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## The Empowerment of Women in the Middle East

Ailbhe M. Rice  
*University of Central Florida*

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# THE EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN THE MIDDLE EAST

By

AILBHE M. RICE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Political Science  
in the College of Sciences and in The Burnett Honors College  
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Thesis Chair: Houman A. Sadri  
Thesis Committee Members: Hakan Ozoglu, Robert Bledsoe.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis assesses the current rights of women in Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates. Within each case study, four main factors are measured based on their individual influence in each state. The first factor, historical context, examines various historical influences and their effect on the empowerment of women in their country. The second factor, the socio-cultural context, describes social and ethnical effects on society such as the influence of tribal lineage. The third factor researched is the political structure of the state and the impact that each different political system has upon gender equality in that region. The fourth and final factor is the economic system and the various economic determinants that influence the presence of women in the economy. Subsequently, the conclusion cross analyzes these factors and their distinctive and comparative impact across each region. This thesis attempts to offer an introductory glimpse into the various factors that may hinder empowerment of women in these regions. This information is imperative in order to understand how these states can develop policies that will empower women economically, politically, and socially.

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# **CHAPTER 1**

## **Introduction**

As a society modernizes, the empowerment of women in the social, political and economic realms of society generally increase<sup>i</sup>. This paper is a comparative study between the countries Saudi Arabia, Iran and the United Arab Emirates and it analyzes the extent to which the historical context of the state, the socio-culture structures, the political systems and economic structures impact the advancement of gender equality in each state. Cultural norms and traditional gender roles have played an important role in the development, or hindrance of, a women's rights movement in the Middle East. An investment into the empowerment of women, through education, political availability and economic participation, would present social and economic advancements unattainable to each state without the utilization of women in the workforce. The strong cultural values that have been embedded within Arab states throughout history, impede this aspect of modernization and equality. The teachings of Islam cannot in themselves explain this inequality as the Abrahamic religions all foster patriarchal properties. Thus it is imperative to uncover the factors in the region that have worked to impede the development, empowerment and promotion of women's rights.

## **Argument**

The extent of urbanization, modernization and industrialization within a region drastically impacts the social, political and economic position of women. In this case study, the dependent variable is the status of women within each state, while the independent variables are the factors that affect the prevalence of gender equality within the Middle East. These factors include the historical context of gender equality, socio-cultural values, political systems and the economic structure of each state. The relationship between the variables is negative; for example,

as the influence of tribal and religious determinants increases within a state, the capabilities and social privileges of women within their environment decreases. The relationship between the pervasiveness of traditional structures on economic and social structures of a state and the repression of women is very strong. The Middle East is a diverse region, with various political systems, religious compositions and economic systems, therefore it would be inaccurate to assume that all of the states within the region neglect women's rights. The legal and social status of women fluctuates within the Middle East, with states differing in the level of equal rights afforded to their female population. Furthermore, each state offers a different political, social and economic structure to the study; and these specific states were selected because they each suggest a diverse interpretation of the four dependent variables. Considering the political structures, this study includes a monarchy, an Islamic republic and a parliamentary elected presidential monarchy; and each system offers a unique perspective to the discussion of gender equality in the region. The influence of socio-cultural, economic and political structures within the three state's decreases in severity in each case, with Saudi Arabia endorsing the strictest laws, Iran and then the United Arab Emirates.

This study strives to determine the position of women within each society by analyzing the traditional, political and economic structures of each state; in order to understand the impact these four factors have upon equality in that state. To address this concern, the following paper uses specific indicators to understand each factor. The first indicator, or tribal lineage is used to determine the effect of socio-cultural factors. Next, the wealth of a society and its ability to expend copious amounts without repercussions is an indicator for the economic influence of a state. Finally, the nature of the political structure, whether it is an open or closed system, is the

indicator for the political systems and gender equality. How have socio-cultural, economic, and political factors influenced women's rights in the Middle East?

### **Topic Significance**

This topic is a crucial part of determining the future of the Middle East and the effect that modernization will convey upon women in the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region. Many countries within the Middle East have failed to utilize a crucial sector of the economy, women; thus, the empowerment of women in the Middle East substantially affects the economic and political endeavors of the state. The introduction of measures that would enable a state to combine cultural values and modernization to enhance the rights of women, would offer numerous economic benefits to the state. The empowerment of women would diversify the workforce, strengthen a state's position in the global market and increase the national income. It is imperative to uncover what determinants contribute to the repression of women in order to determine what can be changed. That being said, it is important that while the rights of women are enhanced, the traditional and socio-cultural values, imbedded in each state, are preserved. The theoretical importance of modernization in relation to the promotion of gender equality transcends the Middle Eastern region; these rights should be incorporated into the entire international community. Education plays a vital role in the advancement of the social and political rights of women as an educated woman is more likely to be politically active. In regards to important policy decisions that would result in an advance in women's rights, it is imperative to recognize the inevitable shift in policy decisions within the Middle East as more women become politically involved. An investment in the education of women would strengthen the workforce, and most likely spark an increase in foreign investment. Therefore an investment in the advancement of women would affect social, political and economic factors in the Middle



East and on the international sphere of influence. The case studies reflect different levels of economic, social and political development in Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE.

## **Literature Review**

Various scholars in the field of political science have analyzed the socio political role of women throughout the Middle East in order to determine their status within society. Valentine Moghadam, the author of *Modernizing Women*, discusses societal institutions and their effects on the political, economic and social liberalization of women in the Middle East. While she acknowledges cultural influences, her research focuses on the effect that the variation of political and economic structures, throughout the Middle East, have upon the empowerment of women. This can be demonstrated by comparing traditional monarchies such as Saudi Arabia with more secular states for example Turkey. She asserts that low levels of female labor participation in the industrial sector of the economy has less to do with cultural stigmas, and more to do with the characteristics of petroleum centered economies prevalent in the Middle East.<sup>ii</sup> The empowerment of women in the Middle East is a very prominent topic discussed among political scientists. Niels discusses the impact that natural resources have upon women's labor market participation (LMP); for instance, in oil exporting countries with high levels of economic development women's LMP is higher. He also emphasizes the variation of policy regarding equality across the Middle East, thus factors such as modernization impart different impacts depending on the state. Alternatively, Moghadam contends that gender based discrimination can be traced to the cultural foundation and political framework of governments within the Middle East.<sup>iii</sup> Adversely in the United Arab Emirates there is a gender inequality in post-secondary education, surprisingly in favor of women; recorded at sixty-five percent female to thirty-five

percent male participation. Georgia Daleure interviewed Emirati women in an effort to uncover the source of this rare inequality. Her studies revealed that favorable political rights for women, proportionate educational structures and incentives given by the government to companies hiring women, all contributed to the high levels of secondary education for women in the UAE. <sup>iv</sup>

Focusing on Iranian politics, from the Qajar dynasty through the Pahlavi era to modern day Iran, Hamideh Sedghi examines the emphasis of gender in politics in Iran. She reveals the impact that political power and economic development have had upon gender equality, specifically regarding the veiling and unveiling of women throughout time. Furthermore, she argues that the state exploits gender as a method in which to achieve political legitimacy and foreign policy goals. Her study reveals that women in Iran are transcending social, geographical, ethnic and cultural divisions to fight against oppression, inequality, and political neglect; and this resistance can inhibit state behavior.<sup>v</sup> Similarity, Roksana Bahramitash discusses the status of women in Iran during the reform era. This paper builds upon Sedghi's proposal, by discrediting the Western perspective of women in the Middle East as *passive victims* by focusing on the transformation of women's rights in Iran through passionate resistance to the status quo by Iranian women.

However, this article also analyzes the impact that Islamic reform and religious conservatism had on these strides. <sup>vi</sup> Furthermore, in 2008 Valentine Moghadam wrote a comprehensive study on the endorsement of gender equality by women's rights groups in the MENA region and their push for political reforms and increased employment opportunities. The article indicates that progress can be attributed to a combination of government reform and cooperative efforts of women across social and economic classes. While an inevitability of gender equality can be closely linked to modernization and democratization, this progress (specifically in Morocco) would be inconceivable without the efforts of the activists fighting for equality. <sup>vii</sup> Conversely, in

an effort to analyze the level of economic freedom that women in the UAE experience, Toni Briegel created an exploratory study of the financial empowerment of women in Abu Dhabi. An overwhelming seventy-nine percent of the women stated that they have financial autonomy from their spouses. This article touches on the economic freedom that is imbedded into the cultural and religious aspects of the region as these financial rights are outlined in the Quran.<sup>viii</sup>

Returning to the impact that resistance movements had in Iran, Haideh Moghissi builds upon earlier studies that focused on the expectations that transpired out of the development policies in Iran. The author argues that these expectations, although suppressed under conservative regimes, prevail and cannot be reversed through re-islamization policies. Moreover, Moghissi presents the idea that this perseverance in gender equality for women energizes a movement towards

democracy.<sup>ix</sup> Nikki Keddie also discusses the role that women's rights activist groups have played in empowering women in the Middle East, specifically in Egypt, Tunisia and Turkey.

