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Between Reform and Performance: Women's Rights in the Gulf as Strategic Statecraft

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Abstract:

Gulf states have rapidly expanded women's legal rights—covering mobility, employment, and political quotas—while simultaneously intensifying authoritarian repression and suppressing independent feminist voices. This article argues that these reforms are best understood as strategic statecraft rather than a trajectory toward emancipation. Drawing on comparative legal analysis of Saudi and Emirati legislation and critical discourse analysis of official policy documents and speeches, it develops the concept of "authoritarian state feminism": the deployment of gender reform to serve authoritarian consolidation.

Externally, reforms function as nation-branding tools that attract investment and deflect human rights scrutiny; internally, they neutralise religious authority and pre-empt independent civil society. Class inequalities ensure that migrant and rural women are largely excluded from these gains. The article contributes an integrated analytical framework bridging authoritarian upgrading, state feminism, and nation-branding literatures, and tentatively suggests that this model may have comparative relevance beyond the Gulf region.

Keywords: *Women's rights; Gulf states; Authoritarianism; Statecraft; Nation-branding.*

Introduction:

In June 2018, Saudi Arabian women were finally permitted to drive, a reform heralded by global media as a historic breakthrough in one of the world's most gender-segregated societies. The image of women behind the wheel swiftly became a cornerstone of the Kingdom's "Vision 2030" campaign, projected alongside photographs of female

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fighter pilots and corporate leaders. The message was unmistakable: the Gulf was modernizing, and women would be central to this transformation. Yet, in the very same months, activists who had campaigned for precisely these rights—women such as Loujain al-Hathloul and Nassima al-Sada—were arrested, imprisoned, and, according to United Nations reports, subjected to torture. This contradiction—the simultaneous expansion of women's legal rights and the brutal suppression of women's political voice—is not an anomaly confined to Saudi Arabia. Across the Gulf Cooperation Council states—though with varying intensity and pace, as this article primarily documents in Saudi Arabia and the UAE—a parallel process unfolds: women are integrated into the workforce, appointed to sovereign wealth fund boards, and guaranteed parliamentary quotas, even as authoritarian structures remain not merely intact, but increasingly entrenched.

This paradox forms the central problematic of the present article. How are we to make sense of a political moment in which women's legal status advances with remarkable speed, while political freedoms for all citizens contract? The question challenges the theoretical frameworks through which scholars have traditionally understood the relationship between legal reform, social change, and political authority in the Arab world.

The existing literature offers two dominant but insufficient explanations. The first, rooted in liberal modernization theory, posits a linear relationship between socioeconomic development, legal reform, and eventual democratization. From this perspective, women's rights reforms are understood as the leading edge of a broader transformation that will, over time, erode authoritarian structures. The Gulf states, however, confound this expectation. Despite significant legal and social liberalization for women, there has been no concomitant movement toward political liberalization; the rentier social contract has been replaced not by democratic institutions, but by a new form of authoritarian populism centred on the reformist Crown Prince. The second explanation, derived from political economy approaches focused on oil rentierism, long predicted stasis and the preservation of patriarchal bargains. According to this logic, states awash in hydrocarbon revenues have little incentive to alter social structures. Yet this framework fails to account for the sheer speed and scope of the current transformation. The

Gulf state is not preserving tradition; it is actively dismantling significant elements of it, albeit for purposes that remain distinctly illiberal.

In response to the inadequacy of these frameworks, this article advances a central hypothesis: the rapid expansion of women's rights in the contemporary Gulf states—particularly in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—is best understood not as a linear trajectory toward emancipation, nor as a cynical hoax, but as a sophisticated instrument of **strategic statecraft**. These reforms constitute a technology of governance deployed to manage the dual pressures of global integration and domestic authoritarian stability.

This hypothesis rests on three subsidiary propositions. First, these legal changes serve a critical *performative* function for external audiences. In an era of intensified competition for foreign investment and reputational standing, women's rights have become a central component of nation-branding, functioning as "reputational cover" that signals modernity and deflects scrutiny from the suppression of dissent and exploitation of migrant labour. Second, these reforms operate as a tool for *internal* governance, aimed at reconfiguring domestic authority structures. By granting rights from above, the state neutralizes traditional power centres—particularly the religious clergy—and pre-empts the emergence of an independent feminist movement from below. Third, these processes are mutually reinforcing: the performance for external audiences strengthens domestic legitimacy, while internal consolidation enhances credibility with international investors.

The objectives of this research are threefold. The first is empirical: to document and analyse the key legal reforms affecting women's status enacted in Saudi Arabia and the UAE over the past decade, including changes to personal status laws, labour codes, and political representation. The second is theoretical: to develop an analytical framework capable of accounting for the simultaneous expansion of social rights and contraction of political freedoms, bridging International Relations scholarship on soft power and comparative politics scholarship on authoritarian upgrading. The third is critical: to interrogate whether the "emancipation" on offer extends beyond elite, urban women to encompass migrant domestic workers and rural citizens.

To achieve these objectives, the article employs a qualitative methodology grounded in two complementary approaches. The first

is **comparative legal analysis** of relevant statutes and decrees enacted since approximately 2015, including the Saudi Personal Status Law, amendments to the guardianship system, and UAE Federal Law No. 6 of 2020. The second is **critical discourse analysis** of state media, policy documents, and leadership speeches framing women's reforms within national development strategies such as Saudi Vision 2030 and the UAE Centennial 2071. This dual approach traces both the content of legal changes and the narrative within which they are embedded. The selection of legal instruments followed an explicit criterion of comprehensiveness within the defined period: all primary legislation, royal decrees, and constitutional amendments directly affecting women's civil status, labour rights, and political representation enacted in Saudi Arabia and the UAE between 2015 and 2023 were included. Secondary legislation and ministerial regulations were incorporated where they substantively altered the implementation of primary norms. For the discourse analysis component, the corpus was constructed from three categories of source: (i) official strategy documents (Saudi Vision 2030, UAE Centennial 2071, and associated progress reports); (ii) leadership speeches and interviews addressing women's issues, drawn from official government archives and verified transcripts; and (iii) state media outputs from Saudi Press Agency and UAE WAM covering women's rights reforms over the study period. A total of thirty-seven discrete texts were analysed. Discourse coding followed a thematic frame analysis procedure: texts were read for the recurrence of specific rhetorical frames—economic productivity, national branding, security and stability, tradition and modernity—and coded accordingly. Alternative interpretations were assessed by subjecting the coded material to a counter-reading that sought evidence of emancipatory, rights-based, or democratising framing; the near-total absence of such framing in official discourse across the corpus supports the interpretation advanced in this article.

