

Nation-Building, State and the Gender-Framing of Women's Rights in the United Arab Emirates (1971-2009)

By Vânia Carvalho Pinto.
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The theoretical entry point employed by Pinto in *Nation-Building, State and the Gender-framing of Women's Rights in the United Arab Emirates (1971-2009)* is the “gender-framing” perspective. “Framing,” as defined by Snow and Benford, refers to the process by which leaders attempt to gain support for ideas by presenting the value of said idea in terms and concepts that relate to a target audience. As a theoretical concept framing accounts for a shifting value base and the need for leaders to consistently frame and reframe concepts in order to continue to garner support from their target audience. Thus, it is a strong explanatory tool for the UAE due to the country's rapid expansion and growth, following its consolidation in 1971. In her book, Pinto analyzes the shifting Emirati social values as they relate to the education, employment and political rights of women. Pinto's specific analytical tool is “gender-framing;” the process by which the state's justification for the changing nature of women's rights constantly shifts to account for the changing values of the target audience.

This adaptive quality of the Emirati state is apparent throughout the book. Pinto carefully takes the reader through the changing social, political and economic landscape of the United Arab Emirates from the 1970s through to the late 2000s. After laying out the theoretical framework in Chapter One, Pinto explores what she sees as the primary motivation behind the Emirati ruler's policy on women – the construction of a nation and a national identity – in Chapter Two. Chapter Three explores the “promotion of the gender-frame” until the 1980's. Chapter Four describes the push for a return to traditional and cultural norms of the past. This exploration of the cultural anxiety of the UAE will be of particular interest to those unfamiliar with the unique demographic situation of the Emirates. Specifically, Pinto highlights how cultural anxiety stemmed from increasing mixed marriages between Emiratis and expatriates, decreasing visibility of Emiratis in the private sector, and fear for the younger generation caught between Emirati tradition and the increasingly globalized world. Chapter Five explores contemporary concerns from 1990-2009 by evaluating the new powers of political participation granted to women. While an interesting development, one indicative of the changes to women's position in Emirati society since the 1970s, the almost total lack of political power held by the elected Federal National Council makes this analysis appear slightly hollow. While female suffrage is important, the extent of male suffrage in the UAE remains equally

unimpressive. Thus, Pinto's final section looking at future concerns as they pertain to the millennial generation of Emiratis, touching on the problems of gender-mixing and the increasing difficulty of balancing tradition and globalization, provides a more satisfying end to the exploration of the role of gender in the UAE.

I particularly enjoyed the analysis of the shifting balance of power between the state and society, strongly evident in both Chapters Three and Four. Pinto demonstrates how the state's manipulation of symbols is a means by which it both reflects cultural norms – but also has the power to shape them. This theme can be illustrated by the policies surrounding female education, discussed in Chapter Three. Despite the clear governmental goals requiring the education of women, following consolidation of the UAE in the 1970s, rural families maintained their cultural traditions and failed to see the benefit in educating their daughters. Thus, the state was forced to incentivize them by providing free, segregated education. Interestingly, in this example, and Pinto's wider exploration of government policy, the policies implemented by the state appear to provide the result desired by the rulers - but at a diminishing return. Namely, after a point, societal norms relating to marriage, honor and family become the main driving forces again. This is evident by the subsequent increase in the numbers of females attending school, following the implementation of free education (1970s), until the women reached a marrying age - at which point families continued to remove them from school. Here Pinto touches on the complexity of nation-building under such rapid time constraints: that there is only so much manufacturing of culture that can occur. However, due to the increased education of both genders – Pinto describes how Emirati men began to desire marrying more educated and globalized women to match their own educational background. Education, therefore, became a “necessity of life” (43) for women because it had become fused with the concept of marriage. Thus, while cultural norms relating to marriage continued to play a central role, the content of those norms are shown to have been shaped by the state's rhetoric.

Overall, while an informative read, Pinto sacrifices in depth analysis for a more comprehensive explanation of the thirty-eight years of nation-building. Pinto deftly consolidates the complex landscape of state policies and changing cultural and societal norms and presents them in an accessible format. However, her use of primary evidence in the text is focused heavily on the rhetoric of members of the Emirates royal families. Quotations from women directly quoted in the text remain scarce. Thus, as the reader, I could not come to my own conclusion about the veracity of Pinto's claims about cultural and societal reactions to state policies; instead, her claims about societal response had to be taken on face value. Ultimately, I would recommend this book to those unfamiliar with the UAE who are looking to have a descriptive understanding of the history of state feminism and the position of women in the Gulf country.

By Danielle Soskin