



## The UAE is Making Strides in Closing the Gender Gap

by *Muna Al Gurg*

*Lessons can be learned from the UAE's ongoing efforts toward greater gender balance*

**I**m frequently asked the same question: does the glass ceiling still exist for Arab women? The short answer is of course it does, as with everywhere else in the world. Despite some recent and robust government initiatives aimed at empowering women, the Gulf region's fiercely patriarchal society continues to curtail the more sweeping change I have come to expect.

Our society still discourages talk of gender inequality. When I attend women's social gatherings—namely weddings or dinner parties—discussion is typically limited to who married whom and the latest trends in fashion. As far as I can tell, there's no discussion of the arts

and sciences, and little interest is shown in the latest technological trends or the achievements of high-impact social enterprises. In fact, for at least a decade, I'd regularly see one particular woman at these functions, usually weddings, only to later find out at a business mentoring session that not only does she run a successful women's social enterprise but she also won the region's Acumen Fund Award for Social Impact. I had no idea.

The main reason for all of this is family expectations. It may be 2018 but men's opinions still matter a great deal in a patriarchal society. Social pressures weigh on the decisions women make and therefore shape the direction in which their lives take. This reality reduces choice for women in much more powerful ways than it does for men. It's common, for example, for an academically gifted woman to study in her home country even when her less studious brother goes abroad to attend a top university.

### Women's status over time

The Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are geographically close, but they exhibit relatively diverse cultural nuances—particularly when it comes to attitudes toward women in society. Over the past century, Kuwait has generally had a more liberal and progressive attitude to women's rights. Education plays a role—the region's first secular school, Al Mubarakiya, opened in 1911. Kuwait maintained the Gulf region's best schools through to the 1960s—its textbooks were even adopted in the UAE despite their prefaces having a portrait of the Kuwaiti emir. This “head start” for Kuwaiti women gave them the breathing room to pursue occupations that were unconventional for their time—such as artists, actors, physicians, and psychologists.

During the 1940s and 1950s, women in the Gulf worked to some extent, typically selling handiwork and food supplies. Since gaining independence from British rule in the 1960s and onward, the Gulf region has come a long way in both education and women's workforce participation. In the 1970s, women obtained the right to work—even though they were limited to segregated workplaces, which largely restricted their career options to

areas like education. Today, women are able to work in a greater number of fields, though society still frowns upon women who work late hours and frequently travel abroad.

#### The UAE case study

Within the last decade, there has been a huge drive to achieve greater gender equality—particularly in the UAE. Since Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum became ruler of Dubai in 2006, he has repeatedly advocated for women’s empowerment through various decrees and laws. Sheikh Mohammed also launched several non-profit organizations such as Dubai Women’s Establishment and Dubai Business Women’s Council, both of which provide women a platform to network and develop their business skills.

In 2015, Sheikh Mohammed established a Gender Balance Council, a Gender Balance Index, and introduced quotas for women on corporate boards. Today, 9 out of 31 ministerial positions in the UAE are held by women, a further example of the efforts being made by the government. Moreover, UAE Ambassador to the UN Lana Nusseibeh recently completed her term as president of the UN-Women Executive Board for 2017, the UN’s governing body dedicated to advancing gender equality. Nusseibeh’s example has had a large impact on reducing patriarchal views, and we now see men playing a more supportive role in their wives’, sisters’, and daughters’ lives.

We also see a small but growing number of female engineers, lawyers, physicians, and pilots across the UAE. Women in the UAE are also making progress in accessing informal networks—to a large extent male-dominated ones—outside the work environment through networking organizations such as the Dubai Business Women’s Council.

Another breakthrough took place in 2017 when it was announced that citizenship could be passed down to the children of Emirati women married to non-Emirati men when they reach six years of age. No other Gulf country grants women the right to pass their citizenship onto their children if their spouse is a foreigner. The rest of the Gulf governments need to follow the UAE’s example

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and give women the same citizenship rights in this regard.

#### What’s next for Gulf women?

In the wider global sphere, more women working could add up to \$12 trillion to the global economy in the next 10 years—and the Gulf region has become a lucrative place to do business. 1.5 million wealthy households in the Gulf region have assets totaling at least \$2.2 trillion. Increasingly, many of the wealthy family businesses now include women who have taken control of their wealth (both from an investment and philanthropic perspective) as a result of merit or inheritance. Women across the Gulf region are beginning to take a seat at the table.

It’s evident that Gulf officials are realizing the economic potential women offer—and acknowledging the gender gap and developing policies to address it. But as is always the case, success will depend on how these policies are executed. The Gulf region today has more gender balance initiatives in play than ever before. Gulf leaders have made significant commitments to bridging the gender gap—now it is society’s turn to catch up.

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