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**Women Employment and Job
Choices in a Middle-Eastern Gulf
Society: Case of the UAE**

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Dr. Gregory T. Papanikos
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Abstract

This paper discusses women employment and job choices in the United Arab Emirates society (UAE). In this context, it is believed that societal attitudes and family interests usually override women's employment choices and dictate the kind of careers women should pursue. Consequently, women might be denied access to the kind of jobs they desire. However, the apparent success of women in educational achievements might have translated in dramatic changes in female employment choices and career development. To elucidate on the effect of education and other factors on women's job satisfaction and employment choices, a sample of 1037 employed Emirati women was conducted. Results based on the logistic regression were generated and discussed in line with reviewed evidence from the literature. Evidence suggests that age and education level play significant role in shaping Emirati women's opinion about job satisfaction and job suitability. For them, the public sector is the first employment choice.

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Introduction

Following the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971, many economic and social changes have taken place. The country has witnessed impressive real growth that averaged 7 percent between 2003 and 2005, mainly due to the oil price hike. This growth resulted in a growing demand for labor. Prompting reliance on foreign supply of labor, mainly from the Indian Subcontinent, South East Asia, the Middle East, and Europe (Abdalla et al, 2008). These developments have pushed the local population from 253,000 in 1971, to 4.1 million in 2005 (UAE 2005 population census). The population grew at an average annual rate of 8.5 percent. In 2004, local people composed no more than 20 percent of the total population. In response to these changes, the UAE government stepped up efforts to facilitate employment for national people, including Emirati women. Measures taken included nationalization policies that limit employment opportunities for expatriates in certain areas, and adaptation of plans for improving the quality and accessibility to education. As a result, the number of private and public owned colleges and universities licensed by the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research (MHESR) increased from 5 in 1997 to about 45 in 2007. This situation led to a substantial growth in higher education opportunities to nationals in general, and expatriates in particular (Hijazi et al, 2008; Vine, 2008). About two thirds of the national graduates are females. This majority of females among graduates may be explained by the preference of many national males to join the labor market right after or before secondary school, or pursue their higher education abroad.

The educational achievements of Emirati women have translated into a dramatic increase of female employment in the labor market, particularly the public sector. Data indicate that many of these women are working by choice, rather than necessity (Shallal, 2011). This choice is mainly influenced by family factors (Abdulla, 2006). In a UAEU context, the family interests usually override individual interests; and the family greatly affects the individual's attitude and choices. Family attitudes about female employment and a woman's ability to combine both work and family responsibilities are often identified as key to accessing work and remaining within the labor force (Abdulla, 2006). Women are encouraged to join careers that are perceived to be more suitable for them, such as education and office work. However, Women's role and participation in the workforce in the UAE have witnessed significant developments which have created new challenges and responsibilities. According to Al Gurg (2006), "Gulf women have to deal with three aspects. First they have to keep up with the human sustainable development process, then they need to deal with the globalization and its effects on social values and behavior, and finally they got to be part in their own empowerment process."

Aside from providing an overview of women's job choices and development of their employment status, the main purpose of this paper is to empirically explore several variables that reflect the opinion of employed women in the UAE society about the suitability of the job they are employed in. The research is particularly focused on Emirati women.

Literature Review

Current local and regional women studies in the Middle East are focused on issues related to employed women; the workplace, the type of jobs they do, and job

satisfaction (Al Mazrouqi, 2011; Shallal, 2011). One major issue concerning Emirati women is job suitability, which is closely related to societal and cultural attitudes. It is believed that the Emirati society plays an influential role in determining women's choice of employment and work career (Olmsted, 2009). Employed Emirati women are faced, in addition to the type of jobs, with other concerns, including workplace location and remoteness from place of residence, night shifts work, reluctance to work in a male dominated environment, rooted religious values, and cultural factors (Wanda, 2009; Dencker, 2008; Gallant and Pounder, 2008; Read, 2004). Al Mazrouqi (2011) believes that there are many young Emirati women are unable to choose career in IT sector because of family hindrance. It is also argued that Emirati employed women is, to some extent, has to deal with three different fronts, first, the human sustainable development process, second with the current socio-economic changes due to globalization effects, and third their involvement in the empowerment process (Al Gurg, 2006). All these challenges create obstacles to the working women and influence their job choices and work careers and affect the level of job satisfaction. Despite these challenges and impediments, women in the UAE and in other countries of the Cooperation for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG) which includes the Kingdom of Bahrain, Kuwait, Sultanate of Oman, Qatar, and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, are recently encouraged by their governments to step up and take leadership roles as businesswomen, heads of financial firms, teachers, scholars and writers (Momaya, 2010). In the UAE the state established several institutions, such as "Dubai Women Establishment (DWE)" to assist Emirati women to develop their personal skills and to increase their contribution to the nation at large. The major aim of the DWE as stated on their online home page is "to increase women's participation, retention, and representation across key economic and social spheres; through DWE's strategic framework which defines the needs of the key target segments that the organization will address (Saleh, 2012). Recent statistics indicate that fifty percent of the jobs in the UAE Ministries and federal institutions are occupied by women; constituting about 65 percent and 80 percent of the nationals employed in respectively the health and education sectors (<http://www.khaleejtimes.com>).

