
April 2022

The Role of Emirati Women during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Challenges

Suaad Zayed Al-Oraimi

Department of Government and Society, College of Humanities and Social Sciences. United Arab Emirates University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Zayed Al-Oraimi, Suaad (2022). The Role of Emirati Women during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Challenges. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 23(3), 41-56.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol23/iss3/4>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

The Role of Emirati Women during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Challenges

By Suaad Zayed Al-Oraimi¹

Abstract

Using a qualitative methodology of personal interviews and participant observation, this research investigates the role of Emirati women in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent impact/challenges. Research participants included female Emirati health care workers and educationists. We observed Emirati families to help better understand the challenges women went through during the pandemic. Contrary to existing narratives about the invisibility, docility, marginalization, victimhood, and dependency of Arab women, this research reveals that Emirati women were able to exercise agency in the fight against the pandemic due to the following factors: longstanding government empowerment of women, a sense of patriotism, supportive male relatives, and female dominance in the health and educational sectors. During the pandemic, Emirati women have contributed in the following ways as: volunteers; international aid workers; care givers; health information agents; and virtual teachers. Despite this, challenges abound because of the following: increased family conflict; domestic violence; the psychological toll of Covid-related deaths; economic challenges; and increased domestic responsibilities. The Emirati women's case provides lessons for policy makers and societies desirous of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Emirati women, Covid-19, Pandemic, Frontline, Agency, Empowerment, Society, State

Introduction

Historically, the spread and combat of infectious diseases during pandemics has been a major global challenge. Covid-19 has become the latest pandemic plaguing the world with dire consequences for humanity. The UAE, as part of the global community, has not been impervious to the ravages of the pandemic and, like many states, has adopted various policies and strategies to help combat it. Emirati women, just as the emerging literature on the role of women worldwide in the ongoing pandemic indicates, are also exerting agency and contributing towards the fight against the pandemic. Their contributions are ultimately challenging the existing narrative about the role of women in Arab Muslim countries. Hence, this is the reason behind the focus of this research.

Historically in Arab societies, the status of women has been determined and governed by Arab traditional customs and Islamic canon with mixed results on their capacity to exert agency. Equally, social factors define their roles in society and determine their everyday life. The family is one of those forces that influence women's lives. Within the moderated tribal structure, women have limited power in all social spheres. While in the tribal society, the social status of women was subject to the roles they play in the public sphere. Indeed, the value of women in the public arena is very much influenced by their weight in the private realm. Since the establishment of the UAE as a federal state in 1971, the government has continually focused on women. This continuous support has provided women with a positive vitality that has enhanced their position

¹ PhD. Department of Government and Society, College of Humanities and Social Sciences. United Arab Emirates University. Email: s.aloraimi@uaeu.ac.ae.

in society. Now that the state needs them, they are ready to give back—and the time of pandemic is the most critical time (Al-Oraimi, 2011).

This research is important in a couple of ways. First, most of the literature on women and crisis/wars/pandemics disproportionately focuses on women as hapless victims, male dependent, and invisible forces waiting for respite or rescue (Pateet, 1992; Scheil et al., 2000; Nikolic-Ristanovic, 2003; Reuther 2005 and Kofmal, Garfin, Usta & El-Jarrah, 2021). Second, in the Arab Middle East, few illuminating researches exist on female agency in the public or domestic sphere, as a disproportionate number of literature focusing on how women are oppressed or hindered from decision making or serving in the public sphere by patriarchy (Sharoni 1993; Mishra 2007; Sadiqi 2014 and Benstead 2021). Thus, this research, which makes the case for female Arab agency in times of crisis, will add to the emerging literature on the evolving role of Arab women with regards to agency and empowerment. This research seeks to accomplish these objectives with the aid of three major research questions:

1. What are the factors leading to the Emirati women contributing towards the Covid-19 fight?
2. How have Emirati Women contributed to the Covid-19 fight?
3. What is the impact of Emirati women's contributions towards the Covid-19 fight?

After the introduction, the rest of the article is organized as follows: literature review; theoretical framework; methodology; factors enabling Emirati women's contribution; the role of Emirati women; challenges of contribution; and the conclusion.

Literature Review

Covid-19 has become an international crisis to the extent that this era has come to be called the "Age of Covid-19." No one knows when the end will come. It has come to affect, in one way or another, all aspects of life, whether on the economic, social, political, moral, or intellectual levels. According to Abdul Rahman Ibn Khaldun, "People in peace are the same, if adversity comes, they differ" (Ibn Khaldun, 2015). The Coronavirus might prove this theory; it can be applied to the marginalized half of the world to reflect unpleasant futures (Haj-Ali, 2019).

