“I Want to be a Leader, But Men Are Better Than Women in Leadership Positions”

State Feminism and Legitimizing Myths in the United Arab Emirates

Rana al-Mutawa

University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom

rana.almutawa@sant.ox.ac.uk

Abstract

This research paper investigates female perceptions of female leadership in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), where, particularly recently, state feminism has supported women's occupation of leadership positions. It thus explores how state feminism's portrayal of the ideal woman in leadership has impacted Emirati women's perceptions of female leaders. A survey comprising 350 female Emirati students was undertaken, and results were supported by interviews. Findings suggest that although 93 percent of respondents “wanted to” or “probably wanted to” be leaders, they nevertheless endorsed “sexist” stereotypes and legitimizing myths. These contradictions are due, most likely, to ambivalent messages disseminated by the state and by society at large about female leaders. This research postulates that, while women have gained more agency in the public sphere through occupying leadership positions, their own perceptions and portrayals of acceptable gender roles are complex and ambivalent.

Keywords

UAE – Arab Gulf – state feminism – female leadership – Emirati women

Introduction

I have often had ambivalent experiences as an Emirati woman navigating work, education, and personal choices. I have always felt supported as a woman seeking opportunities in the workplace, expecting that no position would be out of

my reach because of my gender.¹ At the same time, I often heard people around me criticizing women who spent long hours at work—in ways they have never done with men. On TV and in other forms of media, I have seen Emirati women occupying senior positions in government, an encouragement for many like myself; yet, in classroom discussions with my female students about women in leadership, I was surprised to find some of them reiterating stereotypes I do not expect among younger women, such as about women being “too jealous” to be adequate leaders—particularly because the state vehemently promotes the idea that women can occupy leadership positions.

State feminism has placed capable women in important leadership roles, showcasing them as model citizens. Of course, there are also caveats, as society and the state promote a certain ideal of behaviour and dress for Emirati leaders.

Most Emiratis look up to the rulers and the ambitious visions they endorse, which made me assume that young women, in particular, supported female leadership. And while many women indeed did, this did not mean the absence of legitimizing myths about female leaders. Through a survey of 350 female students at Zayed University (at its Dubai and Abu Dhabi campuses) and through interviews with female Emirati leaders, I aim to address these contradictions. Specifically, I explore female Emiratis’ perceptions of female leadership, how state feminism’s vision of the ideal woman leader impacts these perceptions, and whether the women I surveyed and interviewed endorse sexist perceptions of female leaders.

Contrary to many assumptions, women in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and in Gulf countries, were generally active in economic life between 1900 and the 1930s (al-Sayegh 2001; El Saadi 2012). But, following the economic depression in the 1930s, their economic contribution declined, and it remained low well into the 1970s, when they no longer needed to work because oil wealth had elevated the financial status of the Emirati family. By 1975, Emirati women constituted only 1 percent of the workforce. But by 2009, this figure had grown to 17 percent (al-Awad 2015; Metcalfe 2008). Behind this more recent increase in the female workforce has been state feminism (rather than financial need), which encouraged women to study and work, especially as the government sought to nationalize the workforce.

However, conflicting messages from the government and society meant that “sexist” ideas about women still dominated, despite government attempts to

1 An earlier version of the paper was presented at the Eighth Gulf Research Meeting (GRM) organized by the Gulf Research Centre, Cambridge, at the University of Cambridge, 1–4 August 2017.

eradicate some of these beliefs. Moreover, state feminism in the UAE was concerned with women's contributions to the nation, rather than in their liberation, meaning that traditional, patriarchal structures were maintained in the more private spheres.² This type of state feminism, which attempted to change certain cultural perceptions about women's education and employment, while maintaining traditional understandings of gender norms within the family, has also been discussed in Egypt and Turkey (Hatem 1992; White 2003). The present research aims to contribute to this wider literature on state feminism in non-Western societies and its impact on female perceptions of women's roles in society as well as to research on legitimizing myths that women practice in different parts of the world.

The paper begins with a short description of the situation of Emirati women in the UAE. It continues with a review of the literature on state feminism and legitimizing myths. This is followed by a description of the survey and the methodology applied, as well as a discussion of the results and an analysis. The concluding section sums up the findings and provides an outlook for further research avenues.

