

The Evolving Space of Emirati Women's Economic Participation

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Abstract: This conceptual paper discusses the contouring of the embryonic space in which Emirati women can enact economic agency. I examine this from three perspectives, namely, the workforce localisation policies, the government's aspiration to establish itself as a force within the international political arena, and the country's cultural landscape. These three factors represent the most powerful influences that determine Emirati women's experience of the workplace, and this paper explores their impact on the space that is evolving in which women can exercise their economic agency. The space available for Emirati women's economic participation is not prescribed; rather, it emerges as ever fluctuating and transforming as a consequence of the varying contextual dominance of one or other of these three potent influences. The UAE's severe workforce imbalance, marked by 96% expatriates in the private sector and about 40% in the public sector, renders localising the workforce a key strategic objective. This fosters a route for women to find their place in the economy. The government's goal to become a key player on the global stage and a beacon of Arab political power and diplomacy involves crafting a distinguished international image. A substantial component of achieving this goal is redressing the historic female disempowerment that is seen to characterise the region. Again, this ambition eases women's access to economic participation. The country's cultural landscape, however, imposes certain constraints on women enacting economic agency. This landscape has altered exponentially since the affluence of the oil boom and many segments of the local population see positive aspects in Emirati women's expanding economic capacities. Yet values which maintain that women are primarily domestic creatures survive and militate against full acceptance of women in the workforce. Additionally, this space is also keenly influenced and configured by myriad diverse collective and individual understandings of national development aspirations, cultural legacies, and new positionings of women. The contribution of this study is its analysis of how specific institutional and societal forces effect how gender can be done and undone in this geopolitical context in which women's highly liminal economic agency is generating new conceptualisations of empowerment and freedoms.

Keywords: Doing and undoing Gender, Gender Norms, Liminality, Space, United Arab Emirates, Women's Economic Agency

1. Introduction

As historic gender inequality shifts as a result of diverse trends such as more liberal national governance, increased secularisation, and awareness of the value of diversity for the economy, we witness varying degrees of acceptance of women's burgeoning economic agency globally. The political, institutional, and cultural elements that populate a particular geopolitical setting symbiotically impact how gender and women's increasing economic agency are construed, constructed, and manifested within a given context. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) presents a particularly interesting case of a highly dynamic reconstitution of the gender/work intersection given its exponential change from a collection of desert communities to one of the world's most modern and wealthy nations. It illustrates an evolving space for women's economic agency, a space interactively contoured by empowering workforce exigencies and gendered state policy alongside restrictive gendered cultural values. These potencies mutually influence the potential for positions of change for women. Women's empowerment represents a fundamental pillar in the UAE's identity formation and is showcased in its public diplomacy efforts (Carvalho-Pinto, 2019). This high visibility of the gender equity issue offers a distinct chance to explore explicit and implicit reconstitutions of gender, work, and culture within a context of rapid modernisation. This paper conducts a conceptual exploration of these dynamic forces which are determining the nature and extent of Emirati women's economic participation.

This paper is organised as follows. It begins with a discussion of the construct of space, continues with accounts of the UAE's workforce localisation policy, political aspirations, and cultural landscape. Each of these forces is overviewed in relation to its influence on Emirati women's economic participation. The paper concludes with a discussion of the liminal space being created for women's economic agency and the rippling effect on other social structures.

2. Space

A key conceptual construct underpinning this paper is the notion of space as it is moulded by the diverse, fluctuating influences of cultural phenomena, institutional provisions, and political aspiration. This notion of space does not refer to a physical entity, but rather a subjective realm shaped by contextual and subjective intricacies. It is marked by liminality, that is, a state of transition characterised by the shifting from established norms to new and unpredictable orders (Thomassen, 2016). Liminality, which can be understood as a type of rite

of passage from one state to another, typically involves disorientation and ambiguity as individuals attempt to reconsider themselves in new roles. Former structures that determined their behaviors, restrictions, and entitlements fall away and new frameworks for behavior come into a process of development. In the case of Emirati women's expanding economic participation, this liminality arises from the new state policies for women, the need to localise the workforce, and the evolving individual and collective interpretations of these policies and their implications. These policies, promulgated by a powerful semi-constitutional monarchy (Stewart, 2012), are enacted against the background of deep-rooted cultural and religious understandings prevalent in UAE society (Kazemi, 2000). This space represents a convergence point for cultural, religious, and governmental influences in which the contours of women's economic agency are delineated and shaped (Mahmood, 2001, p. 210). The multifaceted gravitational pull of these distinct strands of influence generates the emergence of multiple and varied gendered subjectivities. This confluence of authorities is diagrammatically represented in Figure 1 below.