While the article does not establish a direct link, she establishes a strong correlation between women's organizations and an increase in labour force participation, education and political participation.<sup>x</sup> Ida Lichter accounts the struggles that Muslim women face in the Middle East in her book *Muslim Women Reformers*, through the inspirational stories of Muslim women around the world. These stories feature strong women that have fought against oppression, such as Barakzai from Afghanistan, who successfully lobbied for a seat in parliament or Rania Al-Baz, of Saudi Arabia, who stood up to protect women after being beaten unconscious by her husband. Lichter carefully analyzes the status of Muslim women throughout the Middle East, and through these women's biographies she sheds light upon issues such as "honor killings", sex slavery in Algeria, compulsory marriages and female circumcision.<sup>xi</sup> While often portrayed as fighting against tyrannical Islamic fundamentalists, activists fighting for women's rights in the Middle

East are utilizing Islam to create economic and political opportunities for women. Isobel Coleman acknowledges Islam's role in the empowerment of women in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Pakistan in her book *Paradise beneath her feet*. She successfully reveals the intricate relationship between Islam and feminism, by asserting that gender inequality is not ingrained in the Quran, but in fact the empowerment of women is intertwined in the tenets of Islam. Thus she argues that the future of feminism in the Middle East will be fought with the support of Islam rather than a fight against it.<sup>xii</sup> Media has played an integral role in the gender equality movement in the post 1979 revolutionary Iran. Women's organizations have used blogs and virtual networks to engage in the political sphere of Iranian government policies. With a pressing aspiration to establish a 'women's charter', activists published a document outlining the specific ambitions of women in Iran on the website *Meydaan* in 2009 during the presidential campaign. Homa Hoodfar attributes the establishment and strength of these coalitions of women fighting for equality, to the overbearing nature of Ahmadinejad's government. Ultimately she acknowledges the important relationship between gender equality and Islam but argues that the transformation and application of these developments into law has been extremely slow. Regardless of popular support, emphasized through a strong media presence, or the strong presence of Islam in these virtual networks, Hoodfar argues that the present state structure of Iran hinders these developments.<sup>xiii</sup> In *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa*, Sanja Kelly presents a cross-regional analysis of various countries in the MENA region, specifically focusing on the advancements and obstacles to women's rights. She indicates five major factors of empowerment that are assessed in each country; nondiscrimination and access to justice, autonomy, security and freedom of the person, economic rights, equal opportunity, political rights, civic voice and social and cultural rights.<sup>xiv</sup> Husein Mohammad Al-Othman conducted a

survey amongst university students in the UAE to determine their opinion on the extent that women should be able to participate in the social, political and economic sectors of society. The study revealed a lot about the future of Emirati society; despite a small margin of conservative stances about political and economic participation, a majority of the participants gravitated toward a liberal viewpoint.<sup>xv</sup> In discussing the gender gap in politics in the Middle East, Julia Groeblacher, analyzes the 2009 parliamentary elections in Kuwait to formulate an understanding of this disparity. This revolutionary election in which four women were elected, confidently verifies that Islam and gender equality are not only compatible but reliable and efficient.<sup>xvi</sup> Barry Rubin's book *The Middle East*, offers a comprehensive analysis of various religions, political and economic structures and cultures in the region. He discusses the status of women in the Middle East throughout history, and in summation he contends that liberal democracy, while ideal, is inapplicable within the region.<sup>xvii</sup> Modernization theory explains a correlation between the modernization of a state and the transformation from a traditional society to a modern one. Theorists such as Samuel Huntington argue that as societies develop, economic development leads to social change; furthermore, the theory proclaims that as access to education increases, the social mobility and empowerment of women will also increase. Elhum Haghighat argues that while the MENA region is going through a period of economic modernization, the rights and empowerment of women are severely lagging behind this trend. This ambiguity can be traced to political alienation and inadequate economic opportunities for women.<sup>xviii</sup> Although inequality is still widespread, the facets associated with modernization are enabling women to fight against oppression in ways previously inaccessible. Replicating the successful utilization of information communication technologies during the Arab Spring, women's rights activists are using social media to contest discrimination.<sup>xix</sup> Wendy Isaacs-Martin discusses how Islamic extremists are

using Sharia law to oppress women in the Middle East. She sites Islam in its most extreme forms and cultural norms embedded into society as the fundamental causes of inequality in the region.<sup>xx</sup> Based off of data from the United Nations and the Arab Human Development Report, Romie Littrell developed research on the social status of women in the Middle East. Her findings revealed that the employment of women has declined since 2002. This study shows the important role that women play in the economic development of the Middle East, thus economic growth throughout the area heavily relies on a steady increase in the employment of women.<sup>xxi</sup> Fatima Seedat articulates the meticulous endeavor of combining Islam and feminism into a single methodology, *Islamic Feminism*. She concludes that there is a value in appreciating differences, thus to erode the disparities unique to each concept would be to discredit the entire movement.

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The Middle East has a very youthful demographic that are interested in economic growth and social reform. Fatemeh Torabi contends that in order to achieve economic growth, an investment in education for women is imperative. Using data from across the MENA region, her research concluded that there is a positive relationship between utilizing women as a resource and economic growth.<sup>xxiii</sup> Fakir Gharaibeh evaluates an in depth analysis of the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council, or GCC, in order to uncover the social, economic, political and health factors of women in the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. Cultural norms and political structures are cited as barriers to substantial developments in women's rights. Conclusively, although strides in economic and political reform have been implemented women are still considerably underrepresented within the GCC.<sup>xxiv</sup> Beyond political and economic freedoms, it is imperative to recognize that social equality is equally important. Yanyi Djamba discusses the repercussions of extreme patriarchal cultural norms in her book *Gender-based Violence*. Through case studies

of Egypt and Jordan she links social and political unrest to an increase in domestic violence. <sup>xxv</sup>

While there are many more scholars who have discussed the topic of women's rights and empowerment in the Middle East, this research fails to encompass the direct relationship between the predominance of traditional customs and the enfranchisement of women.

### **Gap in the Research**

While scholars have individually discussed factors such as modernization, education, political involvement, economic growth and social inequalities in regards to their impact on the empowerment of women, this paper discusses the combined impact of these factors. A substantial sector in the literature is devoted to the factors that encourage the empowerment of women, but the authors fail to indicate the combination of specific factors that hinder gender equality in the Middle East. Thus this topic focuses on the direct relationships between the political structure and culture of a state and the subsequent engagement of women in the labor force. Authors recognize the issues regarding gender equality in these regions and many argue that advocating for education initiatives would enhance gender equality in the region but there is a gap in the research as regards the primary causes of this inequality. Furthermore, while studies focused on economics, politics or cultural values throughout the entire Middle East rather than focusing on more detailed case studies of these regions. An in depth case study of three very different countries within the Middle East, Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE, provides a historical basis on which to derive inferences regarding women's rights in the region. These case studies also provide three examples of different countries, each in different phases of modernization, with diverse religious factions.

## **Research Design**

The aim of this research design is to formulate a greater understanding of the factors that impede the promotion of gender equality within Saudi Arabia, Iran and the UAE and comprehensively within the MENA region. Furthermore, this proposal attempts to comprehend the effect that the variables such as education, economic factors and political involvement, have upon women in the region. The three sections will individually assess the prevalence of these factors within each state, starting with Saudi Arabia, then Iran and finally the UAE.; beginning in 2003 and continuing to present day. Each case study will be divided into five sections, an introduction to the history of each state, the influence of traditional structures, an analysis of the political system, the economic dynamics of the state and finally the conclusion. The first section discusses the history and formation of each state, in relation to its impact on the construction of gender equality and women's rights. The second section examines the socio-cultural factors, and it considers the negative relationship between traditional and cultural norms embedded in the region and the empowerment of women. The third section, or political factors, examines the relationship between the political state structure and the promotion of women's rights. The fourth section evaluates the economic elements, such as oil, that hinder or promote equality. The fifth and final section, or the conclusion, analyzes the results across the variables and within the region.



## CHAPTER 2

### First Case Study: Saudi Arabia

#### Historical Context

In the eighteenth century, tribal leaders controlled the various regions within Saudi Arabia, and the state was known for its isolation and vast deserts. Muhammad Ibn Saud, the founder of the Saud Dynasty, worked closely with Ibn Abdel Wahhab, the Islamic fundamentalist who established the Wahhabi sect of Islam.<sup>xxvi</sup> Unlike the disparate tribal leaders, Ibn Saud advocated for Islam in its purest form; he utilized this focus on religion as the foundation for his claim of legitimacy. The ties established between Ibn Saud and Wahhab drastically impacted the construction of Saudi Arabia's political structure and it continues to affect policies in modern aspects of Saudi culture, religion and economic foundations. In 1744 the first Saudi state was established around Riyadh, and through conquests, the Al-Saud territorial claim steadily expanded<sup>xxvii</sup>. The United Kingdom formally recognized the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; and in 1927 through the Treaty of Jeddah, Abdul-Aziz Al-Saud was accepted as the sovereign king.<sup>xxviii</sup> Islam plays a vital role in the rights of citizens, as Saudi Law of Governance is taken from the Quran and the Sunna. As the state adheres to the strict Wahhabi sect of Islam, certain policies and cultural traditions within Saudi Arabia hinder the empowerment of women. While the discovery of oil in 1933 expanded the economic opportunities of the state, cultural and ideological values have curtailed the development of political structures that would promote the rights of women.<sup>xxix</sup> Nonetheless, in 2011 Crown Prince Abdullah announced that women would secure the right to vote in 2015. After his death, his half-brother Salman assumed the throne and in 2015 women received the right to vote, moreover, twenty women occupied municipal council seats.<sup>xxx</sup> While the traditional nature of

the state has historically prevented the acquisition of political, economic and social rights for women, there are certain factors that indicate that the state is moving towards modernization.

### **Socio-Cultural Context**

Thus in discussing the shortcomings of gender based inequality in the region, it is imperative to understand the social structures of Saudi Arabia's society in order to fully grasp the source of gender inequality. While the Kingdom has afforded women the right to vote, there are many contentions that have yet to be addressed. The right to drive a vehicle is denied to women, a woman cannot initiate a divorce and a woman cannot hold her own passport.<sup>xxxii</sup> These controversies, among many others, are simple rights that many women take for granted. This disparity in equality can be partly attributed to the strong impact that the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam and tribal customs has upon the state's social structure.

The tribal structure that is ingrained within Saudi's history has bestowed immeasurable impressions upon the current political and social atmosphere of the region. The Bedouin tribal customs and traditions still hold a strong influence among nomadic tribes in Saudi Arabia and among the settled populations. The practice of customary law, or '*urf*', by tribal groups dates back to pre-Islamic times; and these traditions have been integrated into the political and social structures of modern Arabian principals<sup>xxxiii</sup>. Furthermore, kin-based tribal associations are significant within society, and a person's origin or *asl*, can determine social status. Although, in accordance with Islam, the state recognizes citizenship regardless of tribal ancestry, race or ethnicity; social determinants are significantly influenced by tribal or Arab identity, most notably marriage. Dating back to the era of the prophet Muhammad, marriages have been used to solidify alliances, preserve status and to create advantageous partnerships. This is clearly exemplified in

the arrangement between Muhammad ibn Saud and Ibn Abdel Wahhab that established the *Emirate of Diriyah*.<sup>xxxiii</sup> The union of Ibn Wahhab to Ibn Saud's daughter Jawhara, continues to affect politics in Saudi Arabia; the *Al-ash Sheikh* lineage, the descendants of this marriage, have led the Saudi *ulema* throughout history and unremittingly until today. While tribal determinants are imbedded in the culture and traditional structure of the state, the influence of religion in politics substantially impacts the rights of women in the Middle East.

