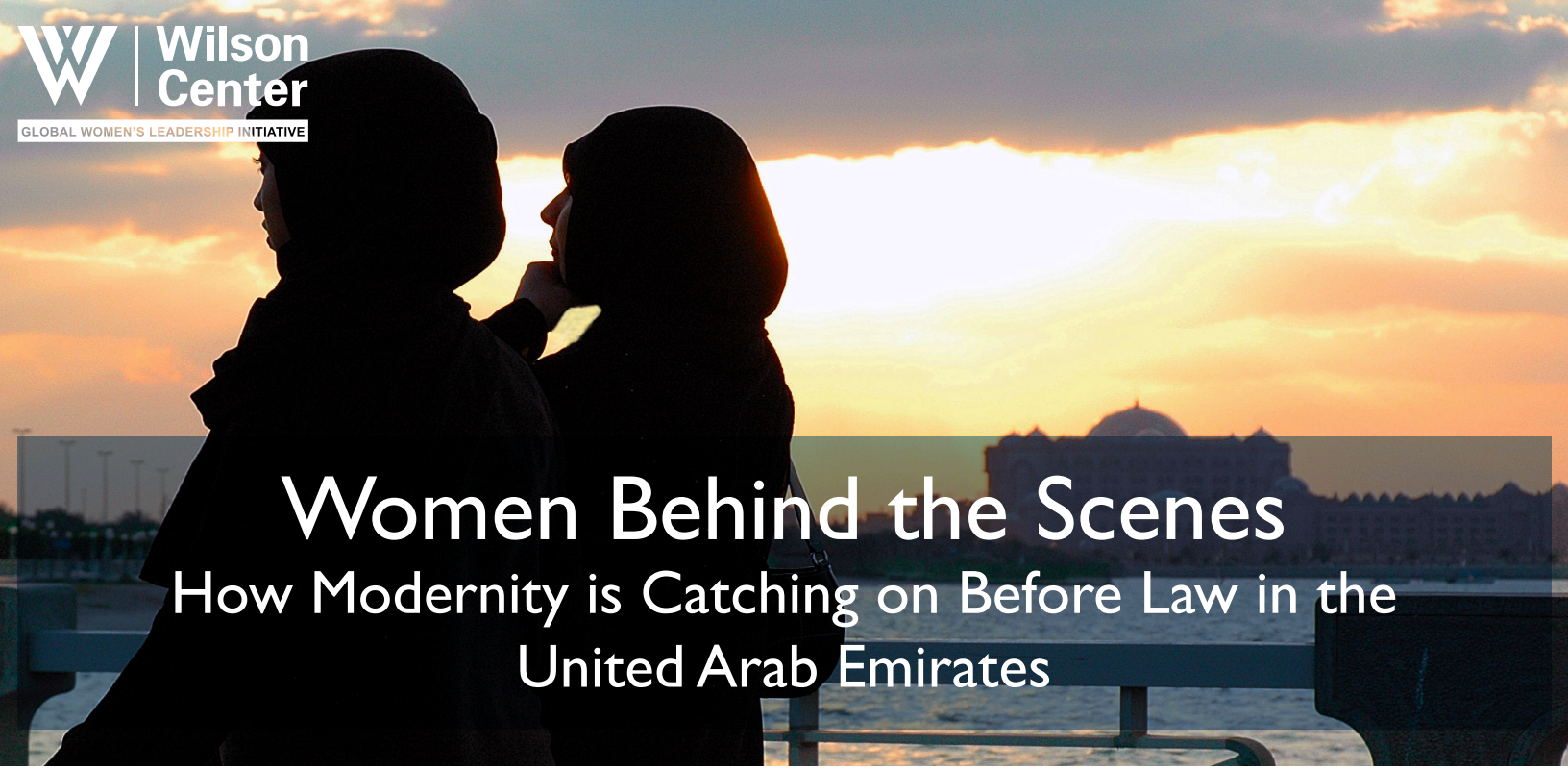

Wilson Center
GLOBAL WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP INITIATIVE

Women Behind the Scenes

How Modernity is Catching on Before Law in the United Arab Emirates

There is something fitting that one of the most progressive and rapidly modernizing countries in the Middle East was given many of its most significant mandates by a woman.

Dr. Kent Davis-Packard

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Long before oil was discovered in this small but highly influential, elegant country perched on the Gulf coast of Saudi Arabia, between Qatar and Oman, Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Al Ketbi, wife of the founding President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, insisted that women attend the two-room school in the village of Al Ain, where her husband was governor in 1971. "Sheikha Fatima," as she is called by Emiratis, went from family to family, giving out food rations to convince them to send their daughters to the school. Years later, after the collection of seven cities in the region united to form the United Arab Emirates (UAE), one of the president's advisors met a genetic scientist who was a graduate of that school. Today, under the influence of Sheikha Fatima and many other Emirati leaders, the number of female graduates across all higher education institutions has increased to 62 percent.[1] Although literacy rates of both women and men in the UAE are close to 95 percent, more women than men complete secondary education and enroll in university and post-graduate education.[2]

Emirati women, in their federal absolute monarchy, are also outshining their male counterparts in secondary school and university. Ten percent of male students drop out, but only two percent of female students leave school prematurely.[3] While there is room for improvement, the UAE enjoys one of the highest rates of female workforce participation in the Gulf at 47 percent, after Qatar (51 percent) and before Kuwait (43 percent).[4] Two thirds (66 percent) of the public sector workforce in the UAE is made up of women (the average global rate is only 48 percent), with 30 percent of those women in senior and decision-making positions.[5] Women own 50 percent of small and medium enterprises.[6] When asked about conditions in the workplace, the Emirati women interviewed voiced few complaints – in fact, one senior level woman who had also experienced part of her professional life in the United States said she felt less sexism

THE WOMEN IN PUBLIC SERVICE PROJECT

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About the Women in Public Service Project

The Women in Public Service Project will accelerate global progress towards women's equal participation in policy and political leadership to create more dynamic and inclusive institutions that leverage the full potential of the world's population to change the way global solutions are forged.

