



20
26

BRIDGING GENDER GAPS IN HUMAN DEVELOPMENT:

A Landmark UNDP-UAE Gender Indices Case Study
for Global Knowledge Exchange

Copyright© UNDP and UAE Gender Balance Council - July 2026. All rights reserved.

About this case study

This case study consists of two parts (Part I on data synthesis and statistical findings, Part II on policy drivers and implications), each independently prepared by the teams from Human Development Report Office of UNDP and the UAE Gender Balance Council.

Disclaimer: UNDP does not endorse any entity, brand, product or service. The views expressed in this report are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), or the Member States of the United Nations.

The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of UNDP concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

PART I

MEASURING PROGRESS: UAE'S GENDER INDICES AND THE PATH TO GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Written by:

Yanchun Zhang

Chief Statistician
Human Development Report Office/UNDP

Yu-Chieh Hsu

Policy Specialist (Research and Statistics)
Human Development Report Office/UNDP

1. INTRODUCTION

Beginning as a high human development country in 1990, the UAE elevated itself to a very high human development status by 2002. The country has demonstrated one of the largest and most consistent improvements in its human development index score and rank since 1990. This progress is evident across all dimensions of human development, extending beyond GDP to gains in health and education.

By 2023, the UAE led its Arab peers, ranked among the top 15 HDI countries globally, and surpassed advanced economies like Canada, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the United States, and the Republic of Korea.

The UAE's path to higher human development is also a path to greater gender equality and women's empowerment. The UAE's advancement in human development has been accompanied by increased gender equality and women's empowerment, with the benefits of progress being equally shared between women and men.

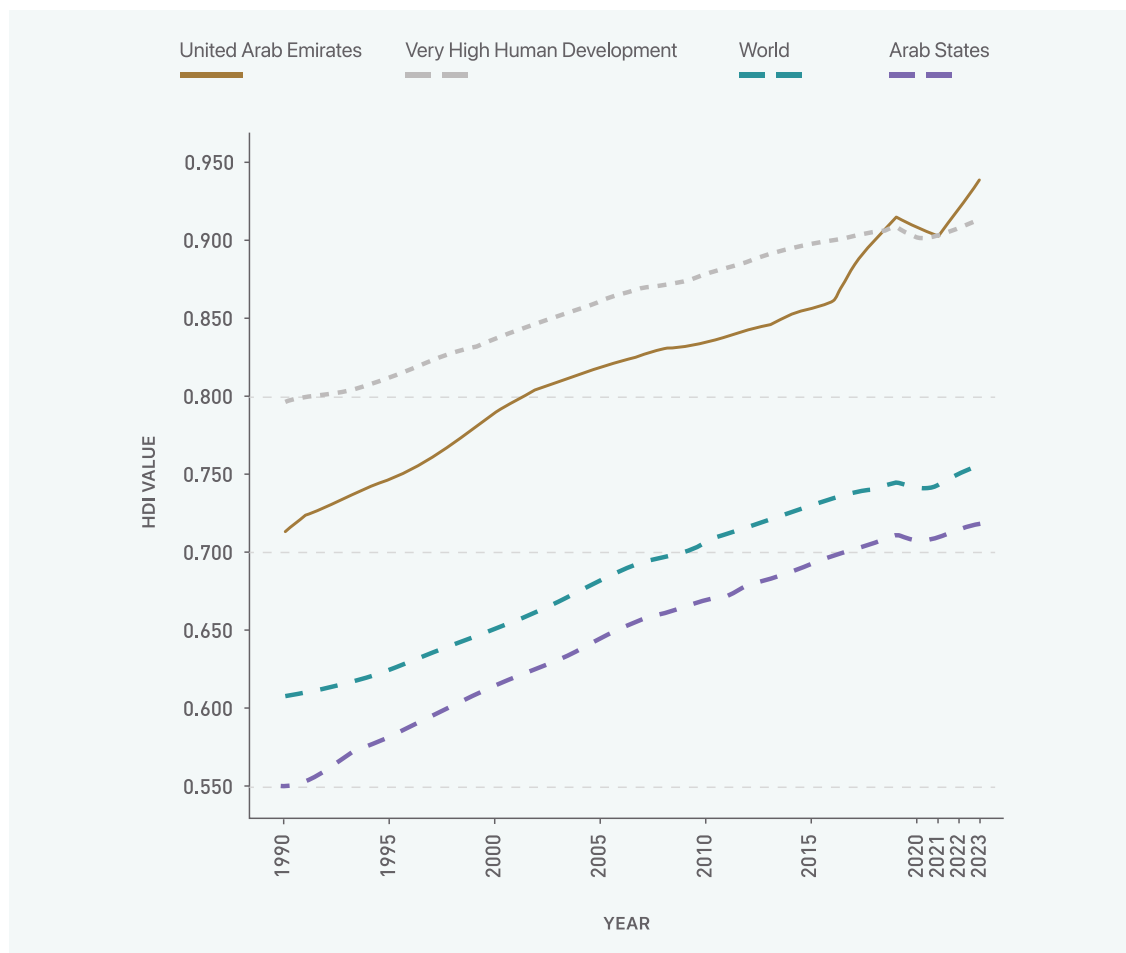
Gender equality and women's empowerment, on the other hand, are essential for accelerating the UAE's human development progress. The country's commitment to these areas has significantly contributed to its advancement to a very high human development status.

This case study examines the progress of the UAE's human development indices over the past thirty years, as reported by the UNDP. It aims to document the country's advancements in human development, gender equality, and women's empowerment, while linking specific policy changes to improvements in these indices. Additionally, it incorporates other gender development indices for supplementary insights and compares the UAE with similar countries to highlight its strengths and weaknesses in advancing human development, gender equality, and women's empowerment.

2. PATH TO HIGHER HUMAN DEVELOPMENT, PATH TO GREATER GENDER EQUALITY

2.1 Path to very high human development

Figure 1. Human Development Index



Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

Starting as a high human development country (HDI value 0.713 in 1990), the UAE has transformed itself into a very high human development country (HDI value improved from 0.798 in 2001 to 0.805 in 2002, elevating the country into the very high human development group, and further to 0.940 in 2023).

The UAE registered one of the highest rates of growth in HDI among the region of Arab States since 1990, and has kept up the pace for further improvement in the past two decades. The UAE is one of the only two Arab States that have registered an annual growth rate in HDI higher than 1.0% since 2014,¹ whereas the growths for the very high human development countries and Arab States were only about 0.2% and 0.5%.

The path to very high human development led by the UAE has been accompanied by improvement in all fronts of human development – going beyond the GDP², with major progress in health and education.

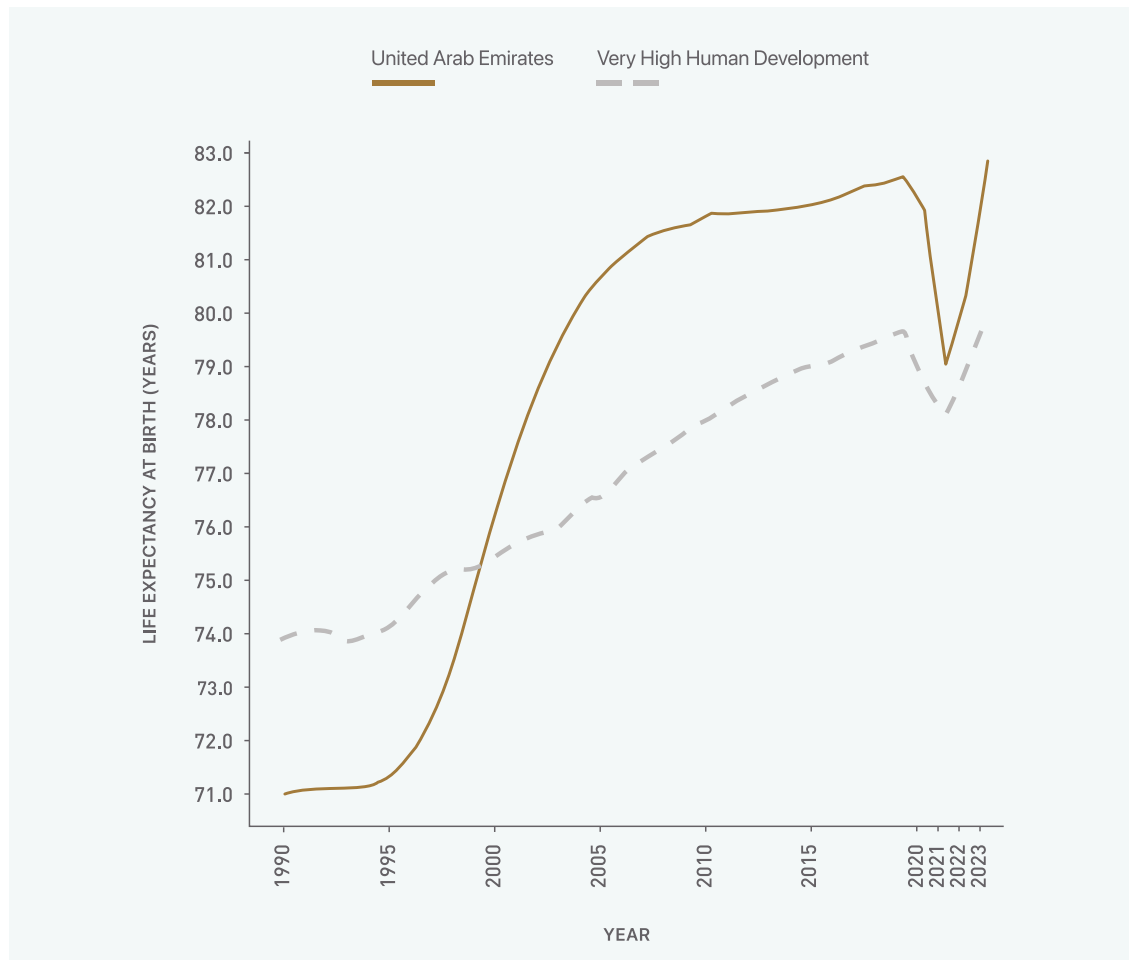
¹ The other country is Djibouti.