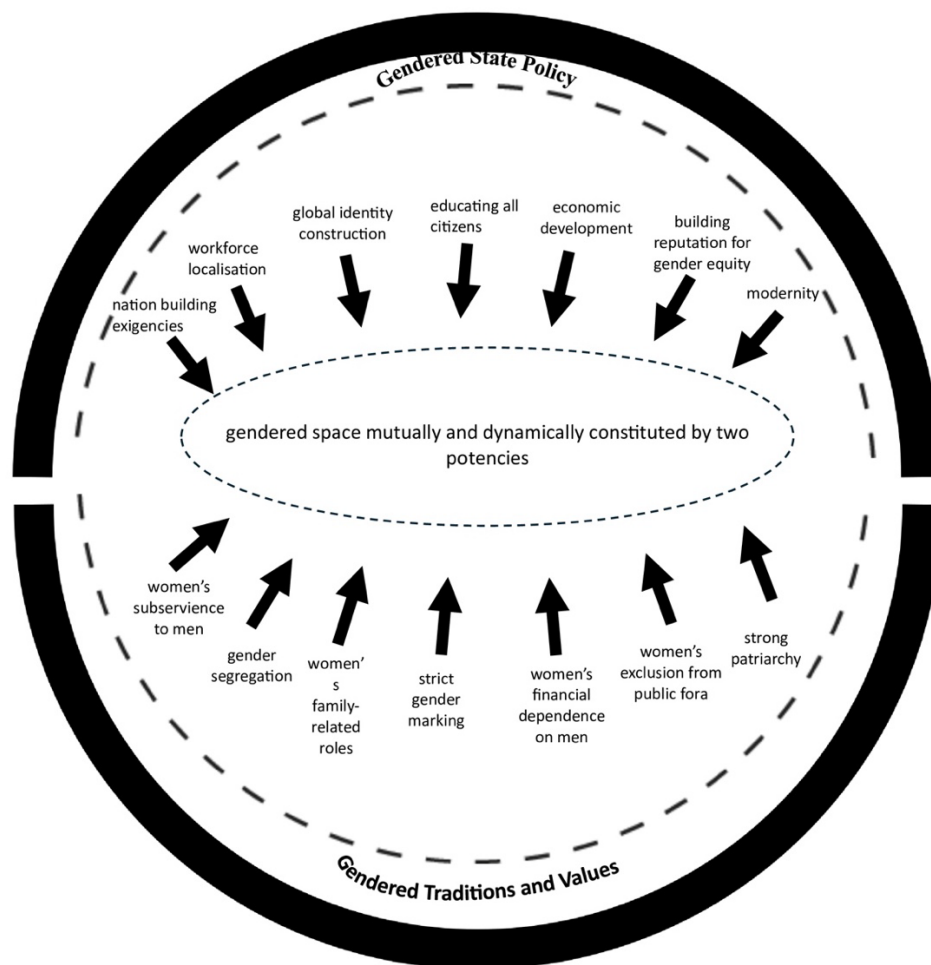


Figure 1: Space within institutional, political, and cultural forces

3. Workforce Localisation Policies

The UAE's population currently stands at approximately 10 million, with only 12% being Emirati citizens and the remaining 88% comprised of expatriates (Infographics, 2024). This demographic distribution is mirrored in the workforce, in which Emiratis constitute a mere 4% of the private sector (PWC, 2024). In response to this imbalance and aiming to facilitate greater Emirati participation in the private sector and accrue the socio-economic benefits of a robust indigenous workforce (Sarker and Rahman, 2020), the government began implementing a workforce localisation policy known as Emiratisation in the 1990s. This policy includes the development of professional training programmes, quotas for Emirati employees across various sectors, and a range of incentives for Emiratis to take up private sector positions (Elbanna, 2022; Forstenlechner, 2008, 2010; Zeffane and Kemp, 2020). These policies assist Emirati women in securing jobs, and, with the rising levels of

education among citizens, there has been a gradual increase in Emirati presence in higher-level and leadership positions (Forstenlechner, 2010).