Throughout the world, women have been heavily affected on different levels of economic shocks, unpaid work, domestic violence, health care, as well as social statues of young girls. Some women are mobilized forcefully and resolutely to protect their families at the expense of their comfort and health. There have been multiple roles played by women during the Covid pandemic. During this difficult circumstance, women are the main source for maintaining the balance of the family. Women are on the frontline in facing the effects of the outbreak of the disease. Despite their lack of economic expense, women did not separate themselves from their community. Women try to manage the crises resulting from the quarantine, whether economic or social, and protect their families with equanimity (UN Women, 2021).

Officials in the Department of Health in Abu Dhabi (SEHA) report that the number of Emirati female professionals and volunteers working on the first line of defense and tackling the Covid pandemic in Abu Dhabi exceeds four thousand. The officials emphasize that Emirati women have proven their worth in various sectors, including the health sector (Al Khaleej, 2021).

SEHA also indicated that the number of Emirati women in Abu Dhabi working in the health sector as doctors, nurses, or aid professionals exceeds 2,600. Emirati women are said to account

for 62% of the total workforce in the Department of health. The officials stressed that the Emirati women who have succeeded have assumed leadership positions and become role models. This confirms their success in the health sector and the clarity of their mark in various fields (Al Khaleej, 2021).

Women in Crisis Times

Women's roles in crisis times have been enormous and courageous throughout history and across cultures. During World War I and II, women were recruited to fill the posts left by male soldiers in the middle of the conflict. They were chosen as symbols of the home front under attack. Indeed, the role of women in both World Wars has become the focus of many devoted historians in the past few decades, especially regarding their social progress in the following years. Between the years 1914 and 1918, women learned skills and independence. A few years at the end of the war, they gained votes in most allied countries (Thom, 1998).

However, some social forces viewed women as a threat; they thought their temporary freedom might change their gender role after the war. Thus, the jobs they held during the war were taken from them after the demobilization. Despite this fact, women were able to maintain their role in nursing that they played during the crisis of War Word I. Nursing saw a huge growth in numbers and many women from the lower classes were able to obtain a medical education. These nurses had first-hand experience and were able to return to their normal lives using that information and skill set. Nevertheless, they have broken as many boundaries as in other professions (Razek and Fayyad, 2020).

From a Durkheimian perspective on the Sociology of Anomie, crisis and abnormality are natural and cause social disorder. According to the sociological dictionary, anomic means the absence of norms, values, and laws. Thus, when crises emerge, it inflicts general social anarchy and affects many areas and different segments of society. Crisis is not an expected social and natural phenomenon and is difficult to be controlled before it happens; it often occurs suddenly and disastrously. Durkheim linked the anomic with a major social moral crisis. Crisis can be in the form of a health catastrophe that can lead to social disorder and disintegration (Mestrovic & Lorenzo, 2008).

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Theoretically, this research is anchored in the feminist theory of agency and empowerment as an explanatory tool for the decision of Emirati women to contribute towards the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. According to Qutteina et al. (2019: 34), agency is a woman's "belief in herself and awareness of her rights (power within); and a woman's instrumental agency, or her ability to affect her life by having power to make choices and to control acquired resources." Women exercise agency in numerous ways such as in their individual capacities or collectively within a social unit such as a family, in the public sphere such as in politics, or via their participation in markets and other formal and informal channels (Hanmer and Klugman, 2016). In addition, agency can take different forms such as "bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis" (Kabeer, 1999: 438).

Women's agency is often linked with women's empowerment, defined as the "process by which women gain power and control over their own lives and acquire the ability to make strategic choices" (European Institute of Gender Equality, N.D). Intrinsically, agency has important implications for women's empowerment and the nature and exercise of other dimensions of well-

being, including the pursuit of economic opportunities and engagement in decision making (Qutteina et al., 2019). Emirati women have over the years achieved great strides in education with record levels of educational attainment which have enabled them to take advantage of economic opportunities in the labor force as well as in business. Emirati women's response and contributions during the Covid-19 pandemic is a further demonstration of their agency whereby they have made the decision to meaningfully contribute towards the Covid fight in their respective professional and social settings.

Methodology

This research is a qualitative study that utilized the techniques of personal interviews and direct observations to collect empirical data from women in the health and educational sectors in Abu Dhabi and A-Ain. The sample included a total of twelve (12) women in the educational and health sectors. The health professionals included four (4) medical-doctors, three (3) nurses, one (1) lab technician, and one (1) X-ray technician. The educationists included one (1) teacher, one (1) administrator, and one (1) senior male. All the interviewees were purposively selected because of their professional roles as frontline health workers. The goal of the interviews was to get first-hand accounts of the experiences of Emirati women as they navigated the Covid-19 pandemic.