Background

Women in the Gulf, and in the UAE, were by no means entirely excluded from the economy before the discovery of oil. Some ran their own shops, others harvested the land and sold dairy products, and some even owned pearling boats (al-Sayegh 2001; El Saadi 2012; Lootah et al. 1993: 48). While this characterized life until the 1930s, women's economic roles in the UAE started to decline as economic conditions worsened, and they remained stagnant until the advent of oil in the 1960s, increasing slightly after that (al-Sayegh 2001). After the union in 1971 of the emirates into what is now the UAE, development initiatives were implemented that sought to give women an education and employment (al-Sayegh 2001; El Saadi 2012). Although these efforts succeeded in giving women an education, they were less successful in bringing them into the workforce, principally because female graduates did not have a financial need to join the workforce as their great-grandmothers had done in the 1900s (al-Awad 2015).

While the number of women in the workforce was extremely low in the 1970s (al-Awad 2015), it gradually increased thereafter as the government actively sought to nationalize the workforce (Alserhan 2013) and to change a

² In this paper, "traditional" will refer both to cultural and religious perceptions, unless otherwise noted.

situation wherein over 85 percent of the population was foreign, and only 11 percent of the workforce was national (UAE NBS 2010). Women's participation in the workforce was promoted as a positive development for a modern nation; by working, the ideal Emirati woman would be fulfilling her national duty. At the same time, the state also stressed the importance of women's domestic roles as mothers and caregivers, signifying that a woman's work was not to distract her from her "primary" duties. Thus, those women who wanted to work were expected to be able to fulfill their household duties (or otherwise to not work).³ Nevertheless, women's employment came to be seen positively, as it was framed in a way that signified loyalty to the nation and commitment to local values rather than in terms of Western individualism and egotism. Similar methods were employed in state feminism in other non-Western societies, such as in Egypt and Turkey (Hatem 1992; White 2003).

Literature Review: State Feminism and Legitimizing Myths

State feminism has acquired different meanings to different scholars. Lovenduski (2005: 4) describes state feminism as the advocacy of women's movement demands inside the state. Similarly, McBride and Mazur (2010: 5) explain that state feminism is "the degree to which women's policy agencies forge alliances with women's movements and help them gain access to policy arenas and achieve their policy goals."

Scholars studying non-Western countries use the same term in different ways. Hatem (1992: 231) sees the role of state feminism as "introducing important changes in the reproductive and productive roles of women," wherein the state's role in encouraging women to study and work is complemented, for example, by its support for pregnant working women. White (2003) identifies state feminism in Ataturk's Turkish republic as a similarly top-down, state-imposed feminism rather than as a feminism inspired by women's movements within the state. In the UAE, too, state feminism is certainly a government initiative rather than an initiative led by women's movements.

It is questionable to what extent Emirati women would be enrolled in formal education and employed in top positions were it not for state feminism. Shaykh Zayed (r. 1971–2004), the founding father of the UAE, not only sent his own daughters to university—to demonstrate to his countrymen and women that higher education is valuable for women and for the development of the

3 There is little mainstream discussion in regards to the idea that men and women should equally share household responsibilities.

nation—but also encouraged men to support women in joining the workforce (Sights of Dubai 2016).

Recent years are especially noteworthy for women in leadership positions. The Federal National Council (FNC), a 40-member consultative body (20 members elected by an electorate of approximately 200,000 people from the general population, and 20 members appointed by the UAE's rulers) welcomed its first female members in 2006.⁴ Although only one woman was elected by the population in that year, eight further women were appointed by the rulers. In the most recent election, in 2015, only one woman was elected, but eight were again appointed by the rulers. A female president of the FNC was also appointed by the UAE's rulers in that year (Khoori 2015; Khoori and Dajani 2015). In the 2016 ministerial cabinet reshuffle in the UAE, eight new cabinet members were appointed by the rulers, five of them women (*The National* 2016).

Women from the GCC play increasingly significant roles in business also, even more so than other Arab women, according to a *Forbes* Middle East ranking. Indeed, the top six “most powerful women in business” were all GCC nationals, and 10 of the top 15 were from the Gulf states, including the UAE (*Forbes Middle East* 2015).