For many UAE nationals, employment and career service in the public sector are still top priority; employment in the private sector might be viewed as a temporary transition until a suitable position in the public sector is secured. For some, Jasim (2008) this is mainly because, on one hand of the low standard of education and skills and lack of trust from the side of the employers, and on the other is from the individual national perspectives that the private sectors doesn't offer as much of employment opportunities compared to the public sector.

The current literature confirms that in spite of Emiratis women's high achievements and representation in the field of education and in the public sector, they are still underrepresented in the private sector (Al Mazrouqi, 2011; Nelson, 2004). There are a number of reasons why this is happening. Firstly, it is widely believed that the UAE society is a patriarchal society; almost all issues concerning women's roles in the society are still nonnegotiable. This is simply because traditionally men have been the providers while women are the homemakers. Secondly, for women family comes first, that means they cease working after marriage and devote most of their time to child bearing and upbringing. Thirdly, some private sector institutions discourage employment of females in their workforce. This is mainly because the private sector is reluctant to provide needed services to employed mothers similar to those provided by the public sector (Dillner, 1991; Hughes, 2003; Mostafa, 2005). Those who join the private sector are generally described as young, comparatively low educated; having

comparatively unstable job tenure; and are low-paid. This group is faced with many problems such as holding a last resort job, a general sense of dissatisfaction, and legal and cultural restrictions (Nelson, 2004).

The current literature confirms that job choices and job suitability are generally problematic for women. Although many research findings try to relate the problem to given cultures or societies; yet, to a certain extent, it seems that the problem is a masculine stereotype. This may be due to old fears that women will displace men. That means men don't want women to go out of their homes for work because job opportunities are not just enough for everybody. But, as it seems in many societies especially in the Middle East culture plays a critical role in restricting women in determining their own employment choices and work career. This conclusion might apply to women in the UAE as well. To investigate the effect of educational changes and other relevant factors on women's work choices and job suitability, the study adopted the following methodology.

Methodolog

Participants

We distributed 1500 questionnaires for Emirati working women, both in the public and private sectors, all-over the seven emirates of the state. The number of the questionnaires received back represented about (86%) of the total number sent. In view of the difficulty of designing a sample frame in the Emirati society, being relatively a conservative one, with special emphasis on females who enjoy a high degree of privacy-some of the employers rejected the requests by data collectors to interview female employees at their places of work; and in view of the fact that the number of working women is not big compared to the total number of population (Heckathorn, 2002), the study relied on traditional non probability methods, including both location sampling such as targeted sampling and these involve the selection of samples utilizing insider chain-referral such as snowball sampling. Knowledge and referral chains among Emirati employed women, respectively. A team from the Emirates university students (males and females) was trained to conduct data collection. Age of the sample members varied between 18 to 55 years, (with the mean age being 28 years). About half of the researched sample (49%) were married, and 45% not married. 59% of the sample were university graduates, 15% were holders of Higher Colleges of Technology diplomas (above secondary level by 2 years), and 13% were graduates of secondary schools, while 2% have post graduate degrees.

Emirati women are encouraged to establish their own business and to seek employment in different work sectors, particularly the private sector, as part of the government Emiratization policy intended to replace foreign workforce with UAE nationals. Women in the UAE who participate in the private sector are hindered by family and community restrictions together with high pay and job security expectations which the private sector cannot afford (Al-Ali, 2008). For the majority of Emirati women many jobs are undesirable or not suitable as they require a high degree of interaction with males (Gallant and Pounder, 2008). To elucidate on factors that determine Emirati women's opinion about suitable jobs, this study has randomly surveyed one-thousand thirty-seven employed Emirati women about their opinion as to whether or not the job they are employed in is suitable for Emirati women. This question was developed into a dichotomous response variable, coded 1 for an opinion that regards the job and the nature of work to be suitable for Emirati women, and zero

otherwise. The dependent variable is thus an indicator of job suitability. Utilizing logistic regression, the probability that the job is suitable for Emirati women can be estimated based on several factors or predictors. Possible predictors include women age (<30 vs ≥30(reference)), marital status (*married(reference) vs not married*), educational level (*college or higher(reference) vs secondary or lower*), monthly salary (<6000(reference) AED vs ≥ 6000 AED) and the sector of employment (*public(reference) vs private*). The data is summarized in a frequency form depicted in Table 1 below.