² The UAE's human development index score continued to improve without major breaks despite its gross national income per capita declined significantly after the 2007-2008 global economic crisis.

As reported in the latest 2025 Human Development Report (HDR) (UNDP 2025), the UAE has improved its HDI value (0.940) and rank (15 out of 193) in 2023. The UAE tops its peers in the Arab States, placing it among the top 15 HDI countries, and outperforms advanced economies such as Canada, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the United States, and the Republic of Korea. This achievement could be attributed to progress in the three basic human development dimensions – health, education, and standard of living.

Since 1990, steady progress has been observed across all these three fundamental human development dimensions. The improvement in life expectancy at birth was substantial between 1995 and 2010, surpassing the growth rate of the average of very high human development countries. Despite the world experiencing unprecedented damaging impact due to the pandemic, the UAE's life expectancy at birth has reversed the curve and back to the level of 82.9 years in 2023.

Figure 2. Life expectancy at birth

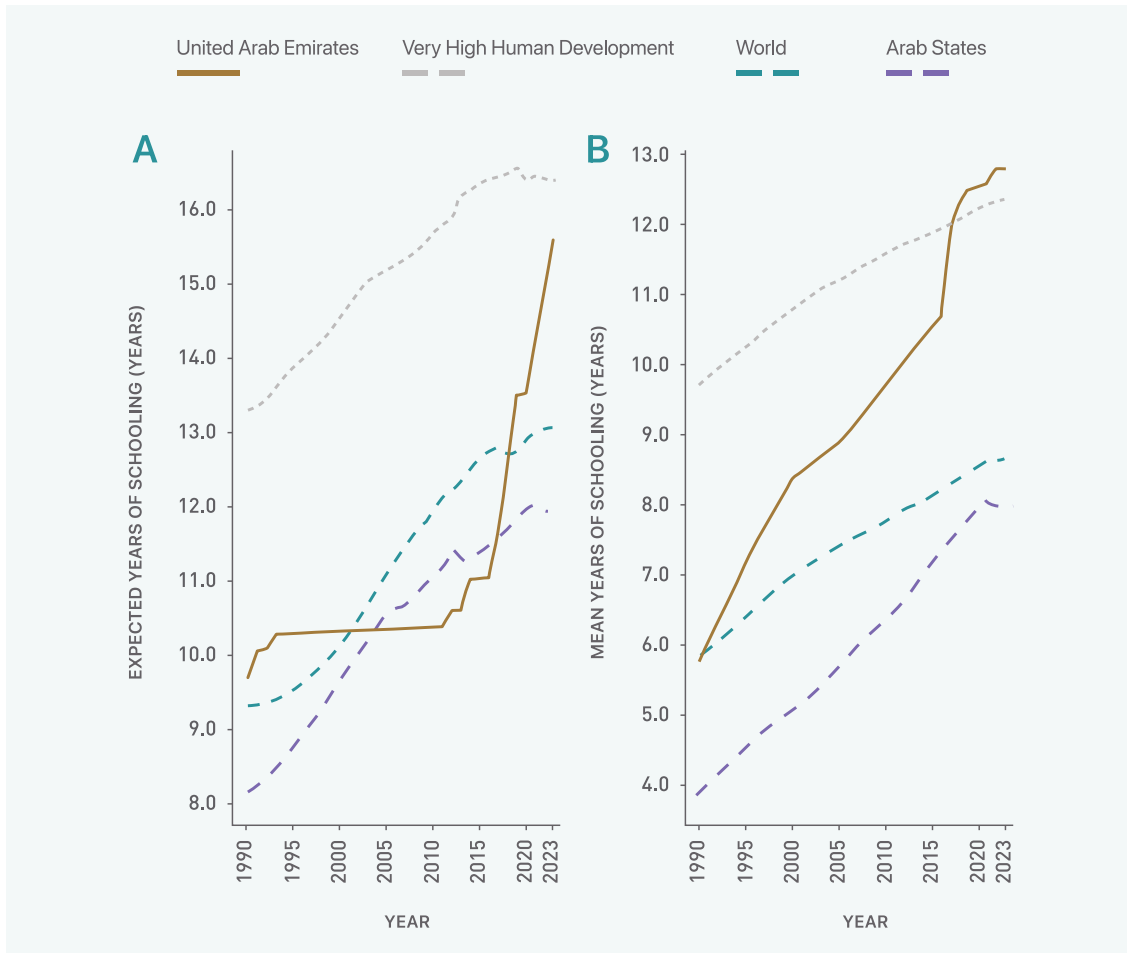


Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

In education, both component indicators, expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling, demonstrate the UAE's progression toward the top performers: both indicators have been gradually catching up with the level of a very high human development group. In recent years, the UAE's mean years of schooling have outperformed those top human development countries. The UAE's expected years of schooling is 15.6 years and the mean years of schooling is 13.0 years in 2023.



Figure 3. Expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling



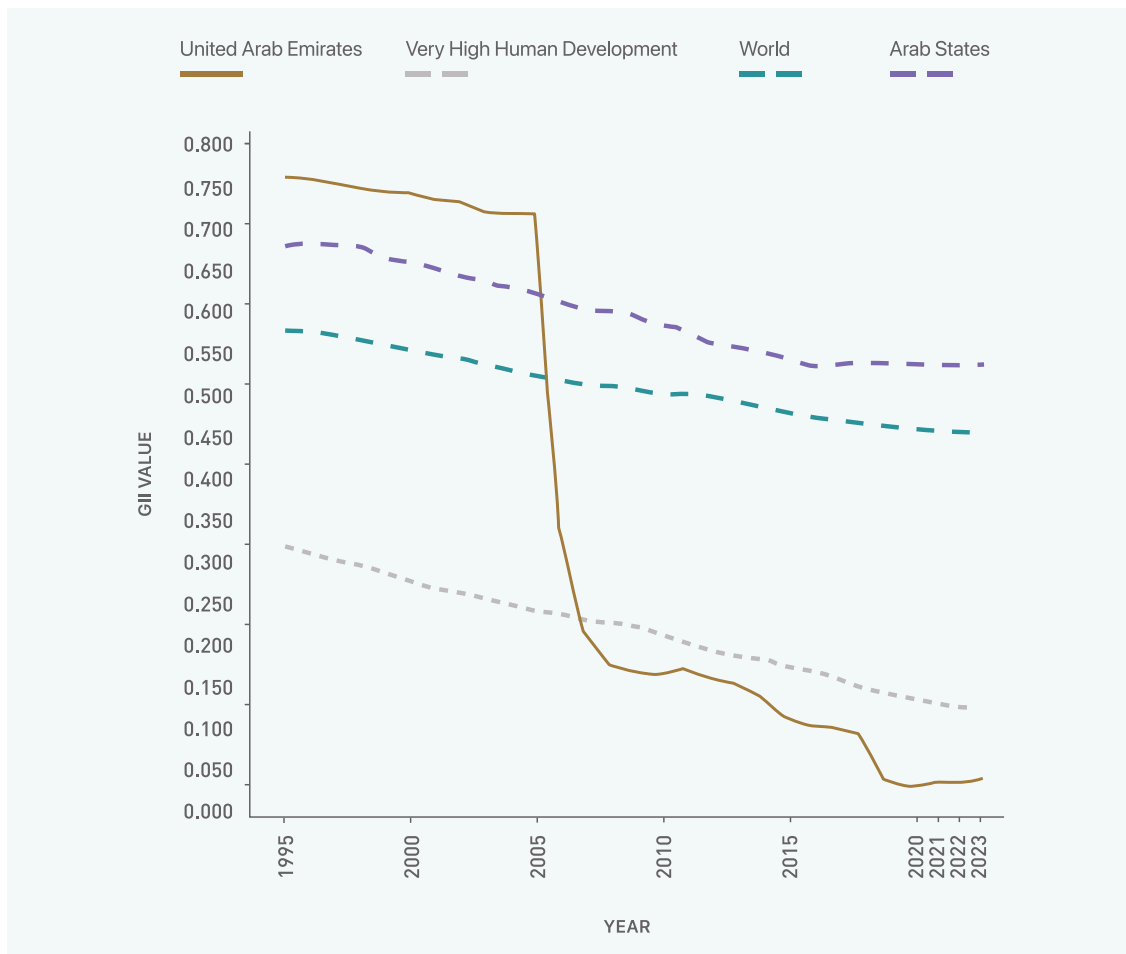
Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

2.2 The UAE's journey to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls

Global progress in gender equality has been slowing after 2020 as indicated by the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index (GII) (UNDP 2025). The UAE stands out on the GII which captures gender inequalities in three key dimensions – reproductive health, empowerment, and the labour market.