The article proceeds in five parts. Section one reviews the theoretical literature on law, authoritarian governance, and political performance. Section two provides an empirical survey of key legal reforms in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Section three analyses the external dimension of these reforms, examining their role in nation-branding and deflection of international criticism. Section four turns to the internal dimension, exploring how these reforms reconfigure domestic authority structures. Section five confronts the limits of this statecraft, acknowledging class dimensions and unintended consequences. The

conclusion reflects on what the Gulf model portends for the global relationship between gender equality and political authority, suggesting the emergence of a distinctly illiberal form of "state feminism" that may prove increasingly influential beyond the region.

In addressing these questions, the article aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how authority is constructed and maintained in contemporary authoritarian contexts. It suggests that law, in such settings, is neither a neutral instrument of progress nor a mere façade, but a complex terrain upon which the struggle over the meaning of rights, citizenship, and belonging is continuously waged.

1. Theoretical Framework :Law, Performance, and the Authoritarian State

Understanding the paradox of women's rights expansion within entrenched authoritarianism requires an analytical lens capable of bridging legal analysis, political theory, and sociological inquiry. This section develops such a framework by synthesizing insights from three distinct but intersecting bodies of literature: legal theory on the constitutive function of law, International Relations scholarship on state performance and branding, and comparative politics research on authoritarian upgrading and state-managed social change. The goal is not merely to borrow concepts from each field, but to forge a coherent analytical apparatus adequate to the Gulf case.

Before proceeding, it is necessary to situate the concept of authoritarian state feminism in relation to three adjacent bodies of scholarship with which it overlaps but from which it is analytically distinct. The first is the literature on authoritarian upgrading (Heydemann 2007; Schedler 2002), which analyses how non-democratic regimes adapt institutionally to survive. The present framework draws on this tradition but narrows its focus to gender reform specifically, arguing that women's rights constitute a particularly effective upgrading instrument because they generate reputational and legitimating benefits unavailable through other strategies. The second adjacent concept is state feminism as theorised in comparative politics (Charrad 2001; Kantola and Squires 2012), which describes state-led promotion of women's rights across regime types. The Gulf cases diverge from this literature in a key respect: whereas most accounts of state feminism—including Charrad's North African cases—describe states that deploy women's rights as part of a

broader modernising or secularising project that carries some emancipatory potential even when instrumentally motivated, authoritarian state feminism in the Gulf is distinguished by the simultaneous intensification of political repression and the structural exclusion of women from political voice. Emancipation and consolidation are not sequential but simultaneous. The third adjacent literature is nation-branding and soft power scholarship (van Ham 2001; Nye 2004), which examines how states manage international reputation. The present framework treats nation-branding not as an end in itself but as one dimension of a broader governance logic: the external performance and the internal reconfiguration of authority are mutually constitutive, not separable functions. What the concept of authoritarian state feminism adds, then, is an integrated account that holds these three registers—upgrading, state feminism, and branding—together and explains their co-articulation in a single analytical framework.

1.1 Law as Constitutive Discourse

The conventional understanding of law, particularly within liberal legal theory, regards it primarily as a set of rules that constrain behaviour and regulate social relations. From this perspective, law is essentially instrumental: it prohibits, permits, or mandates, and its significance lies in its capacity to shape conduct. When women gain the legal right to drive or to travel without male consent, the analysis focuses on the new freedoms thereby conferred.

A richer approach, rooted in critical legal studies and Foucauldian analysis, understands law as *constitutive* rather than merely regulatory. Law does not simply restrict or enable pre-existing subjects; it actively produces the subjects it governs. As Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham argue, law is a fundamental technology of governance that helps constitute the social world it purports only to regulate[1]. When the Saudi state enacts a decree permitting women to drive, it does more than remove a restriction. It produces a new category of social actor: the female motorist, who is now integrated into the infrastructure of the modern nation-state in ways previously impossible. More significantly, it produces her as a particular *kind* of subject—not a rights-bearing citizen

[1]Alan Hunt and Gary Wickham, *Foucault and Law: Towards a Sociology of Law as Governance* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp. 78–82.

in the liberal sense, but a national asset whose mobility serves the economic imperatives of Vision 2030.

This constitutive function becomes visible when we attend to the discourse surrounding legal change. The speeches of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the pages of the official Vision 2030 document, and the curated imagery of state media do not frame women's rights in the language of inherent human dignity or universal suffrage. They frame them in the language of gross domestic product, labour force participation rates, and national competitiveness. Women are addressed not as citizens with claims against the state, but as human capital to be optimized for the post-oil economy. The law, in this context, is the instrument through which this new subjectivity is inscribed into the social fabric. It transforms the female citizen from a ward of the family—protected but confined—into an economic actor accountable directly to the state.

This perspective illuminates why the same state that grants economic freedoms simultaneously suppress political demands. The subject being produced is an *economic* subject, not a *political* one. When activists like Loujain al-Hathloul demanded the right to drive, they were initially celebrated; when they continued to demand broader political reforms, they were imprisoned. The law had produced the subject it intended to produce. Those who insisted on becoming a different kind of subject—a political subject making claims on sovereignty itself—had transgressed the implicit boundaries of the entire project.

1.1. The Performance of Statehood

If law constitutes new social subjects, it also constitutes the state itself as an actor on the international stage. Here, the insights of International Relations scholarship on performance and branding become indispensable. The traditional realist conception of the state as a unitary, rational actor pursuing objective interests has long been complicated by constructivist approaches that emphasize the social construction of state identity[1]. States, like individuals, are concerned with how they are perceived. They seek not only security and wealth, but also recognition, prestige, and status.

[1]Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 391–425.

Peter van Ham's concept of the "brand state" captures this dynamic with particular force. In an era of intensified global competition for investment, tourism, and talent, states increasingly adopt the techniques of corporate branding, crafting narratives about themselves designed to attract favourable attention[1]. The brand state does not merely *have* an image; it actively *manages* that image through strategic communications, public diplomacy, and visible policy choices. Women's rights reforms have become a central element of this branding effort for Gulf states seeking to shed their association with ultra-conservatism and present themselves as modern, dynamic, and open for business.

This performative dimension operates on multiple levels. At the most visible level, there is the direct appeal to Western media and investors. The Saudi delegation to the World Economic Forum in Davos now prominently features female ministers and executives. Emirati women in positions of authority are showcased in international conferences and diplomatic engagements. These are not incidental by-products of reform; they are the reform's intended audience. The goal is to generate a specific kind of international discourse—one that speaks of transformation, moderation, and opportunity—that will in turn attract the foreign capital and talent necessary for post-oil diversification.