These indicators underline the country's national agenda in promoting women's participation in the workforce and in leadership positions. The government's success in doing so is likely due to the population's trust in the government to do what is best for the nation while also safeguarding tradition and culture. However, the promotion of female leadership does not negate other gender norms or stereotypes that society (and, at times, the state) upholds towards women. Indeed, rather than a sharing of family responsibilities, women are expected to remain the primary caregivers in the family, even if they are working women. Arab Gulf society still views the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the homemaker and caregiver. Research has shown that the image of the man as the head of the household persists even if women contribute significantly to the family's income (Metcalf 2008). My research suggests that attitudes may subsequently have changed, but not sufficiently that these perceptions are no longer held.

State Feminism, Gender-framing, and Women's Associations

State feminism has employed gender-framing in its endorsement of female employment and leadership, rendering it more acceptable to society. Indeed, tying female leadership to national development frames female employment

4 The electorate consisted of 224,279 members in the last FNC elections in 2015; see <http://www.khaleejtimes.com/nation/government/uae-s-electoral-base-for-fnc-polls-gets-66-wider>.

and leadership in terms acceptable to local society. Not only is female leadership tied to national duty, but the female leader continues to be described as a mother who maintains her “duties” as a primary caregiver (Ministry of Education 2014: 14). Pinto describes this as “gender-framing” and explains that when the state supports women’s participation, it does so through framing it within culturally and socially accepted ideals (2012: 6–7). The Emirati female leader, therefore, is also expected to raise children, be attentive to them and to her family, and dress and act in a way that conforms to tradition.

Once she is framed within these confines, a female leader is no longer an egotist or an individualistic rebel, but the epitome of a respectable and loyal Emirati woman. Thus, women’s employment, education, and leadership are framed in relation to the nation and society, not in terms of women’s rights and liberation. Women’s associations in the UAE provide a fine example of this. Al-Qassimi (1993: 164) states that the goals of women’s associations in the UAE are tied to goals of nation-building rather than female empowerment. She explains that women’s associations are meant to act as unions pushing for women’s rights, but, as unions are not permitted in the UAE, women’s associations work as public interest groups instead and have no power to defend women’s rights. Because of society’s “traditional” view of women, it is preferred that these associations play certain roles within their environment, provided such roles are not too controversial (such as promoting women’s literacy rather than certain ideas about women’s rights).

There has been a conflict between the progressive and conservative segments of society, the latter including the religious establishments, who have strongly—and successfully—promoted more “traditional” roles for women (al-Qassimi 1993: 164). Lootah et al. (1993) believe that women’s associations have played a marginal role in society, and that the activities women’s associations engage in are repetitive and do not add value to women’s awareness or engage with important women’s issues—with a few exceptions, such as the Women’s Association in Dubai. Examples of such marginal activities, other than helping to eradicate illiteracy, include creating centres for reciting and memorizing the Qur’an, organizing religious competitions, raising funds for charity, holding contests on the cleanliness of schools and homes, running chess training, and promoting sports (Lootah et al. 1993: 54–65).

This is not to say that women’s associations have not played any part in UAE society, such as in eradicating illiteracy, as mentioned above (Lootah et al. 1993: 67). However, it is important to note that the discourse (not just in these associations but also in the media, in school textbooks, and so on) regarding women and their rights is enveloped with religious and cultural ideas. Women’s associations’ activities allow women to play a bigger role in nation-building, but their

role ends when it comes to promoting women's rights, an activity which some would view as contradictory to local culture and religion (al-Qassimi 1993: 164). Returning to gender-framing, Pinto (2012) argues that Emirati society's preference for subtle expressions of discontent means that there are fewer alternative ideas about women's roles in society, as many women themselves prefer to remain in the accepted gender frame because of social pressures.

Social Dominance Theory and Legitimizing Myths

According to Sidanius and Pratto's social dominance theory (SDT), all societies are structured by group-based hierarchies, where one or more groups are more dominant than others, so have more social power, prestige, and privilege (1999: 31–32). These group hierarchies are based on different stratifications, such as gender, age, race, religion, and so forth (33). The first mechanism that produces or maintains this hierarchy is “aggregated individual discrimination,” when an individual discriminates or dominates over another in a simple, or subtle, daily context (39–41). With regard to Gulf society, this can be seen in the way a woman's brother, father, or husband may expect her not to be outside the house at certain times in the evening.

