



## WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN THE UAE: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN ACHIEVING GENDER EQUALITY

### Introduction

Gender equality and women's empowerment have been significant focal points in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as the nation strives to build an inclusive society. Over the years, the UAE has made remarkable progress in promoting women's rights and providing opportunities for their advancement. However, challenges persist, and the journey toward achieving full gender equality continues. This article explores the progress made in women's empowerment in the UAE, highlights key initiatives, and sheds light on the challenges that still need to be addressed.

Traditionally, the UAE has been a patriarchal society, where gender roles were clearly defined. However, in recent decades, the country has undergone significant social and economic transformations. Its leadership recognized the importance of women's participation and empowerment as crucial components of the nation's development.

The [World Economic Forum's 2022 Global Gender Gap report](#) reveals that the UAE has attained the highest level of gender parity among Arab nations, indicating a strong national dedication to empowering women in both the public and private sectors. Laws and initiatives safeguard women's rights, promote equal job opportunities, and encourage participation in sustainable fields. Additionally, appointing women to prominent government positions signifies major progress in empowering women.

### Education

The UAE has made education a priority for both genders, leading to high literacy rates and improved access to education for women. Notably, women outnumber men in tertiary education, showcasing their commitment to learning and career advancement. It boasts one of the highest rates of female enrollment in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs worldwide, with women accounting for 56% of government university graduates in STEM fields.

### Workforce

The UAE government has introduced policies that promote women's participation in the workforce, including initiatives like Gender Equality Certification and maternity leave benefits. Women in the UAE achieved a significant milestone by having 15 representatives on the [2023 Forbes 100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen list](#), the highest number among others in the MENA region. According to a report released by Nama Women Advancement, Emirati women entrepreneurs owned a staggering 50,000 businesses valued at Dh60 billion with a total of 25,000 women leading the way in 2021.

### Politics

The UAE has been recognized as the top-ranked country in the MENA region and 30th globally for its efforts in advancing women's political empowerment, as per the World Economic Forum. Women in the UAE occupy two-thirds of public sector positions, with 30% holding senior leadership roles. The journey towards women's empowerment in the UAE has progressed through multiple stages, reaching a significant milestone with the appointment of the first female minister in 2004. Subsequently, the number of women in ministerial positions has grown from 1 to 10 in the latest cabinet reshuffle in 2023, constituting 28.5 percent of the total of 35 ministers.





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## Social Initiatives and Projects

The UAE has taken significant steps to empower women and prioritize their well-being through various initiatives. Legislative reforms have been a key driver of change, introducing measures like an extended maternity leave period by 30 percent and implementing policies in the private sector that mandate female representation on the boards of listed companies. To support aspiring female entrepreneurs, programs such as "100% Emirati Women-Owned Businesses" and the "Mother of the Nation" campaign offer financial support, training, and mentorship opportunities. In collaboration with the UAE Women's Sports Federation, the "Positive Energy" initiative was launched in 2023, offering a wide range of sports activities and dialogue sessions. This initiative focuses on promoting physical and mental well-being while addressing the impact of climate change on women's health. The UAE has also implemented legislation to prohibit workplace discrimination based on gender, race, color, and nationality. Additionally, the UAE Gender Balance Council Strategy 2022-2026 further strengthens the country's commitment to achieving gender balance and serves as a global benchmark. This strategy encompasses four pillars and objectives, including economic participation, entrepreneurship and financial inclusion, well-being, quality of life and protection, leadership, and global partnerships. Furthermore, campaigns against domestic violence and efforts to protect women's rights have raised awareness and contributed to fostering a safer environment for women in the UAE.

## Challenges

While the UAE has made significant progress, challenges remain on the path to achieving full gender equality. Cultural norms, societal expectations, and lingering gender biases continue to pose obstacles to women's empowerment. Despite increased workforce participation, there is a need for further representation of women in leadership roles across all sectors. In a 2021 survey by NAMA Women Advancement Establishment and UN Women, it was found that 41.2% of women-owned businesses faced limited market access, while 39% cited unmet credit demand and lack of finance access as obstacles to growth. Gender-based challenges for these businesses in the UAE were mainly socio-cultural, with respondents highlighting the difficulty of balancing household and business responsibilities. Addressing these challenges requires continued efforts in breaking down barriers, fostering gender-responsive policies, and promoting inclusivity and diversity.



## Conclusion

The UAE has demonstrated a strong commitment to women's empowerment, with noteworthy progress in various spheres. The nation's leadership, combined with the determination of women themselves, has been instrumental in driving positive change. However, achieving gender equality requires continued focus and sustained efforts to dismantle remaining barriers, challenge stereotypes, and create an environment where women can thrive in all aspects of life. By building on the progress made and addressing the challenges, the UAE can further enhance women's empowerment and become an outstanding example of gender equality in the region.

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