| Age | Marital status | Education | Market sector | Salary | Job suitable | Job not suitable |
|-----|----------------|--------------------|---------------|--------|--------------|------------------|
| <30 | Married | Secondary or lower | Public | <6000 | 22 | 5 |
| | | | | ≥ 6000 | 10 | 7 |
| | | | Private | <6000 | 6 | 3 |
| | | ≥ 6000 | 4 | 0 | | |
| | | College or higher | Public | <6000 | 43 | 5 |
| | | | ≥ 6000 | 239 | 22 | |
| | Not married | Secondary or lower | Public | <6000 | 29 | 1 |
| | | | | ≥ 6000 | 15 | 11 |
| | | | Private | <6000 | 8 | 2 |
| | | ≥ 6000 | 7 | 1 | | |
| | | College or higher | Public | <6000 | 63 | 4 |
| | | | ≥ 6000 | 265 | 22 | |
| >30 | Married | Secondary or lower | Public | <6000 | 20 | 3 |
| | | | | ≥ 6000 | 2 | 1 |
| | | | Private | <6000 | 3 | 0 |
| | | ≥ 6000 | 1 | 0 | | |
| | | College or higher | Public | <6000 | 10 | 0 |
| | | | ≥ 6000 | 146 | 8 | |
| | Not married | Secondary or lower | Public | <6000 | 8 | 1 |
| | | | | ≥ 6000 | 6 | 0 |
| | | | Private | <6000 | 1 | 1 |
| | | ≥ 6000 | 0 | 1 | | |
| | | College or higher | Public | <6000 | 4 | 0 |
| | | | ≥ 6000 | 54 | 5 | |
| | | | Private | <6000 | 2 | 0 |
| | | | ≥ 6000 | 4 | 1 | |

Analysis Results

Women’s educational achievements are usually linked with more skills, better job choices and more participation in the labor market. According to The United Nations Development Program (UNDP), women are two-thirds less likely than men to get

employment in Africa; and six out of ten of the world's poorest people are still women and girls (<http://www.undp.org/women/>). This is mainly because women in developing countries are in vulnerable situations. They lack education and training; they are heavily burdened by the unpaid domestic work, child bearing and care, which restrict them from having income-earning activity (Manuh, 1998). On the other hand, research evidence (see for example Clark et al., 1996) suggests an increasing linear relationship between job satisfaction and age, older employees tending to report higher satisfaction than younger ones. In terms of incentives, it is believed that higher pay is related with more job satisfaction. In this context, the public sector jobs offer greater stability and benefits compared to the private sector. This is appealing, particularly for young women as it provides better pay, more flexible working hours and better maternity leave policies (Kabbani, 2009). Similar research evidence suggests a relationship between marital status and job satisfaction. Fetsch and Kennington (1997), for example, found that both divorced and married agents are more satisfied with their jobs than agents who were never married, remarried, or widowed.

A statistically significant multiple logistic regression model (p -value < 0.10) was fitted to the data. Results (Table 2) suggest that job suitability is associated with Emirati woman age. Older Emirati women (≥ 30 years) are more likely to view their jobs more suitable to their careers than their younger (< 30 years) counterparts. These results confirm current literature evidence that indicate a positive significant relationship between employed Emirati female job satisfaction and age (Shallal, 2009; Vidyasagar, 2004; Al-Otaibi, 1993). Clark et al., (1996) argued that some women have higher levels of job satisfaction than men. Women, who spend a considerably long time in a job, are more likely to be content and satisfied with their jobs.

Further analysis results indicate that the education level is positively related to Emirati women's opinion about the suitability of the job they are employed in. Emirati women with college or higher level of education are particularly more content with the job they are hired in, as compared to those having secondary or lower level of education. The increment to log odds of a suitable job for employed women with college education or higher is 0.9717. This gives an associated odds ratio of 2.64, indicating that Emirati women with college or higher education are nearly three times as likely to describe their job as suitable than women with secondary or lower level of education. Highly educated women tend to hold well paid and well respected jobs. They are fairly knowledgeable of the state employment policies and have a better understanding of women's rights. They are more likely to have job training opportunities that secure their current jobs and enhance their chances for highly paid ones, which in turn generate more satisfaction and challenges.