The relationship established between Ibn Wahhab and Ibn Saud is significant because it brought about the installation of Wahhabi Islam within Saudi Arabia. As a branch of Sunni Islam, Wahhabism is a fundamentalist and puritanical interpretation of Islam that calls for a strict adherence to the Quran and Sharia' law. The incredible endurance of the Al-ash Sheikh marital alliance, of over 150 years, has instilled an indestructible bond between state politics and religion.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Consequently, members of the Al-ash Sheikh lineage have continued to impact the religious structuring of the state and they have prevailed as prominent members within the ulema. The Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul-Aziz ibn Abdullah Al Ash-Sheikh, is currently the central religious authority in the region; which reiterates the impact that lineage and tribal connections still divulges upon policy in Saudi Arabia<sup>xxxv</sup>. Moreover, the tribal and customary traditions that have prevailed in the region since the era of Muhammad through to modern times; such as inter-familial marriages and placing an emphasis on ancestral affiliations, have conveyed an enormous impact on the structure of politics. Abdullah ibn Muhammad Al Ash-Sheikh, a descendant of al-Wahhab, is the chairman of the *Majlis ash-Shura*, otherwise known as the consultative assembly. Established by *Article 8* in the *Basic Law of Governance*, consultation, or *shura*, guides the socio-political organization of the kingdom<sup>xxxvi</sup> Derived from the Quran, this concept emphasizes the importance of Islam in daily decisions made by the Muslim community.

The social precedents of the region are established and inspected by the *ulema* through the *Committee for the Exhortation to Good and Interdiction to Evil*. A sect of this committee, the *Mutawayyin*, otherwise referred to as the “religious police” works to ensure that the Muslim community is adhering to *sharia* law.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

In March of 2002, firefighters in the region appealed that the *Mutawayyin* blocked the rescue of schoolgirls in a fire in Mecca because they were violating the codes of Islamic Dress; which resulted in the death of fifteen girls.<sup>xxxviii</sup> These codes include the stringent enforcement of the veiling of a woman's face, a strict prohibition of prostitution, ensuring girls are escorted by a male relative or, *mahram*, and the sale of clothes to women (particularly the use of fitting rooms).<sup>xxxix</sup> While Islam itself, in conjunction with the other Abrahamic religions, does not endorse patriarchal teachings, the strict Wahhabi interpretation of Islam, utilized by Saudi clerics, hinders the rights of women. Although the education of girls was introduced in 1960, it was closely monitored by the Grand Mufti, and was administered under the Department of Religious Guidance until 2002.<sup>xl</sup> International coverage of the fire in 2002 brought about mass discontent for the General Presidency for Girls’ Education and the massive influence that religious clerks had on the educational topics of women. Female education was guided towards “gender appropriate” jobs for women, and preparation for motherhood; furthermore, the department instilled a normalization of gender inequality in regards to education by emphasizing the various discrepancies between genders.<sup>xli</sup> Although university attendance rates for women have steadily increased over the past decade, the budget for the education of women is only eighteen percent of the money appropriated for the education of men.<sup>xlii</sup> It is imperative to recognize that while many interpretations of the Quran encourage the open education of women, the Wahhabi discernment calls for a limited and supervised education. While women have

obtained minimal political positions within the bureaucracy, their status as members of society remains unequal; which can be attributed to the historical influence of Wahhabi Islam, and the extensive interaction of politics and religion. This relationship is directly linked to the tribal association and relationship established between Ibn Saud, the political leader and Al-Wahhab, the religious leader.

### **Political Systems**

The infamous political structure of Saudi Arabia has an immense impact on the rights of women in the region. As one of the few remaining hereditary monarchies in the region, the Kingdom adheres closely to sharia law. The king serves as the head of state, the prime minister and the commander and chief of the military; and the Al-Saud family holds absolute power. The consultative council, or the *Majlis as-Shura*, acts as a legislative branch, in that it is a council that advises the king on important political and social matters.<sup>xliii</sup> Women in Saudi Arabia have been gradually accepted into the political system, and many have acquired very high ranking positions within the government<sup>xliv</sup> In 2009 Norah Al-Fayez was appointed the minister of education, in which she formally secured the first female cabinet-level position. King Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz, granted women the right to vote, and run for office in 2011.<sup>xlv</sup> Despite this advancement, polling locations are separated by gender, and the municipal council's scope and influence are limited. Furthermore, while legally women reserve the right to engage in politics via voting, and running for office, there are social factors that prohibit many women from voting. As women are unable to drive, and they are legally obligated to obey either their husband or father, many women are denied this fundamental right.

In January 11 2013, the Royal Order incorporated women into the council when King Abdullah appointed thirty women to serve four year terms<sup>xlvi</sup>. While King Abdullah made slow progress, he increased the opportunities for women in the work force, he established the first co-ed university, and he expanded the education rights of women. <sup>xlvi</sup> The judicial branch is comprised of the Shari'ah Courts, the Board of Grievances and the Supreme Council of Justice, all of which are guided by a strict interpretation of the Quran. This is solidified in Article 26 of the *Basic Law of Governance*, in which the state is called to protect the citizens in accordance with *Sharia* law<sup>xlvi</sup>. Thus criminal and civil courts are subject to the interpretation and jurisprudence of the Saudi Clerics, who are predominantly educated in the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. The intense relationship between religion and politics, and the influence that al-Wahhab's descents, the *Al-ash Sheikh* lineage bestows upon the system of governance; has historically hindered the advancement of women's rights. Although the al-Saud dynasty may endorse the establishment of gender equality, it is in the interest of the royal family to comply with the contentions of the religious establishment. The varying interpretations of *sharia* law characterize the rights of women in different areas, and unfortunately the schools in Saudi Arabia have hindered the advancement of gender equality. While women have secured seats in political positions on the surface within the Saudi government, there are fundamental disparities in equal rights for women in the society. While it is important to recognize the significance of the 2015 election for municipal council seats, in which women secured 20, of the 2,100 seats; it is also imperative to note that this number comprises less than 1% of the council. <sup>xlvi</sup> Furthermore, only 130,000 women registered to vote, compared to 1.4 million men; which as previously mentioned can be attributed to social road blocks. <sup>1</sup> There are many barriers that hinder women's right to vote, the *Guardian System*, often prevents women from voting; but the acquisition of seats on the

council can be seen as a small victory. The relationship between traditional structures and Saudi Arabia's political system has been clearly established, but a third component, or the economic dynamics of the state plays a vital role in this topic.

## **Economic Structures**

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's leading exporter of oil, and petroleum accounts for over eighty percent of the royal government's revenues <sup>li</sup>. According to the Law of Governance, Saudi corporations are required to pay a religious tax of 2.5%, and there are no corporate taxes, therefore overall tax accounts for less than five percent of the Kingdom's GDP. <sup>lii</sup> Many scholars have argued that Saudi Arabia is failing to utilize a substantial portion of its potential; women. While the educational system, and the availability to education have substantially improved in the kingdom, there are many obstacles in place that prevent women from obtaining jobs. Although Article 28 of the *Basic Law of Governance*, states that jobs should be made available to all "able-bodied people", women are nevertheless denied this right. <sup>liii</sup> First and foremost, the prevalence of cheap foreign labor in Saudi Arabia, forestalls the need to employ women. With around 10.4 million foreign workers in the state, Saudi Arabia is ranked third for their immense presence of expatriate workers; this is about thirty percent of the population. <sup>liv</sup> With such a strong presence of foreign labor, structural problems arise as unemployment among Saudi nationals increases due to inequitable wage competition. While the overwhelming presence of expatriates and foreign workers in the kingdom limits the opportunities for women, it also presents plentiful reports of human rights abuses <sup>lv</sup>. *Oger*, a distinguished company in Saudi Arabia, is facing enormous debt; more than 50,000 employees, including Saudi's have not been paid for seven months. The strict regulations on residency permits and work visas have trapped

these starving foreign workers, both males and females in the country <sup>lvi</sup>. A historic reliance on revenues from oil has deteriorated the market, and factories are not producing export competitive products. Therefore, although many women are obtaining a higher education, both inside the Kingdom and abroad, this distorted economic system breeds inequality and allows for an enormous gender disparity within employment.

The endorsement of women right's in the kingdom would not only provide basic human rights to women, it would stabilize and secure their economy. While Saudi Arabia has long capitalized on its vast oil reserves, the country can no longer rely on the oil industry alone to remain economically viable for the future. By encouraging the economic participation of women in the workforce, Saudi Arabia would be ensuring a prosperous and stable future without relying on their beloved commodity. The strides that King Abdullah made towards incorporating women into the political structure of the Kingdom is imperative to the future of Saudi's economy. An increase in accessibility for women in the political realm correlates positively with the economic accessibility of the market for women. As the price of oil falls, and the population increases on a steady incline, it is imperative that women enter the workforce. Although women have received numerous incentives to obtain a degree both inside and outside of the Kingdom, jobs for women within the region are limited; thus women often seek employment outside of Saudi Arabia. While education has been the prominent focus among the key policy makers, it is just as crucial to ensure that there is an adequate level of job availability for women.

The guardianship system is flawed; furthermore, it deprives women of their basic economic, social and welfare rights. A father, husband, son or relative acts as a 'guardian' for a woman for her entire life; this is demeaning and hinders a woman's ability to be an independent component of the economic sector. There are no female judges and female lawyers were denied



the right to practice in the kingdom, so despite education initiatives, the state has yet to ensure the stability and availability of jobs <sup>lvii</sup>. In order for the Kingdom to develop a stable market, it must not only welcome but encourage women to participate in the labor force. Saudi Aramco and various companies have circumvented the obstacles to employing women by establishing female only workforces.<sup>lviii</sup> While this offers a decent and temporary solution, in order to fully benefit economically, there must be a substantial increase in the availability of jobs for women.