The first phase of the interviews investigated the driving factors behind the agency of the women and their roles in the frontlines, educational sectors, and at home. The second phase dealt with the impact/challenges encountered by these women in their fight or response to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition, direct observation of five families was conducted to understand the impact of the pandemic on women and their families. To avoid bias, families of non-working women were also included in the direct observations and constituted three out of the five families observed. The interviews and direct observations lasted from April 2020 to April 2021. A major drawback of the data collection for this research was that due to the ongoing pandemic and the required safety protocols, the number of participants was limited. Nevertheless, this limitation was addressed through the complimentary use of primary and secondary data from government, international organizations, and media reports on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Factors Enabling Women's Participation in the Covid Fight

Among the many established factors of women's empowerment identified by the literature as contributing to their agency are: "education, training, rise in awareness, building self-confidence, expansion of choices, increased access to and control over resources, and actions to transform the structures and institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality" (European Institute of Gender Equality, N.D). In the case of female Emiratis and their contributions towards the fight against the Covid pandemic, they were empowered by the following factors: education via government empowerment; training via dominance in the health care and educational profession; awareness raising via changing attitudes of patriarchy; and a sense of patriotism, which are discussed below.

Government Empowerment

Since the formation of the UAE as an independent state, its leadership has made women's empowerment across all strata of society a cornerstone of its social policy. This has resulted in Emirati women achieving some of the highest levels of social advancement in the world. For example, the literacy rate among Emirati women is 95.8%, a tertiary enrollment of 77%, as well as constituting 70% of all university graduates. In addition, Emirati women make up 56% of UAE

public university graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Overall, Emirati women constitute two-thirds of public sector workforce in the UAE with 30% of them serving in leadership roles while 15% serve in technical and academic roles (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, USA, 2021). Furthermore, a 2020 report on global gender gap by the World Economic Forum cites the UAE as one of the best-performing countries, having attained a 65.5% reduction in the gender gaps in terms of legislators, senior officials and managers, and healthy life expectancy (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2021).

The state has invested in women and considered them as the latent human wealth that appears in difficult times. Since the establishment of the state, successive UAE governments have paid attention to women and considered them as equivalent to men in society. Hence, women obtained easy access to education without discrimination. In the second wave, the state provided women with work opportunities in the government sector as teachers, physicians, and employees. Women built the base of the education system because they were the majority. In the third wave, women shared with men in the decision-making positions as Ministers in the Federal Government and shared with men 50% of the National Assembly seats. Although the empowerment of women has become a state project, society has been slow in accepting women as decision-makers (Al-Oraimi, 2014).

Thus, with such a long and stellar track record of state empowerment of women in the UAE, Emirati women were primed and prepared to play a vital role during the Covid-19 pandemic. A common sentiment among the interviewees serving in the health care was a sense of confidence and readiness to serve knowing very well that they were competent to face the challenges posed by the pandemic. A senior official stated that the confidence and responsibility granted to women enhanced their resilience in times of the Covid-19 crisis. During this crisis, women have been fighting on all levels: at work, in the household, and in society. The official believes that the lack of appreciation is based on a gender stereotype and posits that, “even if women are not appreciated by their husbands, they are always supported by the state. The leadership have a deep belief in their reliability” (Interviews April 2021).

Dominance of Women in Frontline Professions

Although, UAE's health care sector is dominated by foreign professionals, Emirati women overwhelmingly dominate among the few Emirati health care workers. This is due to the social perception among male Emiratis that health care work is a female profession and the relatively low salaries of certain healthcare professions such as nursing. Available data from the government of Dubai shows that women constituted 79.2% of all Emirati doctors serving in hospitals under the jurisdiction of Dubai Health Authority “DHA.” In addition, all Emirati nurses in DHA hospitals are females while Emirati women constitute 94.6% and 90.6% of Emirati pharmacists and other technical health professions in DHU hospitals respectively (Dubai Statistics Center, 2021). Thus, with Emirati women dominating the health care profession compared to their male counterparts, the former has become frontline workers by default during the pandemic and are playing a major role in fighting it.

Changing Attitudes of Patriarchy

Although the status of Emirati women has evolved over the years to the point where they now constitute most employees in the public sector, they still operate in a conservative society whereby their choices and life decisions are affected by patriarchy. This is particularly pronounced for married Emirati frontline workers who need the approval of their spouses to continue in the

line of duty during a pandemic. Based on the responses of the health care workers interviewed, most of the women commended their male partners or guardians for being supportive throughout their contributions towards fighting the pandemic. Indeed, some of the frontline workers indicated that they have received far more support from their husbands and male relatives in the course of their work during the pandemic than they have received in normal times. This can be attributed to a realization among men that these were not normal times and that the services of their female family members were essential in defeating the pandemic. This realization has been aided by the UAE government's public acknowledgement and recognition of the efforts and sacrifices of health care workers, especially the female frontline workers. According to a junior nurse (2021), "the respect and appreciation are not granted to women as a gift, but rather it came with the huge efforts and sacrifice they provided to society."

In addition, a pandemic specialist posited as follows:

As a specialist in the epidemic, I am responsible to manage the situation in the hospital. My work hours have doubled, and additional responsibilities assigned to my tasks. I left my house because I did not want to expose my family to any infection. I am responsible to raise health awareness for the families and community. My husband appreciates what I have done. He takes care of our son, who was not yet two years old when I left the house. I would like to greet all Emirati women in the front-line (Pandemic Specialist, 2020).