Yet performance is not merely external. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical sociology, though developed for the analysis of face-to-face interaction, offers a useful analogy. Goffman distinguished between the "front stage," where actors perform for an audience, and the "backstage," where they can drop their performance and be themselves[2]. For Gulf states, the international arena is the front stage, and women's rights are a central element of the performance. But the backstage—the domestic sphere of actual governance—remains distinct. On the backstage, the security apparatus operates, dissent is suppressed, and the boundaries of acceptable advocacy are enforced. The performance is not necessarily a lie; the reforms are real. But their meaning is inseparable from the dual audience they address and the dual function they serve.

[1]Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 2–6.
[2]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 17–25.

1.2. Authoritarian Upgrading and State-Managed Social Change

The third pillar of the theoretical framework draws on comparative politics scholarship concerned with the resilience of authoritarian regimes. The question of why some authoritarian states persist and even strengthen in an era of democratization has generated a rich literature on "authoritarian upgrading"—the strategies through which non-democratic regimes adapt to changing circumstances without surrendering control.[1]

Steven Heydemann's analysis of authoritarian upgrading in the Arab world identifies several key strategies: the appropriation of civil society discourse, the management of political participation, and the selective incorporation of reformist demands[2]. Women's rights reforms in the Gulf exemplify all three. By adopting the language of women's empowerment, the state appropriates a discourse traditionally associated with liberal civil society and makes it an instrument of state policy. By granting reforms from above, it manages the pace and scope of change, ensuring that participation remains contained within state-sanctioned channels. By selectively incorporating the demands of reformers—granting the right to drive while refusing to countenance an elected parliament—it fragments potential opposition and deprives critics of unifying grievances.

This process is intimately linked to what Mounira Charrad, in her influential study of state formation and women's rights in North Africa, termed "state feminism."[3] Charrad showed how post-independence states in Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco deployed family law reforms as part of broader projects of nation-building and state consolidation. Where a strong, centralized state emerged (Tunisia), it imposed relatively progressive family law as a means of weakening tribal and religious authorities and consolidating its own power. Where the state remained weak and fragmented (Morocco), family law remained

[1]Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1959), pp. 17–25.
[2]Steven Heydemann, "Upgrading Authoritarianism in the Arab World," *Analysis Paper* 13 (2007): 1–37.
[3]MouniraCharrad, *States and Women's Rights: The Making of Postcolonial Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 45–67.

conservative, reflecting the continued power of those traditional authorities.

The Gulf cases both echo and diverge from this pattern. Like the Tunisian state under Bourguiba, the Saudi and Emirati states are using women's rights reforms to weaken traditional authorities—in this case, the religious clergy whose social influence once rivalled that of the state. But unlike Bourguiba's Tunisia, which combined family law reform with broader projects of secularization and (limited) political opening, the Gulf states are pursuing what might be termed *authoritarian state feminism*: the use of gender reform to strengthen, not weaken, authoritarian rule. The goal is not to produce citizens who will eventually demand accountability, but to produce subjects whose loyalty to the modernizing monarch eclipses their allegiance to family, tribe, or mosque.

This framework reveals the limitations of analyses that simply ask whether Gulf women's rights reforms are "real" or "fake." They are real in the sense that they change legal statuses, open opportunities, and alter lived experiences. But they are also performative in the sense that they are designed for specific audiences and serve strategic purposes beyond the ostensible goal of emancipation. And they are authoritarian in the sense that they reinforce, rather than challenge, the concentration of power at the apex of the state. The task of analysis is not to adjudicate between these dimensions, but to hold them together in productive tension.

Three counterarguments to the strategic statecraft thesis deserve explicit engagement. The first holds that reforms reflect the genuine modernising preferences of a new generation of rulers. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his Emirati counterparts are, by generational formation, more cosmopolitan and less invested in the patriarchal bargains of their predecessors. On this reading, women's rights reforms are a sincere expression of changed elite values, not primarily an instrument of governance. This argument has some purchase: the speed and scope of change under MBS exceeded what a purely instrumental calculus might require, and there is evidence of genuine intra-elite enthusiasm for social liberalisation. The strategic statecraft framework does not, however, require that reforms be exclusively instrumental. Sincere modernising preferences and strategic governance logic are not mutually exclusive; indeed, the two may be mutually reinforcing. What

the framework insists on is that regardless of motivational origins, these reforms have been systematically deployed in ways that serve authoritarian consolidation—and that this deployment has structural effects that transcend the intentions of any individual ruler.

The second counterargument locates the primary driver in economic necessity rather than political performance. The fiscal pressures of declining oil revenues and the imperative of post-hydrocarbon diversification demanded a larger, more productive workforce, and women's entry into the labour market was the most immediately available supply-side response. This economic logic is real and is explicitly acknowledged by the article. The point of the strategic statecraft thesis, however, is not to deny the economic logic but to show that it intersects with, and reinforces, a broader governance project: reforms that were economically necessary were also politically useful and were framed and sequenced in ways that maximised their legitimating and branding value.

The third counterargument emphasises the agency of Gulf society itself: survey evidence suggests genuine attitudinal change among younger generations, particularly women, who aspire to professional participation and personal autonomy. Reforms may thus be a response to real social pressure from below, not only a strategic imposition from above. This argument is taken seriously. The article does not claim that the state operates in a social vacuum or that demand for change is absent. It argues, rather, that the state has systematically channelled and pre-empted this demand, granting from above what might otherwise have had to be conceded in response to organised pressure—and ensuring that the granting, rather than the demanding, defines the terms of change.

2. The Legal Reforms: A Survey of the New Landscape

Before advancing the analytical argument, it is necessary to establish the empirical terrain. This section provides a concise survey of the major legal reforms affecting women's status enacted in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over approximately the past decade. The focus on these two cases is deliberate: they represent the most dynamic and visible instances of reform in the Gulf region, and together they illustrate the range of strategies through which Gulf states are reconfiguring the legal architecture governing women's lives. The survey is organised thematically rather than chronologically, addressing reforms

to mobility rights, personal status law, labour market access, and political representation. It is important to note from the outset that these reforms do not benefit all women equally. The legal architecture being constructed primarily serves nationally privileged, urban, educated women; its reach to rural, poor, and migrant women is substantially more limited. This intersectional dimension is not merely a qualification to be addressed at the end of the analysis: it is constitutive of the statecraft logic itself, as the following sections will demonstrate.