“Aggregated institutional discrimination,” the second mechanism, refers to institutional discrimination sanctioned by institutional rules and guidelines, whether these are deliberately or unconsciously discriminatory (41). An example of this in some GCC states is that some workplaces require a woman to get her “guardian's” permission to work.

“Behavioral asymmetry,” the last mechanism, is when the behaviours of individuals in groups reinforce the group-based hierarchies. While this includes the dominant group's abuse of their power over the subordinate group, SDT focuses on the way subordinate groups participate in their own subordination (Sidanius and Pratto 1999: 43). These hierarchies are reinforced through what Sidanius and Pratto term “legitimizing myths.” Through legitimizing myths, subordinate groups in society may endorse their own oppression, as seen in the responses of some black men and women, as well as white women, in the United States, who, following Sidanius and Pratto, seem to endorse racist and sexist stereotypes about themselves (106, 110–11).

As SDT and legitimizing myths show, women commonly legitimize and endorse the sexism and traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society (Becker 2010; Becker and Wagner 2009; Kilianski and Rudman 1998). According to Metcalfe (2008), in a study carried out by the Women Affairs Committee of the Democratic Arab-Islamic Wassat Society in Bahrain, females did not support female political candidates by a majority of 60 percent, believing that women lack the skills appropriate to participate in politics and have limited political

knowledge and awareness. They also believed that such a job would distract a woman from home life (Metcalf 2008: 90–91). Such research findings are not specific to the Gulf states. Research in Germany has found that women generally validate sexism and promote existing gender bias, endorsing both benevolent and hostile sexism. Benevolent sexism can be explained as the endorsement of traditional gender roles, such as the idea that women need to be protected by men. Remarkably, women also endorse hostile sexism (Becker 2010: 453–54; Glick and Fiske 2001). Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra (2006) have found that Spanish women and older respondents were more likely than men and younger people to be prejudiced against women occupying leadership positions. Thus, in societies that are considered to be less patriarchal than Arab Gulf states, and where women have more legal rights, and where a culture of individualism is valued, women still legitimize sexist myths against themselves.

Sample and Methodology

The survey was carried out at Zayed University, a national university of the UAE, which has campuses in both Dubai and Abu Dhabi. The university was established by the federal government in 1998 as a university for female Emirati students. (Very few non-Emirati students attend the university.) Ten years later, however, the university started allowing male enrollment, according to the university's website. Classes are gender-segregated and taught either in separate buildings or in secluded wings of the building (where females are not allowed entry to the male wing and vice versa), except for graduate levels, which are a minority of students. Both female and male faculty staff teach female students, and most faculty members are not UAE nationals. Zayed University has around 10,000 female students in both campuses, mostly studying for their undergraduate degrees, with some students working towards their master's degrees. Students come from all seven emirates, with students from Sharjah, Ajman, and the northern emirates studying in Dubai. However, most students are from Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Student age is normally between 17 and 25, although there are older students working on their master's degrees.

A survey with twenty-three questions was emailed to students via the campus announcement system, which reaches all students, and only female Emirati students were requested to respond.⁵ Respondents were asked to

5 The survey's questions assessed student background (which emirate they came from, the highest education degree of the head of the household), as well as their attitudes towards women's roles (such as whether being a leader contradicts religious values).

respond to statements about female leadership and women's roles in society, such as "Men are better than women in leadership and pioneering positions." The sample was targeted at 355 respondents with a confidence level of 5 percent and confidence interval set at 95 percent—351 responses were received.

As an Emirati female and an instructor of Emirati students, I used my own positionality to further analyze some of the data I gathered. This allowed me to identify daily biases that were not clearly visible in the surveys, interviews, or secondary literature, and assisted me in analyzing the research findings in a more nuanced manner. It also allowed me to pick up on the type of ideas and gender norms that I have seen while growing up and continue to see in my everyday life.