Executive Summary

Through the Delphi method,[1] this paper offers a new perspective from the voices of Emirati women in politics, policy, business, and university on the status of women in their country in light of the international treaties, conventions, and laws available for women's empowerment.[2] Drawing on true stories from daily life, it reveals that culture in the UAE is in the process of changing. Despite criticism from some human rights organizations and UN member states with regard to the UAE's reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Emirati women concede that they have made unprecedented gains ahead of some legal reforms deemed necessary by the international community for women to achieve their full rights in the country.

With eight women ministers out of 29 total cabinet members, 70 percent women university graduates, and an increasing number of women pursuing science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), among other achievements, an unspoken set of cultural norms has developed in the face of restrictive family laws and traditional, and, according to some women, outmoded cultural practices. This paper examines the mechanisms by which the UAE achieved this culture change, drawing on Emiratis' answers to the major questions of this era with regard to the global women's movement and their position within it. Emiratis address whether there is a women's movement in the UAE; what women leaders bring to the table; the challenges Emirati women still face; the relationship between Islam and women's rights; and the UAE's influence with regard to women's rights on the region and globally.

The interviews suggest that Emirati families are naturally more inclined today to promote their daughters' education and choice of career, husband, and other life decisions despite having restrictive laws available to them to curtail such freedoms. It concludes that these cultural changes are the side-, if not directly intended, effect of a top-down strategy by the Emirati government in which women leaders, by their very existence, make it possible for a new national identity vis-à-vis Islam to come into play. As the state embraces both women's leadership and Shari'a, Shari'a is used less and less as a tool to restrict women's rights, and women's rights and the state's religious identity are naturally de-conflicted. In a country that must navigate an Islamic identity, it may at times be beneficial to proceed first by example rather than legal reforms that appear to contradict Shari'a in order to avoid triggering backlash that could undermine progress.

These conclusions offer a new context by which to transcend the limitations of the entrenched debate within the international human rights community between cultural relativists and those who view human rights as universal.[3] On this third path, culture transcends organically from within as a result of silent but profoundly powerful example, and in the context of Muslim societies, modernity – or women's liberation – no longer holds dramatic consequences for relations between the sexes.[4] Finally, the case of the UAE provokes an interesting question about definitions of democratic governance and democracy's relationship to women's empowerment and freedom. In comparing the UAE to the United States, for example, the paper's findings reveal that, as with legal reform, women are only truly empowered when there is a change in culture and consciousness within a society, regardless of whether its government is labeled a "democracy" or an absolute monarchy. It is the putting into practice of the principles of democracy, rather than merely its procedural elements such as elections by majority, that leads to progress.

About the Author

Kent Davis-Packard is a professor of Middle East Studies and American Foreign Policy at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), where she is directing a new curricular path to mainstream the study of women's contributions to international relations. Most recently, she was co-Executive Director of Women's Learning Partnership, a partnership of 20 international women's organizations located in primarily Muslim-majority countries. She holds a Ph.D. in Middle East studies and international law from SAIS. In 2014-2015, she was a Council on Foreign Relations Fellow at the Brookings Institution and Guest Scholar and lecturer at the American University in Cairo. As a Presidential Management Fellow, Davis-Packard played a key role in launching the State Department's Women in Public Service Project. She also managed the Egypt Desk's human rights portfolio and served as a U.S. Department of Defense country desk officer in Iraq; and as a U.S. Department of State political officer in Syria. Davis-Packard holds a masters degree in conflict management and economics from SAIS; a masters degree in French and romance philology from Columbia University and in French literature from the Universite de Paris VIII; and a BA in English and Comparative Literature summa cum laude from Cornell University. A Fulbright Scholar to Morocco and fluent in French, Spanish, and able in Arabic, Davis-Packard has reported on such topics as family law reform, sectarianism and extremism, the women's movement, labor, and language politics for the Christian Science Monitor and other publications including the Washington Post and the Wall Street Journal.

in the UAE than she did in a major metropolis in the United States. In a similar vein, the UAE's Permanent Representative to the United Nations, the first woman to hold the position, Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh, remarked that after studying and living in the United Kingdom for over a decade she felt "there was no difference between the glass ceiling in the United Kingdom and the UAE." If anything, she said, there were more opportunities for talented women in the UAE because of the affirmative push from the government on this agenda. "The UAE is really a talent-based society," she said from her office at the UAE Mission in New York. "You produce and you deliver, and you achieve the goals that you strive for."

Human rights organizations are quick to criticize the UAE for maintaining reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW),[7] an international agreement it ratified in 2014. Most Arab countries make reservations for mainly the same reasons – the possibility of contradicting Shari'a law – which, according to interpretations, calls for a male guardian to grant a woman permission to marry, travel, and work, among other major life choices.[8] Men can unilaterally divorce their wives while women must apply for a court order. Women must be "obedient" to their husbands, including maintaining the house and its belongings. Women lose their right to maintenance if they refuse to have sexual relations without a lawful excuse.