## **Conclusion**

This report explores the many elements that contribute to gender inequality in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Most notably, this case study exposes the significant relationship that exists between politics and religion, and which dates back to the formation of Saudi Arabia as a state. While Islam promotes peace, equality and goodwill, the fundamentalist interpretation of Islam, or Wahhabism, that is so prominent in the region, has prevented the acquisition of women's rights. Furthermore, the tribal structures instilled by al-Wahhab and al-Saud are still intertwined within the state's modern system of governance. Lastly the Kingdom's economic dependence on petroleum as their primary commodity has led to a tremendous presence of foreign workers in the state. This has enabled the policy makers to avoid accepting women into the workforce, in their pursuit of the attainment of cheap labor. This dependence also increases the risk of economy instability and as the price and abundance of oil declines, the dependence on women in the labor force increases. Thus it may be inferred that if the market instability continues, the reliance on foreign workers increases and if the young population expands and becomes educated; women will be

incorporated into the economy. Although raising the level of employment among women is a very crucial aspect of obtaining women's rights, there are many rights that are imperative in achieving status as a modernized state that endorses gender equality. First and foremost, women need to receive basic freedoms such as the right to operate a vehicle, hold their own passport, interact with men and to disregard the dress code if it's so desirable. While the Kingdom has made advancements, such as the incorporation of women into the Municipal Council, there are many more developments that are necessary, not only for the women of Saudi Arabia but for the state's economic and political prosperity and well-being.

## CHAPTER 3

### Second Case Study: Iran

#### Historical Context

Unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran entertains a vast and mostly equal history for women; which extends to the Achaemenid Empire in 550 BC. The Persian region was ruled by various empires and conquered by many dynasties; which brought about many religions, traditions and customs. The Sassanid dynasty, known for its practice of Zoroastrianism, was conquered by Arab invasion in 636, marking the beginning of Islamic rule in Iran.<sup>lix</sup> The Shah Ismail became the first ruler of the Safavid dynasty, in which he declared the Shia interpretation of Islam as the religion of the state. Amidst a fragile and unstructured state, Agha Mohammad Khan, the leader of the Qajar tribe sought to unite the various tribes in Persia, thus establishing the Qajar dynasty. In 1848, during the reign of Naser o-Din Shah, the modernization of Iran began, as education technology and science were placed at the forefront of Iran's goals.<sup>lx</sup> *Dar-ol-Fonoon*, now Tehran University, was Iran's first modern university, and it was established by Amir Kabir, the consultant to Din Shah, in 1851; instructors taught language, medicine, science, history and engineering.<sup>lxi</sup> Available to both men and women, this expansive education provided capacious opportunities for women during the nineteenth century. In 1929, Reza Khan deposed Ahmad Shah Qajar, initiating what is known as the Pahlavi dynasty. The rights and freedoms of Iranian women were extensive during the Pahlavi dynasty, and Reza Khan believed in the development of economic and social industries by a strong, independent and unified government. The *Majlis*, or the National Assembly, is Iran's legislative body, and it was established by the Iranian constitution in 1906<sup>lxii</sup> During Reza Khan's reign he tried to circumvent the influence of the *Majlis*, in order to establish social and economic reforms. After being deposed for pro-Axis

loyalty during the Second World War, Reza Khan's son, Mohammad Reza Shah procured the throne.<sup>lxiii</sup> Continuing the plans that his father implemented, the Reza Shah initiated a five-pronged plan to modernize the state of Iran. Known as the *White Revolution*, these plans called for economic reform and the promotion of equality, justice and freedom<sup>lxiv</sup>. The topic of gender equality and women's suffrage was of chief importance to Reza Khan, and in 1935 he eliminated the requirement of women to wear the *chador*, or veil. In 1963 women received the right to vote and run for positions within parliament and the Family Protection Law was established. While the advancement of women's rights was unparalleled during the Pahlavi dynasty, the 1979 revolution and the introduction of Islamic Tradition drove the rights of women back decades.

### **Socio-Cultural Context**

Ayatollah Khomeini lead the hostility, disapproval and opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah; his argument was centered in the Shah's unparalleled use of the SAVAK, or Iran's secret police. After returning from his fourteen-year exile in Iraq, Khomeini arrived in Iran and the Shah was forced into exile.<sup>lxv</sup> It is important to understand the social, and educational upbringing of Khomeini, as it gives an important insight into his persistent passion towards incorporating religion, specifically Islam, into politics. In his youth, Khomeini attended *maktab*, or a strict form of religious schooling, in which he was familiarized with the Quran.<sup>lxvi</sup> Khomeini was raised in a family of renowned religious scholars, who followed a strict Shi'ite interpretation of Islam. Following his return to Iran, he ordained a national referendum; and the previously established monarchy was transformed into an Islamic Republic under which the new constitution employed the Shiite interpretation of Islam. After Ayatollah Khomeini was appointed the Supreme Leader, or *Valy-e-Faqih* of Iran, protests ensued the implementation of strict rules, such as a stringent dress code for women. In effect since the 1979 Revolution, this

dress code requires that women: cover their hair completely, conceal their body's from their ankles to their neck and avoid tight fitting clothing.<sup>lxvii</sup> Khomeini dissolved the Family Protection Law, which gave women the right to initiate a divorce and fight for the custody of children. Furthermore, the age constraint of marriage for girls was reduced to nine in accordance with Islamic law and limitations on polygamy were eliminated.<sup>lxviii</sup> As the rights of women were slowly reversed, they were guided towards "gender appropriate jobs" such as teaching, and nursing. Following the death of the Ayatollah Khomeini, Mohammad Khatami embraced reform through liberalization, in his platform, in which he was elected as President in 1997. During his presidency, the enforcement of the dress code became progressively lenient; in fact women showed hair in loose fitting headscarves and wore tight fitted clothing.<sup>lxix</sup> Although his policies reflected the public opinion of a majority of Iranian citizens, he met considerable opposition from conservatives serving in the *Majlis*. While Khatami was unsuccessful in his determination to enhance the freedoms and rights of both men and women; he disclosed subtle changes in his eight years in office. Dr. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad followed Khatami as president from 2005 to 2013 in a landslide election, in which accusations of fraud and corruption are still speculated today. As a key advisor to the Ayatollah Khomeini, the conservatives supported him and he sported anti-Israel rhetoric. The Islamic Dress Code was strictly reinforced, and patrols traversed large cities, capturing those who violated these rules.<sup>lxx</sup>

This evident fluctuation in women's rights can be directly correlated to the influence that strict conservatism and fundamentalist interpretations of Islam have upon a presidential candidate or election. Many times, when a political leader emphasizes religious conservatism and a reignited relevance on Islamic principles women's rights are reversed or reduced; as is clearly revealed through the rule of conservatives such as Khomeini and Ahmadinejad.<sup>lxxi</sup> Furthermore,

the rights of women are extended, supported and enhanced when liberal leaders, such as Mohammad Khatami, assume the presidency. It is imperative to note that this correlation is associated with the conservative interpretation of the Quran, rather than the fundamental principles of Islam. Although Hassan Rouhani, the current president of Iran, advocated for women's rights in his campaign, and pledged to restore the Ministry for Women's Affairs; he contests a conservative *Majlis*. The uncertainty of women's rights, since the dissolution of the monarchy and the establishment of Iran as an Islamic Republic in 1979, has shown excessive dispute among Iranian citizens, the Consultative Council and the various presidents. President Rouhani has vowed to uphold the rights of women and he declared that society needs to "...believe in women's presence and capabilities just like men..." and holds the government accountable, "...the government sees it as a duty to provide the groundwork for women's capabilities..."<sup>lxxii</sup> Despite this proclamation, he has yet to establish the Ministry for Women's Affairs, abolish the mandatory dress code and reinstate the rights previously secured by women. The *Islamic Penal Code* was amended in 2012, and it is based on *Sharia* law; according to Article 638 of chapter eighteen, women who appear in public without a *hijab*, or headscarf, can be sentenced to two months in prison and up to fifty thousand Rials.<sup>lxxiii</sup> Congruent with the political environment of Saudi Arabia, there is a meaningful relationship between religion and politics in Iran.

### **Political Systems**

As articulated in the aforementioned sections, Iran experienced a momentous political transition from a constitutional monarchy to an Islamic Republic. This historic shift greatly affected the political involvement of women in Iranian society. As the pervasiveness of women's rights fluctuated based on the religious conservatism of both the *Majlis*, and the president,

women's access to Iran's political system altered in conjunction with each surge of Islamic fundamentalism. Despite the significant breakthroughs that followed the Iranian Revolution of 1979, such as education reforms, women still struggle to obtain administrative positions within the government. Prior to the revolution, the literacy rate among women was around thirty-five percent, whereas today all women between the ages of 15 and 24 are virtually literate.<sup>lxxiv</sup> In 1992 the High Council of the Cultural Revolution indicated the important role that women play in the workforce, by establishing employment policies. Although this initiative to integrate educated women into the economy excluded "Islamically Inappropriate" jobs for women; the fields of science, technology, medicine and law were no longer restricted to men.<sup>lxxv</sup>

In 1995, nine women were nominated for positions within the *Majlis*; most notably, Faezeh Hashemi, the daughter of Iran's president from 2007 to 2011, Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani. As a famous activist for women's rights in Iran, Faezeh spent six months in jail for her rhetoric surrounding the aftermath of the 2009 election<sup>lxxvi</sup>. Furthermore, the Revolutionary Court banned Iran's first women's newspaper, founded by Faezeh in 1998, for its modern and controversial content.<sup>lxxvii</sup> Recently, in May of 2016, Faezeh received a great deal of criticism surrounding her meeting with Fariba Kamalabadi, a former leader of the Baha'i faith.<sup>lxxviii</sup> As the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran, the Baha'i faith was banned following the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The government executed numerous Baha'i leaders, imprisoned hundreds of followers, solely based on their faith and inhibited the employment of, and access to education for followers of the faith.<sup>lxxix</sup> Faezeh met Fariba during her brief stay in prison, and they reconnected during Kamalabadi's short leave from her twenty-year prison sentence.<sup>lxxx</sup> Clerics are claiming that the controversial photo taken of their meeting; which displays Faezeh, veiled and abiding by the dress code, next to Fariba, who is unveiled, warrants Hashemi's arrest.