Results

A significant finding was that an overwhelming majority (93 percent) of respondents answered "Yes" or "Maybe yes" to the question "Do you want to become a leader?" (fig. 1); yet, 43 percent of respondents answered "Yes" or "Maybe yes" to the statement "Men are better than women in pioneering and leadership positions" (fig. 2). However, it is important to note that 40 percent answered "No" and 16 percent answered "Maybe no," meaning that the majority generally disagreed with the statement. This means that a significant number rejected such a negative view of women in leadership. While these results may seem balanced at first glance, they in fact show contradictory perceptions on the side of the respondents. That is, even though 93 percent of these female students wanted to or probably wanted to become leaders, many of them still believed that men are or may be better than women in leadership positions.

Similarly, 43 percent agreed or strongly agreed that women's primary role is to take care of the family, while 30 percent were neutral (fig. 3). Although these perceptions are not particularly astonishing per se, they are surprising when taking into account that 93 percent of the students wanted to or probably wanted to be leaders. This implies that these females may expect themselves and other women to play two roles, the role of a leader and the role of a stay-at-home mother and wife.

One possible reason for this are the mixed messages that students receive from different segments of society. The UAE's rulers strongly promote female leadership and have taken very significant steps in promoting this as a desirable norm. This is echoed by the students' responses to the question "Who or what encouraged women to become leaders?" Although this was an open question, over 50 percent of the students had the same response: the rulers of

FIGURE 1 Do you want to be a leader?

Note All figures have been created by the author on the basis of data collected from the survey.

FIGURE 2 Are men better than women in leadership?

FIGURE 3 Women and their primary roles

FIGURE 4 The factors that encouraged women to become leaders.

the country (some students named them specifically, others generally stated “the rulers” or the “nation’s leadership”).

The second most common response was the government, which garnered about 11 percent. In the UAE, the government is sometimes seen as synonymous with the rulers. Consequently, this implies that the rulers may have over 60 percent of the votes. The third most common response was education, with 9 percent. The answers “society”, “family,” and “women” made up less than 10 percent each, thus only small percentages compared to the UAE’s leadership (fig. 4).

Analysis

Although 93 percent of respondents wanted to or probably wanted to be leaders, many of them believed that men are or may be better than women in leadership positions. This reiterates Sidanius and Pratto’s (1999) ideas on behavioural asymmetry, wherein the subordinate group (women) endorses and maintains group-based hierarchy. The legitimizing myth that men should dominate the public and leadership spheres because they are considered to be “better than women in leadership” is even endorsed by females who want to be leaders. Similarly, women have endorsed benevolent sexism based on legitimizing myths, propagating the notion that women should be the primary caregivers in the family rather than that caregiving should be shared. Perhaps one can argue here that the state has promoted a form of Islamic feminism

that views leadership and caregiving as roles a woman can (or should) play. And it is important to note that ideas of gender norms (especially in terms of caregiving) can originate from religious concepts of family roles. The following section explains how state feminism and gender-framing support female leadership while also endorsing benevolent sexism.

State Feminism and Mixed Messages

It is important to note the rulers' efforts in changing cultural perceptions, which was confirmed by students' responses. The rulers have been successful in promoting women's education and employment for two reasons. First, they are highly admired by Emirati citizens, which allows their efforts to be adopted more smoothly. The second reason is that they are also seen to be safeguarding the nation's traditions and culture, meaning that citizens feel confident that their leadership will not promote ideas that are against local traditions and culture regarding women.

In other parts of the world, including other conservative societies, the elite often differs from the general population in terms of cultural upbringing. Although the UAE rulers have embraced a progressive stance on various issues, they are still seen to share the same conservative culture and traditions as their subjects, and particularly to play an important role in safeguarding them. Many of the rulers' wives and daughters, for example, do not appear in public, and photos of them are not supposed to be shown on TV or in newspapers or other media, an attitude that many Emirati families also show towards their own female members. This is surely not the case for all the UAE's rulers or the whole population, but it serves as one example. Indeed, when Shaykh Zayed wanted women to receive a higher education, he knew it was not enough to build female-only universities, and so he sent his own female family members to university.