4. Political Aspirations

The UAE is a politically stable and industrialised nation situated in the Arabian Gulf and has the world's sixth-highest GDP (Schwab, 2023). Since its foundation in 1971, the country has endeavoured to harmonise tradition, globalisation, and modernity in its development trajectory (Eno et al., 2016). Central to this agenda has been a commitment to moderate Islam and this has become an integral component of its national rebranding strategy (Kourgiotis, 2020). The application of Sharia law, Islamic canon law, is not uniform throughout Muslim countries and there are various schools of thought regarding its interpretation and significant differences in its integration into local legal systems. In the UAE, Sharia law has not been fully incorporated in the legal framework (Lombardi, 2013) as its influence has been tempered by the country's first president's call for the acceptance of "transnational jurisprudence" (Hamade, 2012). To bolster this commitment to moderate Islam, the UAE has implemented various initiatives under the banner of the "moderate Islam" campaign (Cafiero, 2018). The drive to promote moderate Islam serves multiple objectives (Kourgiotis, 2020). One is that it aims to counter and discredit militant Islamists and the perceived threat of political Islam, safeguarding both national and global security. It also seeks to enhance the international image of Islam and the UAE. One pivotal initiative in relation to this was the establishment of the "Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies" (PEACEMS) in 2014. PEACEMS endeavours to revive the purported original spirit of coexistence and tolerance within Islam and employ scientific discourse as a countermeasure to distorted religious ideologies (Kourgiotis, 2020). The objectives of the drive to promote moderate Islam have spawned considerable debate, with some interpretations framing it as an ambition to assume leadership within the Arab world (Carvalho-Pinto, 2014; Al-Azami, 2018). However, irrespective of the underlying motivations, the promotion of moderate Islam catalyses shifts in thought and values and this evolving paradigm holds significant implications for women's economic and societal empowerment. Alongside this pursuit of moderate Islam, there is a gradual transition towards increased secularisation. This secularisation does not follow the traditional model of complete separation between state and religion (Casanova, 1994), but rather involves the establishment of arenas where compromises between religion and state can develop (Bhargava, 1998). Examples of this include the 2020 legislative amendments which decriminalised practices proscribed by Islam, such as co-habiting, homosexuality, attempted suicide, and the consumption of alcohol by Muslims. These reforms institutionalise greater personal freedoms (Kerr, 2020) and facilitate interpretations of religious duty in ways that deviate from those of the more homogeneous, preindustrial UAE society. Such institutional transformations afford people the opportunity to "discover Islam in unrestricted and unconventional ways" (Elbasani and Roy, 2015, p. 13) and to contemplate alternative interpretations and expressions of their religious identity and values in their rapidly changing world. These ideological shifts contribute to a lessening of the formerly strict gender marking that molded women as solely domestic creatures and contribute to the legitimisation of their expanding economic agency.

Apart from these trajectories specifically related to religion, the very fact of fostering modernity and a unified pluralistic national identity (Findlow, 2000; Kazemi, 2000) generates implicit institutional backing for reinterpretations of societal values beyond those characterising the country's historic identity. Shifts in interpretation of traditional values are occurring among Emiratis whose educational and socio-economic backgrounds diverge fundamentally from previous generations. Raised in the Internet age and exposed extensively to diverse cultural and religious influences within a nation where the vast majority of the population is from other countries (Bristol-Rhys, 2010; Bristol-Rhys and Osella, 2018), these individuals are enacting profound transformations in their perspectives of traditional values and societal frameworks. Again, these broader globalised perspectives serve to readjust popular thinking away from the traditional conception of women as domestic creatures.