Similarly, the sentiment of an Emirati ward nurse below shows a mix of pride in her work as well as gratitude towards her father for the latter's appreciation and encouragement of her service and sacrifice in these trying times:

As a ward nurse in the hospital, my responsibly is so complicated, I am working unlimited time. I am watching people dying and others suffering in the intensive care rooms. This experience affected me emotionally. I was infected with Corona virus, when I recovered, I returned to work, this is my ethical obligation. I am single, but my parents were worried about me—Yet my father told me that he is proud of me among all men in the community (Ward Nurse, 2020).

High Sense of Patriotism

As the adage goes, "to whom much is given, much is expected in return." Hence, interviewees felt a patriotic obligation to serve their country in a time of need. Many of the women deemed their service as a show of appreciation to the government for the investments that the country has made in them throughout the years. A young teacher said that she was working hard not only because she was professionally obligated, but also because of the confidence the state has reposed in her. The women viewed their crisis time service as a form of patriotic duty and a practical demonstration of gratitude to the state. This sentiment was captured in a recurring phrase throughout the interviews: "I am loyal to my homeland and to the leadership" (Young Teacher, 2021).

Throughout the responses of the interviewees, they mentioned service to the "state" as a rationale for their services and commitment throughout the pandemic but no mention of service to

“society”. This can be seen as their recognition of the role that leadership of the state has played in their empowerment and social advancement throughout the years. The lack of recognition of the “society” can be attributed to the challenges Emirati women have faced from certain quarters of society that have not been supportive of their empowerment over the years.

The Role of Emirati Women during the Pandemic

Emirati women have endured in the face of pandemic, and this role is not alien to them. As the country confronted Covid-19, the leadership has reposed confidence in their ability to contribute and encouraged them in this regard. Confidently, the state relied on women in the health sectors, remote teaching, and in the administering of international aid and health education. Equally, women have demonstrated sacrifice by being in the frontline. They showed courage and high efficiency in dealing with the crisis and demonstrated their professional competence professionally both on the frontlines and at home. They often accomplished this by playing dual roles as professionals in the public sphere and in the domestic realms as wives, mothers, and daughters. As multi-taskers compared to their male counterparts, the role of Emirati women throughout the pandemic are discussed below.

Senior females shared their past experiences in pervious pandemics and social challenges and observed that social cohesion was the feature of UAE’s society in normal times and during pandemics. They referred to past pandemics related to diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis, and cholera as very challenging times. However, the senior women pointed out that, unlike the current pandemic, which is widespread, previous pandemics did not extend to all places because the areas were located far apart due to sparse settlements at the time. Therefore, the disease was confined to certain areas without the need for a mandated quarantine regime. A senior Emirati declared that:

Cities and villages were isolated from each other naturally—the patients were removed away from the neighborhoods and young people with a good health take care of them. No modern hospitals or health sectors existed like today, but some traditional healers make medicines from wild herbs to control the pandemic (Senior Emirati female, 2021).

Historically, the importance of women in society increases in crises time, and Emirati women played a heroic role. They were needed to take care of the patients, as traditional healers—their role was to cure the infected women and take care of children. Legitimately, women were responsible for preparing medicine and food for the patients; they were experts in medicinal herbs. Women have established a reputation in the community for using herbal medicine as remedy against the Covid virus. In addition, women were caring for patients at home, as every family was responsible for their patients (Senior Woman, 2021). This is before the formal health care system and the establishment of clinics and hospitals. More recently, with the arrival of medical doctors on the scene, traditional healers had no role in health care. However, certain people in the UAE still believe in the traditional healers, and some women are still practicing the old way to cure Coronavirus (Observation, 2021).

Women as Volunteers

Volunteering is a humanitarian act that is not related to a place, time, or type, but rather a valued civic behavior and component of social capital. The UAE has undertaken several initiatives to help people in the UAE and internationally. Emirati women have a history in providing, caring,

and helping without financial benefit. In recent crisis, they have provided unlimited efforts in the UAE and abroad. Some of them have been engaged with the initiative called: *"Together we are good."* The program was established by the Authority of Social Contributions to urge the community to participate in the government's efforts. Women volunteered efforts and time to assist people by addressing challenges associated with the crisis of Covid-19. Through their involvement with *"Together we are good"*, women provided support to families who were affected by health and economic challenges such as job loss or unpaid salaries (Authority of Social Contributions, 2021).

Furthermore, Emirati women have played a role in the health center within the "Humanitarian City" and the Preventive Health Center. This Center provides 24-hour emergency services in Abu Dhabi. Through this mission, women have provided curative care to ensure the safety within the framework of the UAE's humanitarian approach. Through their involvement in this organization, women have taken full responsibility of health services. They have considered the safety of the people as the UAE is pursuing the highest global health standards. Successfully, Emirati women embody the UAE's values of building solidarity with societies and peoples in crises and disasters (Preventive Health Center, 2021).