2.1. Saudi Arabia: The Rapid Transformation

Saudi Arabia has undergone the most dramatic legal transformation in its modern history. The change most visible to external observers was the September 2017 royal decree lifting the ban on women driving, which took effect in June 2018[1]. This reform was symbolically potent, as the driving ban had long served as the international emblem of Saudi women's confinement. Yet it was accompanied by a series of equally significant though less publicized changes. In 2019, the Saudi government issued a new Personal Status Law, the first codified legislation of its kind in the Kingdom's history.[2] While conservative in many provisions, the law represented a significant shift from rule by uncodified judicial discretion toward rule by codified statute, creating new possibilities for legal predictability and reform.

Most consequential have been the amendments to the male guardianship system. Since 2019, Saudi women over twenty-one have been permitted to obtain passports and travel abroad without male guardian consent.[3] They may now register marriages, divorces, and births, and act as legal guardians for minor children in certain contexts. The reforms stopped short of abolishing guardianship entirely—male consent remains required for marriage in many interpretations—but they fundamentally altered the relationship between women and the state. Where women once accessed the state through male intermediaries, they now increasingly stand before it as direct legal subjects.

[1]Royal Decree of September 26, 2017. For analysis, see Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's New Deal: The Drive to Reform and Its Limits," *Middle East Brief* 124 (2018): 1–8.
[2]Saudi Personal Status Law, Royal Decree No.M/73, 1441 Hijri (2019 Gregorian).
[3]Saudi Ministry of Interior, "Procedures for Issuance of Passports," August 2019.

Workforce participation has been a central target of reform. Under Vision 2030, female labour force participation was targeted to rise from 22 percent to 30 percent; by 2023, it had surpassed 35 percent, exceeding the original goal.[1] This was achieved through a combination of legal changes—including amendments to labour law prohibiting gender discrimination and mandating equal pay for equal work—and regulatory interventions, such as the "fit to work" campaign that encouraged women's employment across sectors. The result has been the visible presence of Saudi women in retail, hospitality, finance, and even religious tourism, domains from which they were previously excluded.

These gains, however, are unevenly distributed along class and geographic lines. Workforce participation rates mask deep stratification: the women most visible in Vision 2030 brochures and corporate boards are overwhelmingly urban, educated, and from families with the social capital to navigate new opportunities. Rural women, who constitute a significant proportion of the female population, face persistent barriers of infrastructure, family authority structures, and limited access to education and transportation that formal legal reform has not addressed. Migrant domestic workers—an estimated two million in Saudi Arabia alone—remain entirely outside the framework of reform, governed instead by the kafala sponsorship system that renders them structurally vulnerable regardless of changes to national labour law.

2.2 United Arab Emirates: The Cosmopolitan Model

The United Arab Emirates, already possessing a more liberal legal infrastructure than its neighbour, has pursued reform through a different register: the cultivation of a cosmopolitan legal identity designed to attract global talent and investment. Federal Law No. 6 of 2020, amending the Personal Status Law for non-Muslims, represented a significant departure.[2] For the first time, non-Muslim residents of the UAE gained access to civil marriage, divorce, and inheritance procedures based on secular principles rather than Sharia. While this law technically applies only to non-Muslims, its symbolic significance extends further,

[1]Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, "Vision 2030 Progress Report 2023," Riyadh: Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 2023, p. 17.
[2]United Arab Emirates, Federal Law No. 6 of 2020 on Personal Status for Non-Muslims.

signalling the state's willingness to pluralize legal authority in ways previously unthinkable.

For Emirati citizens, reforms have been more incremental but nonetheless significant. The UAE amended its labour law in 2019 to mandate equal pay for women performing the same work as men.[1] In 2021, further amendments extended maternity leave and introduced paternity leave for the first time. The state has also aggressively promoted women's political participation through a quota system reserving 50 percent of seats in the Federal National Council for women, though it must be noted that the FNC remains a consultative rather than legislative body with limited formal powers.[2]

More striking than formal legal change has been the state's investment in women's economic leadership. The UAE has appointed women to senior positions in its sovereign wealth funds, including the Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, and to the boards of major state-owned enterprises. Women now hold cabinet positions, ambassadorships, and senior judicial appointments. The message is consistent: in the UAE's model, women's advancement is framed as an integral component of the state's broader project of economic competitiveness and global integration.

The UAE presents a parallel, if differently inflected, picture of intersectional stratification. The cosmopolitan model projects Emirati women as symbols of regional modernity, yet Emirati nationals constitute a minority of the country's population. The vast majority of women residing in the UAE—migrant workers from South and Southeast Asia, domestic workers from East Africa and the Philippines—have no access to the civil protections conferred by Federal Law No. 6 of 2020, no recourse to equal pay provisions under the labour law, and no prospect of political representation. Their labour underwrites the lifestyle and professional participation of the Emirati women whose advancement the state celebrates. This structural dependency is not incidental to the cosmopolitan model but constitutive of it: the emancipation on display

[1]United Arab Emirates, Federal Law No. 14 of 2019 Amending Certain Provisions of the Labor Law.
[2]UAE Federal National Council, "Women's Representation Report 2021," Abu Dhabi: FNC Secretariat, 2021.

depends on a form of labour exploitation that the state has no interest in disrupting.

Several patterns emerge from this survey. First, the reforms are overwhelmingly concentrated in the economic and social spheres. They concern mobility, employment, education, and family status. They do not concern political rights in any meaningful sense. No Gulf state has moved toward an elected parliament with genuine legislative authority, and the suppression of political dissent has intensified even as social freedoms have expanded. Second, the reforms are top-down in character. They are enacted by royal decree or state initiative, not in response to organized social movements. Indeed, independent feminist organizing remains illegal and is actively repressed across the region. Third, the pace of change has been notably rapid by regional standards, suggesting not gradual evolution but deliberate state strategy. These patterns support the hypothesis that the reforms serve purposes beyond the ostensible goal of women's emancipation, a proposition the following sections will explore in depth. It should be noted that the empirical analysis that follows draws primarily on Saudi Arabia and the UAE; references to other GCC states—Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman—are indicative rather than systematic, and the extent to which the framework applies to those cases remains a question for further comparative research.

3. The Performance: External Legitimation and Nation Branding

If the legal reforms documented above were solely about improving women's lives, their meaning would be relatively straightforward. But the speed, selectivity, and top-down character of these changes suggest they serve additional purposes. This section argues that women's rights reforms in the Gulf function as a critical instrument of *external legitimation*, directed at international audiences whose perceptions materially affect the fortunes of these states. The argument proceeds in three parts: first, an examination of how these reforms feature in the nation-branding strategies of Gulf states; second, an analysis of their role in attracting foreign investment and global talent; and third, a consideration of how they function to deflect international human rights scrutiny.