At the same time, over 50 countries, including most Western European countries, have signed on to the Convention with reservations, declarations, or objections. While a few of these statements benefit women, most of them seek to allow these countries to privilege their constitutional or internal government autonomy over the provisions of CEDAW, further limiting women's rights in those countries. Globally, only six UN member states have not ratified CEDAW, including the United States, and yet there is no country in which all forms of discrimination against women have been eliminated. There is almost universal consensus among analysts that "the ratification of CEDAW did not bring any qualitative change because of the weakness of this legal instrument per se, and

because of the numerous reservations placed by the Arab MENA states on it."[9] As telling evidence for CEDAW's inability to make an impact in Arab countries even in cases in which they have removed all reservations – Tunisia and Morocco, for example – women continue to experience discrimination in all sectors and in family law.[10] The Tunisian government even declared that, despite removing all reservations to CEDAW, it would not enforce any provisions that it believes contradict Article One of the Tunisian constitution – that is, any provisions that are deemed in violation of Shari'a law.[11]

This does not mean the UAE should not remove its reservations to CEDAW, but the immense progress it has made without doing so is worth a closer analysis. In 2015, the UAE ranked first in the GCC and third in the Arab world in gender equality according to the Gender Inequality Index of the Human Development Report.[12] The UAE's Gender Balance Council is leading efforts to achieve the UAE's goal of being of the world's top 25 countries for gender equality by 2021. At the Dubai Women's Forum in February 2016, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), remarked that the UAE has a good "story to be told" about female empowerment and can set standards for governments elsewhere in the world."[13]

In what is sometimes called "the largest construction site on Earth," there was no major women's movement, no protests, no public debate on sexism or pay in the workplace, and yet some Emirati women claim they have never felt more freedom.[14] As Ambassador Nusseibeh remarked, "It's not the same debate or the same cultural conversation you see in other parts of the Arab world – we don't have debates about whether women should be in parliament – they just are. We don't have conversations about whether women should be active players in society or in the workforce – it has always been that way since the founding of the country."

Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh
Photo: UN Women (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Meanwhile, women living in democracies, especially the United States, still complain daily of sexism in the workplace, unequal pay for the same work, expensive childcare, and the inability to rejoin the workforce after having children. On January 21, 2017, more than 3.3 million women and men joined women's marches in over 500 U.S. cities under what should be an obvious concept by now – the motto "women's rights are human rights" – and an estimated 2.5 million people participated in nearly 700 rallies globally.[15] The United States also ranks lower than the UAE in women's representation in its 114th legislative equivalents (19.3 percent in the Senate and 20 percent in the Congress). The new UAE Cabinet announced in February 2016 includes eight women (27 percent of the total cabinet members). Nine women hold seats within the Federal National Council (FNC) – almost 25 percent of the FNC's membership – and women make up 20 percent of the diplomatic corps. In November 2015, Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi became president of the FNC, making her the first woman in the Middle East to lead a national assembly. She previously had made history in 2006 as the first elected female to the FNC and in 2011 was appointed its Deputy Speaker.

How did this many women in the UAE come to hold leadership positions, despite laws that in theory and in practice hold women back from such achievements? Is the situation in the country truly as good as Emirati women depict it? What are the challenges that remain and how does this newly born monarchy outrank in some respects the status of women in the United States and other democracies? The purpose of this paper is

to generate new perspectives on what is actually happening to the status of women in the UAE, despite the laws, specifically within the context of a state that has to navigate both an Islamic identity and modernity associated with the West. The paper's findings invite the reader to consider the surprising relationship between leadership by implication, culture, and the status of women. Its scope is both specific in its analysis of the impact of culture change in the UAE as well as broad in its conclusions about what truly matters when it comes to ideal leadership.

From a young novelist and Rhodes scholar, to the ruler of Sharjah, to businesswomen and regular students, to senior level diplomats and cabinet members, a wide range of Emirati women offered their insights over a three-month period from October to December 2016. They comment on whether there is a women's movement in the UAE; the mechanisms by which the UAE has made so much progress on women's leadership; what women leaders bring to the table; the challenges Emirati women still face; the relationship between Islam and women's rights; and the UAE's influence on the region and globally.

From their experiences one can draw surprising conclusions about how progress with regard to women's leadership and empowerment might occur in a region in which the exigencies of religion come into play at the level of national identity by means of the law. Their answers provide insights on how a government and society can navigate both an Islamic and modern, if not secular, identity. They provoke reflection on the limits of modern democracy, legal reform, and what it truly means to be free.

H.E. Minister Noura al Kaabi
Photo:World Economic Forum via Flickr (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Part I: Women's Empowerment as a Fast-Forward to Modernity

Is there a women's movement in the UAE?[16]

Scholars have called the type of women's movement that exists in the UAE "state feminism,"[17] as it is mainly a top-down approach. Indeed, there are few, if any, organizations in the UAE that advance women that are not government affiliated. Noura al Kaabi, Minister of State for Federal National Council Affairs and Chairwoman of the Media Zone Authority-Abu Dhabi and twofour54 and Abu Dhabi National Exhibitions Company (ADNEC Group) described the many government-sponsored annual events in which she often participates as a speaker, including Emirati Women's Day, the activities of the General Women's Union, which was established as an umbrella organization for all women's organizations in the UAE in 1975 by Shaikha Fatima, and the Dubai Women Establishment, launched in 2006. The Dubai Women Establishment sponsors the Arab Women's Leadership Forum, the Emirates Leaders Gathering, professional development workshops, the National Corporate Child Care project, the Women on Boards Initiative, among many other programs.

The UAE government has made a concerted effort to regularly participate in and host international and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) conferences on women's issues and has signed all international treaties on protecting the rights of women, including the Child Protection Convention (1997), the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention (1982), the Equal Remuneration Convention (1996), the Convention concerning Night Work of Women Employed in Industry (1982) and the Convention on Minimum Age (1996). In 2012, the UAE passed a law calling for mandatory female representation on all boards of governmental corporations and bodies. It was the first country in the region to implement such a law.

Dubai Abulhoul Alfalasi
Photo: Dubai Abulhoul Alfalasi

Dubai Abulhoul Alfalasi, an exuburant New York University Abu Dhabi undergraduate student and novelist on her way to Oxford next year as a Rhodes Scholar, says this "top-down" approach reflects a desire already present within the Emirati population – especially among youth – who do not feel they need to start women's organizations or rally around one particular issue or another because the government "has provided different outlets to push for empowerment, and is aligned with these movements."