On the international level, young women represented the UAE in the global community. They traveled overseas to assist people and distribute material aids and utilities. According to the official Portal of the Government, Emirati women participated effectively in the "10 Million Meals Campaign". This program was launched on April 19, 2021 by the government to provide meals during Ramadan; women joined the program as volunteers. A government official declared that women's role in the volunteering sector is the most valuable role as they work hard to alleviate the suffering and pain of families who have lost families to the Coronavirus (Emirates News Agency, 2021). However, while volunteering reproduces women's roles as effective care givers, it should not come at the expense of women earning a decent living wage in society.

In addition, the Emirates Red Crescent Authority reported the volunteer works provided by women at different levels. They have been very active part of the initiative called: *"You are among your family"*, which enhances the authority's programs in the field of community services. Expressively, women are more eligible to enhance the ability of these families to face life conditions and overcome the ordeal of loss they suffered (Emirates Red Crescent Authority, 2021).

Women on the Front Line

The Emirati women play a leading role of defense in the face of Covid-19. According to interviews conducted by the Emirates News Agency "WAM", the role of women during the pandemic is complementary to that of men. Their efforts are an integral part of a joint national work system to limit the effects of the crisis facing the country. In addition, women played effective roles in both the medical zone and other public sectors. They are active in the educational and economic sectors as well as in the community services. According to WAM (2021), women have been efficient and reliable to carry out the work assigned to them; respectfully, the government considered them as official sources. Despite the Covid imposed difficulties and challenges, Emirati women have continued to deliver voluntary community services.

Virtual Educators

As part of efforts to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, the UAE government like many worldwide, ordered virtual teaching where students nationwide were to be taught online. The task of executing this order fell disproportionately on Emirati women who overwhelmingly constitute

most teachers among the local population of teachers. In addition, because traditionally, Emirati women spent more time raising their children compared to their husbands, the responsibility of ensuring that homeschooled children were prepared for virtual learning fell disproportionately on Emirati mothers. An Emirati Female School Administrator (2021) commented as follows:

I would say that with the application of the distance educational system, the learning process of our children is moving forward. Although we faced pressure to follow up on our students as they receive their lessons, the cooperation of the teachers and the concerted efforts of all of us have helped a lot. However, this course affected the level of quality of knowledge we delivered to our students. Working under epidemic conditions is not an easy mission; yet we have commitment to our responsibilities.”

Health Information Agents

Emirati women, by virtue of cultural and gendered role of child rearing, have traditionally been responsible for making routine health care decisions for their children right from birth. In addition, while male Emiratis are traditionally considered as family bread winners, their female counterparts are considered as care givers at home. Hence, throughout the pandemic, Emirati women have been the ones providing the necessary preventive information and necessary safety protocols to their households to safeguard the health of their respective households. Armed with the experience of making vaccinations decisions to inoculate their babies against deadly childhood diseases, female Emirati mothers have been instrumental in ensuring that their children and their entire household got vaccinated. In addition, the task of taking care of relatives recovering from the coronavirus usually falls on Emirati women at home, a task that can be daunting if multiple family members were simultaneously infected.

Impact And Challenges of Emirati Women’s Role during the Pandemic

The outbreak of the corona pandemic in the UAE and the role of Emirati women in combating it has had profound impacts on them, both positive and negative. In terms of the positive, the heroic role played by Emirati women has boosted their self-confidence in their abilities and increased their stature and respect in society.

Positive Impact

This research has noticed some changes in gender roles and women’s social status throughout the pandemic. First, contrary to the portrayal of women in the literature on Arab women as invisible and marginal groups in nation building and in times of crisis, Emirati women’s diverse roles during the pandemic has demonstrated their agency and capacity to step up in times of crisis. Second, after withstanding the pressures and the success of dealing with Covid-19 cases, Emirati female-medical personnel expressed increased confidence in their competence and capabilities as health practitioners. Medical frontline interviewees expressed an increase in their self-confidence after achieving success on the ground. Indeed, the image of Emirati women have changed not only because of their heroic service in times of crisis, but also because of the trust given to them by the state. A female Emirati nurse indicated the following: “In UAE society, nursing was not a respected career especially for women; however, with the government support and encouragement, the negative impression changed. This enhancement reinforced by Sheikha² Fatima as she

² Sheikha Fatima is the former First Lady of the UAE and the God Mother of Emirati women.

established Fatima College of Health Sciences". During Coronavirus, nursing became an important and desirable profession (Female Emirati Nurse, 2021).

Third, many of the medical personnel feel a sense of validation from the state's public recognition and commendation of their work and sacrifice throughout the pandemic. Female physicians obtained social recognition because they have been seen as national heroes who are sacrificing themselves to serve their country. For example, the Ruler of Dubai and Vice-President of the UAE has commended efforts of frontline medical staff in combating the Corona virus in a tweet in which he said that "heroic efforts of healthcare workers during the Covid-19 crisis are a source of pride and inspiration for all of us" (Sharma, 2020).