The GII of the UAE was 0.764 in 1995 – higher than the averages of the Arab States (0.680) and the world (0.579), the worst performer among all Arab States countries. However, through years of deliberate policy investment in women and girls, the GII of the UAE has gradually gone down and reached the level of 0.341 in 2006 – below the averages of the Arab States (0.616) and the world (0.518). In 2007, the GII of UAE continued to improve and for the first time surpassed the average performance of the very high human development group countries. The UAE has been at the top of GII rank among all Arab States countries since 2007.

Figure 4. Gender Inequality Index



Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

The UAE's progress in gender equality and women's empowerment thereafter has steadily improved over the past 16 years.

As reported in the 2025 Human Development Report (UNDP 2025), the GII of UAE is 0.040 in 2023. The UAE ranks at the 13th among all 172 countries for the 2023 GII. The UAE has improved GII rank, placing it among the top 15 and outperforming advanced economies such as Slovenia, Italy, and Spain (who are also in top 15). The UAE is also best-in-class in the Arab States region in 2023.

Like its progress in the HDI, the GII of UAE has changed substantially over the past three decades, catching up and surpassing the achievements of very high human development countries. As the 2025 International Women's Day is dedicated to "celebrating the achievements of women – For ALL Women and Girls: Rights. Equality. Empowerment."⁴, and the year 2025 marks the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the UAE serves as an example of "invest in women: accelerate progress"⁵ exhibiting the importance of investing in women and girls through state-led programmes that translates into progress in gender equality and human development.

3 Behind Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, Netherlands, Finland, Iceland, Belgium, Singapore, Austria, France, and the Republic of Korea (based on GII rank order).

4 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/announcement/2024/12/international-womens-day-2025-for-all-women-and-girls-rights-equality-empowerment>

5 68th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (<https://www.unwomen.org/en/how-we-work/commission-on-the-status-of-women/csw68-2024>)

2.2.1 Reducing gender inequality and empowering women and girls through educational and political lift up

Both educational component indicators of the HDI, expected years of schooling and mean years of schooling have been improving steadily for both females and males, the female-male gender gap has been gradually converging to the level of a very high human development group.

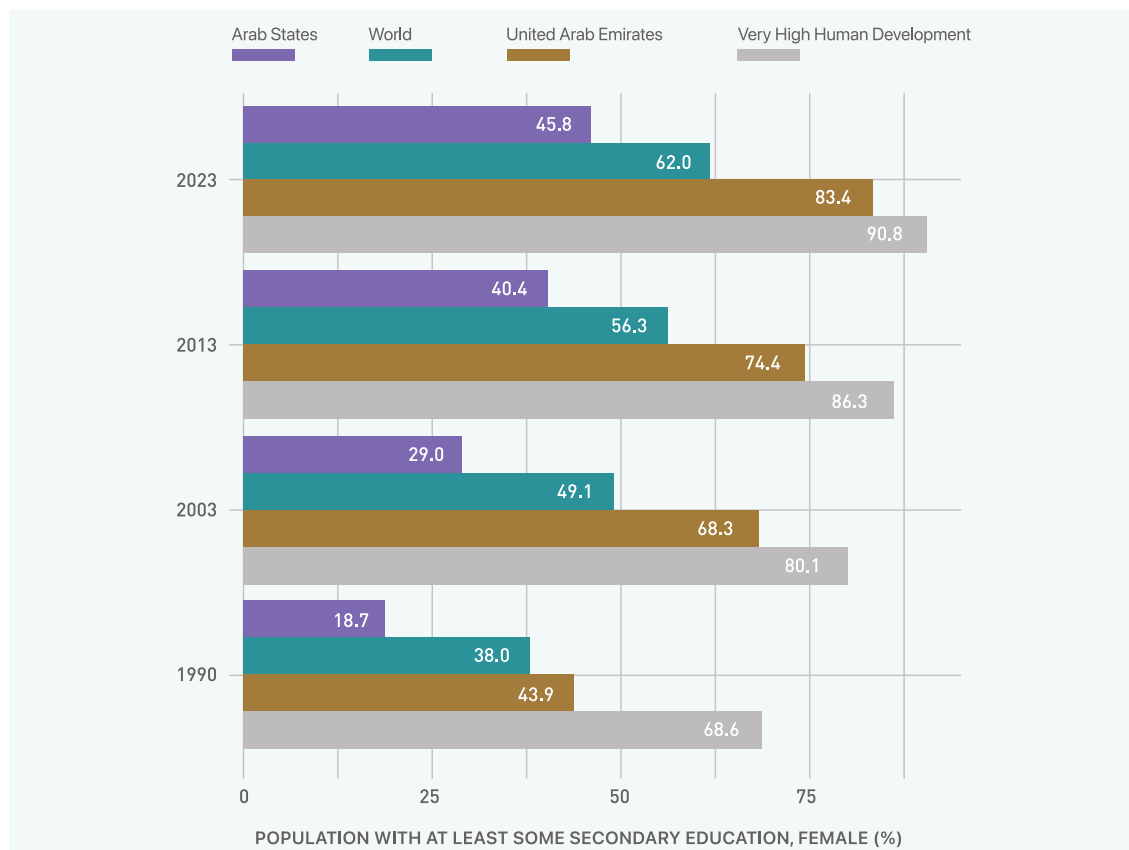
In 1990, the UAE's expected years of schooling for females is 10.6 years and for males is 9.1 years, and mean years of schooling for females is 5.9 years and for males is 5.7 years. In 2023, the country's expected years of schooling for females is 16.1 years and for males is 15.3 years, and mean years of schooling for females is 12.8 years and for males is 13.1 years.

The improvement in female mean years of schooling is substantial, currently 0.4 years higher than the average of very high human development countries (12.4 years).

The improvement in educational attainment has been the key for the progress of UAE's female human development, and for further closing the gender gap to a similarly low level as its peers in very high human development countries.

If we zoom in to the education indicator in the construction of the GII, "**population with at least some secondary education**", the figure for females has improved from 43.9% in 1990 to 83.4% in 2023. In 1990, the UAE was on a similar footing with the world average (38.0%) while the average for very high human development group is 68.6%. But in 2023, the UAE closed the gap with the very high human development group (90.8%) while the average for the world is only 62.0%. Again, the UAE has come up to par with the very high human development countries in the dimension of educational attainment for women.

Figure 5. Population with at least some secondary education, female



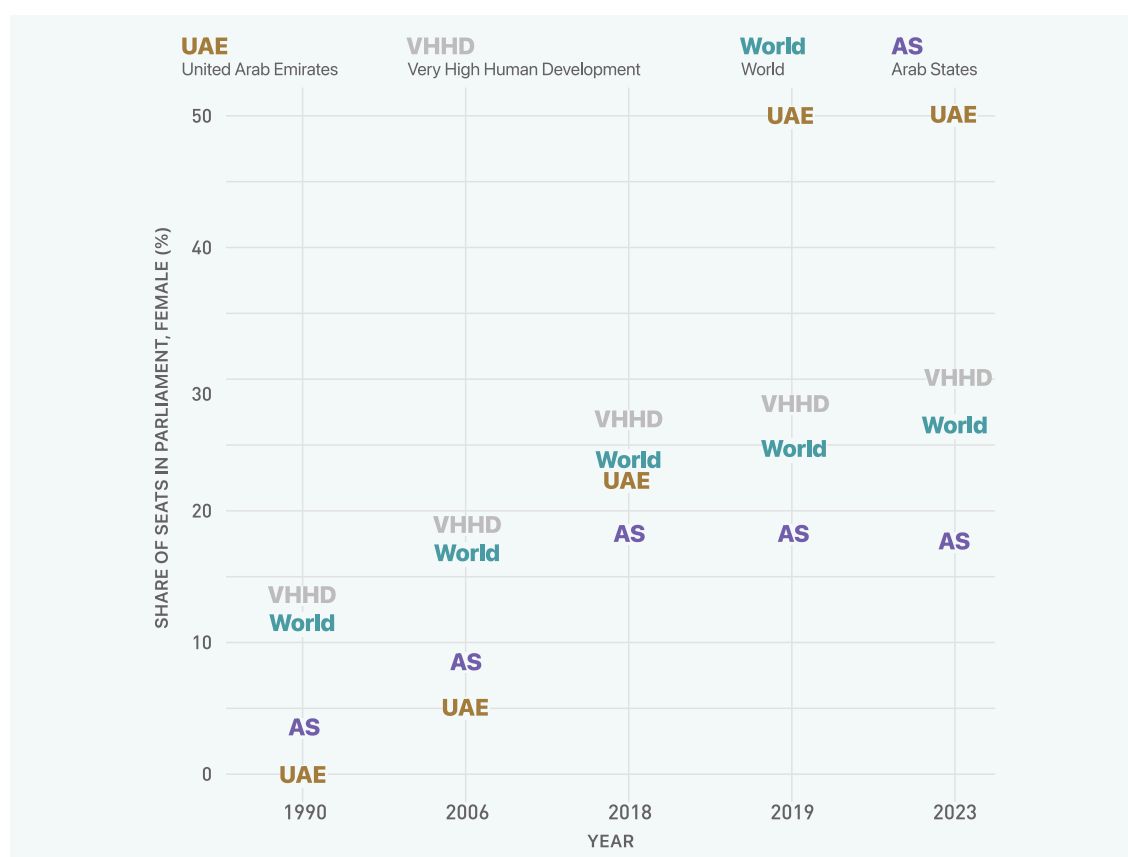
Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

The difference between females and males is around 3.6% (83.4% for females, 87.0% for males) in 2023, which is lower than the average for the world (8.2%) but higher than the average for very high human development group (1.9%).