<sup>lxxxii</sup>This situation highlights that while women have advanced in the realm of education, there is specific political threshold for women in Iran.

Women's Affairs offices were established prior to the revolution, through parliamentary reform, and women have steadily obtained seats in the parliament. Furthermore, the employment of women in the public sector has rapidly increased among women with secondary degrees.

<sup>lxxxiii</sup>Despite these advancements, women are thus far unable to penetrate the male governed domain of higher politics in Iran. In June of 2013, around thirty women decided to campaign for the presidential candidacy of Iran. The Guardian Council, an executive body that inspects and assesses the applicability of candidates, rejected all of the applications; on the basis that in accordance with Islamic Law, women are unfit to assume the presidency. <sup>lxxxiii</sup> The conservative clergy in Iran plays a dominant role in preventing women from acquiring senior positions in politics. Furthermore, on the rare occasion that women obtain high ranking positions within the government, such as Marzieh Vahid-Dastjerdi, *the Minister of Health and Medical Education*, the Clergy strains to prevent women from actively participating in governing. <sup>lxxxiv</sup>Dr. Marzieh was the first female cabinet member since Farrokhroo Parsay, the *Minister of Education* in 1968 and the only women to serve on the cabinet since the establishment of Iran as an Islamic Republic. <sup>lxxxv</sup> A statement made by Marzieh concerning the budget of funds for medical supplies in comparison to the allocation of funds for "luxury foreign goods" stirred controversy. As a woman, it was deemed inappropriate for Dr. Marzieh to divulge her opinion on the executive decisions of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad; and subsequently she was fired in December of 2012. <sup>lxxxvi</sup> Moreover, recently in the city of Qazvin, Nina Siahkali Moradi won a seat on the city council, but was removed by religious conservatives who claimed she was "too pretty" to be on the council. <sup>lxxxvii</sup>



After winning the presidency in 2013, Hassan Rouhani offered policy decisions that leave his intentions for women's rights ambiguous. Rouhani failed to incorporate women into his cabinet, or revive the Ministry for Women's Affairs; two key policy points that he advocated during his campaign.<sup>lxxxviii</sup> In February of 2013, Rouhani attended a conference entitled "*Women, Moderation and Development*" in which he emboldened women to become active participants in politics, but he failed to articulate how women should do so.<sup>lxxxix</sup> Shahindokht Molaverdi, the vice president for *women and family affairs*, was appointed by Rouhani in 2013. As an active advocate for the rights of women, Shahindokht has enthused discord with the conservative *Majlis*, over the role that women should play in Iranian society. In 2015, women were refused entry into the Azadi sport complex in Tehran, for a critical volleyball match between Iran and the US. As a stipulation of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, women are banned from sporting events; even so the 200 tickets sold to women were deemed invalid. Shahindokht openly criticized her conservative opposition in an interview with *Ebtekar* newspaper, for their resistance to the implementation of "equal opportunities for all".<sup>xc</sup> While Rouhani has released women's rights activists from jail, such as the human rights lawyer Nasrine Sotoudeh, he barred the reinstatement of the feminist magazine, "*Zanan*".<sup>xc</sup> Thus the future of women's participation in politics and their securement of senior policy positions within the Iranian government is uncertain. Although women have struggled to secure resilience in politics, they have steadily maintained a presence in Iran's economy.

### **Economic Structures**

Within the workplace, there is a grave discrepancy between the salaries of men and women, regardless of educational background, competency and experience. An unofficial figure of the rate of unemployment among women in Iran convenes at around thirty-eight percent.<sup>xcii</sup>

Furthermore, a far greater number of educated women struggle to find employment in comparison to educated men.<sup>xciii</sup> Therefore, although Iran's politicians have focused on educational reform, there is a significant policy gap between endorsing education and ensuring economic participation prior to graduation. Although women substantially outnumber men in Iran's University's, Iran ranks at 141 out of 145 on the scale for the World's Gender Gap Report.<sup>xciv</sup> Iranian women are clearly just as capable and qualified to fill administrative positions as men, but a clear disparity between economic rights prevails. Shahindokht Molaverdi, Iran's vice president for *women and family affairs* emphasizes that "... human capitals must be exploited equally in order to ensure sustainable development".<sup>xcv</sup> The introduction of women into the economy is vital for the state's success, in both foreign and domestic politics.

There are significant social and political barriers to women's involvement in the economy; such as the social stigmas that are often embedded within a traditional patriarchal society. Despite Rouhani's moderate stance on women's rights, the conservative *Majlis* still controls much of Iran's political policies. Cultural impediments, such as an extremely conservative council, hinder participation by placing an emphasis upon "gender appropriate" jobs for women.<sup>xcvi</sup> The traditional gender roles advertised by the conservative elites, presents a false reality, in which women are unable to work alongside men. Social obstacles encourage gender discrimination; as women are perceived as inherently inefficient and unequal in status, in comparison to men.<sup>xcvii</sup> Therefore, although women are legally as entitled to engage in the economy as men, social barriers within the male dominated work environment, often diminish the opportunities for employment of women. Lastly, there are legal and financial impediments to the employment of women. In accordance with Iranian law, a woman must receive her husband's consent in order to become employed in the traditional economy.<sup>xcviii</sup> Financially women are

often denied loan requests, restricting entrepreneurship to women with access to personal capital. Although, under President Hassan Rouhani, the employment of women in the workforce has increased by two percent; his efforts to emphasize and encourage women to participate economically have been measly and inadequate.<sup>xcix</sup> Although Rouhani endorses a stance starkly different to that of the conservative *Majlis*, his administration has failed to make noteworthy steps towards incorporating women into the formal economy. Despite Rouhani's miniscule improvements, the *Majlis* has not only hindered these efforts, but in many aspects it has reversed them through policy initiatives.

In April of 2016, Shahindokht Molaverdi ordered a reassessment of gender quotas for individuals seeking jobs within the Iranian government, as she argued that these policies were discriminatory towards women. Of the thousands of government jobs offered, only thirty percent were deemed appropriate for women.<sup>c</sup> Despite promising discussions between Rouhani's administration and Shahindokht, these biased and unfair policies remain in place. Recently, in May of 2016, the parliament passed a bill that substantially reduced the hours that a female employee was authorized to work. While this would immediately affect the 4.3 million women currently working in Iran; it would also increase the rate of female unemployment by encouraging employers to hire their male counterparts.<sup>ci</sup> Furthermore, a bill proposed and accepted by the *Majlis* in 2013, the *Comprehensive Population and Family Plan*, states that a women's primary responsibility remains within family care and raising children. This proposal argues that a formal introduction of women into the workforce hinders the development and growth of family life.<sup>cii</sup>

## Conclusion

Throughout this case study the main influencing factor on the status of women in Iran remained the makeup of Iran's political system. As the religious fervor of each president fluctuated, so did the rights of Iranian women. Although women in Iran have secured seats within the Parliament, their political and economic role in Iran's economy has steadily declined under Rouhani's governance. While women have retained roles in politics on the surface, they have struggled to truly affect policy. Since Rouhani assumed the presidency in 2013, both the *Majlis*, and the Guardian Council have imparted drastic economic initiatives that, if approved will undoubtedly affect the rights of women in Iran. Iran's intricate history plays a diverse role in their policy towards women. The rights of women tend to increase as a moderate candidate is elected and the rights of women decrease during the reign of a conservative candidate. Congruent with the study of Saudi Arabia, Iran exemplifies a state in which the political structure and economic configuration are indisputably interlaced with the religiously conservative elite.

## CHAPTER 4

### Third Case Study: United Arab Emirates

#### Historical Context

The forces of trade, foreign intervention, Islam, tribal lineage and modernization all play a vital role in the history of women's rights in the United Arab Emirates. Merchants from across Europe and Asia were drawn to the UAE for its prime coastal location.<sup>ciii</sup> The geographical variance within the UAE, allowed for the formation of distinct and independent economies to unite and create a unique and economically robust federation of states. In the 19th century "The Trucial States" agreement was formed between the Bedouin inhabitants of what is now Dubai, and the United Kingdom. This contract limited the state's interaction with other countries in exchange for a promise to rid the coast of piracy and deter invasions by outside states.<sup>civ</sup> The British defended their military influence in the UAE by asserting that without foreign intervention, these small vulnerable states would collapse. However, this occupation was both economically and politically costly for Great Britain, thus in 1971 the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson agreed to withdraw peacefully from the emirates.<sup>cv</sup> While the British advocated for the unification of these states, they ultimately left the decision to unite to the feuding tribal leaders. In 1962, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan al Nahyan, the leader of Abu Dhabi, capitalized on the new found wealth of petroleum; thus he began to modernize his state through the construction of roads and schools. By 1966, Sheikh Zayed remained the only large obstacle preventing the establishment of a formal federation of states; as Zayed didn't want to share the newfound wealth of Abu Dhabi.<sup>cvi</sup> Nevertheless, the newly achieved independence from Great Britain, served as the leading incentive among the tribal leaders to unite as an amalgamation of diverse, yet culturally and religiously alike states. As the discovery of oil became more prevalent within the Emirates, and the states began to thrive economically, the rights of women within the region

have steadily grown.<sup>cvii</sup> The modernization process that has occurred in the past forty years in the UAE has substantially improved gender equality; specifically, in regards to education and the economic sectors. The UAE offers a unique case, in which the force of modernization was met with traditional values and not only allowed for economic and political development, but for overall gender equality and empowerment.<sup>cviii</sup>

