

Case Study on Gender Equality in the United Arab Emirates through the Lens of Sport

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Abstract : Using a case study methodology, this study explores the lived experiences of elite women footballers (soccer) team in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the challenges and enablers women in this country encountered in their journey to competing at an international level. Through a series of face-to-face interviews with members of the first all-Emirati (people with UAE passport) women's football team, members of the team's coaching staff and key policymakers, the study sought to explore the social and cultural conditions that enabled the emergence of this team. A key aim of the study was to analyze the cultural shifts that have seemingly facilitated changes to gender relations in the UAE and to highlight possibilities for future gender equality work. The study explores the significance of sport in UAE society and its role in disrupting traditional gender boundaries. To do this, the study identifies and analyses contemporary social (religion, class, and culture) conditions that facilitate, and/or restrict, women's sports participation in the public sphere of sport. Drawing on a feminist poststructural framework the study sought to analyse the discursive enactment of (disruptive) gender identity positions, using lenses such as 'discourse' and 'power'. With a particular focus on elite women's sport, the study sought to build knowledge around the advance of female participation in what has long been considered as a masculine domain. Here, the study sought to explore the lived experience of social change through a series of face-to-face interviews with members of the first all-Emirati- women's football team and key support personnel. To maintain representational integrity, the principles of narrative methodology were employed for their ability to privilege the voices of participants while integrating contextual forces that comprised the stories they told about their experiences and the key people who participated in them. This approach supported a key aim of the study, being to analyse the cultural shifts that have supported changes in gender performance in the UAE and to highlight possibilities for future gender disruption. While the results of the study convey a growing sense of opportunity for aspiring sportswomen in the UAE, they also reveal that the participant pathways were full of contestation and restriction. What we learn from the stories of the first Emirate women's football team is that where the will is strong enough, there can be a way. While it is reasonable to assume that such pathways will become easier in the future, as the participation of women in such sporting arenas becomes less exceptional, there are factors that are likely to enable and disable such journeys. Prominent here is the presence of a 'powerful' guardian and mentor who can offer sustained support, and influence. In a society where males continue to have disproportionate access to social and domestic power, such support can be extremely influential. Guardians and mentors can play a crucial role in garnering the support of dominant male figures, or helping to find ways to work around it.

Keywords : gender equality, women, sport, Middle East

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