



TRADE,  
INVESTMENT AND  
COMPETITIVENESS

Public Disclosure Authorized

Public Disclosure Authorized

Public Disclosure Authorized

Public Disclosure Authorized

EQUITABLE GROWTH, FINANCE & INSTITUTIONS NOTES

# United Arab Emirates (UAE): Legal reforms to strengthen women's economic inclusion – Case Study



WORLD BANK GROUP

THE WORLD BANK  
IBRD • IDA

IFC  
International  
Finance Corporation

© 2022 International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank  
1818 H Street NW  
Washington DC 20433  
Telephone: 202-473-1000  
Internet: [www.worldbank.org](http://www.worldbank.org)

This work is a product of the staff of The World Bank with external contributions. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in this work do not necessarily reflect the views of The World Bank, its Board of Executive Directors, or the governments they represent.

The World Bank does not guarantee the accuracy, completeness, or currency of the data included in this work and does not assume responsibility for any errors, omissions, or discrepancies in the information, or liability with respect to the use of or failure to use the information, methods, processes, or conclusions set forth. The boundaries, colors, denominations, and other information shown on any map in this work do not imply any judgment on the part of The World Bank concerning the legal status of any territory or the endorsement or acceptance of such boundaries.

Nothing herein shall constitute or be construed or considered to be a limitation upon or waiver of the privileges and immunities of The World Bank, all of which are specifically reserved.

#### Rights and Permissions



The material in this work is subject to copyright. Because The World Bank encourages dissemination of its knowledge, this work may be reproduced, in whole or in part, for noncommercial purposes as long as full attribution to this work is given.

Any queries on rights and licenses, including subsidiary rights, should be addressed to World Bank Publications, The World Bank Group, 1818 H Street NW, Washington, DC 20433, USA; fax: 202-522-2625; e-mail: [pubrights@worldbank.org](mailto:pubrights@worldbank.org).

Cover design and layout: Diego Catto / [www.diegocatto.com](http://www.diegocatto.com)



## Acknowledgements

This study was funded and led by the IFC in close collaboration and with technical support from a WBG team led by Iva Hamel, Senior Private Sector Specialist, Global Business Regulation, FCI and comprised of Gharam Alkastalani Dexter, Private Sector Specialist, Global Business Regulation and Souad Adnane, Private Sector Specialist ETC, Global Business Regulation in collaboration with Ergon Associates, UK. Comments were provided by Sagita Muco, Senior Private Sector Specialist, Global Business Regulation, FCI; Sylvia Solf, Senior Private Sector Specialist, Global Business Regulation, FCI; Henriette Kolb, Manager, Gender and Economic Inclusion, IFC; Sammar Essmat, Gender Lead, Middle East and North Africa, IFC; and Laila Elrefai, Associate Operations Officer, Gender and Economic Inclusion, IFC.

The team is very grateful to H.E. Hanan Ahli, Acting Managing Director, Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Center, and H.E. Shamsa Saleh, Secretary General of the UAE Gender Balance Council, for their extensive collaboration in preparing the study.



# Contents

---

<b>1. Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. The context for the reforms</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>3. Key steps in the reform process</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>4. Reform Benefits</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>5. Success factors</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>6. Conclusion</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>8. References</b>	<b>17</b>

---



## Introduction

In 2019-2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) introduced a historic package of legal reforms aimed at strengthening women's economic participation, in line with its national policy commitment to gender balance.

The reforms signified a major milestone for the region, introducing paid parental leave in the private sector for the first time in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), enabling women to choose where to live and to travel outside the home and internationally in the same way as men, introducing the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, and lifting the obedience provision in the UAE's Personal Status Law. The reforms aligned with the UAE's national vision to expand women's role in driving economic growth, and with its goal of establishing itself as a regional—and international—leader on gender equality. Following the reforms introduced in 2020, the UAE became the top-performing economy in the MENA region, as measured by the World Bank's Women, Business and the Law Report.

This case study explores the nature of the legal reforms in the UAE, their potential implications for women's economic empowerment and the UAE's gender policy goals, and the factors that provided the enabling conditions for change.

### Key points

- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) introduced historic legal reforms in 2019 and 2020 to support higher levels of women's economic participation. The reforms were introduced in the context of wide-ranging national policy commitments to gender balance and women's economic participation. The UAE reform experience shows that strong progress can be made towards gender equality within a short period of time when strong leadership commitment is present.
- The UAE has set an important precedent for legal gender equality in the region by being the first economy to introduce paid parental leave<sup>1</sup> for male and female employees in the private sector.
- The UAE reforms also demonstrated how changes to the Personal Status Laws can be implemented to create greater gender equality while aligning with sharia principles.
- Following the 2020 legal reforms, the UAE became MENA and the GCC's top performer in the 2021 WBL Report.
- Following the reforms, the UAE is well situated to increase women's economic participation, building on existing progress in areas of strategic national interest. For example, 56 percent of UAE's STEM graduates are women, and the majority of the national space program workforce is female.