3.1. The Brand State and the Performance of Modernity

The concept of the "brand state," introduced by Peter van Ham, captures a fundamental shift in how states compete in the global arena.[1] In an era of intensified competition for investment, tourism, and talent, states increasingly adopt the techniques of corporate marketing, crafting narratives about themselves designed to shape international perceptions. The brand state does not merely have an image; it actively manages that image through strategic communications, public diplomacy, and visible policy choices. For Gulf states seeking to transition from hydrocarbon dependence to diversified, knowledge-based economies, the content of their national brand is not a matter of superficial concern but of material consequence.

Women's rights reforms have become central to this branding effort. The Saudi Vision 2030 document, the master narrative of the Kingdom's transformation, explicitly frames women's participation as an indicator of national modernity and economic dynamism.[2] The document's pages feature photographs of women in professional settings, and its targets include specific metrics for female labour force participation. This is not incidental illustration but deliberate branding: the image of the Saudi woman as engineer, executive, or entrepreneur is offered to the world as evidence that the Kingdom has left its conservative past behind.

The United Emirates pursues a similar but distinct strategy. Where Saudi branding emphasizes transformation, Emirati branding emphasizes tolerance and cosmopolitanism. The UAE's official narratives highlight the appointment of female ministers, the presence of women in its diplomatic corps, and the country's rankings on international gender equality metrics.[3] These narratives are directed at specific audiences: Western investors considering regional headquarters, global professionals weighing expatriate assignments, and international media outlets whose coverage shapes broader perceptions. The message is consistent: this is a place where modernity functions, where women

[1]Peter van Ham, "The Rise of the Brand State: The Postmodern Politics of Image and Reputation," *Foreign Affairs* 80, no. 5 (2001): 2–6.
[2]Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, *Vision 2030* (Riyadh: Council of Economic and Development Affairs, 2016), pp. 37, 42, 56.
[3]UAE Government, *UAE Centennial 2071* (Abu Dhabi: UAE Government Communications Office, 2019), pp. 22–25.

participate fully, and where global visitors can expect to encounter a familiar, professional environment.

3.2. Economic Diversification and the Attraction of Capital

The intensity of this branding effort reflects genuine economic imperatives. The Gulf states are engaged in an urgent project of economic diversification, seeking to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon revenues that will eventually deplete or lose value in a transitioning global energy system. This project requires foreign direct investment, which in turn requires international confidence in the stability, modernity, and regulatory quality of the host state.[1]

Women's rights reforms signal precisely these qualities to potential investors. When international corporations consider establishing regional headquarters in Dubai or Riyadh, they assess not only tax rates and infrastructure, but the broader social environment in which their employees—including female executives and professionals—will live and work. The presence of women in visible professional roles, the legal guarantee of equal pay, and the removal of mobility restrictions all function as signals that the Gulf states can accommodate a global workforce. The reforms say, in effect: your female employees will not face legal barriers to driving, working, or travelling; your company will not face reputational risk from association with a deeply patriarchal state.

The branding logic, however, is selective in whose experience it represents. The image projected to foreign investors—of a society modernising through women's empowerment—is constituted through the deliberate exclusion of migrant women from the frame. The kafala system, which binds two to three million domestic and low-wage workers to their employers with minimal legal protection, is not mentioned in Vision 2030 or in the international communications campaigns that frame the Gulf as a destination for global talent. The performance of modernity for external investors thus requires not only the front-stage display of national women's advancement but the active erasure of migrant women's subordination from the official narrative.

[1]On the relationship between regulatory environment and foreign direct investment, see World Bank, *Doing Business 2020* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2020), pp. 15–18.

This logic extends beyond corporate investment to the competition for global talent. The Gulf states seek to attract highly skilled professionals from around the world to staff their knowledge-economy sectors. These professionals, increasingly including women in senior positions, have choices about where to locate. They are unlikely to choose destinations where their basic mobility and professional autonomy are legally constrained. The reforms thus function as a form of regulatory competition, aligning Gulf legal frameworks with the expectations of a global professional class whose presence is essential to post-oil economic visions.[1]

The language in which reforms are framed reinforces this interpretation. When Gulf officials address international forums like the World Economic Forum or the United Nations General Assembly, they discuss women's rights in the vocabulary of economics, not rights. They speak of labour force participation rates, GDP contributions, and human capital optimization. Women are addressed not as rights-bearing citizens but as underutilized economic assets whose full deployment serves national competitiveness. This framing is not incidental; it reveals the underlying logic of the reform project as one oriented toward economic rather than political transformation.

3.3. Deflecting International Scrutiny

The performative function of women's rights reforms extends to a third audience: the international human rights community and the Western governments and media that influence its attention. Gulf states have faced sustained criticism over their human rights records, from the murder of Jamal Khashoggi to the treatment of migrant workers to the suppression of political dissent. Women's rights reforms provide a powerful counter-narrative that complicates this criticism and fragments the coalition of potential critics.[2]

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[1]For the concept of regulatory competition in the Gulf context, see Steffen Hertog, "The Political Economy of Distribution in the Middle East," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Politics of Development*, ed. Carol Lancaster and Nicolas van de Walle (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 456–78.

[2]On the concept of "reputational cover," see Sarah Leah Whitson, "Friends Like These: The West's Double Standards on Human Rights in the Gulf," *Human Rights Watch World Report 2021* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021), pp. 45–52.

The strategic logic is straightforward. When international media outlets or human rights organizations publish critical reports on Gulf human rights abuses, state officials and their allies can respond by pointing to women's rights progress. The implicit argument runs whatever problems may persist, this is a society in transformation, a society that has lifted its driving ban, appointed female ministers, and expanded workforce participation. The criticism is deflected, the moral clarity of the accuser blurred, and the political will to impose consequences diminished.

This dynamic was visible in the aftermath of the Khashoggi killing. As international outrage mounted, Saudi officials and their supporters consistently invoked women's rights reforms as evidence of the Kingdom's broader modernization under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.[1] The narrative of the "reformer prince" risking his political capital to drag his society toward modernity served to contextualize—and implicitly excuse—the violence attributed to his circle. The reforms provided reputational cover, a reservoir of goodwill and positive association that could be drawn upon when reputational threats emerged.

