesting that Kuwaiti males will simply *have* to be more open-minded, tolerant, and so on if they wish for local women to marry them.³⁹ This hints at the larger gender dynamics at play in the region; in the resource-rich economies of the Arab Gulf, women increasingly outperform men in educational achievement and attainment, complicating the marriage market. Although a global trend, nowhere is this “reverse gender gap” in education (favoring women) more dramatic than in the Gulf (Ridge 2014).

Nevertheless, and despite considerable support for the core of the reformist argument tested in this paper, many on the ground described the civic benefits of gender mixing as emerging out of a longer-term process of reform, adjustment, and re-socialization. Their expectations for the short-term were far more pessimistic and aligned with social dominance theory. As noted earlier, this is very understandable. Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are both highly conservative and patriarchal societies, where men clearly outrank women. To many and especially females, the notion that males, as they have been socialized today, should behave in any sense “better” around females was seen as quite fantastical. For example, when asked to predict the results of the experiments conducted above testing for positive moral and civic effects, a female professor at the College of Basic Education replied, “I am sorry, but you will not find anything like that with these boys.”⁴⁰

³⁹ The issue of local Gulf women marrying expats and foreigners is very sensitive. See, for example, Al-Fawaz (2014). Indeed, seemingly to prevent it, several regimes have ensured that only if female citizens marry male citizens will their children receive citizenship. (However, if male citizens marry a foreigner, his children typically do obtain citizenship.)

⁴⁰ Conversation with Kuwaiti female professor, Kuwait City, April 2016.

A typical expectation I heard again and again was as follows: if males today change their attitudes and behavior at all around women, it will probably be for the worse. Women, especially, emphasized domination, condescension, harassment, “mansplaining,” slacking off, and the like. As a female professor put it, in a mixed workplace today, men would simply be “condescending, saying you don’t understand this or that,” and leave the women to do all the work.⁴¹ Another professor said simply that “women are seen as less.”⁴² Due to these expectations, even many critics of gender segregation are hesitant to support de-segregation, and prefer to advocate “safe spaces” for women where they will not be harassed and undermined. Thus, it would appear that even some critics of segregation have come around to the pro-segregationists’ view that males cannot control their bad impulses around females.

Such attitudes may point to the limits of the experimental results, particularly the likelihood for social dominance and impression management incentives to co-exist. Yet they may also suggest an unwarranted degree of local cynicism that has the effect of perpetuating gender segregation. For example, in Saudi Arabia, Le Renard (2008, 619) found that “even if some of [the women in her sample] envision the end of sex segregation in the long term or are theoretically against this spatial organization, in the contemporary context, they would rather ask for the creation of more female institutions.” Likewise, and also in Saudi Arabia, Van Geel (2012, 69) found that many women “would like to have more women-only malls, arguing that it would make them feel more relaxed and at ease.” Given the positive experimental results surrounding men’s attitudes around women, it may be that some on the ground have grown unduly cynical, perhaps bound by their own stereotypical forms of thinking about males.

⁴¹ Conversation with Kuwaiti female professor, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

⁴² Conversation with Kuwaiti female professor, Kuwait City, Kuwait, April 2016.

Conclusions

Across much of the Middle East, and particularly in the Gulf, state-imposed gender segregation is pervasive; it is a form of social engineering believed by proponents to safeguard against moral and civic corruption. It is also the subject of considerable debate and vitriol, and may be called the “third rail” of national politics in societies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Yet research is difficult to carry out due to the very laws and taboos that maintain gender segregation. Thus, the primary contribution of this paper is a rare empirical investigation into the moral and civic implications of segregation, testing hypotheses about the malleability of attitudes at the individual level.