Fourth, medical frontline interviewees pointed out that their work and sacrifices during the pandemic have garnered respect from their spouses and immediate family members, and that is a source of pride for them. These frontline workers who have been playing multiple roles throughout the pandemic felt particularly appreciated by their husbands—and the opposite is also true. An X-ray technician was wondering about the importance that her work has acquired during the epidemic and made the following observation:

It is the first time I felt that my work is significant until Covid-19. I saw the respect in the eyes of my brother, and my husband appreciated my strength appreciates my endurance and strength while I am standing more than 12 hours behind the machine (X-ray Technician, 2021).

Fifth, interviewees expressed the hope that the heroic efforts of the mostly female-dominated frontline workers in the fight against the coronavirus will help elevate the status of the medical profession such as nursing among the local Emirati population. In addition, interviewees hoped that the increasing dependence of hospitalized patients on female health personnel will break gender barriers in the administration of health care whereby certain conservative patients prefer not to be touched or examined by the opposite sex. A female medical doctor said the following:

Cultural stereotype played a large role in limiting the role of women in the medical sector as the social patterns based on the division of gender. Before the pandemic, female doctors were not appreciated by men and always accused of not understanding anything; within the crisis, women's efforts were very much needed. As I specialize in chest diseases, I regained my self-confidence as a doctor in time of crisis. I took over the supervision of patient—both genders—thanks God no male's objection!" (Female Physician, 2021).

Negative Impact

Increased Domestic Responsibilities

According to Anne Jackson, relationship counsellor with One Life Coaching, "There are global studies which show women are suffering more than men though as they take on more of the responsibility when it comes to teaching children from home" (Ryan, 2020). Thus, Emirati women are no exception as they have been forced by the exigencies of the times to play multiple roles thereby increasing their domestic responsibilities. A major new task that has become burdensome and a source of unhappiness for many of these women is that they have been saddled with the new responsibility of home schooling their children as schools have gone virtual for prolonged periods

of time. This responsibility gets more tedious if a woman has multiple underage children to supervise their virtual learning in a day, as hands on is required. Butressing this point, Anne Jackson, posits that, “a lot of people are not trained to properly home school their children and this can lead to further frustrations” (Ryan, 2020).

Most of the women who are also working professionals lamented that they could not handle the requirement of their work and children as their husbands did not help them with the children. Ultimately, Emirati women feel burdened by added domestic responsibilities. A participant indicated that she is an accountant in the bank and a mother of five children—her responsibilities have increased with online teaching. She must look after her children and divide her time between work and other tasks. Nevertheless, she has been able to play multiple roles despite the increasing loads. A teacher in a public school said:

I teach high school students, grad-12 and my responsibility is to enable them to pass the exams. Long distance learning is not the perfect way for students to build knowledge or even to understand and analyze what they have learned. My students and I tried hard to make the virtual classroom as normal as we could. I am a single mother with three children, all of them at school—I am also responsible for my parents. It is difficult to ply multiple role—I am trying to deal with my everyday life with the support of my family and the community (A High School Teacher, 2020).

Increased Family Conflict

Restrictions such as lockdowns and working from home imposed by the government to stem the spread of the coronavirus have had negative unintended consequences on Emirati women. Participants in this research complained about frequent friction with their spouses due to prolonged time spent together. According to Ryan (2020), “not being able to spend even a few moments apart from a spouse was at the top of the list of complaints from quarrelling couples” in Dubai.

Compounding the family friction is the fact that traditionally, Emirati couples have always lived independent lives even in their martial homes and thus spent less time together. In addition, in a typical Emirati household, there are separate quarters for both genders, whereby both a husband and wife can separately entertain their guests along gender line. Hence, lockdown and quarantine rules upended this sociological order making couples interact more with each other thereby increasing the incidence of conflict. A young mother provided her experience as follows:

My husband and I used to talk loudly like all couples, but not to this degree. The disagreements between us did not reach the point of conflict or violence. During epidemiological quarantine, the loud discussions arose to the point of screaming. I was trying to protect my children and myself, as he puts all the mistakes on me. When he could not go outside or visit his family's house, he got mad at me and becomes angry about everything. I am a housewife and never worked, now I am thinking to have a job, I can do any work with my high school diploma (Observation, 2021).

Domestic Violence

During the coronavirus pandemic, men lost the opportunity to have face-to-face interactions within the community. This situation created boredom and distress for the family and

children. Therefore, marital life became very complicated; in some cases, there was no room for understanding, leading to severe consequences for women. The most difficult experience resulting from COVID-related lockdowns and quarantine is domestic violence; this social phenomenon deepened in the time of Covid crisis. Some women indicated that this was the first time they were abused by their husbands. Worldwide, the pandemic exacerbated the already high rates of violence against women as their mistreatment became a common social trend. While the global high rates of violence against women is attributable to the exercise of power and control by men over women, the pandemic added a new dimension in the form of stress induced violence against women. As couples spend more time together, they discover the limitations of each other; it seems that they did not know themselves well before the pandemic. A senior male opined that, “the domestic violence and the rising number of divorces, is due to the feeling of losing love and mutual disrespect.” Yet, the most important factor is that some couples could not overcome the challenges of Covid-19 (Interviews, 2021).