Another of the country's strategic objectives relates to gender equity. The government considers women's issues as part of its ongoing development process and displays a commitment to fostering their empowerment (*Women in the United Arab Emirates*, 2009, p. 3). Government efforts to set a new standard for gender equity in the Gulf region are vital to its strategy of seeking prestige, with women's empowerment emerging as a prominent component of its desired identity formation (Carvalho-Pinto, 2019). To this end, it has implemented policies aimed at integrating women into the workforce (Kemp et al., 2021). Yet, while their achievement of educational qualifications has overtaken that of men, women's entry into the workforce is not unimpeded and their professional skills remain underutilised (Budhwar et al., 2018; Marmenout and Lirio, 2014). Evidence of this is

the country's ranking of 128th out of 146 countries for women's economic participation in the 2023 *Global Gender Gap Report* (WEF, 2023).

5. Cultural Landscape

Religion remains a significant element of UAE culture and a strict display of adherence to its principles is socially required (Rugh, 2007). It has wielded significant influence in delineating gender roles and establishing a robust set of norms governing women, thus fostering societal resistance to changes in their activities and status (Karam and Afiouni, 2014). Shariah law does not permit any notion of gender equality (Metcalfe, 2008, pp. 90-91), and gender roles are traditionally perceived as static and binary (Kelly and Breslin, 2010; Metcalfe, 2007), with women's family-related duties remaining much prioritised. Despite demonstrations of the lack of justification for women's subjugation in Islamic scripture (Mernissi, 1996), religious dogma is often cited as contributing to the obstacles women encounter in the workplace and their limited enthusiasm for embracing career advancement (Naguib and Jamali, 2015; Tlaiss, 2014a, 2014b). Government policy explicitly underscores the Islamic conceptualisation of women as domestic beings: "Traditionally, women have always been the backbone of family life and the social structure of the UAE and they continue to remain an integral part of maintaining the nation's Islamic heritage and national culture" (*Women in the United Arab Emirates*, 2009, p. 2). This approach resonates with that of many developing nations, where women bear the "burden of representation" of the nation's identity (Yuval-Davis, 1997, p. 45) and are required to embody a dual identity that integrates the country's traditions with imported economic and professional praxis. This particular positioning impacts the modalities of agency which Emirati women can operationalise (Macleod, 1991). Nonetheless, the enduring historic respect for tribal leaders (Rugh, 2007), a cultural value which encourages government aspiration to become espoused community aspiration, has the potential to diminish the conservative associations of desirable roles for women in the light of national development objectives.

In practical terms, Emirati women with children and households to manage are well-positioned to enter the workforce due to the abundance of domestic help made available by UAE labour laws which permit the employment of low-cost foreign domestic labour. The UAE imposes limited minimum wage regulations and salaries are typically determined in relation to those in the workers' home countries. Also, the prevalence of extended family living arrangements ensures the availability of relatives, such as grandparents, to assist in supervising childcare. However, despite such material support, societal values play a significant role in moderating the extent of permissible changes in women's roles (Suchman, 1995), with traditional patriarchal values continuing to influence the modalities of agency that working Emirati women may enact.

Increased levels of education often lead to a heightened awareness of inequities among women and bolster their ability to articulate such disparities (Shakiba et al., 2021). Yet, in the case of the UAE, there is limited evidence of widespread discontent with the current state of gender equity in the country and many young Emirati women consider that they have been granted significant rights and freedoms (Schedneck, 2014). This perspective undoubtedly owes much to three factors. One is the substantial government funding that has been channelled into education and other resources that women benefit from. Another is the Islamic precept of taking care of women (Bristol-Rhys and Osella, 2018) which provides women with some specific benefits, for example, the doctrinal injunction for men to financially provide for their womenfolk. While benevolent sexism rests on the perception of women's inadequacy, this special status does promote a notion that women are well provided for. This special care has been shown to manifest in the workplace in the form of women being accorded greater consideration than their male counterparts in certain ways, such as being more likely to be granted an interview by higher management (Alhadhrami et al., 2018). This notion of distinctive status intersects with the UAE's abundant resources for training women potentially rendering the patriarchy appear a reasonable compromise between new professional opportunities and the legitimacy essential for Emirati women within their communities. A third powerful factor is the public discourse around gender such as the government's constant assertions of commitment to equity for women and how it "is determined to continue supporting their empowerment" (*Women in the United Arab Emirates*, 2009, p. 3). Gender equity serves as a vehicle for enhancing international prestige by a demonstration of globally acceptable levels (Carvalho-Pinto, 2019) intended to enhance the country's global image which has been a central issue since the foundation of the state (Carvalho-Pinto, 2014). Public discourse highlights gender equity in the process of UAE nation building (Allagui and Al-Najjar, 2018; Hesketh and Williams, 2021).