### **Socio-Cultural Structures**

Prior to the discovery of oil in the 1960's, the cultural structure of the seven emirate states consisted mainly of nomadic Bedouin farmers of the desert and coastal pearl traders. These isolated and independent economies thrived in their separate cultural individuality, in the small towns and cities under the ruling of tribal sheikhs.<sup>cix</sup> In fact, today many of last names of the families that reside in the UAE are derived from the *qabalah* tribe.<sup>cx</sup> Throughout their history, the emirates were separate political domains, in which a leader would oversee and govern several alike tribes. Even so, the traditional tribal structures created a network between each state through intermarriages between the ruling House of Falahi and the House of Falasi.<sup>cxii</sup> The religious homogeneity of the seven emirates cannot itself explain the resilience of the federation. Although the assemblage mostly adheres to the Sunni sect of Islam, the success of the federation can be tied to the tribalism that intertwines each state.<sup>cxii</sup> The political structure of the emirates, most notably Dubai, is based on a 'tribalist' relationship between the Sheikh and the ruling tribal families. The network of families closely associated with the Al-Maktoum ruling elite, make up the administrative system of Dubai. Not unlike the strategic marital alliances created by Ibn Saud of Saudi Arabia, the Al-Maktoum dynasty have used marriage to politically distance themselves from other elitist tribes in Dubai.<sup>cxiii</sup>

The case of the UAE diverges from those of Iran and Saudi Arabia, in that the quickly expanding economies and the increasing modern metropolis have opened the doors to foreign investment. A mixture of tradition and modernity has combined to uncover opportunities to women that are absent in many places; such as Saudi Arabia.<sup>cxiv</sup> Although the economic, academic and political positions of women have been greatly expanded since the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, or *CEDAW*, in 2004; the social aspect of women's rights, continues to delay the empowerment of women in the UAE. Despite the ever-growing modernity of the UAE and the economic development; the society remains predominately segregated by gender; as schools, hospitals and mosques are separated by gender.

<sup>cxv</sup> Without permission from the Naturalization and Residence Directorate, an emirate woman loses her citizenship upon marrying a foreign man. Furthermore, under emirate law, a woman cannot transfer citizenship to her children, thus if an emirate woman marries a foreign man, their children do not hold citizenship for the UAE.<sup>cxvi</sup> Likewise, illicit relationships and cohabitation are strictly prohibited in the UAE. For example, if a woman becomes impregnated outside of wedlock or resides in an apartment or hotel with a non-relative male, she is subject to jail or deportation.<sup>cxvii</sup> Hospitals and clinics are required to report cases of pregnancy, including miscarriages, to the police, as they are evidence of *zina*.<sup>cxviii</sup> Even in cases of rape or sexual assault, a woman can face charges of *zina*, which criminalizes acts of adultery outside of marriage. In cases of marital rape, there is no criminalization of this act; in fact, a woman can lose the *right to maintenance* if she withholds sexual relations.<sup>cxix</sup> Martial laws are also subject to gender inequality; under Article 39 of the *Personal Status Code*, male guardianship laws require that a woman must receive approval from a male guardian in order to get married.<sup>cxx</sup>

According to Human Rights Watch, while a man in the UAE can divorce his wife by saying 'I

divorce thee', a woman must prove that her husband has in some faculty failed to invest in the marriage, through abuse or in some other capacity. <sup>cxxi</sup> Additionally, in 2010 according to the UAE penal code, the Federal Supreme Court stated that the use of coercion, domestic violence and punishment was acceptable as long as there were no marks or extreme bruising. <sup>cxxii</sup> In the United Arab Emirates, there are no specific laws that outlaw domestic violence or abuse. <sup>cxxiii</sup> The *CEDAW* has actively advocated for the implementation of these rights into Emirate law, but unfortunately as the UAE is a federation of absolute monarchies, the execution of these regulations is difficult and gradual. Despite these setbacks in the fight for gender equality and the empowerment of women in the United Arab Emirates, there have been substantial advancements for women in regards to their engagement in the emirate political system.

## **Political Structures**

As a federation of seven states, the UAE is referred to as a presidential elected monarchy, as the monarchies on the Federal Supreme Council (FSC) elect the president from within the council. Under the legislative branch, the Federal National Council (FNC) hosts forty seats, of which, nine are women. <sup>cxxiv</sup> In 2015, Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi was elected as president of the FNC, making her the first woman to administer a national assembly in the gulf region. <sup>cxxv</sup> According to the Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, women account for 22.5 percent of the FNC; this is compared to an average of 9.3 among Arab countries and 17 percent worldwide. <sup>cxxvi</sup> Although this historic election is indicative of the expansive political inclusion of women in the UAE, compared to other states in the MENA region; this body is an advisory council that lacks legislative powers. <sup>cxxvii</sup> The UAE's political system, in which political parties are illegal and the Federal Supreme Council is based on monarchical and tribal lineage, limits the



access to political involvement of ordinary citizens, particularly women. According to *Article 7* of the UAE's constitution, *Sharia* law is used in certain criminal cases; thus the UAE operates a dual system with both *Sharia* courts and civil courts.<sup>cxxviii</sup> Therefore, in certain scenario's, a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's; thus in turn this makes women more vulnerable to criminal offenses such as *zina*. That being said, women active in the UAE's parliament have engaged in the council's debates on key issues and reviewed the drafts of laws.<sup>cxxix</sup> In 2012, the UAE was the second country in the world to enact a law the required the representation of women on the board of all government organizations.<sup>cxix</sup> One such organization, the General Woman's Union (GWU), is an entity dedicated solely to the empowerment of women through education initiatives and political participation in the UAE. As the Head of the GWU, Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak has become the face of gender equality and empowerment, not only in the UAE but in the MENA region., As the chief contributor to *UN Women* among Arab countries, GWU and UN Women are working to create a Liaison Office to facilitate the empowerment of women among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, in Abu Dhabi.<sup>cxixi</sup> As the wife of the first president of the UAE, Sheikh Zayed Bin Sultan Al Nahyan, Sheikha Fatima embraced her political affluence and has imparted an immeasurable influence of the empowerment of women both within the gulf and worldwide. Fatima created the Abu Dhabi Women Development Association, the General Women's Union, The Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood and influenced the organization of the Arab Women Organization.<sup>cxixii</sup>

Education is one of the main indicators of gender equality in any region; in the UAE the ratio of boys to girls enrolled in primary and secondary school is approximately equal.<sup>cxixiii</sup> The GWU has played an important role in literary programs; in fact, in 2005 the rate of illiteracy among women was 2.4 percent, compared to 10 percent for their male counterparts.<sup>cxixiv</sup>

According to the United Nations Development Program, the rising rate of Emirate women in higher education is unparalleled to any other Arab state; and seventy percent of students who graduate from university in the UAE are women. <sup>xxxxv</sup> This can be attributed to the commitment of the Council and their advisories towards education initiatives since the establishment of the federation. In 2008 a law was amended, which allowed women to become judges and federal prosecutors; later that year Kholoud Ahmed Juan Al-Dhaheiri an attorney specializing in *Sharia* Law, was elected as an appeal judge in Abu Dhabi. <sup>xxxxvi</sup> Women account for thirty percent of the Emirate's civil service; Sheikha Najla Mohammad Al Qasimi was nominated as the ambassador to Sweden. <sup>xxxxvii</sup> While woman have secured positions within the Emirate political system, some scholars argue that there are still major steps towards truly establishing gender equality within politics in the UAE These intellectuals criticize the FNC for the absence of legislative authority and argue that these women are elected to simply fill a quota. <sup>xxxxviii</sup> Despite these reproaches, it is imperative to note that the government has demonstrated its commitment to empowering women through political involvement through the reshuffling of the Cabinet, both in 2008 and then again in 2016. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum added four women to the Cabinet in 2008, and recently reshuffled the Cabinet again in 2016. These selections debunk the accusation that these women were chosen to fill a quota, as they are highly qualified for the positions of which they were elected. Shamma al-Mazrui attended Oxford University, where she obtained a master's degree, and at twenty-two years old she was appointed the Minister of State and Youth Affairs. <sup>xxxxix</sup> Although women have been elected to positions within the FNC, the Emirate political system gives voting advantages to the Electoral College, thus disenfranchising both women and minorities. In order for the administration to wholly adopt gender equality practices in regards to politics, the UAE would need to expand voting privileges to all citizens.

Furthermore, while the United Arab Emirates is at the forefront of Arab Nations for their steadfast inclusion of women in politics, it is important to note that there are still substantial disparities in mid-level administrative positions. <sup>cxl</sup>

## **Economic Structures**

The rapid and steadfast growth of the economy in the UAE can be attributed to their open trade policies, the accessibility of their markets to entrepreneurship and their vast investment opportunities. While the federation of states has become the nucleus of international business investment in the Arab world, it has historically relied heavily on their immense oil supplies; as the UAE accounts for ten percent of the world's oil reserves. <sup>cxli</sup> In an effort to stimulate growth, and to create a less oil dependent and more diversified economy, the UAE has focused on transforming the economy to one based on knowledge, instead of natural Fossil Fuels.

<sup>cxlii</sup> Tourism has played an integral role in the diversification of the economy, as it has enabled the state to distance itself from this oil-dependent economy. <sup>cxliii</sup> Additionally, the state has focused on the transformation of the economy through free trade zones as an incentive for international businesses to invest in the private sector; which offers these businesses no corporate taxes and full ownership. This has enabled the Emirates' percent of GDP for natural gas exports to decrease considerably. <sup>cxliv</sup> Although the UAE leads the Arab world for its commitment to education, the setbacks arise in facilitating the transition of that education populous into the labor force.

