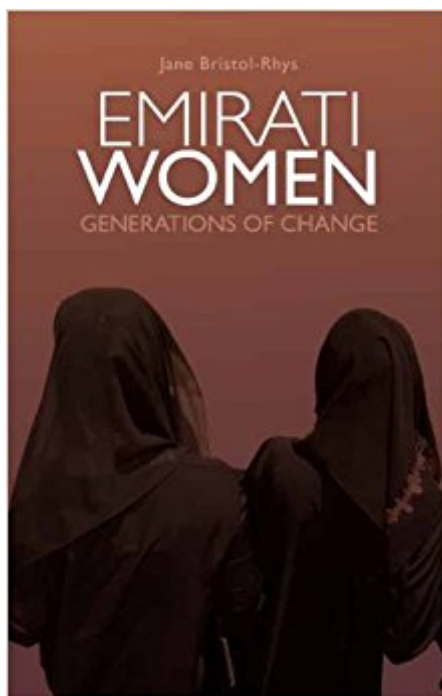


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Emirati Women: Generations Of Change (Columbia/Hurst)



Synopsis

The discovery of oil in the late 1960s catapulted Abu Dhabi out of isolating poverty. A boom in construction introduced new sightlines to the city's landscape and transformed its infrastructure and economy. The impressive growth of just a few decades created new opportunities for work and play and developed a social welfare system that offered free education and medical treatment, generous pensions, family subsidies, and government incentives. Citizens were suddenly encouraged to participate in all aspects of their remaking, and wealth from a seemingly limitless oil economy enabled many households to acquire a sheen of sophistication. The pattern of Abu Dhabi's phenomenal growth can be traced throughout the United Arab Emirates, and oil wealth can be felt among their societies as well. Yet conspicuous consumption hasn't cast the Emirates in a very favorable light. Both at home and abroad, many have accused Emirati citizens of violating the limits of taste and tolerance. *Emirati Women* offers rare perspective on those who have been affected most by the Emirates' rise in power. Jane Bristol-Rhys merges eight years of conversations and interviews with three generations of women and her own personal observations on Abu Dhabi society, boldly confronting the unflattering stereotypes that quietly flourish among expatriate communities. She also shares her unique findings on such topics as marriage, independence, freedom, and the future.

Book Information

Series: Columbia/Hurst

Hardcover: 208 pages

Publisher: Columbia University Press (November 5, 2010)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0231702043

ISBN-13: 978-0231702041

Product Dimensions: 8.8 x 5.7 x 0.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars 4 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #1,338,635 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #25 in [Books > History > Middle East > United Arab Emirates](#) #2493 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Middle Eastern](#) #5473 in [Books > History > World > Women in History](#)

Customer Reviews

This is a rare book where an author balances the raw data of women's words with enough details about context and variation to actually help readers arrive at their own insights...This book should be read by everyone interested in Arab women. It will disabuse them of the view that women are passive individuals oppressed by men. (Andrea Rugh Middle East Journal 1900-01-00) Jane Bristol-Rhys provides an interesting new look at the lives of UAE women. … [Her] collection of different women's voices … can shed new light on Emiratis' lived experiences of change over the past decades. … By giving voice to women from different parts of society, Bristol-Rhys is able to paint a dense and colourful picture of social life in the contemporary UAE. … Her collection of different Emirati women's voices… offers rare and engaging new glimpses into a society undergoing rapid change. (Journal of Arabian Studies)

Emirati Women is a very welcome addition to our knowledge of the people of the Arab Gulf and fills a large void in an area where women's voices are, in general, still marginalized. Little that is published offers readers the local inhabitants' viewpoint, which is why the oral narratives and interviews presented in this book illustrate so tellingly the lives of those who are otherwise marginalized and ignored, thereby revealing a fascinating world that is often obscured. (Wanda Krause, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London)