Further analysis results of private versus public sectors satisfaction, the study found that Emirati women working in the public sector are more satisfied with their jobs as compared to their counterparts working in the private sector. The odds ratio is 1.91; indicating that public sector Emirati woman workers are approximately two times as likely to describe their jobs as suitable than private sector female workers. The majority of employed Emirati women work in the public sector which is known for its more liberal policy in offering flexible working hours and it is not as restricted as the private sector. Sixty six percent of government jobs are occupied by females and about one third of these jobs (30%) are decisions making posts (Vine, 2008). It is argued that women who perceive that their organizations offer flexible work hours report higher levels of organizational commitment and job satisfaction (Scandura and Lankau, 1998).

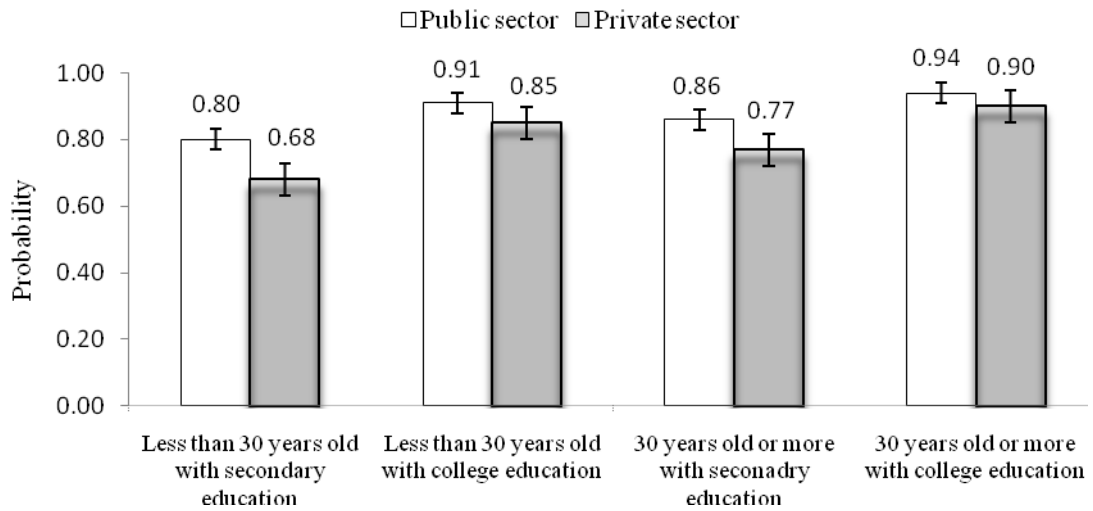
Apparently, marital status and income measured by monthly salary are not significantly related to Emirati women opinion about job suitability. There are a number of factors may justify this finding. First, family incomes in the UAE are high (regarding UAE citizens) if compared to other countries of the world (Willoughby,2005). UAE ranked number ten between the nations of the world with regard to GDP per capita which amounted to about US \$ 48,500 during 2011 (<http://www.theodora.com/>). Such a high income if added to the other benefits received by the families like: child benefit, free: accommodation, education, medical treatment, renders the mothers to be unenthusiastic for mothers to work outside their homes. Second, the majority of the respondents (70%) agree that their workplaces don't offer any kind of child care. For employed mothers this finding could be discouraging to regard their jobs as suitable because about (74%) believe that having child services attached to their workplaces is vital, while about (26%) believe that such services were not necessary. Third, more than three quarters (76%) of the researched sample believe that work increased their feelings of stress and exhaustion. About 24% believed to the contrary. Fourth, It is known that women are not equally paid for equal work as men especially in private sector (Wanda, 2009). Finally, Fourth, many mothers do not seek to continue their work in order to establish a professional career, quoting the answers of about 81% of the sample. They prefer to work for a limited period and return to their homes to take care of their families. Creating a job career is not an important issue to them. Only (19%) continue their work for the sake of developing their careers.