The UAE is distinctive among Arab states, in that it has openly advocated for equal opportunities for all of its citizens to choose their desired occupation since its foundation as a state; as enumerated in Article 34 of the constitution. <sup>cxlv</sup> By providing free and compulsory

primary education to nationals, the UAE circumvents obstacles that are widespread among other Arab states.<sup>cxlvi</sup> The administration has emphasized the importance of equal opportunities for women, most notably in regards to education; and women are now becoming educated in professional fields such as engineering, medicine and law.<sup>cxlvii</sup> The rate of labor force participation among women in the UAE has increased considerably since the rate of twenty percent in 2006; and experts estimate that this number will triple by the year 2020.<sup>cxlviii</sup> Even so, a large discrepancy exists between men and women in the labor force, despite an adamant desire among women to participate in the economy.<sup>cxlix</sup> An alarming twenty-eight percent of Emirate women are employed in the UAE, a low statistic compared to their neighbors; furthermore, this number is most closely related to the labor force employment of women in Saudi Arabia.<sup>cl</sup> A gap remains between women who are employed and those who hold administrative positions, as women in the public sector comprise 66% of staff while only 30% have higher-level positions.<sup>cli</sup> Women have combatted this statistic by becoming entrepreneurs, and women account for ten percent of all Emirate entrepreneurs; which has over doubled in growth since 2012.<sup>clii</sup> Despite the active participation of women in university-level education, a disparity remains between women and men in labor force participation.

While Emirate women play a relatively active role in the economy, a depiction of gender equality in the UAE would be incomplete without analyzing gender equality among female foreign workers. According to the CIA, around 85 percent of the United Arab Emirate's population are noncitizens; consisting of mainly of immigrants from South Asia.<sup>cliii</sup> According to Human Rights Watch, around 150,000 of these foreign workers are female; and they are recruited with the reassurance of high wages and optimal working conditions. While in some instances these conditions are met, unfortunately many women face abuse, dire living conditions,

confiscated wages, extreme hours and entrapment.<sup>cliv</sup> *Kafala*, the labour sponsorship program in the UAE, has brought about a lot of controversy, as both the recruitment process and employment opportunities are rigged with corruption and abuse. Furthermore, the legal system fails to protect these workers, as the labour laws and policies only protect Emirate nationals.<sup>clv</sup> The severity criminal offenses in the UAE often depend on family lineage, nationality and gender; leaving female foreign workers as the least protected, and most discriminated against.<sup>clvi</sup> Although administrators have introduced International Labour Organizations (ILO) conventions, and initiated reforms concerning workers' rights, this issue prevails; most notably among women.<sup>clvii</sup> A decree by the Labour Ministry in 2016 was created to potentially alleviate the issues of the *kafala* system, by enabling victims of abuse to alter their employer before the end of their contract. This also prohibited contract substitution, which is when employers reduce the wages to the prices agreed upon during recruitment. Nevertheless, as of yet these provisions still do not protect domestic workers.<sup>clviii</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The tribal structure, economic success and the integration of traditional values and modernity has imparted an immeasurable effect on women in the United Arab Emirates. While women have made major advancements regarding the political and economic sectors of society, the traditional nature of the state has hindered the social advancement of women. There are still stipulations in the UAE Penal Code, such as Article 358, that restrict the advancement of women. This Article incriminates the display of “scandalous and disgraceful” acts in public; such as a display of affection regardless of marital status.<sup>clix</sup> The constitution of the UAE outlines a framework for equality, but it fails to specifically address the concerns of gender equality. Thus

in analyzing the traditional, political and economic structures of the UAE, this paper endeavors to conclude that while women do not face institutional barriers to their empowerment, they continue to face social barriers; which can be linked to the tribal nature of the state and the traditional values associated within the Emirate culture. The evolution of women's rights in the United Arab Emirates, while gradual and ongoing, can serve as example to both Arab states, and to the World. Despite the social barriers that hinder the advancement of women in certain aspects of society, Al Nahyan, the Cabinet and Sheikha Fatima have stayed steadfast in their commitment to empower women, both in the gulf and internationally.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **CONCLUSION**

This research design set out to uncover the factors that contribute to gender inequality in three historically prominent states in the Middle East. The status of women in each state is the independent variable and the historical, socio-cultural, political and economic factors are the independent variables. Broadly, the argument of this research design was that the status of equality among women in each state varies based on a negative relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The independent variable decreases as the influence of the dependent variables become more prominent; such that as the political structure of a state becomes more conservative the rights of women are more restricted. While this can argument can be applied to each state separately, the challenge arises in directly linking each state to each other. While individually the dependent variables each affect the independent variable in a substantial way, the manner in which women are affected by different determinants within each state fluctuates. Therefore, it would be erroneous to assume that one could candidly compare each factor congruently amongst the states. That being said, in the case study on Saudi Arabia, the marital alliance established between Ibn Wahhab and Ibn Saud directly affected the configuration of the state as a conservative, religiously centered monarchy with an intrinsic focus on the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam. While the nature of this historical context, combined with the other factors, arguably contributes to gender inequality in Saudi Arabia this factor cannot be directly compared to the historical context of Iran; as there was no marital alliance formed in establishing the modern state of Iran. Nevertheless, the distinct Dynasty's throughout Iran's history affected the establishment of Iran as an Islamic Republic. Thus, it can be argued that while the circumstances vary among each state and amid each dependent variable, it is still

useful in terms of this research project to compare between states. This conclusion will focus on the four factors within each state and their impact on the empowerment of women. Furthermore, the findings provide insight to this expansive issue by understanding these important factors in the context of these three very different states. This in-depth look into the four structures of each state brought about immense findings and insight into the different women's rights movements in each state.

## **Findings**

Well known for its application of *sharia* law and for strict laws concerning women, Saudi Arabia presents itself as a unique case study in relation to the discussion of the empowerment of women. While externally it may seem that women have very few rights and freedoms, in the past few years the state has worked on empowering women through political involvement and education. Nevertheless, there is still a very evident disparity in the employment rate of women compared to men in Saudi Arabia; this seems to be attributed to the strong presence of expatriate workers, and the oil industry. Even so, the evidence presented lends towards a state that is modernizing, and thus moving in the direction of gender equality, however gradual that may be. Likewise, in Iran women are becoming increasingly educated, as encouraged by the state, and marginally politically involved. Economically Iran has been slow to incorporate women into the market, thus creating high levels of unemployment among women. Similarly, in the UAE women have become increasingly exposed to positions within the Federal National Council, and women outnumber men in higher education. That being said, the percentage of women employed in the public sector is low, and even comparable to Saudi Arabia. While structurally overall, the United Arab Emirates prevails as the leader in gender equality among the three states, each state has faced major setbacks in fully integrating gender equality into their economy.



One single factor cannot, in itself, explain the prevalence of the independent variable in a state, as the factors are intertwined and combine to impact the pervasiveness of gender equality. This issue is enumerated in the aforementioned example with Saudi Arabia, as the marital alliance between Ibn Saud and Ibn Wahhab impacted the political structure of the state. Likewise, the socio-cultural factors of the state, such as the tribal influence on social norms and practices, also influence the vulnerability of the *Majlis*, to women. Furthermore, in the current economic environment, these socio-cultural factors would be unable to fully impede the progress of empowerment, without having a monarchy funded by revenues from petroleum. Therefore, one factor does not supersede the others, as the main contributor to inequality, as the combination either breeds inequality or empowerment. In the UAE the accessibility of the market opens the doors for women to contribute as entrepreneurs, but the cultural stigmas often prevent women from becoming involved in the formal sector of the economy.

The cross analysis of these assorted factors within each case is briefly outlined in the following table.

**Table 1: Cross Analysis by Case Study**

<b>Factors Cases</b>	<b>Historical Context</b>	<b>Socio-Cultural Structures</b>	<b>Political Systems</b>	<b>Economic Structures</b>
<b>Saudi Arabia</b>	A marital alliance between Ibn Saud and Ibn Wahhab influenced the affluence of Islam in politics.	The combination of Bedouin tribal culture and Wahhabi Islam has brought about a strict society with limited rights for women.	The monarchy system combined with oil wealth has allowed the state to vastly restrict the rights of women.	Oil and expatriate workers have enabled the state a stable economy despite the stark lack of women in the formal economy.
<b>Iran</b>	The rights of women in Iran have fluctuated alongside the shifting of leaders within the Islamic Republic.	The religious disposition and background of each leader has affected the rights of women in the state.	As an Islamic Republic, Iran has institutional barriers to gender equality, but has given women political affluence.	Although, through expansive education initiatives, Iranian women have become highly educated, there is a discrepancy between employments.
<b>United Arab Emirates</b>	The influence of the United Kingdom on the U.A.E had a lasting impact on gender equality in the state.	A focus on tradition and modernization has allotted women rights unheard of in other states.	Although the U.A.E is a federation of states led by monarchies, women have become increasingly involved in the Cabinet.	The accessible open markets of the Emirate states have allowed women to become entrepreneurs.

**Table 1. Cross Analysis by Case Study.**

## **Cross Analysis by Case Study**

### **Saudi Arabia**

In this analysis I will begin with the four factors and their impact on each respective state. The historical context of Saudi Arabia plays a major role in women's rights, as the newly formed state created a relationship that imbedded a strict form of Islam into the formation of the state. This established a conservative administration supported by a tribally influential monarchy;

enabling them full decree to obstruct both political and economic access to women. It is imperative to note that the Wahhabi interpretation of Islam represents a very small sector of the followers of Islam, and the nature of this conservative position has empowered a patriarchal order to inhibit the rights of women. The Quran outlines that superiority is derived from being a devote Muslim, and there is no dominance or advantage based on gender; thus while the inherent ideologies of the Prophet and of Islam promote equality and peace, different interpretations decipher each passage differently. While other states are modernizing and expanding alongside Islam, the Wahhabi devotion calls for a return back to fundamentalism; which has directly affected the rights of women. The inequalities within Saudi society that are so prominently highlighted in western media, can be linked to the Wahhabi nature of the state, and not their characterization as an Islamic nation. This pattern is unmistakable in the fact that the rights of women oscillate substantially across the MENA region; and each state varies in their interpretation and thus conservatism. The historical relationship established years before the state was even founded continues to affect policy in the modern analysis of women's rights in the state. Furthermore, the historical context of Saudi Arabia affects the three other factors interpreted in this paper.