For the other indicator “*share of seats in parliament*” by females in the GII, the UAE has pioneered a gender equal parliament since 2019. The UAE once had the lowest in women’s representation in parliament – no women in the parliament during 1990-2005, but its female parliamentary representation has been 50.0% since 2019, higher than the average for very high human development group (30.2%) and for the world (26.5%) in 2023.

The UAE is among the top 5 countries with more than half of women in the parliament, just behind Cuba, Rwanda, Nicaragua, Mexico, and equal to Andorra.

Figure 6. Share of seats in parliament, female



Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

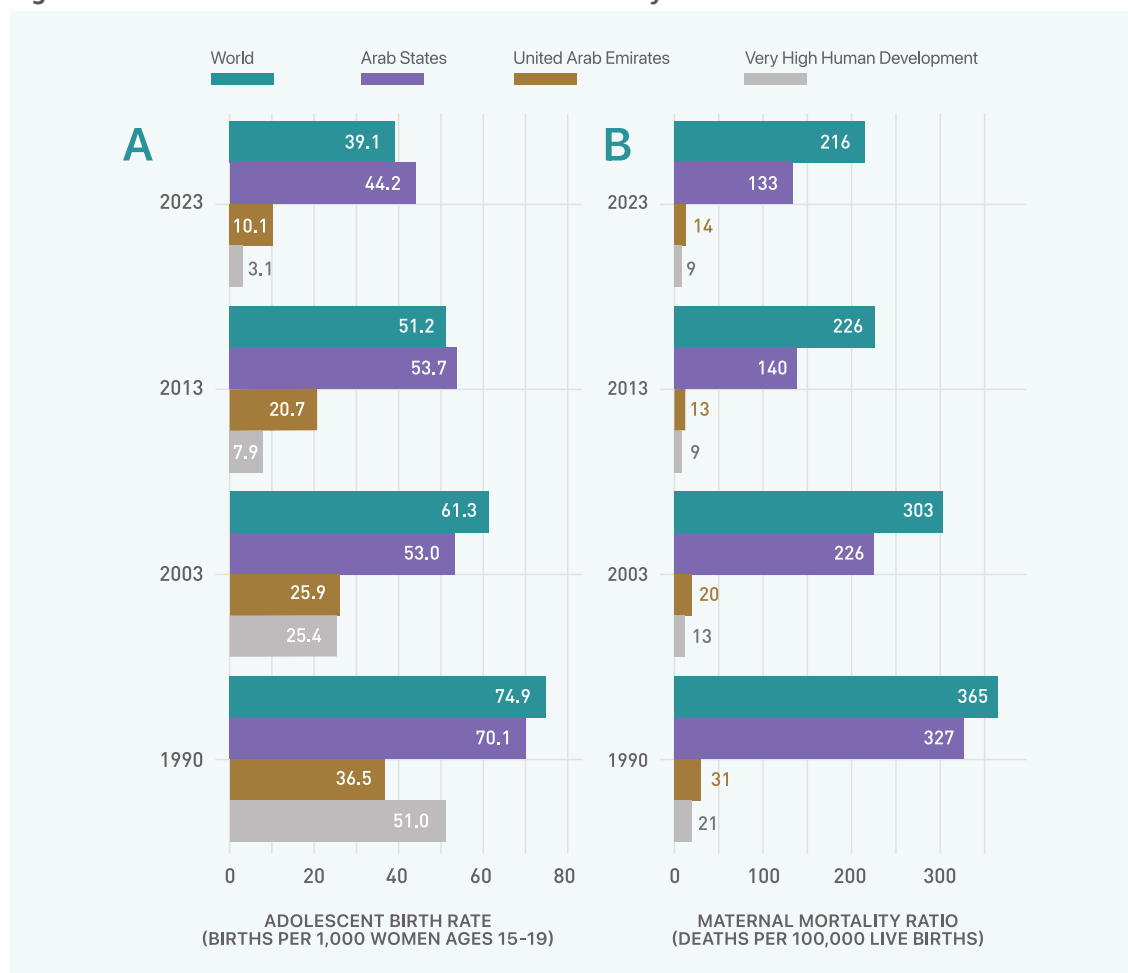
2.2.2 Improving reproductive health to empower women and girls to reach their full potential

On the reproductive health dimension, the UAE’s performances had been better than other countries in the very high human development group or the Arab States in the past two decades. In 2023, the UAE’s *adolescent birth rate* was at the level of 3.1 (births per 1,000 women ages 15-19), which is a substantial improvement compared to the level of 51.0 in 1990 or 25.4 in 2003, reducing at a higher rate than the very high human development group or Arab States. With an adolescent birth rate of 3.1, the UAE is one of the lowest 14 countries⁶ in this indicator.

⁶ Including the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, the Republic of Korea, Hong Kong, China (SAR), Denmark, San Marino, Norway, Switzerland, Kuwait, Liechtenstein, Japan, Sweden, Netherlands, Singapore, Italy, Finland, United Arab Emirates (in order of adolescent birth rate value). This indicator covers 195 countries.

The UAE's **maternal mortality ratio** is at the level of 9 (deaths per 100,000 live births) in 2023, reducing from the level of 21 in 1990 and 13 in 2003, which is at a similar rate as the very high human development group. The averages are 14 for very high human development countries, 133 for Arab States, and 216 globally in 2023.

Figure 7. Adolescent birth rate and maternal mortality ratio



Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

2.3 Advancing to women's full empowerment and gender equality

2.3.1 Large gaps remained to boost female participation in the labour market

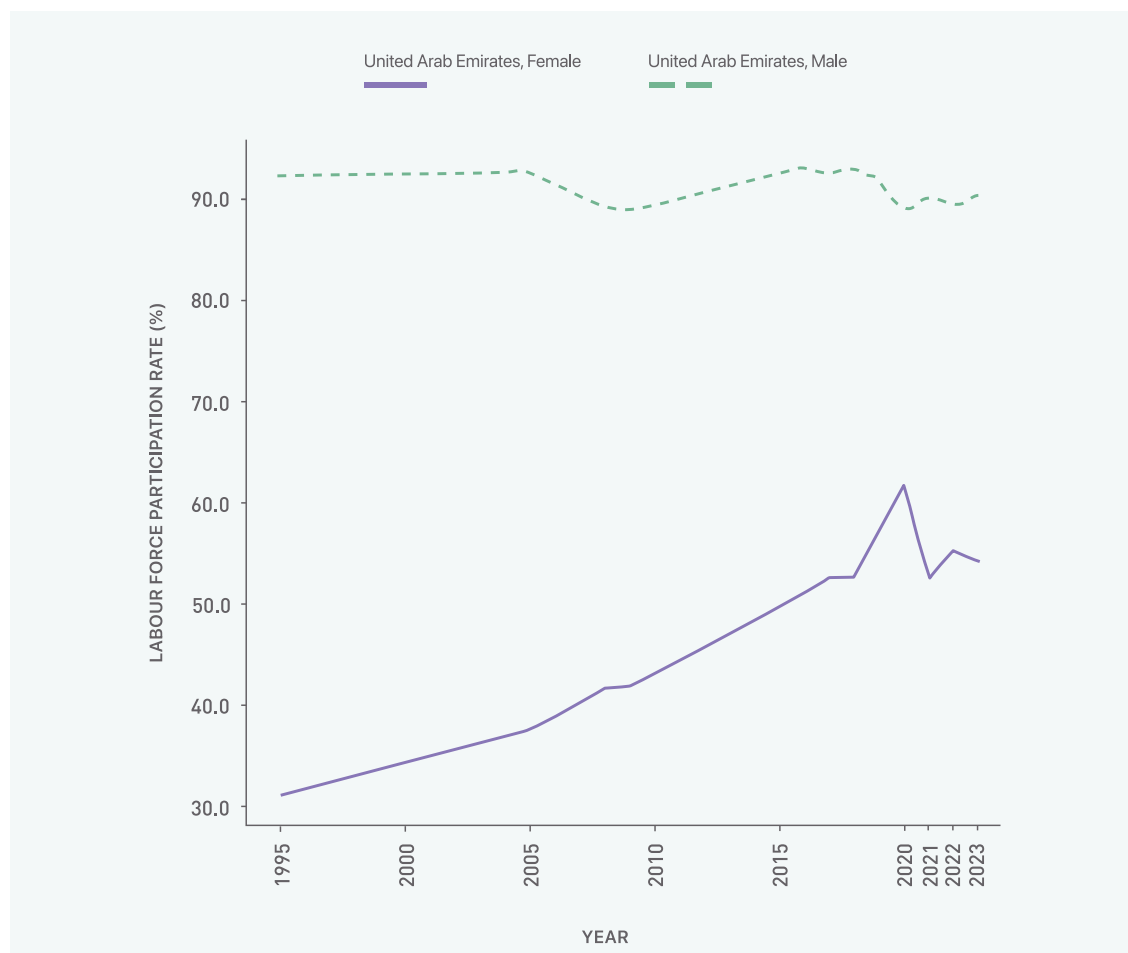
The UAE has demonstrated significant improvement in the female labour force participation rate, increasing from 31.3% in 1995 to 54.5% in 2023. However, the UAE's gender gap in labour force participation rate – 36.3% difference between men (90.8%) and women (54.5%) – is higher than the averages for very high human development group (15.1%) or for the world (25.6%).

The gender gap in the labour force participation rates of UAE has improved over the years⁷, shrinking from 60.9% in 1995 to 27.1% in 2020. However, the UAE's gender gap in labour force participation is still larger than 161 countries, out of 185 countries reporting

⁷ The gender gaps between female and male labour force participation rates have been pervasive and unvarying across countries and regions. At the global level, the gap has been close to 30%. For the Arab States region, it has been around 50% – hardly any noticeable changes in recent years.

such gap in 2023.⁸ This is the area critically in need of more efforts to push for the improvement of women’s achievement – to bridge the gap between men and women.

