

## UAE Women: Equal Rights—Within Reason

Shannon Linden

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We all know men and women were not created equally. We are different. Just pick up a copy of *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus* if you need proof.

But we are equally capable and thanks to the efforts of centuries of sisters before me, I can say so.

Once upon a time in 18th century England, poet and writer, Samuel Johnson, claimed women didn't deserve the same rights as men. In a famous letter Johnson said, "Nature [gave] women so much power that the law very wisely [gave] them little."

Apparently women were a mysterious mix of God-given gifts, packaged in curves and perfumed in roses; so captivating they wielded an inexplicable power over men, so best not to enable them further.

What is particularly frustrating about that line of thought is not the presumption that beauty is beholding but rather that men are incapable of resisting it, making women accountable for the accounts of men.

While the western world has evolved to a place where loveliness has nothing to do with the law, in most parts of the Middle East, men still abdicate responsibility for their actions in the name of temptation.

Compared to many of its Islamic neighbors, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) claims distinction for its liberal laws. Women are granted equality with men in the country's constitution, largely thanks to the remarkable leadership of the nation's founding father, the now deceased Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan.



Photo Patrick Kilorn

An advocate of women's rights to education and equal pay in the workforce, Sheikh Zayed once said, "Nothing could delight me more than to see Woman taking up her distinctive position in society. Nothing should hinder her progress. Like men, women deserve the right to occupy high positions, according to

their capabilities and qualifications.”

An admirable statement, but the reality is that the roots of the UAE's constitution remain firmly embedded in the soil of Islamic faith. Can such a lofty goal truly elevate women to equality when it is born of a religion known for keeping them down?

Working alongside her husband, first lady, Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak did her part by founding the UAE Women's Federation, an autonomous body with its own budget.

Now that the federation's original goal of promoting education among women has largely been achieved (there are more women than men enrolled in a number of post secondary institutions), the group continues to work to elevate the status of women in the work place. Women are employed in an array of fields including engineering, sciences, media and communications, law, commerce and the oil industry. There is even a women's division of the Armed Forces.

Progressive initiatives, but do they equal women's equality?

A look at the VIP Protection Corps, a program select graduates of the Dubai Police College are invited to join, suggests women are welcome—within their place.

Members of the Corps are required to maintain “the best possible physical and mental shape” in order to protect the nation's VIP's. While a number of women are part of the squad, their presence is touted as “vital”, not because they offer a unique set of skills but because “in an Islamic country, it is preferable [for women] to have female bodyguards.”

More women than men are entering the field of medicine but that may have as much to do with the fact women (and domineering husbands who forbid male doctors to examine their wives) can insist upon “doctoras” (female doctors) for care, than with equal opportunity.

Delivery of babies is limited to doctoras at a specific hospital in nearly all cases. While this might be comforting to women, the rule has more to do with fear of male physicians contacting females during vulnerable examinations than excellent care. Even an emergency visit to the nation's top hospital for pelvic pain would result in the re-routing of potentially seriously ill female patients to the “women's” hospital if no doctoras were on shift.

From the time they are ten, men and women don't mingle in the UAE, cementing the belief that they are incapable of mixing without wanting to mix things up.

While 18th century Samuel Johnson might have agreed, 21st century men might find such a suggestion as sexist as contemporary women do.