Psychological Impact

Frontline interviewees who have witnessed first-hand the toll of coronavirus in their various hospitals as well as women who have seen their loved ones succumb to the coronavirus expressed serious psychological concerns about their experiences. The former spoke about being overwhelmed with so many patients during the early stages of the virus and the associated psychological challenges of seeing so many people suffer. Others expressed a feeling of hopelessness as they witnessed Covid-related deaths as well as losing family members, friends, or neighbors.

Despite this, women managed their existence as they faced social and family obstacles. During a TV interview, women declared that they were exposed to a psychological pressure. Nevertheless, they overcame the fear and engaged in volunteer work. A radiologist said: “I have been fighting Corona because I am afraid of losing someone in my family” (Female Radiologist, 2021). This is a normal feeling in times of crisis, a psychologist in Dr. Hassan Galadari’s program, Health for All, stated that usually, in times of epidemic and disaster, people are susceptible to anxiety, hesitation, and uncertainty. Emirati women experienced these psychological pressures for the first time during Covid-19. Those who served in the frontline were exposed to high levels of distress after realizing the danger they faced in the course of their service (Abu Dhabi TV, 2021).

This feeling is captured by a female Emirati medical doctor who left behind her husband and children to treat Covid patients and was in charge of intensive care wards in a hospital:

I work in the intensive care wards and responsible for people who are under the mercy of Allah—this is a devastating situation. I never thought that I would live in the hospital away from my kids and husband. In the beginning, it was difficult for me not to be with my family, but I found myself in the middle of taking responsibility. My husband encouraged me and took care of the children. Before the crisis, he was always complaining about my work as I might leave my children at any time to join the hospital. Today, I am accountable to the people who need my help. Women wear masks of strength in order to reassure the souls of those around them (Female Physician, 2021).

Conclusion

The outcome of this research reveals another dimension to the evolving role of women in the Arab Middle East and further counters prevailing narratives about Arab women as marginalized and invisible victims who are dependent on males for decision making and survival. The role of Emirati women throughout the Covid pandemic shared new insights on the capacity of Arab women to demonstrate agency in the face of crisis, offering a number of lessons learned:

First, the Emirati case demonstrates that women can play a vital role during crisis so long as the state or society has empowered them with the right resources such as education and professional opportunities prior and during crisis. The government of the UAE reaped what it had sowed over the years via provision of educational access and professional opportunities to women. Thus, during the crisis, these women felt obligated to sacrifice for the state in its time of need.

Second, the Emirati case demonstrates the versatility of women during crisis as they can multi-task as professionals and as wives and mothers at home while delivering in all responsibilities. In other words, Emirati women have demonstrated the capacity to carry more of the load than their male counterparts by virtue of their professional and domestic roles as the latter are not encumbered by domestic duties.

Third, the Emirati case also shows the indispensability of women during health pandemics as they become professionally dominant in the health care sector compared to men. This phenomenon is particularly more profound in conservative Muslim societies such as the UAE where certain frontline professions such as nursing and critical care are stereotypically viewed as a female job.

Despite the above positive lessons, there are negative lessons associated with the Emirati case that the government needs to address to deepen its empowerment of women. This includes a feeling of societal lack of recognition and appreciation for the efforts and sacrifices of women per the interviewed women. This is an indication that Emirati women expect more societal support in their continuous progress towards empowerment and agency.