The limits of this strategy are revealing. The reforms provide cover for the regime, but only up to a point. They do not protect individual activists who transgress the boundaries of acceptable advocacy, as the imprisonment of women who campaigned for the right to drive—and then continued to advocate beyond it—makes clear. The performance is for external audiences; the backstage, where the security apparatus operates, remains distinct. But for international audiences whose attention spans are limited and whose memory is short, the performance often succeeds. The image of the female fighter pilot lingers; the names of imprisoned activists fade.

A note on evidence is warranted here. The claim that these reforms were designed as reputational cover—rather than being an incidental by-product of genuine modernising preferences—rests on a convergence of indirect indicators: the temporal correlation between reform announcements and major international summits or investment drives; the documented deployment of women's rights narratives by official

[1]For examples of this framing, see Thomas L. Friedman, "Saudi Arabia's Arab Spring, at Last," *The New York Times*, November 27, 2018; and "The Saudi Gamble," *The Economist*, January 5, 2019.

spokespersons in response to human rights criticism; and the stark simultaneity of civil liberalisation and political repression. This pattern of evidence is consistent with strategic intent but cannot definitively exclude the possibility that the reputational benefits were anticipated but not the primary motive. The interpretation advanced here is offered as the most parsimonious explanation of the available evidence, not as an established fact immune to revision.

4. The Statecraft: Internal Governance and the Reconfiguration of Authority

If the previous section examined how women's rights reforms function as performance for external audiences, this section turns inward. It argues that these legal changes are equally, if not more significantly, instruments of *internal governance*—tools through which Gulf states reconfigure domestic power relations, neutralize traditional centres of authority, and forge new forms of allegiance between the citizen and the state. The analysis proceeds through three interconnected arguments: first, that reforms weaken the religious establishment and recentre authority in the crown; second, that they construct a new social contract based on economic participation rather than political rights; and third, that they pre-empt the emergence of independent civil society by granting reform from above.

4.1. Neutralizing the Religious Clergy

In Saudi Arabia particularly, the traditional power of the religious establishment rested on its control over the social sphere. The *ulama* (religious scholars) and the *mutawwa* (religious police) exercised authority over education, family law, gender segregation, and public morality. Their interpretation of Islamic doctrine shaped the daily lives of citizens in ways that rivalled, and sometimes exceeded, the reach of the state. For the Al Saud dynasty, this arrangement was a bargain: the House of Saud provided political protection and material support to the religious establishment, and the religious establishment provided legitimacy to Saudi rule.[1]

[1]On the historical alliance between the Al Saud and the religious establishment, see Nabil Mouline, *The Clerics of Islam: Religious Authority and Political Power in Saudi Arabia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), pp. 145–72.

Women's rights reforms have fundamentally disrupted this bargain. The abolition of the driving ban, the curtailment of the religious police's powers, and the erosion of the male guardianship system all directly undermine the social authority of the religious establishment. Each reform signals that the ultimate source of authority in Saudi society is not the mosque but the palace. When the Crown Prince declares that Saudi Arabia will return to "moderate Islam," he is not merely announcing a policy preference; he is asserting sovereign prerogative over a domain long reserved for religious interpretation.[1]

The timing and sequencing of reforms reinforce this interpretation. The driving ban was not lifted because the religious establishment was persuaded to change its interpretation of Islamic law. It was lifted by royal decree, over the objections of conservative clerics whose predecessors had declared women's driving a sin. The state did not wait for religious consensus; it imposed its will, demonstrating that the final say on social questions now rests with the political leadership. Subsequent reforms to the guardianship system and personal status law followed the same pattern: they were announced from above, with minimal consultation of religious authorities, and implemented through state institutions rather than religious courts.[2]

This is not to suggest that the religious establishment has been eliminated as a social force. Conservative clerics retain influence over significant segments of the population, and the state continues to deploy religious discourse in support of its projects. But the balance of power has shifted decisively. The religious establishment has been reduced from a partner in governance to a service provider for a state that sets its own agenda. Women's rights reforms have been central to this reconfiguration, demonstrating in the most visible possible terms where sovereignty now resides.

The evidentiary basis for this claim also merits transparency. The argument that reforms were designed to neutralise the religious establishment draws on the documented sequence of events—royal decrees overriding clerical objection, the arrest of prominent conservative

[1]Mohammed bin Salman's "moderate Islam" interview with *The Guardian*, October 24, 2017.
[2] For analysis of the implementation process, see Stéphane Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Reform Trajectory," *Middle East Brief* 132 (2020): 1–9.

clerics in the 2017 anti-corruption campaign, and the formal subordination of religious police powers to civil authorities—rather than on direct statements of intent by decision-makers. These patterns constitute strong circumstantial evidence of strategic calculation, but the article acknowledges that they could also be consistent with a genuine ideological shift within the ruling circle. The two interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and the strategic statecraft thesis does not require that the reforms be exclusively instrumental to remain analytically valid.

4.2 Constructing a New Social Contract

The old rentier bargain in the Gulf was straightforward: citizens relinquished political claims in exchange for state provision of employment, subsidies, and services. The state asked little of its citizens beyond acquiescence, and citizens expected little of the state beyond material support. This bargain produced stability but also dependency, and it proved ill-suited to the challenges of the post-oil era, when states could no longer guarantee public sector employment to all citizens and needed to mobilize the population for economic diversification.[1]

Women's rights reforms are integral to the construction of a new social contract suited to these challenges. The old bargain treated women as dependents of male citizens, their welfare secured through the male-headed household. The emerging bargain addresses women directly as economic actors with obligations to the national project. They are encouraged—through quotas, training programs, and legal reforms—to enter the workforce, contribute to GDP, and participate in the diversification economy. In return, they receive access to mobility, professional opportunity, and a measure of personal autonomy previously denied.

This new bargain represents a fundamental shift in the relationship between citizen and state. Where women once accessed the state through male intermediaries—fathers, husbands, brothers—they now increasingly stand before it as direct subjects. Their loyalty is sought not through the mediation of family and tribe, but through direct identification with the national project and its leadership. The state offers

[1]On the limits of the rentier bargain in the post-oil era, see Steffen Hertog, "The Challenges of Economic Diversification in the Gulf," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst, 2013), pp. 67–92.

women a new identity: not primarily as daughters or wives, but as Saudi or Emirati citizens whose labour and loyalty are owed to the nation.[1]

The limits of this new bargain are as revealing as its content. The state offers economic opportunity but not political voice. It addresses women as workers and consumers, not as voters or legislators with meaningful power over the institutions that govern them. The new social contract is thus continuous with the old in one crucial respect: it does not threaten the concentration of power at the apex of the state. Economic citizenship is extended; political citizenship remains foreclosed. The state gains the benefits of women's labour and loyalty without incurring the risks of democratic accountability.