6. The Emerging Space of Emirati Women's Economic Agency

Considering gender from a social constructivist perspective allows us to understand it as a fluid and evolving construct (Gherardi, 1994). This understanding views gender not as a combination of traits or skills (Brickell, 2006), but rather emerging from the interactive processes that occur within social contexts (Deutsch, 2007). It permits the recognition of gender's capacity for reconstruction and transformation within particular historical contexts (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Billing, 2011). Norms associated with gender are also not static but develop as behaviours formed within social environments are absorbed and perpetuated with little consciousness and eventually become ingrained within a given cultural framework (Martin, 2003).

Given the traditional static conceptualisation of gender roles, legitimacy, that is, the "generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995, p. 574), remains a key concern for Emirati women in their trajectory towards greater economic participation. Emirati women's burgeoning economic participation and the judgements around the desirability of this represents a situation in which "there is no preexisting legitimacy on which to draw" (MacLean et al., 2016, p. 620). Notions of legitimacy, which determine the degree of permissible change and oblige women to avoid non-normative behaviour (Butler, 2004), are susceptible to the impact of ongoing individual efforts to redefine expressions of the traditional value framework and the doing and undoing of gender.

MacLean et al. (2016) argue that legitimacy, once achieved, can influence the broader socio-political context. We can identify how increasing legitimacy within the area of women's economic agency is exerting an impact on their legitimacy in areas beyond the workplace, impacting personal and social behaviours, and reshaping societal norms. Examples of such include unmarried women living alone and young women finding their own marriage partners, behaviours which were impossible historically (Goby, 2021). These changes demonstrate the critical reflexivity of women's reconstitution of gender within their cultural context and their efforts to gain new freedoms without precipitating tension between traditional values and their newfound sources of empowerment (Maclean et al., 2016, p. 623).

7. Conclusion

The government stresses that its gender equity policies are implemented "without sacrificing the heritage and culture that defines this society's national identity" (*Women in the United Arab Emirates*, 2009, p. 2). This begs the question as to the degree of equity that can materialise in a society historically contoured by a strong patriarchy buttressed by scripture on the divinely ordained nature of gender disparity. The extent to which gender politics can be susceptible to a more progressive approach therefore remains uncertain. Specifically, it is challenging to determine whether women's economic participation is targeted solely at serving the objectives of national development, as argued by Sibgatullina and Kemper (2021, p. 7) and Kandiyoti (1991). Nonetheless, the evolving relationships between genders in the UAE illustrate Kandiyoti's (1988, p. 275) assertion that "patriarchal bargains are not timeless or immutable entities, but are susceptible to historical transformations that open up new areas of struggle and renegotiation of the relations between genders." The evolving space that I discuss in this paper demonstrates signs of a moderated patriarchy evolving within a new landscape influenced by women's growing participation in the economy and their resultant emancipations. Women's positioning in society is shifting as they undertake the roles of contributors to economic and national development (Macleod, 1991), and the norms that have historically served as the gatekeepers of their legitimacy are shifting. These changes augur well for increasingly greater enactment of women's economic agency and the societal transformations that will follow as a consequence. The considerable attitudinal changes that are being generated by the institutional objectives of increasing gender equity and workforce localisation represent a potentially valuable avenue for future research on the ways in which women's access to economic participation alters as a result of new understandings of gender roles.

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