References

- Abu Dhabi TV. (2021). *The Impact of Covid-19 on Mental Health on the Individual and Society*. Retrieved on August 25, 2021, from <https://www.adtv.ae> 16/8/2021
- Al Khaleej Newspaper (2021) Increasing number of Emirati Female Professionals, August 28/2021 19:37 PM. <https://www.alkhaleej.ae> ›
- AL-Oraimi, S. Z. (2013). Leading progress, changing reality: Women and leadership in the United Arab Emirates. *Educational leadership and leadership education in Asia*, 3.
- Al Oraimi, S. Z. (2011). The concept of gender in Emirati culture: An analytical study of the role of the state in redefining gender and social roles. *Museum International*, 63(3-4), 78-92.
- Alterio, M. G. (2013). *Memoirs of First World War Nurses: Making Meaning of Traumatic Experiences: Connections (Critical Component)*.
- Authority of Social Contributions. (2021). “*Together we are good.*” Retrieved on September 21, 2021 from <https://maan.gov.ae>
- Benstead, L. J. (2021). Conceptualizing and measuring patriarchy: The importance of feminist theory. *Mediterranean Politics*, 26(2), 234-246.
- Bourke, J. (1996). *Dismembering the male: Men's bodies, Britain, and the Great War*. University of Chicago Press.
- Emirates News Agency. (2021). *100 Million Meals, UAE Food Bank to distribute 10 million meals in UAE*. Retrieved on March 24, 2022, from <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302943571>
- Emirates Red Crescent Authority. (2021). *Emirati Women's role in the program of “You are among your family.”* Retrieved on August 16, 2021, from <https://emiratesrc.ae>
- Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, U.S.A. (2021). *Women in the UAE*. Retrieved on August 30, 2021 from <https://www.uae-embassy.org/about-uae/women-uae>
- European Institute of Gender Equality (N.D). *Empowerment of Women*. Retrieved on August 26, 2021 from <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1102>
- Dubai Statistics Center. (2021). *Dubai Statistics: 13.3% of Female Emiratis Occupy Senior Positions*. Retrieved on August 12, 2021 from <https://www.dsc.gov.ae/en-us/DSC-News/Pages/Emirati-Women-Excel-in-Health-and-Education-Sectors-in-Dubai.aspx>
- Grayzel, S.R. (1999), *Women's Identities at War: Gender, Motherhood, and Politics in Britain and France during the First World War*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Khaldun, I. (2015). *The muqaddimah: an introduction to history-abridged Edition*. Princeton University Press.
- Haj-Ali, A. (2019.) *Muqaddima Ibn Khaldun*. Retrieved on August 26, 2021 from <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse>
- Hanmer, L., & Klugman, J. (2016). Exploring women's agency and empowerment in developing countries: Where do we stand? *Feminist Economics*, 22(1), 237-263.
- Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), 435-464.
- Kofman, Y. B., & Garfin, D. R. (2020). Home is not always a haven: The domestic violence crisis amid the COVID-19 pandemic. *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy*, 12(S1), S199.
- Mishra, S. (2007). “Liberation” vs. “Purity”: representations of Saudi women in the American press and American women in the Saudi press. *The Howard journal of communications*, 18(3), 259-276.

- Mestrovic, S. G., & Lorenzo, R. (2008). Durkheim's concept of anomie and the abuse at Abu Ghraib. *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 8(2), 179-207.
- Nikolic-Ristanovic, V. (2003). Refugee women in Serbia—invisible victims of war in the former Yugoslavia. *Feminist review*, 73(1), 104-113.
- Peteet, J. (1992). *Gender in crisis: Women and the Palestinian resistance movement*. Columbia University Press.
- Preventive Health Center (2021). *Emirati Women Role in the Health Center “Humanitarian City”* Retrieved on August 28, 2021, from <https://www.alittihad.a>
- Ryan, P. (2020). *Coronavirus: Stay-home measures heaping pressure on marriages, experts say*. Retrieved on August 14, 2021, from <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/courts/coronavirus-stay-home-measures->
- Thom, D. (1998). *Nice Girls and Rude Girls: women workers in World War 1* (London: I. B. Tauris).
- Qutteina, Y., James-Hawkins, L., Al-Khelaifi, B., & Yount, K. M. (2019). Meanings of Women's Agency: A Case Study from Qatar on Improving Measurement in Context. *Journal of Arabian Studies*, 9(1), 33-51.
- Razek, O.A & Fayyad, S. (2020). *Women and Crisis of Covid-19*. Retrieved on September 8, 2021 from Al Arab Newspaper: <https://alarab.co.uk/2020/0>
- Ruether, R. R. (2005). Women and globalization: victims, sites of resistance and new world views. *Feminist Theology*, 13(3), 361-372.
- Sadiqi, F. (2014). Gender and violence in Islamic societies: Patriarchy, Islamism and politics in the Middle East and North Africa.
- Schei, B., Frljak, A., Pjskic, M., & Hauser, M. (2000). Women as victims of war. *Women's Rights and Bioethics*, 116.
- SEHA, (2021). *Women Lead the Frontlines at UAE's Largest Healthcare Network*. Retrieved on September 8, 2021, from <https://www.seha.ae/women-lead-the-frontlines-at-uaes-largest-healthcare-network/>
- Sharma, K. (2020). *Sheikh Mohammed Praises UAE's “Heroic” Efforts in the Fight Against Covid- 19*. Retrieved on August 25, 2021, from: <https://en.vogue.me/culture/sheikh-mohammed-praises-uae-response-coronavirus/>
- Sharoni, S. (1993). Middle East politics through feminist lenses: Toward theorizing international relations from women's struggles. *Alternatives*, 18(1), 5-28.
- UN Women. (2021). *UN Women response to COVID-19 crisis*. Retrieved on August 29, 2021 from <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/un-women-response-to-covid-19-crisis>
- Usta, J., Murr, H., & El-Jarrah, R. (2021). COVID-19 Lockdown and the Increased Violence Against Women: Understanding Domestic Violence During a Pandemic. *Violence and Gender*.
- WAM. (2021). *Women in the Frontline Defense*. Retrieved on August 25, 2021, from <https://www.wam.ae>.