4.2. Pre-empting Civil Society

The third internal function of women's rights reforms is perhaps the most subtle but the most significant: they pre-empt the emergence of independent civil society by granting reform from above. In many contexts, feminist movements have emerged from below, organizing to demand legal change and building autonomous organizational capacity in the process. These movements, once formed, often extend their demands beyond specific reforms to broader claims about political participation and democratic governance. They become schools for citizenship, sites where women learn to organize, advocate, and hold power accountable.[2]

The Gulf states have avoided this trajectory by making reform a state project rather than a response to social pressure. Women did not win the right to drive through mass mobilization, public protests, or international solidarity campaigns. They were granted the right to drive by a state that calculated that the benefits of granting it outweighed the costs of continued denial. The state, not civil society, controls the agenda, the pace, and the framing of change. It decides which demands are legitimate and which are beyond the pale.

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[1]This argument draws on the concept of "economic citizenship" developed by Vicki Schultz in "Life's Work," *Columbia Law Review* 100, no. 7 (2000): 1881–1964.

[2]For the classic statement on social movements and democratic learning, see Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 156–82.

This dynamic explains the otherwise puzzling treatment of women's rights activists in Saudi Arabia. Women like Loujain al-Hathloul who campaigned for the right to drive were initially figures of international sympathy. But when they continued to advocate beyond the specific reforms the state was prepared to grant—when they moved from demanding the right to drive to demanding an elected parliament or the release of political prisoners—they crossed an invisible line.[1] The state that had granted their primary demand now imprisoned them as threats. The message to other women was unambiguous: accept the reforms the state offers, and you will be celebrated; demand more, and you will be silenced.

This is what might be termed "state-managed feminism": a project in which the state sets the terms of women's advancement, controls the narrative surrounding it, and ensures that reform never tips over into demands that would threaten authoritarian stability. Independent feminist organizing is rendered unnecessary because the state already provides what activists might demand. Independent feminist voices are rendered illegitimate because they appear ungrateful, demanding more from a state that has already given so much. The result is a population of women who are economically active and legally empowered in specific domains, but who lack the organizational infrastructure or political consciousness that might translate these gains into democratic demands.

5. The Limits of Statecraft: Where Performance Meets Reality

The preceding sections have argued that women's rights reforms in the Gulf are best understood as instruments of strategic statecraft, serving external legitimation and internal governance functions that reinforce rather than undermine authoritarian structures. This framework, however, risks appearing overly deterministic, implying a state that controls the social field entirely and encounters no resistance or unintended consequences. This section introduces necessary nuance by examining the limits of this statecraft. It addresses three domains in which the performance meets reality: the class dimensions of reform that exclude significant segments of the female population; the persistence of the penal state alongside civil law reform; and the potential unintended

[1]Human Rights Watch, "Saudi Arabia: Women's Rights Advocates on Trial," February 20, 2020.

consequences of empowering a generation of economically independent women.

5.1. The Class Dimensions of Reform

The women's rights reforms surveyed in section two are real in their effects, but they are not evenly distributed across the female population. A clear pattern emerges: the beneficiaries are overwhelmingly elite, urban, and nationally privileged women. The Saudi woman who gains the most from the new legal architecture is the one with education, professional ambitions, and family resources sufficient to take advantage of expanded opportunities. She is the woman who appears in Vision 2030 brochures, who attends international conferences, who embodies the nation's modern brand. For her, the reforms constitute genuine emancipation from previously constraining structures.[1]

The same cannot be said for rural women, for poorer women, or for the millions of migrant domestic workers who form a substantial portion of the female population in Gulf states. Rural women remain subject to traditional authority structures that the state has done little to disrupt; their access to the new economy is limited by geography, education, and infrastructure. Migrant women from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa inhabit a different legal universe entirely, governed by the *kafala* (sponsorship) system that ties their legal status to employers who often exploit their vulnerability.[2] For these women, the much-celebrated reforms are not merely irrelevant but potentially harmful: the image of the emancipated national woman serves to obscure the condition of the migrant woman whose labour makes that emancipation possible.

This class dimension reveals a fundamental limit of state-managed feminism. The reforms are designed to serve the state's economic and political projects, not to address structural inequalities that cut across the female population. They produce a class of privileged

[1]On the class dimensions of Gulf women's reforms, see Amelie Le Renard, *A Society of Young Women: Opportunities of Place, Power, and Reform in Saudi Arabia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014), pp. 89–112.
[2]On the *kafala* system and migrant women, see Ray Jureidini, "Migrant Labour in the Gulf," in *The Gulf States and the Arab Uprisings*, ed. Mehran Kamrava (London: Hurst, 2013), pp. 145–68.

national women whose enhanced status depends, in part, on the continued subordination of migrant women who clean their homes and care for their children. The performance of modernity for international audiences requires the backstage of migrant labour, just as the performance of reform requires the backstage of continued repression.[1]

5.2. The Persistence of the Penal State

A second limit concerns the relationship between civil law reform and the broader legal apparatus of the state. The reforms examined in this article concern civil status: mobility, employment, family law. They leave untouched the penal laws and security institutions that constitute the authoritarian core of the state. The same state that grants women the right to drive retains the capacity to imprison them for political speech. The same state that appoints women to corporate boards maintains the security services that torture dissidents. The reforms and the repression are not contradictions; they are two faces of the same state.[2]

This duality was starkly illustrated in the case of Loujain al-Hathloul. She was arrested not for demanding the right to drive—a demand the state eventually granted—but for continuing to advocate beyond it. Her imprisonment, torture, and trial occurred under penal laws that remained unchanged by the wave of civil law reforms. The message to Saudi women was clear: accept the freedoms the state offers, and you will be celebrated; demand freedoms the state is not prepared to grant, and you will discover that the penal state remains fully operational.[3]

The persistence of the penal state places clear boundaries on the meaning of reform. Women's rights are expanded, but only within parameters set by the security state. Red lines are drawn around political speech, association, and organization. Crossing these lines transforms the beneficiary of reform into an enemy of the state, subject to the full

[1]This argument draws on the concept of "intersectionality" developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241–99.
[2]On the persistence of the penal state in reforming authoritarian contexts, see Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp. 67–92.
[3]Human Rights Watch, *Saudi Arabia: Events of 2020* (New York: Human Rights Watch, 2021).

coercive power of institutions untouched by the spirit of modernization. The woman who enjoys newly granted mobility must internalize these boundaries, calibrating her behaviour to avoid triggering the penal apparatus that lurks beneath the surface of reform.