The message is that if an honourable Arab tribesman and ruler such as Shaykh Zayed sends his own daughters to higher education, it is then a culturally appropriate thing to do and encourages emulation in the wider population. Meanwhile, students often cited the Minister of State Rim al-Hashimi (who is often seen standing next to Shaykh Muhammad b. Rashid al-Maktoum at major events) or former minister and former president of Zayed University Shaykha Lubna al-Qassimi, as examples of successful women in leadership. Therefore, a very high percentage of students want to be leaders most likely because they are influenced by the nation's rulers, as well as by the female model citizens who receive the support and encouragement of the rulers.

It is unlikely that women's rights in education and the workplace would have developed so quickly if these rights had not been promoted by the rulers. If women's associations had pushed for female leadership, it is highly possible that society would have considered their demands to be norm-deviating or disrespectful of cultural values. Indeed, women's associations had already faced such criticisms from conservative societal factions (al-Qassimi 1993: 164). However, the fact remains that women's rights are tied to the nation, and are considered (morally) dangerous to be pursued on their own. Therefore, the ideal "citizen woman" studies and works for the development of her nation (or for her family), and not necessarily for herself. Because this type of state feminism ties women's rights to national development, pursuing women's rights in the private sphere is irrelevant, even unfavourable.

Women's ambivalent attitudes towards female leadership, as seen in the survey findings, are possibly due to these contentions. In state-sponsored textbooks, Emirati women are portrayed both as employees and as full-time mothers (Ministry of Education 2014: 14). Even as they are commended for being leaders, women are also expected to fulfill household duties as if they were stay-at-home wives. Similar cases have been documented in other non-Western societies that promote state feminism. Indeed, the woman that the state (and society) envisions in the UAE is similar to the "citizen woman" that White (2003) describes in her research on state feminism in Turkey during Atatürk's rule. Women under Atatürk were empowered to serve the nation, as well as to create what can be considered a modern nation-state. However, the rights of these women were only understood in their relation to the state. For example, the state did not concern itself with the mistreatment of women in the private sphere (158).

Naturally, there are some glaring differences between the UAE and Turkey, such as the fact that Atatürk sought to Westernize Turkish society by encouraging women to unveil and adopt Western customs, which is in complete contradiction to the way a "citizen woman" is expected to behave in the UAE. Nonetheless, there are significant similarities: in spite of the reforms, Turkish society was still considered conservative, and Atatürk was concerned not only with "morality" but also with women's role in society. He is quoted as having said that a "woman's highest duty is motherhood" (Duben and Behar 1991: 221). Just as in the UAE, Turkish women were expected to play dual roles for the development of their nation—one at work, and one for raising children. Moreover, just as women's associations in the UAE worked within traditional frameworks of women's rights, so did women's journals in Turkey, which discussed motherhood and "scientific" ways of child-rearing, therefore subjecting their discourse to the accepted gender-frames (154).

While the state has sought to oppose the hostile sexism that society promotes regarding female leaders, it has not particularly called for women's rights. Rather, women's rights have been framed in terms of national development, and women have been relegated to their "primary" roles as mothers at other times, allowing private patriarchal structures to prevail. This not only places a dual burden on the woman (to work and be a full-time mother or else give up her career); it also signifies that her rights should not extend beyond certain public spheres associated with national development. These attitudes have been prevalent in other states that have employed state feminism.

In Egypt, Gamal Abdel Nasser's state feminism promoted the work and education of women but still kept women relegated to patriarchal standards at home, where personal status laws described them as dependent on men and gave them less rights in their personal lives, such as in divorce (Hatem 1992: 232–33). That being said, family laws are often related to shari'a law, making them more difficult to change. Similarly, in the UAE, although women outperform men in education and have reached senior and influential positions, they still lack the same personal rights as men. For example, they do not have the right to grant their children citizenship as do Emirati men (even though this is not sanctioned by religion). Such forms of state feminism allow women to benefit from increased rights in a short span of time and in certain spheres, but remain stagnant in other spheres. These contentions may likely be one of the reasons for the mixed responses students gave with regard to female leadership in this survey.