The paper posited that greater gender “mixing” (in Arabic, *ikhtilāt*) is likely to have positive moral and civic effects on males, thus exposing a set of costs linked to the gender-segregated status quo. The argument is broadly consistent with that of reformists, who argue that segregation stands in the way of a healthy public sphere. Results from two experiments in highly conservative, authoritarian, and gender-segregated states—one in Medina, Saudi Arabia, and another in Kuwait City, Kuwait—provide substantial support for the argument, and suggest some generalizability across country and situational contexts. Males who imagined interacting with a female, as opposed to an all-male interaction, displayed significant increases in moral and civic attitudes such as open-mindedness, tolerance, support for gender equality, and ethics and law-abidingness. The results are striking, not only due to the limited salience of “imagined contact” scenarios but also due to widespread cynicism that such effects should arise at all in the context of highly patriarchal societies.

Several important questions arise. First, if the results from the experiments are due in large part to impression management incentives, as proposed, are they “real” and will they

persist? Would they lead to behavioral change? These questions call for further work, but evidence suggests a tentative yes. Impression management incentives are powerful and ever-present. Individuals routinely take their audience's perspective into account as they manage their self-presentations, and research on the "saying-is-believing" effect suggests that the views they communicate as a result do not evaporate.⁴³ Cognitive dissonance theory also points to a drive for consistency between attitudes expressed and actual behavior. Even in the extreme case of "lying," as long as people aren't coerced or bribed, subjects induced to lie tend to begin believing that what they said was actually true (Klass 1978).

Impression management, however, is not the same as lying. Indeed, "nothing in the impression management perspective implies that the impressions people convey are necessarily false," since "even when people match others' likes, they often do so by selectively conveying *accurate* views of themselves" (Leary and Kowalski 1990, 40). Likewise, in their study of gender-of-interviewer effects in surveys, Kane and McCauley (1993, 24) view their social desirability findings not "as 'errors' in the survey process," but as "reflections of the nature of social interaction and as suggestive evidence regarding how gender shapes such interactions."⁴⁴ Impression management is therefore not an inherently deceptive process, but is better understood as an effort to present the best aspects of oneself given various audiences—in this case, a mixed-gender audience vs. an all-male one.

Another important, and related, question concerns scope conditions. The powerful and ever-present nature of impression management incentives does not mean that they will trump

⁴³ For example, subjects who read positive and negative information about a target individual, and then interact with someone who expresses positive or negative views about that target, subsequently tailor their own views to align with their audience, as we would predict. When later asked to describe the original information in detail, the subjects' memories show selective recall for the information that matched the positive or negative view that the subject expressed (Echterhoff, Higgins, and Levine 2009; Higgins and Rholes 1978). In other words, behavior change may follow a change in the attitude expressed, even when the change was mainly driven by impression management incentives.

⁴⁴ Blaydes and Gillum (2013) make a similar point in a study of religiosity-of-interviewer effects in Egypt.

other incentives anywhere and everywhere. In societies such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, a valuable topic for future work is when and why impression management trumps social dominance, and vice versa. The experimental evidence here suggested an important moderator, level of religiosity, with the most religious less likely to engage in impression management that aims to reduce social distance with females. Age may also matter. The literature on patriarchy emphasizes that patriarchal social structures are about age as much as gender, with older men dominant over women as well as younger men (e.g., Kandiyoti 1988). Thus, in mixed-gender settings, older men may be more likely to exhibit social dominance compared with younger men. Although future work is needed, it follows that the moral and civic benefits of gender mixing identified in this paper may be more likely to arise in contexts dominated by young people, such as education and increasingly the labor market, rather than other contexts where older men are more prominent, such as parliaments.