Figure 8. Labour force participation rate



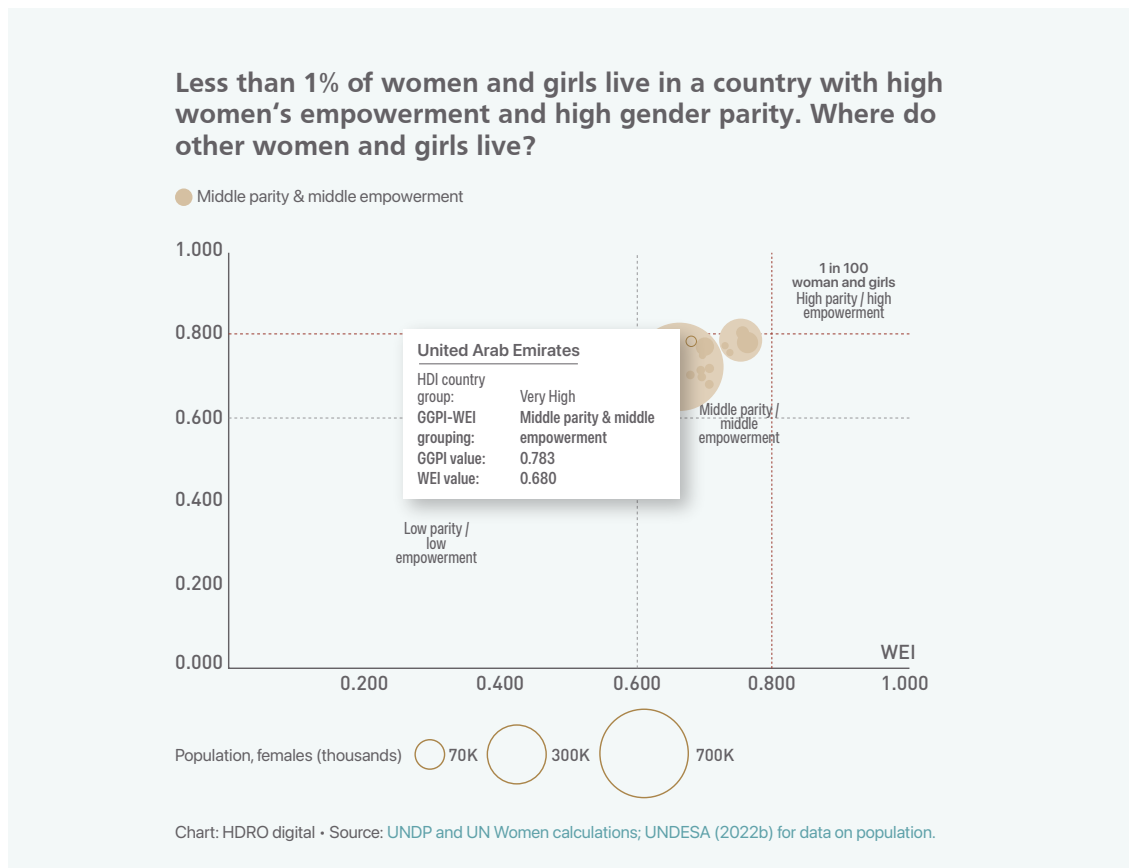
Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

2.3.2 New focus needed on improving enhanced capabilities

According to the 2022 UN Women-UNDP’s twin indices on women’s empowerment and gender equality, the UAE’s Women’s Empowerment Index (WEI) score is 0.680, classified as “lower-middle” women’s empowerment group and its Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI) score is 0.783, classified as “upper-middle” gender parity group. Among very high human development group, the UAE stands at the bottom of the WEI scoring while maintaining a position among the middle performers in the GGPI scoring.

⁸ To interpret UAE’s labour market data, please consult Part II’s detailed analysis of the country’s intricate demographic makeup, in particular the UAE’s predominantly expatriate population, with a high share of male workers in labour-intensive sectors, which results in a unique gender distribution in the country.

Figure 9. Twin indices on women's empowerment and gender equality



Source: Human Development Report Office and UN Women calculations based on data from UNDP and UN Women (2023).

In the “life and good health” dimension, the UAE’s *“women of reproductive age whose need for family planning is satisfied with modern methods”* is at the level of 60.7%, lower than the averages of very high human development group (77.7%), as well as high (85.7%) and medium (73.2%) human development groups. The WEI component indicator *“ever-partnered women and girls subjected to physical and/or sexual violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months”* of UAE is at the level of 17.9.

In the dimension of “labour and financial inclusion”, the indicator *“labour force participation rate among prime-working-age individuals who are living in a household comprising a couple and at least one child under age 6”* of UAE is 37.8% for females – lower than the average of very high (65.5%) and high (62.2%) human development groups, and 98.5 for males. The gender gap of 60.7%, compared to the averages of very high human development group (28.8%) and the world (41.7%), is notably large.

In the dimension of “participation in decision making”, the indicator *“share of managerial positions held by women”* is at 23.1%, lower than the world average of 31.2%.

The UAE’s performance in the gender gap in *“youth not in education, employment or training”* is at 11.3% (17.7% for females and 6.4% for males) could also be improved.

Box. UAE's performance compared to those of the selected very high human development countries

As reported in the 2025 HDR (UNDP 2025), the 2023 HDI of UAE has improved to 0.940, putting the country at 15th place (out of a total of 193 countries). This achievement in UAE's HDI could be attributed to progress in the three basic human development dimensions – health, education, and standard of living.

The UAE also surpasses several very high human development countries such as Canada, Liechtenstein, New Zealand, the United States, and the Republic of Korea. With respect to other key dimensions of human development, for example gender inequalities, different policy choices led by countries had generated different “outcomes”.

The below analysis looks into the comparisons between the UAE versus Finland, Singapore, and the United Kingdom, as well as Canada, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea on the two gender indices published in the global HDR – the GDI and GII. It also takes insights from other countries from different human development groups and regions. In 2023, the HDI of Finland was 0.948, which ranked the country at the 12th place. The HDI of Singapore and the United Kingdom of 0.946 tie at the 13th place. Slightly below the UAE's, the HDI of Canada is 0.939, ranked the country at the 16th place. The HDI of New Zealand is 0.938, ranking the country at the 17th place. The HDI of the Republic of Korea of 0.937 put the country at the 20th HDI rank. This group of countries exhibits comparable performance upon the HDI assessment.

Table B1. Gender Development Index

	GDI		HDI			Life expectancy		Expected years of schooling		Mean years of schooling		Income per capita	
	Value	Group	Female	Male	Value	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
United Arab Emirates	0.957	2	0.908	0.949	0.940 (15)	84.2	82.0	16.1	15.3	12.8	13.1	39,172	89,116
Similar HDI, different GDI group													
Singapore	0.994	1	0.944	0.950	0.946 (13)	86.2	81.2	16.9	16.6	11.7	12.3	96,100	125,389
Canada	0.991	1	0.934	0.943	0.939 (16)	84.8	80.4	16.5	15.3	13.9	13.8	45,016	64,494
Similar income (female), different GDI group													
Finland	0.992	1	0.943	0.951	0.948 (12)	84.7	79.2	20.7	18.4	13.2	12.8	48,533	65,803
United Kingdom	0.979	1	0.933	0.953	0.946 (13)	83.2	79.4	18.4	17.2	13.6	13.4	42,538	66,576

Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

Among countries with a similar HDI rank between 12 to 20 – that is Finland (rank 12) to the Republic of Korea (rank 20) – the UAE along with Liechtenstein, New Zealand, and the Republic of Korea are in GDI Group 2.⁹ Singapore and Canada, from the same HDI circle, are both in GDI Group 1. Even with a similar level of female income as the UAE, Canada, Finland, and the United Kingdom are in GDI Group 1.

⁹ Definition of the GDI Group: Countries with absolute deviation from gender parity of 2.5 percent or less are considered countries with high equality in HDI achievements between women and men and are classified as group 1. Countries with absolute deviation from gender parity of 2.5–5 percent are considered countries with medium-high equality in HDI achievements between women and men and are classified as group 2. Countries with absolute deviation from gender parity of 5–7.5 percent are considered countries with medium equality in HDI achievements between women and men and are classified as group 3. Countries with absolute deviation from gender parity of 7.5–10 percent are considered countries with medium-low equality in HDI achievements between women and men and are classified as group 4. Countries with absolute deviation from gender parity of more than 10 percent are considered countries with low equality in HDI achievements between women and men and are classified as group 5. Group 1 is the best while Group 5 is in the bottom (UNDP 2025).

Table B2. Gender Inequality Index

	GII		HDI		Maternal mortality ratio	Adolescent birth rate	Share of seats in parliament		Population with at least some secondary education		Labour force participation rate	
	Value	Rank	Value	Rank			Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male
United Arab Emirates	0.040	13	0.940	15	9	3.1	50.0	50.0	83.4	87.0	54.5	90.8
Similar HDI, different GII performance and rank												
Finland	0.021	6	0.948	12	8	3.1	46.0	54.0	91.6	91.6	58.5	63.8
New Zealand	0.082	30	0.938	17	7	10.9	44.3	55.7	82.9	82.3	67.6	76.7
Korea (Republic of)	0.038	12	0.937	20	8	0.5	19.1	80.9	85.0	94.2	56.1	73.4
Similar labour force participation rate (female), different GII performance and rank												
Denmark	0.003	1	0.962	4	5	1.1	43.6	56.4	91.0	92.5	59.7	67.7
Germany	0.057	21	0.959	5	4	5.5	35.3	64.7	93.6	94.3	56.4	66.7
Korea (Republic of)	0.038	12	0.937	20	8	0.5	19.1	80.9	85.0	94.2	56.1	73.4

Source: Human Development Report Office calculations based on data from UNDP (2025).