5.3. Unintended Consequences and the Genie Out of the Bottle

The final limit concerns the unpredictability of social change. The state may intend women's rights reforms as instruments of authoritarian consolidation, but intentions do not determine outcomes. Once women enter the workforce in large numbers, once they gain economic independence, once they experience mobility and professional autonomy, they may develop political consciousness and demands that the state cannot easily contain. The genie, once out of the bottle, may prove difficult to return.[1]

There is some evidence that this dynamic is already underway. Surveys of young Saudi women reveal aspirations that extend beyond the boundaries of state-managed feminism. They speak of careers, certainly, but also of voice, of participation, of having a say in the decisions that shape their lives. The state has granted them economic citizenship; some are beginning to wonder why political citizenship should remain forever foreclosed. Women who have experienced the dignity of professional achievement may be less willing to accept the indignity of political silence.[2]

The state is not unaware of this risk, and it has developed strategies to manage it. The promotion of loyal women to visible positions creates role models whose trajectory reinforces the message that advancement comes through alignment with the state, not opposition to it. The repression of activists who cross red lines serves as a warning to others. But these strategies may prove insufficient if the underlying conditions of women's lives continue to change. A generation of women

[1]For a classic statement on unintended consequences of social engineering, see James C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), pp. 45–78.
[2]On young Saudi women's aspirations, see Mark C. Thompson, *Being Young in Saudi Arabia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 156–82.

educated, employed, and economically independent may eventually prove less governable than the state currently imagines.

This is not to predict imminent transformation. Authoritarian states have proven remarkably resilient in the face of social change, and the Gulf states command resources and coercive capacities that far exceed those of any potential opposition. But it is to acknowledge that statecraft has limits, that social engineering produces unintended consequences, and that the women now being summoned into economic participation may eventually make claims that their summoners did not anticipate.

Conclusion:

This article began with a paradox: Gulf states are simultaneously expanding women's legal rights and intensifying authoritarian repression, granting economic freedoms while foreclosing political voice. The puzzle demanded an analytical framework capable of moving beyond the binary of progress versus regression, substance versus illusion. The concept of strategic statecraft was proposed as a lens through which to view these reforms not as a linear trajectory toward emancipation nor as a cynical hoax, but as a sophisticated technology of governance deployed to manage the dual pressures of global integration and domestic authoritarian stability.

The analysis has substantiated this framework across multiple dimensions. Section two documented the empirical terrain, surveying the major legal reforms affecting women's status in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates over the past decade. These changes are real and consequential, altering women's mobility, workforce participation, and legal standing in ways that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. Section three examined their external function, arguing that they operate as instruments of nation-branding directed at international audiences. They signal modernity to investors, attract global talent, and provide reputational cover that deflects human rights scrutiny. Section four turned inward, revealing how these same reforms serve internal governance functions. They weaken traditional religious authorities, construct a new social contract based on economic participation rather than political rights, and pre-empt the emergence of independent civil society by granting reform from above. Section five complicated the picture, acknowledging the class dimensions that exclude migrant and

rural women, the persistence of the penal state alongside civil law reform, and the potential unintended consequences of empowering a generation of economically independent women who may eventually make unanticipated claims.

Several conclusions emerge from this analysis. The first is methodological: the study of law in authoritarian contexts must attend simultaneously to legal texts and to the political contexts in which they are embedded. Law is neither a neutral instrument of progress nor a mere facade; it is a contested terrain on which struggles over the meaning of rights, citizenship, and belonging are waged. Reading statutes alone cannot reveal whether a reform expands freedom or consolidates control. The question is not only what the law says, but who enacted it, for what purposes, and with what relationship to the broader apparatus of state power.

The second conclusion is theoretical: the Gulf cases suggest the emergence of a distinctive formation that might be termed authoritarian state feminism. Unlike Western state feminism, which emerged in response to social movement pressure and was embedded within democratic institutions, authoritarian state feminism is a top-down project designed to strengthen rather than disperse power. It deploys the language and some of the substance of women's empowerment in service of authoritarian consolidation. It produces economically active women who are loyal to the regime but lack the organizational capacity or political consciousness to demand democratic accountability. Whether this formation proves stable over time, or whether it generates contradictions that eventually undermine it, remains an open question.

The third conclusion is comparative: the Gulf model may prove influential beyond the region. As authoritarian states globally confront the challenges of economic transformation and international integration, they may look to the Gulf as demonstrating how social reform can be decoupled from political liberalization. The model offers a tentative template—one that invites rather than forecloses comparative testing: grant economic and social rights selectively, manage the narrative of reform for international audiences, neutralize traditional authorities that might rival the state, and ensure that change never tips over into demands for democratic accountability. Whether authoritarian

states elsewhere are in fact adopting or adapting this repertoire remains a hypothesis requiring systematic comparative investigation.

Preliminary indicators suggest the hypothesis is not implausible. Egypt under President Sisi has combined the promotion of women's political representation and anti-harassment legislation with intensified repression of feminist civil society organisations, a pattern structurally analogous to the Gulf cases. China has similarly deployed women's advancement narratives—particularly in international forums—while suppressing autonomous feminist organising domestically. Whether these resemblances reflect deliberate emulation of a Gulf model, parallel responses to similar pressures, or coincidental convergence cannot be determined without systematic comparative research. What can be said is that the decoupling of social rights from political liberalisation is not unique to the Gulf, and that the analytical framework developed here may offer resources for understanding cases beyond the region.

This article has focused on Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates as the most dynamic cases of reform, but the framework developed here invites extension. How do women's rights reforms function in other Gulf states—Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman—where the pace and scope of change differ? How do these dynamics compare with other authoritarian contexts, from Egypt to China, where states are also deploying gender reform as an instrument of governance? What happens when the women summoned into economic participation begin to make political claims their summoners did not anticipate? These questions await further research.

For now, the analysis suggests that women's rights in the Gulf are best understood not through the lens of liberal expectation—waiting for reform to ripen into democracy—nor through the lens of Orientalist cynicism—dismissing all change as window dressing. They exist in a liminal space between reform and performance, between emancipation and governance, between the genuine expansion of opportunity and its strategic containment. The women of the Gulf live their lives in this space, navigating its possibilities and its limits with resources the state cannot fully control. Their future, and the region's, will be shaped by what they make of it.

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