The extensive changes to Emirati women’s traditional rights and roles have been one of the most visible transformations occurring in the UAE throughout its almost forty years of modern history. From the right to acquire an education, to work and to participate politically, the expansion of women’s rights has been for some in a very fast-paced way, for others unbearably slowly.

This paper adopts the perspective that there is no direct or easy link between the state’s ‘offer of rights’ for women, and society’s acceptance of them. This is particularly so when proposed changes raise deep issues about honour and respectability, and stand uneasily as regards dominant gender norms and accepted traditions. Given these circumstances, the mechanisms that induce women to actually take advantage of what is offered have not been given sufficient attention. The concept of ‘genderframe’ aims precisely at defining that ‘connecting mechanism,’ and explaining the successes and failures of these policies both mobilization and implementation-wise.

Elaborating on the sociological method of examination known as ‘framing’, the term ‘genderframing’ refers to a dynamic and interactive process between the state and its population, which entails the symbolic rework of meanings associated to women-related policies, and its subsequent presentation in novel ways. It is argued that such re-interpretation has been purposefully conducted by the Emirati State in order to portray the changing roles of women as necessary and desirable, for reasons associated to nation-building goals, religious conformity, promotion of family values, and efforts at indigenous cultural preservation.

This paper is based on the analysis of primary and secondary literature as well as on the analysis of data, obtained during a research stay in the UAE from 2007 to 2008.