On the GII, the UAE with a 2023 GII score of 0.040 and rank of 13th place gets ahead of its HDI peers including New Zealand (2023 GII score of 0.082 and rank at 30th place), comparable to the Republic of Korea (2023 GII score 0.038 and rank at 12th place), and proceeds forward to leading HDI and gender equality countries such as Finland (2023 GII score of 0.021 and rank at 6th place). Even with a higher HDI and ranked higher, Denmark and Germany still fall in a similar level of female labour force participation rate as the UAE and inevitably confront the critical issue to close the gender gap in the labour market dimension. Nonetheless, the UAE is the most gender equal country in parliamentary/political empowerment dimension.

3. CONCLUSION

UNDP's human development metrics consistently demonstrate that the UAE performs strongly on key gender indicators, reflecting ongoing commitment and measurable progress over time. The UAE's path toward higher human development is also a path toward greater gender equality and women's empowerment, as advances in education and political participation expand women's capabilities and opportunities. This accomplishment aligns with the vision articulated in the 1995 Human Development Report, which affirms gender equality as both a driver and an outcome of development. Nevertheless, recent Human Development Reports remind us that development is dynamic and evolving, requiring continuous strengthening of capabilities and agency in response to emerging social, economic, and technological realities.

Leveraging its strong foundation, particularly in education, institutional reform, and women's representation, the UAE is well equipped to address more complex and emerging dimensions of gender equality and women's empowerment. As Part I suggests, the next phase goes beyond achieving parity in access and participation. It requires strengthening women's agency, leadership, and economic influence, particularly in the context of shifting social norms, digital transformation, and structural transitions in the new era.

Advancing through this “last mile” therefore entails a shift from formal equality to substantive empowerment: sustaining gains while implementing adaptive and forward-looking measures that capture intersecting challenges, including changing labour markets, care responsibilities, and broader technological and structural transitions. These efforts will help ensure that all women and girls are empowered to fully exercise their freedoms, expand their capabilities, and actively shape their own futures.

REFERENCES

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2019. Human Development Report 2019: Beyond income, beyond averages, beyond today: Inequalities in human development in the 21st century. New York.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) and UN Women (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women). 2023. The paths to equal: Twin indices on women’s empowerment and gender equality. New York.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme). 2025. Human Development Report 2025: A matter of choice: People and possibilities in the age of AI. New York.



PART II

POLICY DRIVERS: UAE'S APPROACH TO GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Written by: UAE Gender Balance Council

1. LINKING PROGRESS MADE ON UAE'S GENDER INDICES TO DELIBERATE POLICY CHANGES AND PRACTICES: EDUCATION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

International organisations such as UNDP often assess gender progress through the concepts of gender equality, which emphasizes equal rights, opportunities, and treatment, and gender parity, which focuses on achieving numerical equality between women and men in participation and outcomes (UNDP, 2018, para. 2). In the UAE context, these principles are reflected and operationalized through the concept of gender balance, which represents the country's approach to ensuring equitable representation, participation, and influence of women and men across all sectors of society and decision-making spheres (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2017).

The United Nations' foundational commitment to gender equality and the empowerment of women is rooted in fundamental human rights principles, enshrined in international frameworks including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). International organisations such as UNDP assess gender progress through complementary concepts: gender equality, which emphasizes equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for all genders, and gender parity, which focuses on achieving numerical equality between women and men in participation and outcomes (UNDP, 2020). These universal principles provide the normative framework for advancing women's rights and opportunities globally.

Within the UAE's national context, these international principles are reflected and operationalized through the locally-adapted concept of gender balance, which represents the country's strategic approach to ensuring equitable representation, participation, and influence of women and men across all sectors of society and decision-making spheres (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2017). This framework demonstrates how universal human rights principles on gender equality are contextualized within national development priorities and cultural considerations, creating pathways for measurable progress in key areas such as education and political participation.

Gender balance, as applied in the UAE, underscores fairness in opportunity, empowerment, and institutional inclusion, while also recognizing the importance of social and cultural dimensions in shaping sustainable progress. The concept highlights balanced participation of both genders in driving national development and reflects the country's efforts to translate global gender frameworks into contextually relevant policies and practices, in alignment with We the UAE Vision 2031 and its commitment to fostering an inclusive, cohesive, and future-ready society. (UAE Government, 2023; UAE Gender Balance Council, 2021)

The UAE's notable progress towards gender balance, reflected in its improvements in rankings across various global indices, is directly correlated to legislative and policy reform, backed by strong political support that will ensure meaningful implementation.



While comparative indices provide useful benchmarks, it is important to interpret participation based indicators within the UAE's distinctive demographic structure. The country's population is predominantly expatriate, with a significant proportion of male migrant workers in labour-intensive sectors. This demographic composition creates an atypical gender distribution within the labour force, influencing overall participation rates and international comparisons (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2024). Accordingly, assessments of gender balance in the UAE should be understood in light of this context, which underscores the need to moderate direct comparisons with countries that have more evenly distributed citizen and gender populations.

Central to this advancement is the enhanced participation of women in political, economic, and public decision-making, which serves as a critical catalyst for driving systemic change, translating gender balance principles and theory into impactful policies and practice.

Gender balance is implicitly¹⁰ stated in the country's constitution, where all citizens¹¹ are guaranteed equal rights in all civil and political matters. This umbrella guarantee offers a vehicle for legislative and policy frameworks cementing advancement in health, education, economic participation, and women's empowerment.

Federal legislative decrees are issued to complement and provide legal frameworks and categorical interpretations of the Constitution. These decrees explicitly offer protection from gender-based discrimination, guarantee equal rights and access to all educational levels, ensure equal protections and rights in the labour market and world of work, and provide special accommodations for unpaid care and family responsibilities, elimination of the gender pay gap in public (governmental) work, reproductive and maternal health rights, increased rights for women in the Personal Status laws, improved social assistance and empowerment programmes for women, increased social protection provisions, support for women in sports, and prevention and protection from gender-based and domestic violence (Ministry of Health and Prevention, 2025; United Arab Emirates, 2018, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024). Additionally, federal decrees were issued to enable women to take part in the judicial system by eliminating restrictions on their appointment as judges and to institutionalise women's participation in decision-making within federal institutions and boards (United Arab Emirates, 2022). Notably, such rights and protections are not exclusive to citizens but also extend to residents of the UAE (United Arab Emirates, 2022).

1.1 Education

Sustained investment in girls' and women's education—supported by national strategies and enabling workplace policies—has strengthened women's capabilities and helped close gaps on key education indicators used in the GDI and GII, notably the "population with at least some secondary education," which rose from 43.9% for females in 1990 to 83.4% in 2023, aligning with very high human development countries (as detailed in Section 2.2). Women's access to quality education and improved educational outcomes have been at the forefront of the government's priorities through its National Strategies for the Empowerment of Emirati Women 2015-2021 and 2023-2031. This vision was translated into increased budget allocation for public and higher education (15.3% of the 2025 total budget), figures from the UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (2024) indicate that although female graduates in STEM fields do not exceed their male counterparts (32% compared to 41.4% in 2023-2024), STEM¹² remains the second most common field of study among women after business, reflecting growing female participation across all educational levels. Additionally, policies introduced during the COVID-19 period, such as flexible work arrangements, have enabled many working

¹⁰ While the constitution does not explicitly mention terms such as "sex", "gender", or "equality between men and women", it does include various provisions and articles pointing to equal rights for all citizens, without exclusions based on identity.

¹¹ A number of legislations also extend some protections and equal status to non-citizen residents of the UAE

¹² STEM: Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

women to pursue higher education opportunities (World Bank Group, 2022).

Furthermore, legal and policy reforms that enhance women's access to political decision-making, employment, and leadership roles inspire girls and women to pursue education at all levels. These reforms encourage them to recognize that their educational investment not only fosters personal growth and self-actualization but also contributes to the broader development and success of their country.

1.2 Political participation

A major driver of this progress is the expansion of women's representation in political leadership. The UAE remains the only country in the Middle East and North Africa region with a mandatory 50% quota for women in the Federal National Council (FNC), introduced through a Presidential Directive in 2019 (UAE Cabinet, 2019). This leadership commitment has evolved progressively over time, beginning with the institutionalization of women's empowerment in 1975, when the General Women's Union (GWU) was established under the leadership of Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, "Umm Al Emirat", to advance women's participation across all sectors (GWU, 2024). In 2006, Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi made history as the first woman to preside over the UAE national parliament, marking a turning point for women's political leadership in the UAE, while early appointees such as Meera Sultan and Aisha Al Mulla further strengthened women's participation in national decision-making bodies (FNC, 2020). In 2019, this commitment was institutionalized through a Presidential Directive mandating 50% representation for women in the Federal National Council (FNC), making the UAE the only country in the MENA region to establish such a quota (UAE Cabinet, 2019). Building on this foundation, women's representation in government leadership has continued to expand, with the number of female ministers rising over time, reflecting the leadership's sustained prioritization of gender balance in decision making and public service (UAE Government, 2024).