The second factor, the socio-cultural context of Saudi Arabia, expands on the historical context, as the marital alliance is interrelated to the tribal customs and Bedouin influence of the state. To this day, status in Arabian society is related to the kin-based tribal associations dating back to the fourteenth century. Appointed by King Fahd, the tribal lineage of the current Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Abdul Aziz Al ash-Sheikh can be traced back to al-Wahhab. Historically, leaders have emphasized the importance of tribal lineage, as is evident in the fact that each Mufti can be tribally linked to al-Wahhab. This simple tradition has kept the elite members of the

administration to the royal family and decedents of al-Wahhab; creating a considerable barrier to the political system for tribally *inferior* sects of society. This focus on ancestral descent has strengthened the influence of Wahhabism in politics, and enabled this conservative rendition of Islam to maintain relevance. Therefore, while women have made political strides within the *Majlis*, these appointments are customarily women within the royal family's circle of influence. Although any upward stride in the empowerment of women should be celebrated, it would be naive to exclude the influence of social status in the advancements for women.

The political system of a state often affects the influence and extent of gender equality in the nation; the absolute monarchy of Saudi Arabia is no exception. Firstly, the nature of an absolute monarchy allows the state to enact and endorse decrees and laws as they see fit. The structure of the state is arranged around Islam; the *Quran* is considered the constitution of the state and an executive council guides the king based on *sharia* law. As enumerated in previous paragraphs, this is important because the state endorses Wahhabi Islam, which arguably thwarts the empowerment of women. Since the royal order, that incorporated women into the *Majlis as-Shura* in 2013, women have become increasingly involved in the political system. Even so, the council to the king is an advisory board, therefore the power of the women on this assemblage is very limited, thus ancient practices such as the guardian system still endure. The organization of Saudi Arabia's political system, combined with the economic structure of the state has enabled the already minimal appointments of women into the council to remain among elites and associates of the royal family.

The state of Saudi Arabia heavily relies on the production and exportation of petroleum, therefore, much like the UAE, their economy is dependent on expatriate workers. This oil wealth is concentrated and expended by the monarchy, with the influence of the *Majlis*. Additionally,

this wealth enables the economy to function adequately without the introduction of women into the formal economy. Despite being highly educated, there is a blatant disparity between unemployment among women and men in the state. While oil revenues remain constant, the state will be able to continue this trend, but looking forward, as natural resources are depleted the state will need to expand their economy. While petroleum revenues and expatriate workers allow for businesses to exclude women, social stigmas and cultural norms also prevent women from becoming involved in the economy.

### **Iran**

The historical context of Iran has influenced the modern empowerment of women, as they were revoked of many rights previously secured during the various dynasties. While both Saudi Arabia and the UAE are guided by monarchy's that claim ancestry dating back centuries, Iran's history consists of a variety of different dynasties. Unlike the other two states, Iran's history isn't exclusively Islamic in nature, prior to the establishment of Iran as an Islamic Republic, the Persian Gulf was ruled by different ideologies, cultures and societies. Throughout the different Dynasty's such as the Achaemenid, Sassanid and through the Zoroastrian era, ancient religions such as Mithraism were central within Iran. Following the creation of the Islamic Republic, rights freely enjoyed by women in the Pahlavi Dynasty were revoked, and often reversed. While the rights of women in Saudi Arabia have steadily expanded over time, the rights of women in Iran have fluctuated through waves of oppression and empowerment.

This vacillation, or wave theory of gender equality is also directly linked to the conservatism and religious background of each leader. Ayatollah Khomeini, the self-proclaimed supreme leader of the Islamic Republic, led the Islamic revolution of 1979. After attending years of religious schooling, the Ayatollah became a revolutionary who sought to transform Iran into

an Islamically centered state. This vision was achieved in 1979, and an Islamic dress code was immediately imposed. Women could now only receive an education in “gender appropriate” jobs, and various rights were reversed. Mohammad Khatami however, deviated from this conservatism and tradition, as he ran on a platform of reform and liberalization. The dress code, while not entirely rescinded, was increasingly lenient during his presidency. Even so, Khatami was still beholden to the conservative and religious *Majlis*. This fluctuation has continued to prevail throughout the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani; further emphasizing the theory that as a leader increasingly emphasizes fundamentalism and conservatism in his platform, the rights of women are reduced, and vice versa.

As previously detailed, the dissolution of the Pahlavi Dynasty in 1979, gave way for a referendum that ultimately established Iran as an Islamic Republic. Closely ensuing, women were no longer permitted to pursue jobs in the fields of science, technology or medicine. While economically women were refrained, women were introduced into the *Majlis* shortly after the revolution. Women were gradually inducted into parliament, and have steadily gained political influence since this initiative was passed. Alongside the Supreme Leader, Iranian citizens elect the president who serves a four-year term, and the Guardian Council must approve the candidate. Recently in 2013, a group of women campaigned and tried to run for the presidency of Iran, but they were met with opposition from the Guardian Council. Much like in Saudi Arabia, women in Iran have become progressively involved in the political system of the state; but there is an ultimate threshold of power over which they cannot transcend.

Much like in Saudi Arabia, while education initiatives are encouraging women to become educated in Iran, there is an inconsistency in the levels of employment of women. While there has been a considerable increase in the employment of women in the formal sector in the past

few years, a large discrepancy exists in high-ranking positions. While Iran has encouraged the diversification of its economy it has made limited efforts not only to include women in the formal sector, but also to ensure they are being selected for senior positions. While there are administrative and legal barriers to their participation, women are often restricted by cultural impediments to economic participation. This pattern, which is encouraged by Iran's conservative *Majlis*, is evident at varying levels in the economic structures of both Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While this pattern often indicates a steady, but upward trend in the empowerment of women in each state, in 2016 Iran's administration increased the impediments obstructing the introduction of women into the workforce.

### **United Arab Emirates**

The historical context of the United Arab Emirates shares resemblances with both Saudi Arabia and Iran. As a group of colonized states of Great Britain, the 7 states of the UAE were unified by the common incentive for independence. The 19<sup>th</sup> century *trucial state* agreement between Dubai and the United Kingdom was dissolved, and the federation of states known as the UAE was established in 1971. The geographical deviation across the federation, with everything from sea bearing pearl traders to Bedouins of the desert, allowed for separate states to unite and form a diverse economy. Although the discovery of oil allowed for the expansive modernization of the UAE, these seven states established independent economies, through trade and specialization. This unique amalgamation of diverse yet culturally and religious homogenous states, has encouraged the empowerment of women. Without the influence of Great Britain, these independent states might not have merged to create the modern, yet traditional UAE.

Much like Saudi Arabia, tribal influence plays an integral role in the socio-cultural context of the U.A.E. Many citizens of the modern federation trace back tribal ancestry to the

*qabalah* tribe. Akin to the *Majlis* in Saudi Arabia, the Federal National Council in the United Arab Emirates consists mainly of elites; established through tribal lineage and acquaintances of the royal families. Intermarriages among these elites and between the monarchies have influenced the endurance of the U.A.E. as a federation of states. The quickly expanding economies and emphasis on foreign investment, have allowed for the state to effectively combine tradition and modernization; a notion that both Saudi Arabia and Iran have historically struggled with. Although women in the U.A.E. have expansive rights, both politically and economically, in comparison to Saudi Arabia, Iran and most Arab nations; the socio-cultural impediments are still very apparent. Male guardianship, the right to maintenance, *zina*, and citizenship issues are widespread within the Emirates.

The seven rulers of the United Arab Emirates comprise the Supreme Council; this council elects the president of the federation for a four-year term. The president elects a prime minister, and approves an advisory council; of which in comparison to other Arab states, women comprise a significant portion. Similar to Saudi Arabia, the monarchy plays an important role in politics, but in the Emirate states, the authority is divvied between seven monarchs; thus there is no central concentration of power among one monarchy. Although the Federal National Council is an advisory board, due to the nature of the Emirate's presidential elected monarchy, the FNC excerpts more power than both the *Majlis* of Saudi Arabia and Iran. Much like the advisory councils in the other two case studies, women are historically selected based on elite status or familial, marital associations to the royal family. Recent elections have indicated that the FNC is distancing itself from this bias, by electing a diverse range of candidates. Although most organizations, including political parties, are banned in the U.A.E., the General Women's Union has worked effortlessly to empower women in the U.A.E. by promoting gender equality. Women



have overcome prejudice in the political system; which is largely due to the state's commitment to modernizing while maintaining tradition.

The economic structure of the federation, which advocates for open trade policies and the accessibility of the market to foreign investment, has massively influenced the rights of women in the U.A.E. Shortly following the establishment of the federation, the rulers committed to the diversification of the economy; thus moving away from a dependency on petroleum by expanding tourism and entrepreneurship. Even so, the wealth accumulated from oil revenues allows the state to provide free and compulsory education. Women are encouraged to pursue higher education, in fact recently women comprised over half of the students in universities in the U.A.E. Unfortunately, similar to Saudi Arabia and Iran, there is a large gap between the employment of educated women and men. The economic system of the U.A.E. plays an imperative role in gender equality, in that while socio-cultural factors impede empowerment, the economic system allows women to become entrepreneurs. In the past few years, Emirate women have taken advantage of this and become an influential part of the economy.

## **Future Research**

In analyzing the four independent variables within the three case studies, this study revealed interesting issues and patterns that can be expanded in future research studies. The following chart summarizes the influence and strength of tribalism in each state, from Saudi Arabia having the strongest influence, and Iran the weakest.

<div>Tribalism</div> <div>State</div>	<b>Strong</b>	<b>Moderate</b>	<b>Weak</b>
	<p>The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has the strongest tribal structures. This was established through the marital alliance between Al-Wahhab and Al-Saud</p>	<p>The tribal structures are present in Emirate society, but the influence of industrialization have created a symbiotic relationship between modernization and tradition.</p>	<p>The state of Iran features the least amount of tribal influence in its society</p>

**Table 2: The Influence of Tribalism in each state**

This study revealed a trend, in which women are steadily gaining rights in both the political and education systems, while they are being restricted in the economic and social realms. The following chart A future study, which expands on each variable and increases the case study to more states in the Middle East, would be imperative to understanding if this trend were representative of a majority of Arab states. This study raises two important questions: firstly, in the future how will the dwindling supply of oil in the MENA region affect the gender equality movement? A second question asks, with the modernization of many states, will traditional and tribal ancestry continue to play an important role in the deterrence of women's rights?

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