While the government provides many outlets through which Emiratis can empower women, activists within the country and internationally have criticized the UAE for co-opting human rights movements and for the absence of independently run NGOs in the country. The government's control over the birth of independent rights movements has meant that it is heavily involved in issues it deems central to the UAE's success, and it continues to claim that one of those issues is women's empowerment. The "co-opting" of the women's movement is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East. In Iran, both the Pahlavi monarchs and the post-1979 revolution Islamist regime championed the movements. During the Pahlavi periods, as Parvin Paidar notes, "the policy suited not only the state but also women who used family and state connections as an opportunity to enter into formal politics and influence social policy." It took a revolution for the women's movement to break free [temporarily] from being seen as "a discredited venture at the service of the state or as foreign colonial importation."[18]

Interestingly, the state's role in promoting women's education in Iran, regardless of its motives, led to an unspoken transformation in consciousness among women. They mobilized; the Iranian women's movement is often associated with the more recent Green Revolution.[19] While their movement has been violently suppressed, there is no question that Iranian women are culturally ahead of the laws under which they live. A similar trend can be seen among Emirati women, though their government's trajectory has been different.

And while it is difficult to call "state feminism" a movement, perhaps the UAE government does represent something new in the region – it seems to constantly push the limits of what is acceptable in traditional Emirati society. Even the UAE ambassador to the United States, Yousef Al Otaiba, was caught by surprise when he saw the royal motorcade at the Dubai Air Show recently. "When they took off their helmets," he discovered, "they were all women riding motorcycles! – I don't see women motorcade riders in the U.S. I don't see them in Europe," he exclaimed. One might argue that this is simply another manifestation of gender segregation rather than gender equality. However, women also comprise a larger share of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates than men in the UAE,[20] working side by side with men in these fields, and the President of the Emirates Scientists Council is a woman – 29-year-old Sara Al Ameri.[21] In 2015, the UAE Government Summit launched two initiatives to promote women in STEM: the UAE Gender Balance Council and the UAE Robots and Artificial Intelligence for Good award. "Our view is that half our population is women," affirmed Al Otaiba. "And if we don't employ them and utilize them and benefit from them and invest in them then at best we would be operating at 50 percent capacity."

Al Otaiba, the youthful ambassador and graduate of Georgetown University, explained that although there is no formalized grassroots women's movement in the UAE, it is not because women are not being empowered there. "I think as far as the UAE's concerned, we're well ahead of the

curve in terms of what women have been empowered to do already," he remarked. "So I don't think there's a movement trying to overcome it. We kind of grew up seeing that this is normal." But how did it become "normal?"

How have so many women achieved leadership positions in the UAE?

Why has the UAE leadership dedicated so much energy and resources to placing women in high positions? Historians explain that it is associated with the Emirati leadership's desire to modernize quickly. The country went from extreme poverty – where pearl diving merchants represented the only chance at economic prosperity – to extreme wealth, after the discovery of oil in the 1950s.[22] Sheikh Zayad quickly recognized that his country not only had to sell oil, but be able to relate to the modern, global business community in order to be successful.[23] Part of fitting in with this global community required raising the status of women, which included encouraging their education and discouraging polygamy. When marriage prospects for educated women increased because Emirati men preferred to marry women with whom they could relate intellectually, Emirati families jumped on board and their girls were educated.[24] Today, consciousness has evolved that it is not necessarily for a marriage prospect that Emirati women are educated.

Part of fitting in with the global community required raising the status of women.

But an even more practical reason ensured women did not become educated housewives. With a relatively small population, all hands on deck were required. Sheikh Zayad and Sheikha Fatima made certain girls were trained to contribute their talents and skills to developing the young nation. In addition, the UAE, unlike many other countries in the region, had the advantage of not having to associate modernity with the West. Western imperialists had not imposed cultural norms on them, which significantly reduced the amount of backlash to modern ideas. Where modernity marked a power relationship that other Arab populations confronted through resistance and more conservative cultural interpretations of Islam[25] that led to restrictions on women's freedom,[26] it thrived in the UAE, and women benefitted. While the laws did not necessarily differ greatly from other Arab countries that claim to adhere to Shari'a, the cultural practices did.

The overall trajectory of Emirati women's political and policy participation took time, however. It took from the 1970s – when women were seen primarily in their role as mothers and wives[27] – to 2004 to see the appointment of the first woman cabinet member. Sheikha Lubna Khalid Al Qasimi broke the glass ceiling – not only by becoming a minister – but overseeing a domain traditionally occupied by men, when she was appointed the UAE's Minister of Economy.[28] She subsequently held the positions of Minister of Foreign Trade in 2008, Minister of International Cooperation and Development, President of Zayed University in 2014, and today, Minister of Tolerance. Some analysts conjecture that the appointments of female ministers after 2001 came in part as a response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in which many Arab countries have sought to reframe their image to the West. But what is occurring in the UAE is a "movement by

Sheikha Lubna Khalid al Qasimi
Photo:The Women in Public Service Project

implication" based on the "power of presence in the public domain."[29] The more women start to successfully occupy leadership positions, the more they silently "imply" change is underway and other women (and men) know that women can join their ranks. "It makes me realize I, too, can reach a high position," said a female engineering student at New York University in Abu Dhabi. "They've made it, so I can do better." Another female student majoring in biochemistry there said "It makes me realize that women are important in this country and taken seriously and won't be stopped from doing what they want to do."