It also follows from the argument in this paper that the moral and civic benefits of gender mixing depend in part on the nature of salient gender stereotypes. Where men are less certain that women are warm, communal, empathetic, ethical, and so on, they should be less worried about women's judgment along these lines. Thus, the effects identified in this paper may depend on "benevolent" forms of sexism in which positive gender stereotypes predominate, rather than "hostile" ones (Glick et al. 2000). Moreover, where gender stereotypes are in general less salient—such as in more gender-egalitarian societies, where men have many opportunities to meet women outside of the family and are exposed to significant counter-stereotyping in the media and elsewhere—it seems less likely that we should see the same sorts of effects arising as consistently from mixed-gender interactions, unless a positive gender stereotype is made salient or a mating incentive is induced. This is one reason that it may be best to conceive of the effects

identified in this paper as *costs* linked to a rigidly gender-segregated status quo, as in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, rather than benefits of gender mixing more generally.

Further research on the moral and civic implications of gender segregation should investigate additional questions, not only related to persistence, behavior, and scope conditions, but also related to outcomes for women. State-imposed gender segregation is a widespread, yet under-studied, form of social engineering in the Middle East. Understanding its implications is therefore an important research goal for practical as well as theoretical reasons.

Tables and Figures

Table 1. Perceptions about Traits of Males and Females Among Male College Students in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Pooled Kuwait Samples</i>			<i>Saudi Sample</i>		
	<i>n</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Paired Mean Difference</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Paired Mean Difference</i>
Decisive-Powerful	546	4.00	2.26*** (.18)	154	3.35	2.98*** (.29)
		(2.90)			(2.53)	
Warm-Truthful	604	6.26	2.26*** (.18)	154	6.33	2.98*** (.29)
		(2.78)			(2.18)	

Subjects were asked to respond to the question “To what extent does each adjective describe girls more than boys, boys more than girls, or describes both girls and boys equally?” Subjects provided ratings on a scale from 1 to 10, where 1=“More like boys” and 10=“More like girls.” Means for the two male stereotypical traits (decisive and powerful) and the two female stereotypical traits (warm and truthful) were calculated for each subject, and paired t-tests were conducted for the pooled Kuwait samples from three previous studies (April 2016), and for the Saudi sample from the current study (December 2016-January 2017). Table shows standard deviations for the means and standard errors for the paired mean differences.

*** $p < .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$, + $p \leq .1$

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics on Samples from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

	<i>Imagined interaction with:</i>	Kuwait		Saudi Arabia		Pooled Data	
		<i>N=198</i>		<i>N=191</i>		<i>N=389</i>	
		<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Age	Female	21.3	-.71 (.53)	19.6	-.11 (.46)	21.2	-.50 (.48)
		(3.82)		(.74)		(3.71)	
	Male	22.0		19.7		21.7	
		(3.43)		(1.16)		(3.30)	
Religiosity	Female	2.02	.01 (.09)	1.93	-.07 (.09)	1.98	-.03 (.06)
		(.61)		(.61)		(.61)	
	Male	2.01		2.0		2.01	
		(.61)		(.52)		(.57)	
Income	Female	4.26	-.07 (.12)	4.28	.08 (.12)	4.27	.003 (.08)
		(0.76)		(.76)		(.76)	
	Male	4.33		4.20		4.26	
		(0.86)		(.85)		(.85)	

Table shows differences in means for demographic variables by treatment condition in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and also pooled across the two sites. For means, standard deviations are shown in parentheses. For differences between the means, standard errors are shown in parentheses. No significant differences appeared between the treatment and control groups in these variables. For religiosity, 1=religious, 2=somewhat religious, and 3=not religious. For income, scaled 1-7, higher scores indicate higher income.

*** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$, + $p \leq .1$

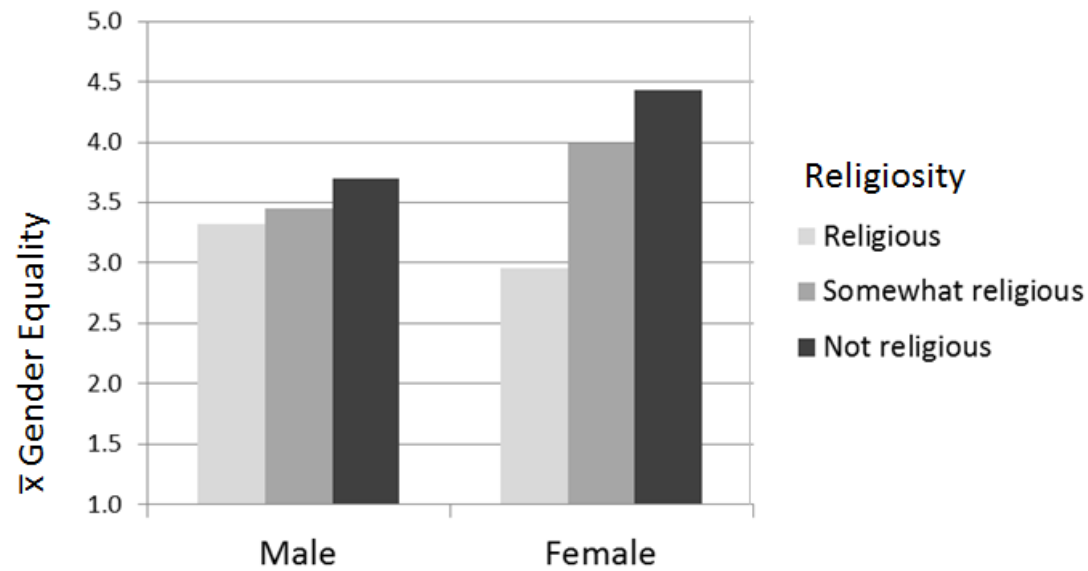
Table 3. Impact of Imagined Interaction with a Male or Female on Male Attitudes in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia

	<i>Imagined interaction with:</i>	Kuwait		Saudi Arabia		Pooled Data	
		<i>N=198</i>		<i>N=191</i>		<i>N=389</i>	
		<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>Means</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Open-mindedness	Female	5.15	.48* (.19)	5.01	.43* (.19)	5.08	.46*** (.13)
		(1.31)		(1.15)		(1.24)	
	Male	4.68		4.58		4.63	
		(1.33)		(1.39)		(1.35)	
Gender Equality	Female	4.14	.63** (.24)	3.52	.09 (.23)	3.84	.37* (.17)
		(1.76)		(1.59)		(1.71)	
	Male	3.51		3.42		3.47	
		(1.46)		(1.47)		(1.47)	
Ethics	Female	5.55	.27* (.14)	5.56	-.09 (.11)	5.55	.08 (.09)
		(.90)		(.73)		(.82)	
	Male	5.28		5.65		5.47	
		(.94)		(.84)		(.90)	
Law Abidingness	Female	5.81	.32* (.16)	5.89	.08 (.15)	5.85	.19+ (.11)
		(1.02)		(.95)		(.98)	
	Male	5.49		5.81		5.66	
		(1.19)		(1.13)		(1.17)	
Tolerance	Female	Not administered		4.33	.32* (.16)		
				(1.16)			
	Male			4.01			
				(1.05)			

Table shows differences in means for dependent variables in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and also pooled across the two sites. For means, standard deviations are shown in parentheses. For difference between the means, standard errors are shown in parentheses. Results show increases in open-mindedness, support for gender equality, and ethics and law-abidingness in Kuwait in the mixed-gender treatment group, as well as increases for open-mindedness and tolerance in more conservative Saudi Arabia.

*** $p \leq .001$, ** $p \leq .01$, * $p \leq .05$, + $p \leq .1$

Figure 1. Impact of Imagined Interaction with Female or Male on Support for Gender Equality, By Self-Reported Religiosity



Graph shows mean levels of support for gender equality for treatment and control groups in the pooled data, by self-reported religiosity. When imagining interacting with a female, support for gender equality increased for the “somewhat” and “not” religious males consistent with the argument made in this paper. But it decreased for the most religious males, as predicted by social dominance theory. The interaction was significant ($p = .05$).

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