The UAE Constitution supports equality between all citizens regardless of gender, forming a foundational guarantee for a series of federal reforms protecting women's rights in employment, education, health, civil status, and social protection (United Arab Emirates Constitution, 1971). Federal Decree Laws have translated these guarantees into explicit legal provisions prohibiting discrimination, expanding maternity and parental leave, offering equal access to education, securing reproductive health protections, and strengthening measures against gender-based and domestic violence (United Arab Emirates, 2021).

1.3 Economic Participation

Federal laws and decrees in the UAE actively support women's economic participation by guaranteeing their rights in the labour market and strengthening family-friendly work provisions. Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021 and Federal Decree-Law No. 49 of 2022 (United Arab Emirates, 2021, Art. 32) enhances women's participation in the workforce through expanded maternity and paternity leaves and childcare breaks (United Arab Emirates, 2021, Art. 32). It also explicitly cements equal rights for women in the labour market and provides protections from sexual harassment, abuse, and discrimination (United Arab Emirates, 2021, Art. 30) and (United Arab Emirates, 2022, Art. 8). Within this national framework, several government entities and public-sector institutions have adopted enhanced maternity leave arrangements through internal human resources policies aimed at supporting working mothers (UAE Government Media Office, 2021). Furthermore, certain public-sector authorities in the UAE, such as in the Emirate of Sharjah, have introduced fully paid long-term care leave for mothers whose children require continuous medical or disability-related support, as reflected in decisions announced by government media offices and executive councils (Sharjah Government Media Bureau, 2024).

Recognizing that childcare is one of the most significant barriers to women's sustained

labour force participation, the UAE implemented a nationwide requirement in 2006 mandating that government institutions employing 50 or more women establish on-site nurseries, a structural reform aligned with global evidence showing that access to early childhood education and care increases women's workforce participation (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2018; UAE Cabinet, 2006). In the public sector, mothers are entitled to 90 days of fully paid maternity leave. Mothers are also entitled to one or two rest periods per day to breastfeed their children, after returning from the maternity leave (United Arab Emirates, 2022, Art. 19).

In the private sector, mothers are entitled to 45 days of fully paid maternity leave, with options for additional half-pay days. Certain social support entities in the UAE, such as the Abu Dhabi Social Support Authority, have expanded these protections by offering financial assistance programmes that allow women to extend maternity leave up to 90 days, particularly in private-sector service roles (Abu Dhabi Social Support Authority, 2024). In 2020, the UAE also became the first country in the region to implement paid paternity leave, five working days, marking a significant step toward promoting shared caregiving responsibilities (UAE Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation, 2020). Additionally, the 2017 federal decree prohibiting gender-based wage discrimination reinforced the UAE's nationwide commitment to equality and fair treatment in the workplace (United Arab Emirates, 2018, 2023).

Flexible working arrangements introduced during the COVID-19 period further enabled women to balance their family life and pursue education while maintaining employment (UAE Government Media Office, 2021). Another example of flexible working arrangements is the "Back to School" policy which allows parents working in the federal government, at the beginning of the new academic year, to accompany their children to and from schools and nurseries, either through a morning late leave or early dismissal (Cabinet Resolution No. (8)/2/W of 2018).

A landmark development in corporate governance came with the 2024 Securities and Commodities Authority (SCA) resolution mandating that all listed companies appoint at least one woman to their board of directors (SCA, 2021), and the Ministerial Decision No. 137 of 2024 regarding women's representation on the boards of directors of private joint-stock companies (Ministry of Economy, 2024). This policy makes the UAE the only country in the Middle East and North Africa region with a legally binding quota for women on corporate boards, where gender diversity remains voluntary. Together, these reforms have reshaped the structural conditions underpinning women's workforce participation, leadership pathways, and workplace protections. In 2023, entrepreneurship leave was introduced for federal government employees which is a pioneering initiative allowing Emirati federal government employees (both males and females) to take a one-year, partially paid sabbatical to establish or manage their own business ventures while retaining their jobs. This initiative aims to empower national talents, encourage private sector involvement, and support the national economy (Cabinet Resolution No (12) of 2023).

These advancements in labour laws and the specific attention to women's economic participation have contributed to bridging the gender gap in the workforce. While this gap remains relatively wide in terms of numbers, the quality and enforcement of workplace protections and rights for women in the UAE is admirable. According to the 2022 Great Place to Work Index¹³, 91% of respondents in the UAE express satisfaction with equal treatment in the workplace (Great Place to Work Middle East, 2022).

The UAE's Gender Balance Index, launched in 2016 as one of the UAE's national indicators to assess government entities' performance in enhancing gender balance, demonstrates tangible labour market gains since inception. Federal entities have shown improved women's workforce retention, leadership representation, with annual recognition

13 The Great Place to Work® Index evaluates workplace quality, capturing employee perceptions of trust in leadership, pride in work, and team camaraderie.

through awards such as Best Personality for Supporting Gender Balance, Best Federal Entity for Supporting Gender Balance, and Best Initiative for Supporting Gender Balance (UAE Gender Balance Council, n.d.).

In the private sector, investment in female-friendly work environments and women's participation has been steadily increasing in recent years, with the number of WEPS¹⁴ (Women's Empowerment Principles) signatories reaching 155 companies, ranking the UAE second among Arab States (UN Women, n.d.). A contributing factor to this progress is the 2024 ministerial decision mandating the inclusion of at least one woman on the board of directors for private companies, which has enhanced awareness of the economic value of women's (Emirates News Agency, 2024; Securities and Commodities Authority, 2021).

2. LESSONS LEARNED AND EXPERIENCE TO SHARE

As the country demonstrates advancements in gender balance through progressive legal and policy reforms, reflecting on key lessons learned and identifying areas for further improvement are essential to sustaining meaningful implementation and progress. Some of the more apparent gaps remain in the area of economic participation.

2.1 Economic Participation and the Labour Market

It is important to note that the UAE's labour force statistics reflect a unique demographic model in which expatriates comprise a significant share of the working-age population, with male workers heavily represented in specific sectors. This structural composition influences aggregate gender participation ratios and differentiates the UAE from more demographically homogeneous very high human development countries.

A significant gap persists between the UAE's strong educational outcomes for women and their participation in the labour market and wider economy. Although the UAE ranks among the top 20 countries globally in the Human Development Index (HDI), placing it within the Very High Human Development category (UNDP, 2023), the gender gap in labour force participation remains more pronounced than in many of its HDI peer countries, largely influenced by the UAE's demographic composition and labour market structure. This discrepancy is particularly notable because the UAE has one of the highest rates of female tertiary education attainment globally, yet women's workforce participation still lags behind that of men (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2024). Importantly, a significant share of this gap is shaped by the UAE's demographic composition, in which a large migrant labour population, primarily male, affects national labour statistics (UNDP, 2023). This demographic structure widens the numerical gender gap even as Women in the Emirates continue to experience expanding employment opportunities through national policies and public sector pathways, including efforts to address societal and maternal related barriers through childcare, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements.

From a capabilities perspective, the UAE has already achieved substantial progress in several gender-related components of the Gender Inequality Index (GII), particularly maternal health, educational attainment, and political participation (UNDP, 2023). Maternal mortality rates remain among the lowest globally (WHO, 2023), women's educational attainment exceeds global averages (Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2024), and women's representation in public leadership has increased significantly, supported by reforms such as the 50% Federal National Council representation directive (UAE Cabinet, 2019). Nevertheless, labour force participation remains the

14 The Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPS) provide businesses with guidance on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment across the workplace, marketplace, and community. Developed by UN Women and the UN Global Compact, these principles draw from international labour and human rights standards, emphasizing that companies share both an interest in and responsibility for advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

most challenging component and represents the largest contributor to the remaining UAE gender gap. To address this, national programmes such as Nafis have introduced incentives and pathways to increase Emirati women's presence in private-sector roles, contributing to outcomes such as women now comprising approximately 70% of Emirati nationals employed in the private sector (Nafis, 2024; MOHRE, 2024).-sector pathways, including efforts to address societal and maternal-related barriers through childcare, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements.

The UAE Gender Balance Council has played a central role in advancing women's economic empowerment through initiatives such as the SDG 5 Pledge for Private Sector Gender Equality, a voluntary commitment through which leading national and international companies in the UAE pledge to adopt policies supporting women's recruitment, retention, leadership advancement, and equal opportunities (Gender Balance Council, 2022). The growing number of signatories demonstrates how private-sector actors are choosing to lead on gender equality, and the pledge has become a key mechanism for translating policy commitments into institutional change, particularly across high-growth sectors where women's representation has historically been limited. Together, these efforts, combined with the broader Nafis agenda, reflect the UAE's deliberate strategy to reduce the gender participation gap through collaborative government-private sector partnerships.

The economic case for accelerating women's labour force participation is compelling. The International Monetary Fund highlights that closing gender gaps correlates with higher economic growth, reduced inequality, increased productivity, and stronger financial stability (IMF, 2022). In the UAE, IMF modelling estimates that increasing women's labour force participation could raise GDP growth by up to 12% (IMF, 2022), representing a substantial macroeconomic benefit aligned with the country's long-term development vision.

Beyond participation rates, evidence from the UN Women-UNDP twin indices highlight the importance of improving "enhanced capabilities": the UAE's Women's Empowerment Index (WEI) and Global Gender Parity Index (GGPI) point to remaining gaps in areas such as women's representation in managerial roles and other dimensions of voice and agency. This reinforces that the next phase of progress is not only about bringing more women into the workforce, but also about improving pathways into leadership, quality employment, and decision-making within organisations (UNDP and UN Women, 2023).