Society and Mixed Messages

Even if mixed messages are erased from government textbooks and other sources, they are still firmly engrained in social life. Anecdotal evidence from my own experience as an Emirati female suggests this is very much the case. Personal comments within extended family circles, or from neighbours or friends, include the following: "Why did you go to a female dentist? Of course she ruined your teeth" or "Why did you vote for a woman in the FNC elections?" These examples of hostile sexism were ironically made by other women, and in both cases by working women in mid-management positions. Such ambivalent attitudes are commonplace; the same person who degrades female leaders may cite female leaders in government, such as Rim al-Hashimi or Lubna al-Qassimi, as examples of the nation's progress. Thus, those who belittle other women may also point to female leadership as a positive development, and vice versa.

While the above-mentioned comments made by family members are easier to detect as sexism, benevolent sexism is more subtle. Women's roles in Gulf society are tied to caregiving and motherhood, and therefore many forms of benevolent sexism do not appear as sexism to many women. Indeed, even those who champion women's roles in leadership emphasize that women are expected to fulfill their "full responsibilities" as wives or mothers. This was clear from the responses of the female leaders interviewed. One of my female interviewees, considered a pioneer (she was among the first batch of women to study abroad), stated that once a woman has children, it becomes more difficult for her to play both the role of a mother and a leader (or even an employee), so that she should give up her career for her family. There is no mention of the husband being responsible for caregiving as well.

Although one of the other female leaders interviewed was a mother, and was able to play both roles, she also had a similar attitude towards female leadership and conformity to culture and tradition. That is, she spoke about female role models who had influenced her growing up. She described them as speaking several languages and being highly educated while at the same time being veiled, married with children, and "respectable." The image of the educated, loyal, and traditional woman comes up again. This is the "respectable" woman, serving the nation and still "respecting" society and tradition through the way she dresses, behaves, and lives. Even among women, female leadership has become more accepted as it is framed in the context of a national development that conforms to culture and identity. However, once female leaders step out of this frame, they are likely to be regarded negatively.

Playing by the Rules

The framing of women's roles in the context of national development parallels what al-Qassimi (1993) discusses in regards to women's associations in the UAE. These associations contributed in promoting women's participation in national development rather than in promoting women's rights (164), as was the case with state feminism in other parts of the world (Hatem 1992; White 2003). In fact, those who voice demands for women's rights may be seen as too loud and aggressive, and as not conforming to cultural ideals, while those who work for national development are seen as conforming to cultural values and are deemed honourable.

This is again a theme echoed in an interview, where one female leader criticized another Gulf national she had met during her studies abroad. My interviewee described the woman as being too outspoken about the absence of some rights in her country, and viewed it negatively that such issues were being

publicized. The interviewee stated that debating controversial issues gave a negative image to foreigners, who also wished to take advantage of criticizing the Gulf. The interviewee herself faced challenges from her family as a woman, but she dealt with them in a quiet and diplomatic manner that allowed her to reach her goals slowly but surely. Possibly because she had success through more subtle means of expressing discontent, the interviewee believed this to be the more accurate way of resolving grievances. Pinto (2012: 7) refers to this when she says that Emirati society prefers to express its discontent through traditional means such as going to speak to the shaykhs in their majlis rather than through protest or other radical means.

Returning to women's associations, this may be one major reason why their work has centred on activities such as eradicating illiteracy rather than on campaigning for women's rights. It may be why, for example, they have not particularly demanded that the same citizenship laws apply to the children of Emirati women married to foreigner men as apply to the children of Emirati men married to foreign women. Even now, the marriage of an Emirati woman to a foreign man remains culturally unacceptable, so any woman demanding such rights might be conceived of as rebellious and as offending against local traditions. Often, the "modern" woman can be modern only if she is also "traditional." Indeed, in the UAE, the image of the female leader has now started to become one of a woman who works for the development of her nation, usually dresses in a traditional manner, is maybe married with children, and subordinates herself to the accepted gender norms.

While exceptions to this ideal do exist (some female leaders, for example, are unmarried), these women nevertheless conduct themselves within the acceptable traditional framework. For example, they may dress in the "national dress," and speak about women's rights through the frame of national development in the same way the state does. This goes back to the concept of gender-framing. Women's participation in society is framed under the concepts of "nation-building" or religion. However, this also means that the idea of a free, independent woman is almost taboo in society, for a woman cannot ask for her rights directly, as demands for personal rights may be seen as too Western (i.e., rebellious). Instead, she has to frame them in other guises, thereby hiding the tabooed concept of "women's rights."