In addition to the practical reasons why the UAE government empowers women, Ambassador Nusseibeh offered another explanation: since the country's founding, the leadership's belief that women have unique talents to bring to the table has become part of the fabric of Emirati society, which highly values the role of women in public life. The children of the founding President His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Al Ketbi, the First Lady, "grew up watching their father consult their mother not only on social or women's issues, but on a wide range of topics," said Ambassador Nusseibeh. Zaki Nusseibeh – Ambassador Nusseibeh's father, who served as interpreter and close advisor of the late Sheikh Zayed – shared that he "was struck by the incredibly close relationship between the two – the ruler and his wife – by the way he consulted and discussed everything with her." In conversation, Ambassador Nusseibeh made a distinction between "mother" in the traditional sense and "Mother of the Nation" in that Sheikha Fatima "led by example and ultimately defined womanhood in a unique way in the UAE." Sheikha Fatima provided a role for women that was different than in relationship to men or the family. While it is arguable that Sheikha Fatima's leadership was attained "by proxy" to her husband's position of power and therefore still based on a patriarchal system, Sheikha Fatima's legacy and continued efforts to empower women in the UAE have led to concrete changes in social consciousness. The means by which she attained her power have not detracted from the positive impact of her leadership.

But do Emirati women agree with the popular argument that women's leadership is unique to their gender? Do Emirati women bring something new to the table?

Do women have unique leadership skills?

There is a preponderance of evidence that suggests that societies are more stable and the economy improves dramatically the more women are empowered politically and in the labor force,[30] but this evidence-based argument is often dismissed in the UAE as undermining the value of all individuals and their unique contributions to professional life as human beings. "I think it's more negative to look at women as having certain attributes because then that contributes

Since 1950, Dubai has transformed from a village on the banks of Dubai Creek to an expansive modern metropolis.
Photo: Steven Stralton via Flickr (CC-BY 2.0)

to a stereotype that perhaps a particular female leader does not necessarily embody," said Alfalasi, who published her first novel about a young girl and a parallel fantasy world while she was still in high school – "so that Emirati girls would have someone to relate to." In this award-winning novel's fantasy world, she says, gender is not a factor. "The way I would like to think of it," reflected Alfalasi, "is that each leader, regardless of whether they are male or female, will bring certain characteristics and talents into a company as opposed to being brought there simply because they are a woman." Minister Al Kaabi agreed that "the conversation should be about what makes a good leader rather than the traits of female leaders." However, she acknowledged that "many of the qualities that are traditionally seen as female traits are crucial to positive leadership – for example: instinct, resourcefulness, ability to multitask, emotional intelligence, agility," but that men could exemplify these qualities as well. She stressed the importance of teamwork. "Nothing is done alone," she said. "You always have a team. Even the best leaders won't have all the skills themselves, but they will make sure that the right skills are there within the team."

Still, some Emirati women acknowledged that women in the past have not been able to lead with traits traditionally associated with femininity, such as compassion. Interviewees underscored that women should be allowed to exercise what are considered "feminine qualities" without fear that they be considered a sign of weakness. Being a woman, being feminine, having compassion and love, they argued, does not make a leader weak.

Rather than assuming all women lead in a specifically "feminine" style, Emiratis are demonstrating a new pattern in which both men and women are encouraged to exhibit leadership styles traditionally associated with the feminine. This includes teamwork, compassion and love. These qualities are not always easily identifiable in a world in which leadership often relies on showmanship, press releases, and superficial results. According to the Emirati women interviewees, this kind of "feminine" leadership has proven effective as a way to introduce positive change behind the scenes that may otherwise not be accepted.

Part II: Change Behind the Scenes

How is the UAE impacting the region "behind the scenes?"

One of the trademarks of Emirati influence on the international arena is that the government often works behind the scenes. The Emirati leadership believes a subtle approach is better is because the women's movement "by implication" can do more to fight extremist ideology than any kind of counter-messaging or propaganda. Only a few months ago Major Mariam Al Mansouri – the first woman pilot in the UAE and one of the few in the world to lead a strike mission against ISIS strongholds in Syria – presented a double insult undermining ISIS. Not only did she launch an attack by air on ISIS, but set an example of a woman leading men into battle in the face of an ideology that considers women as inferior and to be subjugated as sex slaves. In this way, the UAE demonstrated women's skills, courage, and leadership role in the region, loosening the ideological grip the Islamic State could have on its youth.[31]

In order to reach out to youth and ensure the next generation is not "hijacked" by extremism, the government appointed a youth minister who is, for the first time, young. At 22, HE Shamma Al Mazrui, Minister of Youth, traveled across the country forming youth councils in each Emirate and launching a mentoring initiative. She also started a youth retreat to encourage youth to engage in innovative projects that bring them happiness. Her leadership, too, inspires young women to become leaders "by implication," without needing to broadcast the fact that she is a woman or focus specifically on gender issues. The govern-

ment's top-down approach is therefore coupled with a bottom up strategy through its empowerment of youth and enabling young people, both women and men, to hold leadership positions.

At the United Nations, the UAE is also committed to instigating cultural change "behind the scenes." "From the founding of UN Women in 2010, we were one of the top twenty donors and we are the only Arab country in that grouping," said Ambassador Nusseibeh. "We view women's empowerment as a global priority, and put our money where our mouth is internationally to support this effort." In 2016, the UAE inaugurated a UN Women Liaison Office in Abu Dhabi to facilitate UN Women's work in the GCC. The UAE hosts this office because it believes that it offers a model for social development for other countries in the region facing similar circumstances. "The opening of the Liaison Office was the culmination of a lot of work we were putting into the idea in New York," said Ambassador Nusseibeh.

