

Bridging the gap Between Cultural Subordinate and Organisational Success: Emirati Women's Liminal Economic Agency

Valerie Priscilla Goby

Zayed University, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

valeriegoby@gmail.com

Abstract: This paper explores responses to the latent, but still robust, cultural resistance to Emirati women's liminal economic agency in the United Arab Emirates. While a great deal of state policy has sought to encourage women into the workforce and to provide them with a level platform on which to participate economically, some religio-cultural values still prioritise women's family-related roles. One result of this is that there is substantial disparity between women's educational skills and the extent of their participation in the economy. This study uses narrative methodology to explore how Emirati women respond to the surviving prejudices that maintain that they are not fully entitled to engage in the workforce. A highly dominant theme that emerges in this study is that women have identified, and begun to celebrate, the role that women have played in the economic history of their country. They highlight that economically active women are not a new phenomenon in their society. The contribution this study makes is its analysis of how culture and gender are mutually reconstituted and how aspects of modernity are incorporated into a framework of traditional values. This analysis demonstrates a means by which women in a highly patriarchal society seek to defend and legitimate their unrestricted economic participation. It also illustrates how tradition and modernity become blended rather than existing as a dualism.

Keywords: economic agency; heritage; liminality; modernity; narrative; United Arab Emirates

1. Introduction

Challenges to traditional values associated with women in the Muslim world are frequently attributed to opprobrious Western influences (Sibgatullina and Kemper, 2021, p. 8). Elements of such rejection of women in non-traditional roles are discernible in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) where state policy to develop women's economic agency is materialising against a cultural background that disclaims such agency. The earlier prioritisation of women's family-related roles, their domestic seclusion, and their dogma-inspired financial dependence on men generate discomfort around the outcomes of contemporary state policy geared to enhancing women's professional development (Erogul et al, 2019). Women in organisational leadership roles are particularly vulnerable within a cultural framework that underscores women's subordination (Kemp and Zhao, 2016).

This study explores some responses of Emirati women to the enduring assumption that their professional status is discordant with their country's cultural heritage (Jabeen and Faisal, 2018). I employ narrative interviews to elicit Emirati women's handling of culture-based opposition to their liminal economic agency. This methodology enables the researcher to explore gender related issues from the local perspective voiced by participants. These narrative interviews reveal a dominant practice of employing elements of Emirati history to legitimate women's economic agency. This demonstrates a strategic manoeuvring of a revered shared past to validate their changing roles. My paper overviews this repositioning of women's liminal economic agency within their country's historic traditions.

This study contributes to theoretical thinking about the mutual constitution of gender and culture in an Arab Islamic embedded context in two ways. First, it identifies ways in which women identify legitimate spaces for their economic agency. Second, it problematises the notion of tradition and modernity as a dualism (Kim-Puri, 2005).

2. Country and cultural context

Since its foundation in 1971, the UAE has engaged in a rapid modernisation process made possible by the affluence of the oil boom. Its prosperity strengthens the country against changes in the global economy (Issawi, 2013) and permits it full freedom in how it creates its own brand of modernity within its cultural framework (Eno et al, 2016). Women's educational level has increased dramatically and currently 95% of women high school graduates continue to further education and 70% of university graduates are women (OECD, 2020). Yet, despite these high levels of education and abundant state policies to facilitate women's entry into work, women's professional skills continue to be underutilised in common with other parts of the Middle East (Budhwar et al, 2018; Marmenout and Lirio, 2014). While UAE state policy has set a goal to enhance gender equity (OECD, 2017),

the country ranks 135th in terms of women's economic participation and opportunity of the 156 countries surveyed in the most recent *Gender Gap Report* (WEF, 2021).