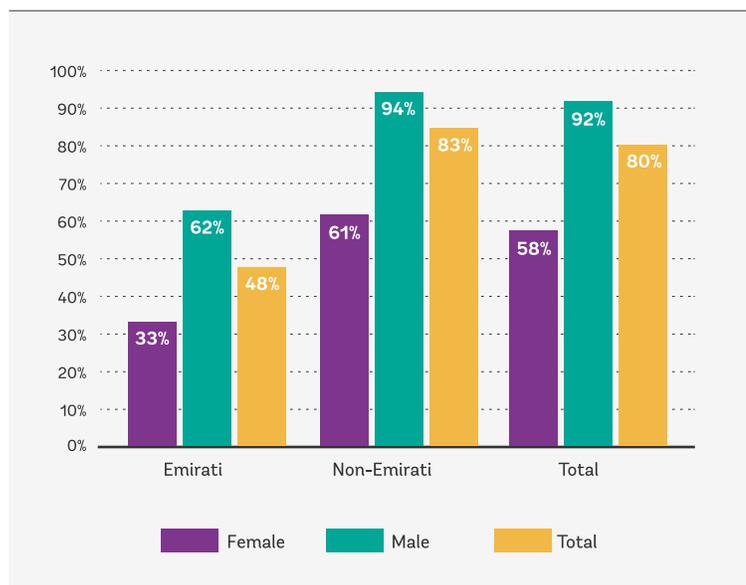


## The context for the reforms

Women's role in the UAE economy has been steadily increasing over time. Female labor force participation has been on an upward trajectory since the 1990s, rising from 29 percent in 1990 to 37 percent in 2005<sup>2</sup>, and reaching 58 percent in 2019<sup>3</sup>. As a result, just prior to the 2020 reforms, the UAE already had one of the highest female labor force participation rates in the MENA region, comparing favorably to the regional average of 20 percent<sup>4</sup> and the global average of 47 percent<sup>5</sup>. This increasing trend of female labor force participation has been linked to a range of factors including increased educational attainment by Emirati women, changing cultural attitudes concerning the role of women<sup>6</sup>, as well as strong public sector employment and nationalization policies in the private sector<sup>7</sup>.

Nevertheless, despite these gains, female labor force participation in the UAE remained considerably lower than men's, which has been relatively stable at over 90 percent since the 1990s (92 percent in 2019).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, total labor force participation rates in the UAE have been heavily influenced by large numbers of migrant workers, which can obscure the situation of Emirati women, who were still considerably less likely to work than their non-national counterparts. In 2019, the labor force participation rate for Emirati women was 33 percent, compared to 61 percent for non-Emirati women (and 62 percent for Emirati men) (see **Figure 1**).<sup>9</sup>

**Figure 1** Labor force participation rates, UAE – 2019, for ages 15 years and above



**Source** Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Center, UAE.

Encouraging more Emirati women to enter the workforce could significantly accelerate progress towards the UAE's national policy objectives to pursue economic diversification and increase the representation of Emirati nationals in the private sector.<sup>10</sup> As of 2019, the employment of Emirati nationals—women and men—was overwhelmingly concentrated in the public sector, despite nationalization quotas for the private sector:<sup>11</sup> only 11.4 percent of Emirati female employees and 6.5 percent of male employees were engaged in the private sector.<sup>12</sup> This meant that prior to the 2019-2020 reforms, the UAE needed to explore new measures to strengthen the economic participation of the entire Emirati population—women and men alike—in order to build a more robust and diverse private sector, with a more substantial representation of Emirati nationals.

>>>

## Highly educated female population

At the time of the reforms, there were already strong foundations in place for women to join the workforce in greater numbers, as the UAE hosts a considerable population of highly educated women. In the most recently available data from 2019, 47.8 percent of women over the age of 25 in the UAE have obtained at least a Bachelor's degree or equivalent,<sup>13</sup> compared to 45.9 percent of men over the age of 25.<sup>14</sup> Women are also educated in areas of strategic importance—56 percent of UAE's graduates in science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) are women<sup>15</sup>—which has culminated in a majority female workforce at the UAE's national space program.<sup>16</sup>

>>>

## Barriers to women's entry into the labor force in the UAE

Women in the UAE have high levels of educational attainment, however, there are still economic gender gaps. Historically, identified barriers in the UAE have been similar to those in other regions with economic gender gaps including access to childcare issues and an inability to find work-life balance, particularly for individuals working in the private sector. A slate of policy reforms in recent years have worked to remedy these concerns, including the 2006 Cabinet Resolution requiring ministries and other government institutions employing more than 50 employees to set up on-site nurseries. The Covid 19 pandemic similarly drove the design and implementation of flexible work options across the emirate of Dubai. These flexible work guidelines granted working women the option to work remotely to meet childcare needs but also to pursue educational opportunities<sup>17</sup>.

In a trend that can be found in other countries including the United States and France<sup>18</sup>, women in the UAE tend to favour working in the public sector versus the private sector, potentially due to more flexible hours, the previously cited childcare supports, and more reliable benefits. Recent collaboration efforts between the government and the private sector aim to address some of these barriers to increasing women's employment and rise to leadership in the private sector<sup>19</sup>.

>>>

## High level commitment to reform through the Gender Balance Council

To tackle these challenges, the UAE intensified its commitment to gender balance over the past decade, enshrining it as a key area of national policy. The creation in 2015 of the UAE Gender Balance Council—a dedicated government entity responsible for guiding progress on gender equality—was an important signal of high-level commitment. Part of the Council's core mandate is to review existing legislation and policies to achieve gender balance<sup>20</sup> in the workplace and ensure non-discrimination, and to propose new legal or policy reforms to the Government to further these goals where necessary. The Gender Balance Council includes senior government executives (including from the Prime Minister's Office) among its members, ensuring that gender issues are prioritized at the highest level of government.