Gender-framing and the Rebellious Woman

Having reached leadership positions, women who wish to do so now have a greater opportunity to attain more rights and freedoms within society. As it is

more acceptable to be in leadership positions, and especially respected when it is being framed for the purpose of national development, it is more common to see women being assertive in the public sphere. This opens not only more opportunities for women career-wise, and gives them more voice, but also allows them to be more independent, at least economically. However, it is also the case that the respect women in leadership positions receive depends on their subordination to the religious and cultural conventions that have been set for them. It is thus unsurprising that there are no outspoken women leaders in the public sphere demanding women's rights.

Therefore, although gender-framing may advance women's participation by making it socially acceptable, it may also reinforce group-based hierarchies. This is because gender-framing plays on the myths and cultural values of a society and uses them to advance a certain agenda, rather than disputing them. As a result, sexist attitudes—such as the belief that women should first and foremost be caregivers—prevail rather than allowing for alternative views to emerge. The idea is thus fostered that women may become leaders only if they can also play the full role of a stay-at-home mother; the idea that women can become leaders and share their caregiving responsibilities with their husbands is, by contrast, ignored. As Sidanius and Pratto (1999) have described, these views are endorsed and believed by the subordinate group (women), with little resistance to it.

Unfortunately, those who resist the myths and cultural values of society are regarded as norm-deviating, as feminists were viewed in Becker's (2010) research, where women legitimized and endorsed the sexism and traditional gender roles of a patriarchal society. Thus, women's promotion to certain arenas of society is accepted (such as in leadership in the government or business), but it is much less acceptable for them to challenge other norms, norms that are accepted by society (such as speaking openly about domestic abuse, citizenship rights for children of Emirati mothers, or guardianship laws). The implication of this is that, while a woman progresses in terms of leadership and public presence, she is still not seen as a fully independent human being or as equal to men in terms of the rights she enjoys.

Conclusion

Women are gaining more opportunities to become leaders in the government and in other sectors of UAE society. The UAE's rulers are especially promoting this through their appointment of women to leadership positions in the government. Although UAE citizens admire their leadership, and as much

as they endorse its ideas, deeply entrenched beliefs about women and their role in society have become subconscious, and even women have internalized them, as Becker (2010) and Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra (2006) have shown is the case in Western countries. Further complicating matters are the mixed messages promoted by different segments of society, including the government. The result of these contradictory messages is seen in the responses of the female students who stated they wanted to become leaders but also thought that men are better suited than women to leadership positions. What is also clear is that for female leaders to be regarded positively, they have to follow acceptable gender-frames. Indeed, it is usually expected of them to play two roles—not only that of a leader, but also that of a stay-at-home mother.

These findings indicate that many women are ambivalent about female leadership. While female leadership becomes increasingly common, and as more women join the workforce for economic reasons as governments in the Gulf plan for a post-oil society, more women continue to have positive attitudes towards female leadership. However, it is possible that benevolent and hostile sexism will continue to prevail, as it has in Western societies (Becker 2010; Garcia-Retamero and López-Zafra 2006). While similar scenarios developed in different countries, decades later a very different scene appears in each of these states. In Turkey, state feminism opened the doors for a more liberal feminism, as well as for an Islamic feminism that had been rejected by Atatürk's state (White 2003). In Egypt, the increased societal conservatism of the 1980s resulted in a decline in women's rights, after Nasser's 1960s secular state feminism had brought women more rights within education and employment. Thus, there are multiple directions that the current situation of state feminism in the UAE can lead.

If a woman partially gives up her caregiving responsibilities, or presses for certain women's rights (such as in relation to guardianship laws or citizenship laws), she may be viewed as selfish and "norm-deviating." Therefore, especially through gender-framing, group-based hierarchies remain intact, keeping women's issues relegated to acceptable topics of discussion and not actively and clearly promoting women's rights. Further contributing to the status quo is the fact that women themselves criticize other women who are vocal about their rights. Additionally, there are those who believe and state that they already have achieved full rights within society, therefore delegitimizing demands for women's rights. Further research is required into the effects of such attitudes on women's issues in the GCC states.

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