Societal judgements of women in the workforce are often negative due enduring sociocultural values which repudiate women's economic agency (Itani et al. 2011), although increasing numbers of Emirati women report benefiting from considerable family support for their careers (Jabeen and Faisal, 2018). Women's family related roles continue to be prioritised and women's financial independence is considered undesirable due to the Islamic precept that men are financially responsible for their womenfolk.¹ The fact that many Emirati women were economically active before the wealth of the oil boom has been excluded from local history (Al-Sayegh, 2001) and their contribution has not been recognised or recorded in school history books (AlMutawa, 2016). State policy encouraging women to engage in the economy side-tracks the issue of women's financial independence by focussing on the contribution that economically active women make to the development of the country (*Women in the UAE: A portrait of progress*). This perspective is reflected in the attitudes of Emiratis of all generations who are reported to consider the most important benefit of education to be that of making citizens better able to contribute to national development (Matherly et al, 2017).

3. Theoretical framework

This study is based on a social constructivist perspective on gender, that is, an understanding of gender as socially constructed rather than a collection of characteristics (Brickell, 2006; Butler, 1990). It views gender as a dynamic construct (Gherardi, 1994) that changes as other social structures change in the course of a country's development (Billing and Alvesson, 2000; Billing, 2011). Culture and gender are mutually constitutive and intricately intertwined (Kim-Puri, 2005). The complexity of these links is further increased by the contradictory dynamics of globalisation, localisation, and renationalisation that characterise modernisation processes (Wodak and Meyer, 2016, p. 13). This complexity can best be revealed through a nuanced scrutiny of culturally embedded subtleties of how gender is done and undone during a particular phase of modernisation (Butler, 1990, 2004). Such investigation must be conducted without privileging assumptions, binaries, and dualisms that originate from research in culturally diverse settings (Oyewumi, 2002).

This social constructivist lens is used to explore the "social doings" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p. 129) associated with women's liminal economic agency and the "multifaceted dynamics" (Bose, 2015, p. 769) of the changing gendered spaces of the UAE's modernisation process. As social events change, the interactive processes relating to gender configurations change (Deutsch, 2007), and the new patterns that are created are learned and replicated and eventually institutionalised in the particular cultural context (Martin, 2003). New identities are created by women in the interplay with their surrounding socio-cultural context (Kovalainen and Österberg-Högestedt, 2014). This study explores some instances of the culturally embedded reconstitutions of gender and permitted identities within Emirati women's liminal economic agency.

4. Methodology

I employ narrative in this study as this methodology enhances investigation of gender in specific contexts (Essers, 2009) and from a local perspective expressed by participants. This helps to reduce the Western-centric bias that has been argued to exist in much research on gender in the global South (Grewal, 1996; Oyewumi, 2002). The personalised narratives that emerge from this methodology are especially revealing in research within contexts which are bound by more conservative values and which do not easily permit individuals to call societal narratives into question (Ybema et al, 2009). This is so because personal narratives reveal how individuals attempt to make sense of their societal systems and thus offer valuable additions to the grand narratives or meta-narratives that "ignore the heterogeneity and variety of human experience" (Eriksson and Kovalainen, 2016, p. 219). Despite valid concerns about its overuse (Jännäri and Kovalainen, 2015), this methodology is increasingly popular for investigating gender (Spiering, 2016) as personalised narratives express the "processes of 'practicing gender'" (Gherardi and Poggio, 2007, p. 25).

I conducted narrative interviews with 22 Emirati working women graduates, all working and aged between 25 and 45. The interviews were conducted in person or on zoom in the course of 2021 and each lasted approximately one to one and a half hours. All were recorded and later transcribed. To encourage participants to talk freely about the issues of their own choice and to recognise their role in producing this research (Sprague,

¹ "Men are the protectors and maintainers of women because of what Allah has preferred one with over the other and because of what they spend to support them from their wealth." (Koran [Sûrah an-Nisâ': 34])

2016), I did not guide the interview in anyway other than by opening it with the statement that being a working woman could be considered to be somewhat problematic in the UAE context.