**“Gender balance is a key national priority for the UAE’s sustainable development. Our progress and commitment can be seen in legal and policy reforms that continue to bring greater equality for women and will support their participation in the economy for generations to come.”**

**H.E Shamsa Saleh, Secretary General of the UAE Gender Balance Council**



## Strong reform momentum

In recent years, the UAE has introduced several wide-ranging legal and policy reforms to strengthen women's economic and political participation, with post-2015 reforms led by the Gender Balance Council. Reforms have supported:

- **Increased female representation in politics:** As a result of a 2019 Presidential Decree to mandate 50 percent representation between women and men at the Federal National Council,<sup>21</sup> the UAE now has one of the highest political participation rates for women in the world —50 percent (up from 22 percent in 2018).<sup>22</sup>
- **Mandatory female representation on boards:** In 2012, a UAE Cabinet decree mandated the inclusion of at least one woman on the board of all federal entities, authorities and government-related enterprises<sup>23</sup>. This requirement was extended to all publicly listed companies in 2021 when the Securities and Commodities Authority Board issued a Chairman's decision<sup>24</sup>.
- **Practical guidance for employers:** To promote women's employment, the UAE Gender Balance Council launched the Gender Balance Guide in 2017, providing practical guidance for UAE employers on how to strengthen gender equality in the workplace.<sup>25</sup>
- **Additional services and infrastructure:** Since 2012, all government entities with more than 50 female employees have provided free or heavily subsidized childcare facilities to all female employees.<sup>26</sup> In some UAE cities, there are also gender segregated public transportation and taxi services,<sup>27</sup> providing a wider array of options to women for travelling safely to work.
- **Protection from gender-based discrimination in the workplace:** In 2019, federal labor and discrimination laws were amended to prohibit discrimination against employees on the basis of gender in relation to employment and promotion<sup>28</sup>.
- **Equality in representation in the judiciary:** In 2018, a federal decree was issued which required equality of representation in the judiciary sector<sup>29</sup>.



## Comparative data – a catalyst for change

Notwithstanding the UAE's efforts to strengthen the enabling environment for women's economic participation, the publication of the World Bank's 2019 Women Business and the Law Report revealed extensive legal gaps in the UAE's legislation based on international standards, which were serving as legal barriers to women's opportunities for employment and entrepreneurship. Consequently, in 2019 the UAE authorities introduced several important reforms to bridge these legislative gaps. These included:

- Amendments to the Federal Law on Nationality and Passports enabling a married woman to apply for a passport without the written consent of her husband;
- Amendment to the Civil Status Law enabling women to be heads of households in the same way as men;
- Amendments to the Criminal Code to impose criminal penalties for sexual harassment in the workplace;
- A new decree to protect women from domestic violence;
- Amendments to the Labor Law to prohibit gender-based discrimination in employment and dismissal of pregnant workers, and to lift restrictions on women's ability to work at night, in industrial jobs and in jobs deemed dangerous; and
- A Central Bank Circular prohibiting discrimination based on gender in access to credit.

These reforms represented important progress in addressing key gender gaps in the legal framework. Following these reforms, in 2020 the authorities decided to go further and pursue an even more comprehensive review of all UAE legislation, which would permit them to identify all legal gender gaps and address them in line with global good practices.

---

An Emirati engineer. **Source** UAE FSCA





## Key steps in the reform process

The UAE Gender Balance Council and the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre (FCSC)—the government entity tasked with developing and enhancing the UAE's performance in various areas of global competitiveness—decided to draw on external expertise in order to launch a more ambitious and targeted reform program. The World Bank Group (WBG) team supported the reform program by bringing in best international practices and expertise on gender legal reforms.



### Identifying priorities and organizing for reform

At the outset, the FCSC and the WBG drafted a reform memo, which identified the gaps and restrictions in the laws, reviewed good practices and international standards, and provided reform recommendations. The team also produced an action plan that included specific draft reforms in the priority areas identified by the government. The findings of the reform memo and the action plan were extensively discussed with the government and all relevant line ministries. The action plan was then approved by the UAE Gender Balance Council and the UAE Cabinet.

#### Women Business and the Law: Supporting legal reforms to promote gender equality

The Women, Business and the Law (WBL) Report, an annual World Bank publication, measures laws and regulations that affect women's legal equality across 190 countries, based on international standards.

The report examines laws and regulations on the books as distinct from implementation and practices. There are eight main areas structured around the economic decisions women make as they go through different stages of their lives, including freedom of movement, getting a job, getting paid, getting married, running a business, and getting a pension.

The reform process was supported by a taskforce coordinated by the FCSC and composed of relevant government entities. Members included the UAE Gender Balance Council, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Community Development, and the UAE Central Bank. The taskforce was supported by three subcommittees on priority areas of reform:

- Personal Status Law, led by the Ministry of Justice;
- Labor Law, led by the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization; and
- Access to finance legal instruments, led by the Central Bank.

These subcommittees met weekly with the UAE Gender Balance Council to discuss progress towards realizing the targets set in the action plan.

### >>> Building consensus around the reforms...

The legal drafting process was iterative, with ongoing dialogue between the WBG, the subcommittees, and relevant stakeholders. There was a high degree of consensus within the subcommittees on the objectives of the proposed reforms, which in many instances were seen as a matter of updating legislation to align with government policy or existing social practice. For instance, in practice, many women already travelled outside the home without necessarily seeking the permission of their guardian.

### >>> ...and responding to resistance

Some of the most complex legal challenges related to amending the UAE’s Personal Status Law. Concerns were raised by legal experts in the subcommittee—including family law judges and lawyers—that the proposed reforms would not be coherent with sharia principles. In order to allay these concerns, some of the proposed amendments were narrowed in scope and a supporting Explanatory Note for judges was prepared that both reflected compliance with sharia principles and alignment with international best practice.

### >>> Reforming through consensus: the UAE legal reform process

Despite the exceptional challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the UAE government successfully enacted a far-reaching reform package to support women’s economic inclusion within a period of eight months, which was facilitated by an agile legal process and priority topics. The UAE has a consensus-based process of legal reform that requires agreement from different government bodies, relevant public and private stakeholders, and the rulers of each of the seven emirates (see **Figure 2**). As such, the final enactment of the laws represented the end point of an extensive process of negotiation and consultation.