As its title suggests, this book explores the lives of women who are citizens of the United Arab Emirates. There is very little information on these women in English (or, I suspect, any other language, including Arabic), partly because UAE Nationals are vastly outnumbered in their own country by expatriates (who make up at least 85% of the country's resident population, according to most estimates), and partly because Emirati women are the segment of the population that is least accessible to foreign observers. As a result, while there has been an increasing number of books lately on the UAE and other Gulf states, few if any have had much to say about Emirati women based on personal access. Jane Bristol-Rhys is to be thanked, therefore, for showing the rest of us a bit of that world. This is not "peek behind the veil" exotica, however. The author is an anthropologist who has lived and worked in the UAE since 2001, and in the Middle East for over two decades. She is a serious scholar and long-time student of the Arab world. At the same time, she has been fortunate to forge close personal friendships with numerous Emirati women. As a result, she brings to her study both a scholar's eye and a confidante's sympathies and knowledge, and she manages to strike a nice balance between the two. The book is both serious and accessible--an enjoyable read that provides both first-hand accounts and scholarly detachment. The overarching

theme that connects the various sections of the book is a familiar one: the tension between tradition and modernity. In the case of the UAE, this theme is given a particular edge by the rapidity with which this transition has taken place, and by the massive amount of wealth that has been created in the process, primarily because of oil. (The book focuses on women in Abu Dhabi, which owns nearly all of the UAE's oil and has one of the largest known reserves of oil in the world. Dubai, for all its flash and headline-capturing qualities, has very little oil wealth, depending instead on other kinds of economic activity.) Without focusing on any particular family as far as we can tell, the author tracks the experiences and views of three generations of Abu Dhabi women. The differences are stark. At the risk of oversimplifying a more complex story, today's generation of university-aged women want to enjoy the comforts of their city-state's new wealth, while their grandmothers, though not denying that life is much easier now, lament the loss of tradition that has accompanied the ease afforded by riches (though not to all Emiratis are rich, of course). Bristol-Rhys also discusses a number of specific issues that have attracted attention in recent years: perceived threats to national identity, including the Arabic language; the problems created by Emirati men marrying non-Emirati women; the disconnect between the ways many foreigners see Emirati women and the ways they see themselves. This is not a long book, but it was obviously written by someone with deep knowledge of, and affection for, her subject. Because of the inside story it provides, this is the book I will recommend to friends who are considering visiting the UAE or moving to Abu Dhabi.

Emirati Women: Generations of Change provides a rare and privileged insight into the lives of Emirati women in the United Arab Emirates. Based on extensive fieldwork in Abu Dhabi, anthropologist Jane Bristol-Rhys explores crucial domains of experience that constitute daily life for women and their families in the Emirates - from marriage, family, and personal relationships, to tradition, religion, identity, and aspiration. Straddling several roles with skill - as teacher, anthropologist, confidant, chaperone, and family friend - Bristol-Rhys layers out the affinities and divergences between women of different generations in this fast-changing country. Bristol-Rhys describes the context of her study in terms of its "restlessness" - referring to the colossal pace and scale of economic and social change in the Emirates since the discovery of oil and the tensions and questions these changes have raised for local families there, particularly concerning their identity and culture. It is an understatement to describe Emirati women of different generations as having matured in almost entirely different worlds. This is restless ethnography also, in which the concept of generation serves well as Bristol-Rhys' prism to juxtapose the old and new, the official and anecdotal, and thus begin to fathom the changes and uncertainties that are redefining gender roles

and family life in Emirati society. The result is crisp, lively, and multi-vocal ethnography that shows to the world a society struggling to moor itself at the start of the twenty-first century. We are shown how these struggles are taking place as much in the grand institutions of state, as in households, shopping malls, and university classrooms. A recommended and accessible book for both academic and popular audiences.

Bristol-Rhys makes abundant information on women in UAE readily available to others through this book. Her writing style is difficult to read at times because every sentence is packed with meaning and wastes no space in delivering the richest description possible. This book has challenged me to ask new questions and explore more about this rarely-publicized and hard-to-research population. I appreciated how Bristol-Rhys waited to discuss marriage until later in the book. The importance of marriage to Emirati students and young females was hard to ignore - but I got the impression that Emirati women are desperately clinging to the men in their lives (especially depending on cousins for marriage) because they don't know anyone else, and especially because they are not allowed to marry anyone else. This text illustrated how separation of religion and state in UAE is virtually non-existent which is a tough concept for me, an American, to grasp. Bristol-Rhys took great care and time to document her observations and conclusions about Emirati women, a rather immobilized yet cherished population. While some delicate subjects were not explored, such as sex trafficking and abuse to housemaids, this book shows a slice of the world through the hijab. This book is a thoughtful and thorough account of Emirati woman and would be a valuable addition to any gender studies, anthropology, sociology, or intercultural course. 'Emirati Women' sets a good example of responsible ethnographic research and representation, while staying accessible and immediate to readers. As it's a fairly short read, I was left wanting much, much more of Bristol-Rhys' information and insight.

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