5. Findings

Many participants made reference to the criticism that women in the workplace experience from more conservative sectors of the community, and this theme is aptly captured in the following narrative of one participant:

There is a certain level of fear amongst women to be out there because they're afraid of judgment, because they are afraid of what the others will say, and this is a society that is very much interlinked. People still very much care about what others think of them. It's a collectivist society, it's not an individualistic society. But in my opinion, that is a method of control as well. And I think a lot of times women aren't aware of that.

Several participants highlight the lack of motivation to earn money experienced by many women and one argues that this is common among the younger generation of Emiratis, both men and women, who have, as she says, "been fed with a golden spoon since birth." However, many participants stress that a lack of motivation to be economically successful is more common for women because they feel entitled to be cared for financially and "believe that comfort is the status quo." Despite the acceptance of the substantial social changes that have come about through the UAE's exponential economic growth, issues relating to Muslim women are generally sensitive and less amenable to change (Kandiyoti, 1991). Various themes relating to the role that Emirati women have had in the socio-economic history of the region emerged in the narratives. Given the limitation of space, I only discuss participants' stress on Emirati women's historic economic agency. To counter censure of women leaving the ambit of the family to enter paid work, participants do not discuss women's economic activity as a change brought about by the country's modernisation. Rather they relate Emirati women's current economic activity to a tradition of women having economic agency. This is mentioned by many participants, and I cite the narrative of one who discusses it in some detail:

But in fact, this idea of women being these passive creatures in Emirati culture is something that is actually new in our society. Emirati women have always had to work alongside their families. Let's say her husband was a fisherman, she would be the person selling the fish. And that used to be the case in our society; it was never frowned upon or looked down on; it was life. Since the oil boom, things have changed dramatically, but we mustn't forget that. It's not an intrusive thought in our society at all, that women work, are breadwinners. In the past they helped their husbands, they were out there, you know, talking to people, being in the forefront of a business, whether that was a shop or whatever, a stand in the fish markets, or something like that. And we also have to remember in my grandmother's generation that used to be quite the norm. Women would amass a certain fortune, they would invest it, buy and sell, or own property. But because this is a patriarchal society, a lot of times these stories are never written, and they're often forgotten. And that is detrimental to the thinking of the younger generation, I think. And this is all part of a bigger issue, which is certainly not specific to the UAE, this idea of women's stories not being celebrated and history being men-centric.

This narrative encapsulates the essence of the input of many participants who were keen to stress that women have not always enjoyed the luxury of being able to stay at home and be taken care of financially by their male relatives. Participants took time to emphasise the active role previous generations of Emirati women played before the financial comfort of the oil boom. The notion that women's economic activity is an integral part of Emirati tradition is taken further by one participant who insists that "more and more women are getting bored of the conversation of correct behaviour for women, and they don't even discuss it anymore and focus on issues such as career and business strategies."

6. Discussion

When women are doing economic participation, they are, of course, also required to do gender and how they do gender and work must be culturally appropriate (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Given the Islamic heritage of the country, arguments about gender equity could have little validity or broad acceptability (Metcalf, 2008). These women adopt a different strategy which is to identify part of the country's cherished tradition and highlight how today's professionally engaged Emirati woman is continuing in this tradition; they stress that

Emirati working women are not a new phenomenon but rather part of the fabric of the country's economic and social history.

The availability of role models for women in positions considered pioneering is vital to the success of significant numbers of women (Erogul et al, 2019; Khan, 2019). The findings of this study demonstrate that Emirati women are finding role models within the history of their country to support the cultural legitimacy of their economic agency. This identification of an historic validation can attenuate the notion that, within the country's value framework, the ideal place for women is exclusively embedded within the family. Participants' situationalisation of the present within the past illustrates Kim-Puri's (2005, p. 142) argument that we should not assume that tradition and modernity are in a dualistic relationship. This combining of heritage with modernity also exemplifies how these contradictory forces contribute to the reconstitution of gender in context of women's liminal economic agency.

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