**Figure 2** UAE legal reform process



Table 1 Reforms introduced in August 2020

	DESCRIPTION OF REFORMS	LEGAL REFERENCES
 <p><b>MOBILITY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women gained the right to choose where to live in the same way as men through the removal of financial and legal consequences to women who do not live in the marital home.</li> <li>• The Personal Status Law was amended so that a woman’s access to alimony is not forfeited where she refuses to travel with her husband without lawful excuse.</li> <li>• Women gained the right to travel outside the home without permission from their husbands. The new law treats women and men equally in terms of leaving the house to work: the new amendment states that it is not considered a violation of marital responsibilities if either spouse (the husband or the wife) leaves the house for work or other purposes as long as it is in accordance with the law, sharia, customs or necessity. Judges have discretion to assess the interests of the family.</li> <li>• These reforms were accompanied by changes to the Explanatory Note of the Personal Status Law, used for judicial interpretation. The Note, which was published in the official gazette, is used by judges as a reference in personal status courts when examining cases related to family matters.</li> </ul>	<p>Personal Status Law No. 28/2005, as amended by Federal Decree No. 5/2020, Arts. 56, 71 and 72</p>
 <p><b>WORKPLACE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Women gained the right to get a job in the same way as men, through the equalization of requirements for working outside the home for women and men.</li> </ul>	<p>Personal Status Law No. 28/2005, as amended by Federal Decree No. 5/2020, Art. 72</p>
 <p><b>PAY</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The UAE mandated equal remuneration for work of equal value. (This upgraded previous requirements that entitled women to the same wage as men for “the same work,” which is narrower than the principle of “equal remuneration for work of equal value.”)</li> </ul>	<p>Federal Labor Law, Art. 32</p>
 <p><b>MARRIAGE</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Personal Status Law was amended to remove the provision on a woman’s obligation to obey her husband.</li> </ul>	<p>Personal Status Law No. 28/2005, as amended by Federal Decree No. 5/2020, Art. 56</p>
 <p><b>PARENTHOOD</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Labor Law was amended to provide private sector employees—male and female alike—with five days of paid leave to care for a child within six months following birth. This is additional to pre-existing entitlements to paid maternity leave in the private sector (amounting to 60 working days as per the labor law amendments of 2020 and 2021). Prior to the reforms, there was no parental or paternity leave available (paid or unpaid).</li> </ul>	<p>Federal Decree Law No. 6 of 2020, Art. 74</p>
 <p><b>ENTREPRENEURSHIP</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The regulation mandates financial institutions to provide equal treatment to both genders regarding financial transactions including loans. In support of the UAE’s objectives of achieving gender equality as a sustainable approach, banks and other financial institutions are required to provide services to their individual and business owner customers, of both genders, equally, and to develop policies and procedures that promote gender equality in all banking and financial transactions, including loans and credit facilities.</li> <li>• The WBG team supported with awareness-raising campaigns and dissemination of materials on this regulation.</li> </ul>	<p>Central Bank of the UAE Notice No. CBUAE/ BSD2019/3457</p>



## Reform Benefits

The 2020 legal reforms have made a clear contribution to UAE's ongoing efforts to support gender balance, strengthening its legislative framework to create an enabling environment for women's economic inclusion. In terms of measuring the impact of the reforms, it is still too early to establish any potential links to changes in women's economic participation, given that the reforms were introduced in 2020, and any changes in women's employment and entrepreneurship are likely to manifest over the longer term. However, the reforms have already sent a strong signal of the UAE's ongoing commitment to improving outcomes for women, not least through the new parental leave entitlement for working mothers and fathers.



### **Bringing national legislation into closer alignment with national gender policy and international best practice**

As a result of the 2020 reforms, women now enjoy greater personal freedoms and formal equality under the law. Before the reforms, the UAE legal framework still included formal impediments to women's economic empowerment, such as legal restrictions on travelling outside the home or internationally or getting a job, even though these were not routinely enforced. Women were also subject to legal and financial consequences, such as forfeiting access to alimony, as a result of refusing to move into the marital home, refusing to travel with their husbands without a lawful excuse or leaving the marital home to work without permission. The UAE now has a legal framework in place that better reflects its national policy commitment to gender balance, and provides legal recourse to women when their rights are violated.

The 2020 legal reforms also ensure that the UAE's laws and social practices are more closely aligned: Hanan Ahli, Acting Managing Director of the FCSC, explained that "most of the reforms involved updating the law to catch up to actual practice: that was the main trigger for reform in the UAE." In the context of evolving social norms and practices, reviewing and updating national legislation is an important mechanism for embedding and safeguarding long-term progress on gender equality within the legal framework, ensuring that rights in practice are guaranteed through formal legal protections for all women in the Emirates.

>>>

## Supporting care responsibilities for women and men alike

The introduction of paid parental leave that is accessible to mothers and fathers may help to attract more into the private sector in line with national policy goals, as it provides important support for working parents to manage their caregiving responsibilities alongside paid work. According to Hanan Ahli, Acting Managing Executive Director of the FCSC, “the entire wave of reform was very much welcomed, but new parental leave entitlement was the most significant change: this benefits women and men, and private sector employers were very receptive to the reform.”