At the UN, where only 21 percent of senior management is female, the UAE is committed to driving management reform. The UAE joined forces with Colombia in the fall of 2016 to form a coalition of over 80 like-minded Member States committed to advocating for gender parity in senior-level management positions in the UN. Initially founded as a group to promote women candidates for the post of UN Secretary-General, the Group of Friends for Gender Parity adapted its mandate after the race. "It was actually the UAE's proposal," noted Ambassador Nusseibeh, "that this group of Member States should now evolve into a group that demands parity in the appointment of senior officials at the UN." The group has been working to support the new Secretary-General in fulfilling his commitments to institutionalizing gender parity at the UN. Ambassador Nusseibeh said of the group, "We realize that as Member States of the Organization, we play a part in this process—for example, by ensuring that lists of candidates for senior appointments include women from our countries. This extends to national representation." Currently, there are 38 women ambassadors out of 193 Permanent Representatives, including only one member of the Security Council, Nikki Haley from the United States, and that is not enough, said Ambassador Nusseibeh.

What is the relationship between Islam and women's empowerment in the UAE?

Unlike in other countries in the region where women's activism has used citations from religious texts in order to demand women's full and equal rights under the law, Emirati women interviewed said these citations have not been necessary. Early in the modernization process, however, Sheikha Fatima and Sheikh Zayad did call upon religious texts to promote women's employment, including Quranic sura:[32] "Men have the portion they have earned, and women the portion they have earned" and the Prophet's saying: "The most blessed earning is that which a person gains from his own labor," as well as the example of Khadija, a successful businesswoman, first wife of the Prophet, and twenty years his senior.32

But Emirati women today are not convinced changes between the early 1970s and today had anything to do with either what is commonly called "Islamic feminism" – appealing to religious texts to affirm women's rights in predominantly Muslim countries – or secularism. These changes include parents' willingness to allow their daughters to travel and pursue traditionally male-dominated career paths, the dramatic increase in women-owned businesses, and the freedom women have to choose when and who they want to marry (and divorce) without negative repercussions. For Emirati women, restrictions on women have and always will be a cultural issue. "In general it is more social cultural norms that can perhaps be a little bit of a barrier – I wouldn't call it a religious society," affirmed businesswoman Najla Midfa. In fact, Emirati women cannot agree whether the UAE is a "secular" or "Islamic" state – many feel

they are in neither category. "Even though we are a religious society we never ask people what their religion is – that's not a question that is common in our country – because we see religion as an individual and personal matter," affirmed Ambassador Nusseibeh. Minister of Tolerance al Qasimi pointed out that "if you look across all Muslim countries – from Afghanistan to Morocco – do we look and dress the same? No. Do we practice Shari'a in the same way? No. What dominates all these societies is culture over religion."

For Emirati women, restrictions on women have and always will be a cultural issue.

Why would Emirati women stress cultural over religious norms as the contributing factor to change? What is most interesting in the interviewee answers is that in attributing restrictive practices to cultural norms, they imply that they can be transcended more easily than those practices associated with religion. In identifying these practices as cultural, they take the first step in transcending them to something that better meets the needs of progressive societies.

In many ways, this awareness of cultural dynamics embodies the relationship between girls and women in the UAE and Islam. The rigid, conservative family laws imposed by Shari'a often do not actually impact their careers as professional women who travel regularly, speak their minds publicly, and manage major organizations operating in countries across the Middle East. "There should be more attention towards understanding individual women in different cultural and country contexts," asserted Alfalasi.

Najla Midfa
Photo: Najla Midfa

Indeed, the Emirati women's experience offers a less black and white picture than the one offered by human rights groups in which women are limited by traditional practices that restrict their right to work, travel, marry, divorce, inherit, and attain custody over their children. Over time, the cultural practices have eased without public announcement or formal recognition within the legal codes. Al-Midfa, Founder of Khayarat, a social enterprise that enables Emirati students to make informed career choices and achieve success in the private sector, General Manager of Sheraa (Sharjah Entrepreneurship Council), member of the Board of Directors of United Arab Bank, and Vice-Chair of Youth Arab Leaders, was forbidden by her parents to travel alone to Egypt for work during her first job in 2000. Midfa broke this family rule. Now, her 22-year-old sister does not even need to ask permission to travel for her work. "I've seen it in my own lifetime and my own generation – small things, such as concerts – now my sister can go to concerts with friends without causing any family issues," she said. Midfa attributed this new-found freedom to the preponderance of women in leadership in the country. The top-down approach to empowering women in the country has inspired a bottom-up response starting at the most basic unit – the family.

Without many changes to legal codes, including the concept of male guardianship under Sharia-based family law, the UAE has seen astounding shifts in its cultural practices, allowing women and girls more and more freedom. "The country has changed a lot," said Midfa. "If you look at the country in 2000 and where it is today, I used to be the only Emirati woman at work who would go down and have coffee with the guys on the team. While this may have been seen as culturally inappropriate at the time, today this is understood to be an acceptable part of professional life. We also have co-education at the university level, which wasn't a widely-available option when I was growing up. As the walls of gender-based social segregation have begun to come down, it has led to a more cohesive and healthier society for both women and men."

Without many changes to legal codes, the UAE has seen astounding shifts in its cultural practices.

The rules binding families to traditional cultural norms, including those mandated by conservative interpretations of Islam, seem to be less and less relevant or applied by families in the UAE. The "movement by implication" seems to have set in motion a pattern that is catching on, behind the scenes. This is not to say legal reforms should not accompany these changes, but that culture itself is already posing a challenge to conservative interpretations of Islam and use of the law to restrict women's rights. In addition, legal reforms could spark a backlash that would reverse the cultural gains that are in process and that are required in order to make any eventual legal changes effective and legitimate. Family laws in the UAE seem to serve only to formally adhere to conservative interpretations of Shari'a, but in reality, the UAE moves forward by putting women in high positions without a national debate, and many families are treating women and girls accrding to ideas associated with modernity and their personal practice of their faith.

