A group exhibition called Abolish 153 was held at the Contemporary Art Platform on May 16, marking ten years since women obtained their political rights in Kuwait. The exhibition’s aim was to raise awareness and funding for the ongoing campaign (Abolish 153) that is committed to “abolishing article 153 of Kuwait’s penal code that sanctifies the murder of female kin and treats it as a misdemeanor punishable by a maximum sentence of three years or 3,000 rupees fine.”

The exhibition featured the works in various media of 17 local and regional artists (Alaa Al-Haddad, Amani Al-Thuwaini, Amira Behbehani, Ibrahim Alatiya, Khadija Al-Bahaweed, Majedah Al-Sabah, Mohammed Ramadan, Mohammed Sarkouh, Mohammad Qambar, Shaimaa Ashkanani, Suhaila Al-Najdi and Thuraya Al-Baqsmi, Maryam Mesri, Nasser Al-Ghanim, Salar Ahmadian, Behnaz Ghasemi and Katya Traboulsi), all highlighting women’s roles in society and emphasizing equality between genders, as well as showcasing direct and indirect forms of violence and raising awareness around the legislation that encourages it.

Communicate Kuwait speaks to the artists behind the exhibition to discuss the different fronts of the campaign, the power of images in transposing a political message and the usage of social media in such campaigns.

THE CAMPAIGN. The campaign started in November of last year and the official launch for the social media campaign was on March 8 (Women’s Day). “I wanted to fight for the bill; I contacted artists locally and regionally, artists that I knew would be interested in working toward such a substantial cause and it all started from there,” says Alanoud Al-Sharekh, founder of Abolish 153. The aim, Al-Sharekh states, is to get women and men alike to stop being apathetic and to start getting involved. Soon after, 17 artists were on board working toward this cause. Amira Behbehani, an artist and a contributor to Abolish 153, says: “Any cause that revolves around human beings in general is very dear to me and it was exciting to work in order to convey a message to the public.” The artists all agreed that there was definitely an issue with people shying away from discussing and simply ignoring the matter at hand. Amani Al-Thuwaini, another contributing artist to the exhibition, says: “We have the ability to use art and images to convey a message that people nowadays don’t exactly want.”
to tap into and are in denial about. It was inspiring to work toward the cause.”

THE STATS. The most ambiguous and possibly one of the driving factors behind Abolish 153 is the fact that there are no statistics released by the government that show how common these “honor crimes” really are in Kuwait. Behbehani says: “We know that Jordan has the highest rate of honor crimes. Here, on the other hand, there are no solid stats since these cases are hushed up, mostly to conserve a family’s reputation.” People shouldn’t be quiet and these cases should be reported to understand the severity of the matter was yet another repetitive statement echoing from the artists.

A THOUSAND WORDS. When it comes to a topic like the one at hand, it was evident that a picture was worth even more than a thousand words. The artists that contributed to the exhibition used their art, images and photography to send out a clear message in support of abolishing article 153. Al-Sharekh says: “We knew we were dealing with a sensitive topic, we had to tread carefully; our purpose was advocacy and awareness – controversially but not confrontationally. Art and the use of imagery was our civilized way of dealing with a touchy political issue.” The entire exhibition became a peaceful and safe way of exhibiting protest and, even if the message was somewhat harsh, it gave a lot of artistic license to stylize.

The artists transposed reality into images and then, in turn, used those images to shed light on the reality of the matter. “It was all a smart manipulation to tell different stories targeted toward one cause. There is an evident mistreatment of women in Kuwait and I wanted my pieces to project the ‘trapped’ feeling that women go through,” says Al-Thuwaini. Nasser Al-Ghanim, photographer and contributor to the exhibition, highlighted how the images created were strong in the nature of the message that they were expressing, but ambiguous enough to lessen the confrontational factor of the campaign, “People sometimes misunderstand the message and that is very common. We are in a conservative society that tends to think that abolishing article 153 taps into and clashes with religion and culture. All it takes is a little explaining from our end and a little understanding from the audience.”

Art exhibitions in general have been gaining more momentum in Kuwait and people are

SOCIAL MEDIA IMPACT. Nasser Al-Ghanim shoots a dining room scene for the Abolish 153 campaign

NASSER AL-GHANIM. Photographer and contributing artist
becoming more and more interested in finding out what the message behind the art is. "The images and work of the artists reflected the dark feeling that revolves around Abolish 153 and were powerful enough to convey the necessary message, while, at the same time, voicing the fact that women will have a safe environment to discuss the issue at hand," adds Al-Sharekh.

SOCIAL ART. Opposing everything that Kuwait has witnessed throughout its social media boom on how effective these platforms are, Abolish 153 took a completely different turn. Using social media simply served as a way to test the waters prior to the actual exhibition. “We had a decent number of followers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but the turnout that we witnessed at the event was so much more than the interaction that we were getting socially,” says Al-Sharekh. An entire shoot with Al-Ghanim was initially meant to target the online audience and social campaigns were very forward in the message that they portrayed but “couldn’t be exposed on a bigger scale because of fear of causing too much controversy and commotion prior to the exhibition’s launch”, says Behbehani. Al-Ghanim, who captured a series of shots depicting women – a sister, a mother, a wife or a daughter– being exposed to various types of violence, says: “I don’t think social media is the right platform for sensitive topics. It served us more as a teaser for the actual event and that echoes in the fact that the turnout and personal support that we got was a lot louder than the online and social interaction received.” Al-Thuwaini, though she views social media platforms as “vital” in getting people’s feedback – both negative and positive criticism – agrees that social media usage for Abolish 153 could not have been too active and adds: “It just goes down to being smart when dealing with conventional and religious people. It’s about delivering an underlying message while still respecting your audience.”

THE RESULTS. Communicate Kuwait was pleasantly surprised at the fact that the exhibition took place coinciding with our women’s empowerment issue. As for the movement itself, this is only the beginning. “We are kick-starting again in August with a symbolic yet more traditional approach, hopefully leading up to creating a space where there will be room for debate,” concludes Al-Sharekh. Stay tuned!