2.2 Care work, leave policy, and UAE innovations for economic participation Family-friendly policies and remaining opportunities

Childcare provision, which is globally recognized as a major determinant of women's labour market entry and retention, is an area where the UAE has made significant progress. The longstanding nationwide requirement for government institutions employing 50 or more women to establish on-site nurseries (UAE Cabinet, 2006) reflects early commitment to family-friendly workplaces. However, international evidence shows that countries with universal or employer-supported childcare systems demonstrate far higher female labour participation (OECD, 2018). Expanding childcare obligations to the private sector or basing requirements on the number of young children rather than the number of women employees could therefore drive further gains in women's employment.

Similarly, while UAE maternity and paternity leave provisions align closely with regional best practices, opportunities remain to strengthen them in line with global standards. The UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization has introduced multiple initiatives promoting parental protections and workplace flexibility for private-sector employees (UAE Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, 2020). At the same time, several UAE public-sector institutions have implemented enhanced maternity

leave or long-term care leave arrangements for mothers caring for children requiring continuous support (Sharjah Government Media Bureau, 2024). The UAE Ministry of Family's 2025–2027 Strategy, presented to solidify family stability and well-being, prioritizes supporting work–life balance and enhancing policies that enable families through integrated programmes and flexible work environments, further reinforcing the national commitment to strengthening parental leave frameworks and family-friendly workplace practices (WAM, 2025). These best practices create a strong foundation for eventual harmonization across sectors.

As a very high human development country, the UAE competes in a tightly clustered group where top performers (e.g., Iceland, Norway, Switzerland at 0.95+) differ by mere fractions of a decimal point, often 0.01–0.03. The VHHD threshold begins at ~0.800 (per UNDP methodology), but advances within this elite category demand highly targeted, high-impact reforms to yield measurable gains in rankings and values. This positions the UAE to benefit significantly from sustainable interventions in labour force participation, parental leave, childcare access, and workplace protections which are areas that represent the remaining high-leverage opportunities for measurable progress.

With continued policy innovation, multi-sector coordination, and a whole-of-government approach, the UAE is well-positioned to maintain its upward trajectory and ultimately achieve its long-term objective of becoming a top global performer on the Gender Inequality Index, ensuring that its human development achievements translate into equitable, productive, and economically empowering opportunities for men and women equally.

2.3 Visionary Leadership & Male Allyship

The UAE's visionary leadership has positioned gender balance as a national development priority, signalled through high-level appointments and institutional reforms that place women in senior decision-making roles across government and public life. The UAE's emphasis on gender balance, rather than traditional gender equality or parity, aligns with its definition of gender balance as ensuring equitable representation, participation, and influence of both women and men across society, an approach that recognizes that gender gaps shape human development outcomes differently for women and men (UAE Gender Balance Council, 2021; UNDP, 2023). This model reflects the UAE's commitment to adapting global best practices to the country's cultural and institutional context, supporting sustainable reductions in gender inequality as reflected in composite human development measures that aligns with national identity, societal values, and long-term development objectives. As a regional pioneer, the UAE continues to embed gender balance within its broader national strategies, ensuring that both women and men are able to contribute effectively to, and benefit from, the nation's overall human development trajectory and progress in reducing gender-based disparities.

Male allyship further reinforces this leadership vision by positioning men at all levels of society, within families, workplaces, communities, and institutions, as partners in advancing gender balance. When men actively support women's participation and leadership, challenge stereotypes, and model equitable behaviours in professional and social settings, they help normalize gender-balanced norms and strengthen the impact of formal policies and reforms on everyday life.

3. CONCLUSION

The UAE's progress in advancing gender equality is grounded in comprehensive legal and policy reforms, strong institutional mechanisms, and sustained political commitment. These efforts have strengthened women's rights across education, employment, political participation, civil status, and social protection, contributing to measurable improvements in global gender and human development indicators. Yet, the remaining gaps, particularly in labour force participation, highlight the need for continued, targeted reform.

Gender balance is not only a matter of rights but also a foundational pillar of the UAE's long-term social and economic development. Ensuring that women and men can contribute equally to national progress will enhance productivity, strengthen human capital, and support the country's aspirations to remain among the world's top performers in human development.

Sustaining momentum toward gender parity will require coordinated, whole-of-society efforts, continued innovation in policy design, and the active engagement of both women and men in all sectors. Equally important is the UAE's commitment to sharing best practices, strengthening global partnerships, and ensuring that progress leaves no one behind, principles that align directly with SDG 17 on revitalizing global partnerships for sustainable development. By building on its achievements and addressing the remaining challenges with the same resolve that has defined its progress to date, the UAE is well-positioned to further strengthen its leadership in gender balance and advance toward its long-term national vision.

4. REFERENCES

- Abu Dhabi Social Support Authority. (2024). Maternity leave for women in private sector service.
- Cabinet of the United Arab Emirates. (2018). Cabinet Resolution No. (8)/2/W of 2018 concerning flexible working arrangements for federal government employees.
- Cabinet of the United Arab Emirates. (2023). Cabinet Resolution No. (12) of 2023 concerning full-time self-employment leave for federal government employees.
- Emirates News Agency (WAM). (2024). UAE reaffirms commitment to gender equality in the workplace.
- Emirates News Agency (WAM). (2025, October 8). Ministry of Family presents strategic plan to empower families across emirates.
- Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre. (2024). Number of new graduates in higher education by field and gender (UAE).
- Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre. (2024). Population estimates (UAE.STAT).
- Federal National Council. (2020). Women in the Federal National Council. FNC.
- Government of the United Arab Emirates. (2024). Cabinet Resolution No. (44) of 2024 concerning the permitted abortion cases.
- Great Place to Work Middle East. (2022). 4 winning strategies to foster gender equality in UAE workplaces.
- General Women's Union. (2024). Foundation and mission of the General Women's Union. National policy for women's health promotion in the United Arab Emirates. Ministry of Economy. (2024). Ministerial resolution No. (137) of 2024 regarding the regulation of private joint-stock companies.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2018). Early childhood education and care.
- Securities and Commodities Authority. (2021). Board decision No. (3/R.M.) of 2021 concerning the corporate governance guide for public joint stock companies listed on the markets of the state.
- Securities and Commodities Authority. (2024). Board gender diversity mandate.
- UAE Cabinet. (2006). Cabinet Resolution No. (19) of 2006 concerning nurseries in public offices.
- UAE Cabinet. (2019). Presidential Resolution No. (1) of 2019.
- UAE Gender Balance Council. (n.d.). Gender Balance Index.
- UAE Gender Balance Council. (2017). UAE gender balance guide: Actions for UAE organisations.
- UAE Gender Balance Council. (2021). UAE Gender Balance Council Strategy 2026.
- UAE Government. (2023). 'We the UAE 2031' vision. The Official Portal of the UAE.
- UAE Government. (2024). The UAE Cabinet: Composition and ministerial portfolios. The Official Portal of the UAE Government.
- UAE Government Media Office. (2021). Flexible working arrangements.
- UAE Government. (2025). Federal budget. UAE Government Portal.
- UAE Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation. (2020). Paternity leave policy.
- UN Women. (n.d.). Women's Empowerment Principles.
- United Arab Emirates. (1971). Constitution of the United Arab Emirates. United Arab Emirates Legislations.
- United Arab Emirates. (2018). Federal Decree-Law No. (27) of 2018 concerning equality in wages between men and women. UAE Legislations.
- United Arab Emirates. (2021). Federal Decree-Law No. (31) of 2021 on the issuance of the Crimes and Penalties Law.
- United Arab Emirates. (2021). Federal Decree-Law No. (33) of 2021 regarding the regulation of labour relations.
- United Arab Emirates. (2021). Federal Decree-Law No. (34) of 2021 concerning the fight against rumours and cybercrime.
- United Arab Emirates. (2022). Federal Decree-Law No. (10) of 2022.
- United Arab Emirates. (2022). Federal Decree-Law No. (32) of 2022 on the federal judicial authority.
- United Arab Emirates. (2022). Federal Decree-Law No. (39) of 2022 concerning compulsory education.
- United Arab Emirates. (2022). Federal Decree-Law No. (41) of 2022 on the civil personal status.
- United Arab Emirates. (2023). Federal Decree-Law No. (4) of 2023 concerning sports.
- United Arab Emirates. (2023). Federal Decree-Law No. (24) of 2023 on combating human trafficking.
- United Arab Emirates. (2023). Federal Decree-Law No. (34) of 2023 concerning combating discrimination, hatred, and extremism.
- United Arab Emirates. (2024). Federal Decree-Law No. (13) of 2024 on the protection against domestic violence.
- United Arab Emirates. (2024). Federal Decree-Law No. (23) of 2024 on social support and empowerment.
- United Arab Emirates. (2024). Federal Decree-Law No. (41) of 2024 on the issuance of the personal status law.
- United Arab Emirates. (2023). Federal Decree-Law No. (48) of 2023 regulating insurance activities.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2018, December 12). UNDP gender equality strategy 2018–2021.
- United Nations Development Programme. (2023). Human development report 2023.
- World Bank Group. (2022). Legal reforms to strengthen women's economic inclusion: UAE case study.



مجلس الإمارات للتوازن بين الجنسين
UAE GENDER BALANCE COUNCIL

 info@gbc.gov.ae   [@UAEGBC](https://www.instagram.com/UAEGBC)  UAE Gender Balance Council or scan the QR code