Female university student interviewees noted that they never had to confront the issue of male guardianship and emphasized that divorce rates in the UAE were very high, and that women could choose who and when they wanted to marry, and whether they wanted to divorce. "Now they basically aren't strict about that anymore," affirmed a female biochemistry student. "Is there a law that men can call upon saying women cannot travel without permission?" asked one female Emirati student. "I do not know – and the fact that I do not know indicates the extent to which it is not called upon and at least to the best of my knowledge it hasn't been used in that context as well." While comprehensive data on this subject is not available in the UAE, these interviews suggest that a new cultural pattern is emerging among youth that transcends the need for Emirati families to prove that they are devout Muslims or maintain patriarchal structures by restricting women's rights.

When asked to what they attribute these new freedoms, a group of female students responded that families saw the problems that arranged marriages caused and enough women had spoken up about them for people to simply do away with the practice over the past few generations. They also cited the fact that Emirati women could be seen as independent of their husbands in high-powered positions. When Ambassador Nusseibeh took the head of UN Women to meet with Sheikha Fatima and explained different programs that have come to the region, Sheikha Fatima stopped her and said: "Have you seen my country? – have you seen what we have achieved here? We'd be happy to have your office, but I want you to look at this model as an example for the region and the world."

Can the UAE model be an example for the region? Analysts differ as to how to interpret the surge of women's leadership in the country, some criticizing the government for appointing women leaders based on family connections, for not being democratic enough, and for living privileged lives

Starbucks in Downtown Abu Dhabi, October 2016
Photo: Kent Davis-Packard

at the expense of the majority of its population, which is comprised of non-nationals working in service positions. The next section describes some of the challenges that remain and offers an analysis of the UAE's contributions and influence in the region.

Part III: Remaining Challenges

What are the main challenges that remain for women in the UAE?

When asked about the challenges to women's empowerment in the UAE, outsiders, including human rights organizations, most commonly cite the UAE's reservations to CEDAW[33] and the fact that there is no specific law on domestic violence.[34] The UAE ranked also 119th in the 2015 Global Gender Gap Report,[35] and dropped to 124th in 2016.[36] Principal concerns include discrimination against women in personal status laws and in the penal code; violence against women, including inadequate protection against domestic violence and sexual assault and harassment; and the abuse of migrant domestic workers.[37]

Legal reform to address these issues often leads to backlash from conservative elements of the population[38] resulting in the undermining of progress[39] as has occurred in other Arab countries where new laws are deemed immoral according to conservative Islamists.[40] "A country that was founded in 1971 is not going to be at the same level of development of legal jurisprudence as the U.S. or a European country," remarked Ambassador Nusseibeh. "It is quite a complicated evolution – developing the legal system that matches our unique model." Seen in that context, the achievements of the past four and a half decades have been remarkable.

Emirati women wearing the traditional abaya
Photo: Tribes of the World via Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

Yet there is still much to do. "The way institutional structures have developed – we inherited codes, judges, and a legal system – to form a nation state very quickly," said Ambassador Nusseibeh. "For many Emiratis, Islamic identity is not only tied to the traditional structures of its primarily tribal communities, but to longstanding, conservative cultural norms in other predominantly Muslim societies."

Another challenge for Emirati women – at least as it is often perceived by the West and by some Emirati women – is in their public appearance – their clothing. Here again, Emirati women interviewed dispelled a myth that they were inhibited based on a religious precinct, claiming it was socio-cultural. Female college students explained that women can wear any color they want in the UAE, but with more probing, they explained that the black abaya, or long flowing dress with hijab or headscarf, is cultural, and fitting into that cultural identity was important. In a country where only 20 percent out of a population of 9.2 million people is Emirati, and that segment of the population occupies an elite position vis-à-vis the rest of the population of immigrants who mainly fulfill service jobs, wearing the right "costume" is important. "Reputation does matter around here," noted the student. "Who wouldn't want to have a good reputation?" she asked.

It is, in fact, a cultural rather than strictly "religious" issue that poses one of the biggest challenges to women's full empowerment in the UAE. It has to do with the social divide in the country. While Emirati women enjoy many rights in practice – whether or not the laws enforce these rights – it is class that makes its millions of immigrant women vulnerable to a number of abuses and limits their abilities to work outside of a limited number of roles. Women's participation in the labor market overall in the UAE is less than half that of men (42 percent versus 92 percent).[41] But the majority of women who do work are non-nationals, and their occupations in the private sector are deemed unfit for the 3 percent of nationals

who work.[42] "Might a culture of women's exclusion from political and economic life encourage women to opt out of working? Or is it the expatriate community that is exerting influence on the national female population, further discouraging their engagement in the workplace?" asks Karen Young in her recent paper on Women's Labor Force Participation Across the GCC.[43] Furthermore, most women in the UAE are public sector employees, and there is a social taboo on Emirati women joining the private sector, because it is currently dominated by non-national women and men. The absence of role models or a "movement by implication" for non-national women who make up the majority of the country's population presents a major impediment towards women reaching their full potential in a country that wants to demonstrate by example. While there are women leaders and role models within the migrant community, they do not generally receive media attention and as a consequence of being non-nationals, they cannot represent their communities in public office.

What some observers call a "two-class society,"[44] however, is being addressed, by one of the UAE's top woman leaders through the Ministry of Tolerance, and also in the UAE's efforts to counter human trafficking. When the UAE was criticized for widespread human trafficking in 2006, Ambassador Nusseibeh, who served on the UAE's first Human Trafficking Committee in 2007-8, was bound to stop it. "We started talking to women coming in from other countries and printed pamphlets about it for airports. We started talking to the people coming from Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, and became much more stringent regarding the contracts that were being signed and validated by our Minister of Labor. We drafted and passed the first federal law against human trafficking – Federal Law 51 – it was actually the first law of its kind in the region," she affirmed.