The design of leave policies is an important tool for supporting higher levels of economic participation for women in the UAE, who are typically considered the primary caregivers in households. When women do not have access to adequate leave, they often must interrupt or reduce their participation in paid work.<sup>30</sup> As such, the new legislative entitlement to five days of parental leave may encourage the attraction and retention of women in the private sector, as it provides new mothers with additional flexibility for childcare in the six months following birth. This represents potentially substantial gains for private sector employers, as it enables companies to retain employees with experience and expertise, whilst avoiding potentially significant costs related to staff turnover.<sup>31</sup>

Importantly, the introduction of paid leave for fathers opens up new opportunities for sharing family responsibilities. The ability to take paid leave not only helps to support father-child bonding, but can also have a transformative effect on women’s economic participation in the medium to long term.<sup>32</sup> There are long-term benefits associated with higher uptake of paternity leave: studies from OECD countries have found that where fathers take leave, they are significantly more likely to be involved in childcare activities at home, with benefits for children and women’s ability to take on paid work. There are also specific benefits for women’s employment in private firms: research has found a positive correlation between mandated paternity leave and female employment in private firms.<sup>33</sup> Qualitative research from McKinsey, a global consulting firm, indicates that employers benefit from the provision of paternity leave: new fathers report feeling more motivated and likely to stay longer in their company as a result of taking leave.<sup>34</sup>

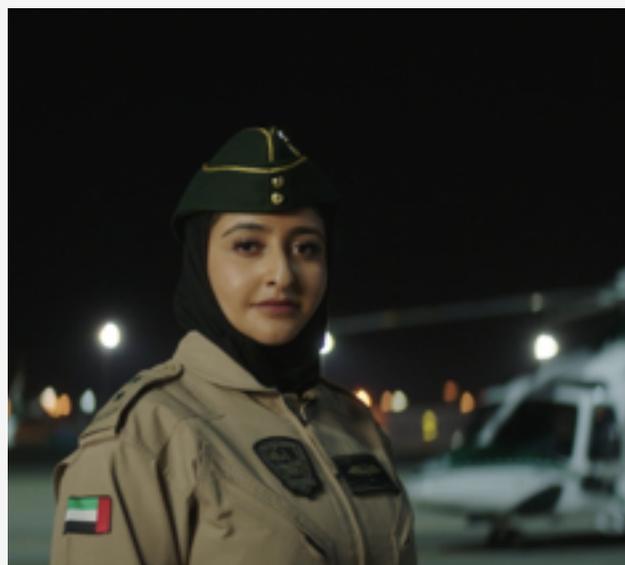
>>>

## Increasing women’s legal capacity to make decisions about mobility

The UAE’s introduction of legal reforms to facilitate greater freedom of movement for women is a crucial building block for higher levels of economic participation, as personal mobility is a precondition for accessing income and resources.<sup>35</sup> International research indicates that increasing women’s legal capacity to make decisions about their own lives, including how and when they travel, is strongly linked to higher levels of economic participation, including higher shares of women participating in the labor force or owning a business.<sup>36</sup> Women’s entrepreneurship and ownership of businesses is significantly higher when women can legally travel outside their homes in the same way as men.<sup>37</sup>

---

Her Highness Sheikha Mozah Al Maktoum.  
**Source** UAE Gender Balance Council



>>>

## Creating a precedent for paid parental leave and other gender reforms in the MENA region

The introduction of paid parental leave is a first amongst GCC and MENA countries and represents an important precedent for other countries in the region, particularly with respect to the provision of paid parental leave for fathers. While several other MENA countries offer paternity leave following the birth of a child, the introduction of five days of paid parental leave in the private sector sends an important signal regarding the ongoing caregiving role of fathers beyond a child's birth. Leave policies, including paternity leave, have been shown to increase the chance of women returning to work after childbirth, and to enable more equitable childcare responsibilities between mothers and fathers.<sup>38</sup> The precedent is also relevant beyond the region: across the world, it is estimated that 39 percent of countries still have no paid leave of any kind for fathers.<sup>39</sup>

The UAE's amendments to the Personal Status Law and Federal Decrees also provide an important demonstration effect in the region, particularly with respect to the removal of obedience requirements for women, and requirements for permission to leave the home, work or travel internationally. These new amendments create an important example for other governments in the MENA region of how to merge sharia, codified law and international best practice.

There are signs that the UAE reforms may have had a ripple effect in the MENA region, potentially inspiring a subsequent wave of other national legal reforms to strengthen gender equality. Several other countries—including Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait and Tunisia—initiated similar reforms in the wake of the UAE's reforms.<sup>40</sup> While there is no direct evidence of a causative link, it is possible that the UAE's example may have contributed to this surge in national reforms, which took place after several years of limited gender reforms in the region.



## Success factors

Several factors paved the way for successful reforms in the UAE and offer important insights for policymakers in other countries who are considering similar reforms. These include:

- **The importance of strong leadership to coordinate and drive the reform process:** The leadership of the UAE Cabinet and of Her Highness Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, President of the UAE Gender Balance Council, were essential to shepherding through the consultation and negotiation required to complete the complex legal reform process within a period of eight months. The UAE Gender Balance Council acted as an accelerator to the legal reform process through its ability to set ambitious deadlines to introduce reforms and work directly with the highest levels of government including the UAE Cabinet and the Prime Minister's Office. Equally, the FCSC played an important role in coordinating the legal reform process across all relevant stakeholders.
- **The importance of effective awareness-raising campaigns and implementation:** The implementation of the UAE legal reforms was supported by a public awareness campaign. For example, the public became aware of recent reforms about new protection from gender discrimination in access to credit through information displayed on banks' automated teller machines (ATMs). Guidance was also targeted at key decision makers, including judges. The government used social media, government websites, seminars and workshops with stakeholders to publicize the reforms. To ensure accurate interpretation of the new provisions by the judiciary, the Explanatory Note of the Personal Status Law was updated, published in the official gazette, and is now used by judges as reference in personal status courts when examining cases related to family matters.
- **The persuasive power of data and benchmarking for driving legal reforms on gender equality:** The WBG's Women, Business and the Law Report helped the Government in pinpointing gaps in existing laws and providing best practices around the globe to inform the subsequent design of the reform program.