Table 2: Logistic Regression Parameter Estimates, Employed Emirati Women Survey, 2006

| Variable | Parameter Estimate | Std | p-value | Odds ratio |
|-------------------|--------------------|--------|---------|------------|
| Intercept | 0.7511 | 0.2454 | 0.0022 | - |
| Age | 0.4402 | 0.2488 | 0.0768 | 1.55 |
| College or higher | 0.9717 | 0.2163 | 0.0001 | 2.64 |
| Public sector | 0.6472 | 0.2172 | 0.0029 | 1.91 |

Expressing the logistic regression results in terms of predicted probabilities, the probability that a young (<30 years) Emirati woman with secondary education level or less would describe her public sector job as suitable is 0.80, more than the probability associated with the private sector, 0.68, (Figure 1). Similar conclusions are evident in the case of college education and for older (≥ 30 years) Emirati women (see Figure 1). These results confirm previous findings in the literature (see for example Abdalla et al., 2008) that Emirati nationals in general prefer employment in the public sector due to salary, working hours advantages and provision of social security schemes.

Figure 1: Predicted Probability of Suitable Job



Discussion and Concluding Remarks

This study focuses on the current state of women employment and job choices in the United Arab Emirates society. The Arabian Gulf states including the UAE are undergoing significant changes in almost all aspects of life. The economic benefits resulting from the discovery of oil have led to significant increases in household and individual incomes and opened up employment opportunities to almost every available adult in the region. The region has issued millions of work permits to people from almost all over the world to help in building and development, mainly from Asia and the Arab countries. Emirati women are greatly affected by the economic transformation that took place in the country. It is believed that the impacts of this transformation have led to other social and cultural changes. In 2010 the Forbes Magazine has rated Shaikha Lubna Al Qasbi, the Minister of Economy of the UAE # 70 among the top 100 powerful in the world. The United Nations Development Program report of 2007/2008 ranked The UAE 29th among 177 countries in the Gender Empowerment Measures. Literacy rate of women in the UAE was 90 percent in 2007. It is believed that, *“the UAE is registering the highest rate of females in higher education in the entire world (Al Gurg, 2006).*

Evidences presented in this study indicate that education level plays a significant role in shaping Emirati women opinion about job suitability and job satisfaction. Higher levels of job satisfaction are observed among women with higher levels of education. The UAE has achieved a great deal in relation to the education and employment of women in a short period since its formation in 1971. The majority of Emirati women in the workforce are young, representing first generation of college students. As such they are pioneers, feeling their remarkable contribution to the building and development of the nation. They mainly work in well established governmental institutions and receive high pay and generous compensation benefits. Moreover, according to new government policies foreign workers have now limited access to certain jobs in the labor market such as secretarial jobs, public-relations officers, and human-resources personnel which can only be offered to UAE Emirati personnel. Most of the new hires for those positions are Emirati women. However, such designations might be criticized on the ground that they confirm societal restrictions on women’s freedom of choosing the profession they desire. Under Article 301 of the

Private Labor Law (No. 63 of 1976), Emirati women are not allowed working between 8 P.M. and 4 A.M., except in certain jobs such as those in the health sector. In addition, UAE Ministry of Health law No. 5 of 1977 prohibits women work in jobs which are believed to require great bodily physical effort and may be deemed risky and dangerous.

Evidences from this study also indicate that Emirati women (≥ 30 years) are more satisfied and more likely to view their jobs as more suitable to their careers than their younger (< 30 years) counterparts. Many studies have consistently demonstrated positive relationship between job suitability and age. Older employees usually have more experience and get to weigh up different situations while younger ones tend to often lack this ability. High hopes and aspirations are more likely to be born with younger workers entering the labor market, in contrast to lower expectations that mostly occur at the later years of life. Workers in this stage of life can adjust their aspirations in a way that reduces the discrepancy between what they desired and what can be achieved; bringing about some positive feelings about their experiences and the work they do.

Further evidence from the study suggests that the public sector is the first employment choice for Emirati women. It provides more advantages and suitable jobs over the private sector. For example, in the public sector, women are entitled to maternity leave ranging from two to six months with full pay during the first two months, and to half salary during the third and fourth months. To many Emirati women, the private sector might not provide the kind of career and work opportunities they desire.

Finally, this study may be viewed as a first step towards identifying and prioritizing factors that affect job suitability among Emirati women. As such it augments scant research in this area and would stimulate further investigations into, for example, factors that impede job suitability among workers in the private sector. It further informs respective policy makers of labor market issues that directly or indirectly affect the well being of women's workers, which is strongly related to productivity and work performance. As a result, policies and remedial measures that can increase job suitability and satisfaction and improve working conditions among labor market workers, particularly women, can be devised.

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