While non-national women are still the most vulnerable demographic in the UAE, the government has taken pains to stop violence against women, especially with regard to those non-nationals who are at risk of becoming victims of human trafficking. The Dubai Foundation for Women and Children became the first licensed non-profit shelter in the UAE in 2007, and calls upon international human rights obligations in its mandate to protect women and children against domestic violence, child abuse and human trafficking. About the E'waa's Shelters for Victims of Human Trafficking in Abu Dhabi, Sheikha Fatima stated: "Everyone in our dear country should accept responsibility for rejecting and fighting these heinous crimes, which are a stain on the face of humanity that God has honored in all divine religions. All of us, citizens and government, have to confront these flagrant attacks on human rights."[45] Will these words inspire substantive changes with regard to how non-nationals are treated in the UAE? Social consciousness must first be encouraged from the top down in both words and actions in order to inspire a new generation to bring it forward from the bottom up - just as has been the pattern for the advancement of Emirati women and girls.

While non-national women are still the most vulnerable demographic in the UAE, the government has taken pains to stop violence against women.

Conclusions

Culture before Law

The results of these interviews suggest that Emirati women have made cultural gains ahead of the law. What has made the difference is the UAE's model of a "movement by implication" in which women inspire culture change through example rather than codified laws or campaigns. Laws, in effect, become moot when behaviors in harmony

with higher principles become natural within a society. Many Emirati women do not face the same limitations they faced in the early 1970s, or even a decade ago. Many are no longer bound by traditional notions of male guardianship. There is a new generation of strong, talented, and educated Emirati women empowered to pursue any career path they wish. Religion is viewed as a private affair, and, whether or not society is "secular," women's empowerment is presented by Emirati leadership as not only in harmony with the precepts of Islamic religious texts and values, but with the values of the nation. This is not to say that what human rights organizations publish is not critically important or valid, or that countries should not be pushed by the international community to reform their laws and respect their commitments in practice. But it is worth taking into account that there is a change in cultural values taking place in the region ahead of the law, and it is the result of a new kind of leadership.

These findings are significant because many other Arab countries face similar identity challenges posed by having to adhere to the rules of an "Islamic state" while modernizing, and, in some cases, defining themselves as secular. This is an especially difficult feat because Islam, by its very nature, makes a secular identity appear as a contradiction to the faith; Shari'a law is not considered "separate" from the state. The UAE model presents a way out of a seemingly endless confrontation between religious norms and state identity in the region. Rather than having to choose between "modernity" and faith, this pattern of leadership creates a side effect that transcends some of the most deeply entrenched cultural norms preventing women from realizing their full potential. Regardless of the origins or intentions behind women's leadership in the UAE, its very existence sets in motion a natural reaction that encourages families to support girls' education, participation in the workforce, and overall greater freedom.

Leadership before Mode of Government

American feminists have made the point that "women are consistently marginalized within democratic ideas and institutions," making these and the notion of "democracy" itself merely imaginative male constructs.[46] In both non-democracies and so-called democracies, women have not achieved their full rights. Must a nation be a "democracy" in order for it to promote and successfully achieve women's empowerment? The case of the UAE begs the question of whether "democratic principles" can exist without an internationally recognized democracy in place. Can enlightened leadership trump the procedural elements of democracy, such as voting and election by majority, especially when the majority does not always vote for greater freedoms and just policies? If the outcome of elections does not create a freer society, what is ideal leadership? Minister Al Qasimi suggests that it has to do with making others happy and depends on the cultural context of a given society. "The democratic process is not a cookie cutter – the U.S. process is different from the one in Europe, which is different from the one in Asia," she remarked. "Is democracy elections? No it is not – elections are the path, not the end result," she affirmed. "If you have a satisfied, happy society that has a government that provides for it, it doesn't matter what kind of democracy has delivered it."

When leadership, whether elected or appointed, allies itself with higher principles such as inclusivity, compassion, and pursuit of happiness – principles often associated with the democracy, and, in many cases, feminine leadership styles – it seems to matter as much as legal reform in the UAE today whether a country calls itself a "modern democracy" or an "absolute monarchy." What counts is that these principles become the pillars by which every day citizens live. For this, something more than superficial procedure corresponding to a particular mode of governance is required – that is – a new consciousness that influences from the highest echelons of government and is

met by a population that is ready to join and amplify these higher principles of life. "Democracy," or voting and electing leaders by majority, may not be merely as important as the minority who want and can bring about lasting and positive change to their societies. Inspired leadership may offer the best strategy for encouraging a nation to live by inclusive, democratic principles, just as a leader who does not demonstrate these principles – even in a democracy – can wreak havoc on citizens' rights and freedoms.

Today, Emirati women are appointed to high positions in the government and rise to the top in business, the sciences and technology not as a part of a "gender strategy," but rather because Emiratis know that their involvement leads to a more prosperous and inclusive society. This does not mean Emirati leadership believes or has accomplished the goal of gender equality. "It is important to recognize our system is not perfect," commented Ambassador Nusseibeh. "We feel we have a way to go – we submit our model humbly as an alternative in the region because our region is going through a very difficult period. We've always sought to influence from behind the scenes. We've always offered quiet advice and we've always appreciated quiet and constructive advice when we receive it."

Minister Al Kaabi described a meeting she recently attended: "There was one other woman at the table who would raise her hand when she wanted to speak and then wait. The men just jumped in and spoke when they had a point to make. After the meeting, I pulled her aside and reminded her that she doesn't need to seek permission to contribute. I told her the fact that she is at the table gives her the right to speak, so if you have something to say, speak up; and if you are not being heard, speak louder."

Do Emirati women bring something to the table?

The answer to this question is yes. And it isn't a new law or a policy – though these may be among their contributions – it is a whole way of life, and behind the scenes, it is already being lived.

Endnotes

Executive Summary

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