“The beauty of the WBL Report is that it provides an invaluable screening of legislation and pinpoints exactly where there are gaps to fill in, or weaknesses to address, based on international standards. Effectively, it did our initial homework for us in terms of identifying what needed to be done in order to update our regulations to reflect our actual policy and practice.”

**H.E Hanan Ahli, Acting Managing Director, Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Center**



## Conclusion

The legal reforms introduced by the UAE in 2020 represent an important milestone in the country's ongoing efforts to strengthen women's economic and political participation. In line with its national policy focus on gender balance, the UAE introduced substantial legal reforms that enable women to choose where to live, travel outside the home and country, and get a job. The introduction of paid parental leave for women and men in the private sector represents a key step in creating the enabling conditions needed for women's economic participation, by providing greater support for working parents and recognizing the care responsibilities of women and men alike.

In the longer term, the success of the UAE's legal reforms will rely on ongoing efforts to enforce and monitor implementation of the reforms in practice, alongside ongoing awareness-raising campaigns and supporting policy interventions. In addition, the collection and detailed analysis of gender-disaggregated data will be vital for assessing the impact of the 2020 legal reforms, understanding ongoing trends with respect to women's education, employment and entrepreneurship, and providing an evidence base for future legal and policy reforms. By working directly with the private sector, UAE policymakers can gather gender-disaggregated data on the uptake of the new entitlement to parental leave and identify the extent to which mothers and fathers are aware of the benefit and making use of it in practice.

Overall, the UAE provides an important model—within the MENA region and beyond—of the swift progress that can be made on legal reforms when there is a strong leadership commitment to boosting women's employment and entrepreneurship. In light of the UAE's stated intention to play a leadership role on gender within the MENA region, there is still scope for the UAE to explore further reforms to bridge remaining gaps in its legislation, and to continue to strengthen its legal framework in line with international good practice. Additionally, to secure further progress on women's economic inclusion—particularly women's participation in the private sector—legal reforms must also be accompanied by targeted policy interventions, including initiatives to encourage women to acquire skills and knowledge that are sought after by the private sector, and efforts to incentivize employers in the private sector to introduce more women-friendly working practices, such as more widespread flexible working arrangements and better support for appropriate childcare.



## References

- Adnane, Souad. 2021. Women's Economic Participation and the Impact of Regulatory Barriers. *Equitable Growth, Finance and Institutions Insight*, World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/36511> License: CC BY 3.0 IGO
- Al-Jenaibi, Badreya. 2015. "The Needs and Priorities of Women in the UAE: Identifying Struggles and Enhancing Satisfaction of Employment, Education, Health Care, and Rights", *Contemporary Review of the Middle East* 2(3) 238-68.
- Amin, Mohammad; Islam, Asif Mohammed. 2019. *Paid Maternity Leave and Female Employment : Evidence Using Firm-Level Survey Data for Developing Countries*, World Bank Policy Research working paper; no. WPS 8715 <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/606031548250184438/Paid-Maternity-Leave-and-Female-Employment-Evidence-Using-Firm-Level-Survey-Data-for-Developing-Countries>
- Goldin, Claudia, Sari Pekala Kerr, Claudia Olivetti and Erling Bath, 2017. "The Expanding Gender Earnings Gap: Evidence from the LEHD-200 Census." *American Economic Review* 107(5) <https://www.aeaweb.org/articles?id=10.1257/aer.p20171065>
- Gulf News Report, 2021. "UAE tops MENA rankings in World Bank's 'Women, Business and the Law' 2021 report", <https://gulfnews.com/business/uae-tops-mena-rankings-in-world-banks-women-business-and-the-law-2021-report-1.1614159299554>
- Hamade, Mona. 2015. *Women and Emiratisation in the UAE Workforce*. PhD diss., (University of Cambridge). [https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/288678/thesis%20\(36\)\\_copyright.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/bitstream/handle/1810/288678/thesis%20(36)_copyright.pdf?sequence=1)
- Hamel, Iva, and Gharam Alkhashani Dexter, 2021. "UAE: The sky is the limit for gender reform", World Bank Blogs: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/gender-reforms-united-arab-emirates>
- Htun, Mala, Francesca R. Jensenius, and Jami Nelson-Nuñez. 2019. "Gender-Discriminatory Laws and Women's Economic Agency." *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State and Society* 26 (1).
- International Finance Corporation (IFC), 2017. *Tackling childcare: The business case for employer-supported childcare*: [https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/cd79e230-3ee2-46ae-adc5-e54d3d649f31/01817+WB+Childcare+Report\\_FinalWeb3.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=IXu9vP-](https://www.ifc.org/wps/wcm/connect/cd79e230-3ee2-46ae-adc5-e54d3d649f31/01817+WB+Childcare+Report_FinalWeb3.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CVID=IXu9vP-)

- International Labour Organization (ILO), 2016. *Women in business and management: gaining momentum in the Middle East and North Africa*: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_446101.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_446101.pdf)
- International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018. *Care work and care jobs: For the future of decent work*: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_633135.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_633135.pdf)
- Islam, A., Muzi, S., and Amin, M. 2018. "Unequal Laws and the Disempowerment of Women in the Labor Market: Evidence from Firm-Level Data." *Journal of Development Studies*. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220388.2018.1487055>
- Omar, Abeer Anu and Pacheo, Filipe. 'UAE struggles with new rule to get women on company boards.' *Al Jazeera*. 18 May 2021: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2021/5/18/bbuae-struggles-with-new-rule-to-get-women-on-company-boards>
- McKinsey & Company, 2021. *A fresh look at paternity leave: Why the benefits extend beyond the personal* <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/a-fresh-look-at-paternity-leave-why-the-benefits-extend-beyond-the-personal>
- Nasir, Sarwat. 'Emirati women are playing a central role in UAE's space sector.' *The National News*. August 28 2020 <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/science/emirati-women-are-playing-a-central-role-in-uae-s-space-sector-1.1069667>
- Salman, Nour. 'UN Women applauds decision to increase Emirati women's FNC representation.' *Emirates News Agency*. December 9 2018 <http://wam.ae/en/details/1395302726009>
- Sadaqat, Rohma 'UAE is best in region for women economic empowerment.' *The Khaleej Times*. February 24 2021. <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/news/uae-is-best-in-region-for-women-economic-empowerment>
- The National News, 2019. 'Dubai Metro to move women and children's pink carriage', *The National News* June 25: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/transport/dubai-metro-to-move-women-and-children-s-pink-carriage-1.879044>
- PwC, 2018. *The Power of Choice: Insights into women's employment decisions and societal perspectives in the United Arab Emirates*. <https://www.pwc.com/m1/en/blogs/pdf/power-of-choice-report.pdf>
- United Arab Emirates, 2018. *Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: Annual Report – United Arab Emirates, 2017/2018*: <https://www.gemconsortium.org/report/gem-uae-2017-2018-national-report>
- United Arab Emirates. *Vision 2021*. <https://www.vision2021.ae/en/uae-vision>
- United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, *Emiratisation* <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/vision-2021-and-emiratisation/emiratisation>
- United Arab Emirates, Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, *Emiratisation Laws* <https://www.mohre.gov.ae/en/laws-legislation/emiratisation-laws.aspx>
- United Arab Emirates, Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs. 2008. *Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress*. <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/women>

- United Arab Emirates Securities and Commodities Authority Board. 2021. The SCA Board Makes It Mandatory for Listed Companies to Comply with the Percentage of Women's Representation on Their Boards. <https://www.sca.gov.ae/en/media-center/news/14/3/2021/board-of-directors-of-sca-approves-the-obligation-of-listed-companies-to-represent-women-in-the.aspx>
- United Arab Emirates. *Transport and parking facilities*. <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/women/public-transport-facilities-for-women->
- United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. 2017. *Gender Balance Guide: Actions for UAE Organisations*. [http://www.gbc.gov.ae/assets/uploads/gbc\\_gender\\_guide\\_en\\_2019.pdf](http://www.gbc.gov.ae/assets/uploads/gbc_gender_guide_en_2019.pdf)
- United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. *Legislation and Gender*. <http://www.gbc.gov.ae/legislations.html>
- United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. *UAE Women FAQs*. <http://www.gbc.gov.ae/facts.html>
- United Arab Emirates, National Committee on Sustainable Development Goals, 2017. *UAE and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: Excellence in Implementation* <https://fcsc.gov.ae/en-us/Pages/SDGs/reports.aspx>
- United Arab Emirates, Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, *About The Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre*. <https://fcsa.gov.ae/en-us/Pages/About-Us/About-FCSA.aspx>
- United Arab Emirates, Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, UAE Stat (database) <https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/en>
- United Arab Emirates. 2021. *Nurseries in public offices*. <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/working-in-uae-government-sector/nurseries-in-public-offices>
- United Arab Emirates, *Maternity and paternity leave*. <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/jobs/working-in-uae-government-sector/maternity-and-paternity-leave>
- World Bank. 2019. *Women, Business and the Law Report 2019*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/31327/WBL2019.pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y>
- World Bank. 2020. *Women, Business and the Law Report 2020*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/32639/9781464815324.pdf?sequence=10&isAllowed=y>
- World Bank. 2021. *Women, Business and the Law Report 2021*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/35094/9781464816529.pdf>
- World Bank. Gender Data Portal (database), World Bank, Washington, DC (accessed April 21 2021), <https://www.worldbank.org/en/data/datatopics/gender/country/United%20Arab%20Emirates>
- World Bank. Data Bank Portal (database), World Bank, Washington, DC (accessed November 29 2021), <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=AE>



## End Notes

- 1 **Parental leave** refers to leave that is available to either or both parents, allowing them to take care of an infant or young child over a defined period. Parental leave is distinct from maternity and paternity leave. **Maternity leave** refers to leave that is available to mothers immediately prior to and after childbirth, while **paternity leave** refers to a defined period of time available to fathers around the time of childbirth.
- 2 Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&most_recent_year_desc=true)
- 3 UAE Labor Force Survey, Labor Force Participation Rate (15 years and More) by Nationality, Gender and Age Group, 2019. Data is from UAE Stat (database), Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre. Note that earlier data on female labor force participation is not available from FCSC. [https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs\[0\]=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS\\_LF%23&fs\[1\]=mi3jZknE%2C0%7CFemale%23F%23&pg=0&fc=mi3jZknE&df\[ds\]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df\[id\]=DF\\_LFPR\\_AGE&df\[ag\]=FCSA&df\[vs\]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=A.....F%2B\\_T%2BM.\\_T.....&lt\[cj\]=CITIZENSHIP%2CGENDER&vw=tb](https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs[0]=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS_LF%23&fs[1]=mi3jZknE%2C0%7CFemale%23F%23&pg=0&fc=mi3jZknE&df[ds]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df[id]=DF_LFPR_AGE&df[ag]=FCSA&df[vs]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=A.....F%2B_T%2BM._T.....&lt[cj]=CITIZENSHIP%2CGENDER&vw=tb)
- 4 Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&name\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&name_desc=false)
- 5 2019 figures. Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) (modeled ILO estimate), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&name\\_desc=false](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&name_desc=false)
- 6 United Arab Emirates Ministry of State for Federal National Council Affairs, 2008
- 7 Hamade, 2015.
- 8 Data is from ILOSTAT (database), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&most\\_recent\\_year\\_desc=true](https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=AE&most_recent_year_desc=true)
- 9 UAE Labor Force Survey, Labor Force Participation Rate (15 years and More) by Nationality, Gender and Age Group, 2019. Data is from UAE Stat (database), Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre. [https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs\[0\]=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS\\_LF%23&pg=0&fc=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX&df\[ds\]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df\[id\]=DF\\_LFPR\\_AGE&df\[ag\]=FCSA&df\[vs\]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=A.....&lt\[rw\]=AGE&lt\[cj\]=CITIZENSHIP%2CGENDER](https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs[0]=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS_LF%23&pg=0&fc=3yIrqeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX&df[ds]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df[id]=DF_LFPR_AGE&df[ag]=FCSA&df[vs]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=A.....&lt[rw]=AGE&lt[cj]=CITIZENSHIP%2CGENDER)
- 10 United Arab Emirates. Vision 2021.
- 11 The UAE has a policy of Emiratisation, which includes a quota system introduced by Ministerial Orders 41, 42 and 43. In the private sector, every company with more than 100 employees is obliged to recruit (and retain on the payroll) a certain number of UAE nationals to ensure the minimum percentage of participation of Emiratis in the workforce. This differs by sector; for example, in the banking sector there is a quota of 4

percent Emiratis per firm, 5 percent in the insurance sector and 2 percent in the trade sector for firms employing 50 or more workers. See: UAE, Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, Emiratisation and Emiratisation Laws.

- 12 Percentage distribution of Employed Persons (15 years and over) by Nationality, Gender and Sector, 2019. Data is from UAE Stat (database), Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre. [https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs\[0\]=3ylrgeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS\\_LF%23&pg=0&fc=3ylrgeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX&df\[ds\]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df\[id\]=DF\\_LFPR\\_AGE&df\[ag\]=FCSA&df\[vs\]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=.A.....&lt\[rw\]=AGE&lt\[cl\]=CITIZE\\_NSHIP%2CGENDER](https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae/vis?fs[0]=3ylrgeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX%2C0%7CLabour%20Force%23LFS_LF%23&pg=0&fc=3ylrgeERqvGgDtXPR7wB2m0xKJDUGMyt53hQdX&df[ds]=staging%3ASIS-CC-stable&df[id]=DF_LFPR_AGE&df[ag]=FCSA&df[vs]=1.9.0&pd=2019%2C2019&dq=.A.....&lt[rw]=AGE&lt[cl]=CITIZE_NSHIP%2CGENDER)
- 13 Data is from Databank Gender Statistics (database), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://databank.worldbank.org/id/2ddc971b?Code=SE.TER.CUAT.BA.FE.ZS&report\\_name=Gender\\_Indicators\\_Report&populartype=series](https://databank.worldbank.org/id/2ddc971b?Code=SE.TER.CUAT.BA.FE.ZS&report_name=Gender_Indicators_Report&populartype=series)
- 14 Data is from Databank Gender Statistics (database), (accessed 21 April 2021) [https://databank.worldbank.org/id/2ddc971b?Code=SE.TER.CUAT.BA.FE.ZS&report\\_name=Gender\\_Indicators\\_Report&populartype=series](https://databank.worldbank.org/id/2ddc971b?Code=SE.TER.CUAT.BA.FE.ZS&report_name=Gender_Indicators_Report&populartype=series)
- 15 United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. UAE Women FAQs
- 16 Nasir, 2020.
- 17 Government of Dubai. Guide for Women's Remote Work Across the Public and Private Sectors <https://dwe.gov.ae/application/files/2616/2987/7413/GuideforWorkingRemotely-AUG2021-English-V9.pdf>
- 18 Birkbeck University of London. Why Do Women Favour Working in the Public Sector? <http://blogs.bbk.ac.uk/research/2019/10/31/why-do-women-favour-working-in-the-public-sector/>
- 19 Emirates News Agency. UAE private sector pledges to accelerate gender balance in leadership <https://www.wam.ae/en/details/1395303012669>
- 20 The UAE vision of gender balance encompasses the concepts of an equitable distribution of life's opportunities and resources between women and men, the equal representation of women and men, and is closely linked to the concept of gender equality. United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council, 2017.
- 21 United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. Legislation and Gender.
- 22 Data is from Inter-Parliamentary Union (database)(accessed 24 November 2021). <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SG.GEN.PARL.ZS?locations=AE>
- 23 United Arab Emirates, 2017.
- 24 United Arab Emirates Securities and Commodities Authority Board, 2021. <https://www.sca.gov.ae/en/media-center/news/14/3/2021/board-of-directors-of-sca-approves-the-obligation-of-listed-companies-to-represent-women-in-the.aspx>
- 25 Gender Balance Council / OECD, 2017.
- 26 United Arab Emirates, 2021, Nurseries in public offices.
- 27 United Arab Emirates, Transport and Parking Facilities and The National News, 2019.
- 28 Amendments were made in 2019 to the Federal Law on Combating Discrimination and Hatred (No. 2 of 2015) and the Federal Labor Law (No. 8 of 1980). For further information see United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. *Legislation and Gender*.
- 29 United Arab Emirates, UAE Gender Balance Council. *Legislation and Gender*

30 PwC, 2018; ILO, 2018.

31 For an overview of the costs related to employee turnover, see, e.g., IFC, 2017.

32 ILO, 2018.

33 Amin, 2019.

34 McKinsey & Company, 2021.

35 Adnane, forthcoming.

36 Htun, 2019.

37 Islam et al, 2018.

38 Goldin, 2017.

39 ILO, 2018.

40 Hamel and Alkastalani Dexter, 2021.

