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WOMEN AND GENDER EQUALITY ISSUES IN THE UAE

The paper examines the dynamics of women’s issues and gender equality-related matters in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Additionally, the research addresses the activities of Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak as a female pioneer figure in the context of perceiving her “Mother of the Nation” state symbol. The paper analyzes political and social reforms implemented in the UAE aimed at women’s legal and socio-economic empowerment. It addresses institutional reforms of gender equality, particularly women’s involvement in education, work, politics, and diplomacy. Special attention is paid to institutions and programs personally initiated and led by Sheikha Fatima, which have contributed to the advancement of Arab women’s rights not only in the UAE but also at the regional level. The work also addresses existing problems, particularly domestic violence and discrimination in the legislative context.

Key words: *Sheikha Fatima, gender equality, women, Emirates, rights, Arab world, women’s rights, women empowerment.*

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) is considered the region’s leading state in terms of gender equality, as evidenced by the 2023 Global Gender Gap Report¹. This achievement stems from a fundamental belief in the equality of women and men in society. Thanks to a series of public and private initiatives, women in the UAE today play a significantly stronger and more prominent role not only in government and business, but also in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields².

¹ World economic forum, “Global gender gap report 2023”, June 2023, https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2023.pdf (18.02.2025).

² Embassy of United Arab Emirates Washington DC, “Women in UAE”, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae> (18.02.2025).

In Georgetown Institute's 2023 WPS (Women Peace and Security Index), the UAE ranks 22nd out of 177 countries in women's involvement in financial, political, and justice sectors¹.

At the same time, in the Middle East and Africa, the UAE is first in women's involvement in financial, parliamentary seats, and absence of legal discrimination against women.

2025 statistics show that women comprise more than one-third of the UAE population – 4.11 million out of a total population of 11.35 million².

In the United Arab Emirates, gender equality is a national priority and is enshrined in the Constitution, which grants equal rights to women and men. Under the Constitution, women enjoy the same legal status, entitlement to titles, access to education and professional training, as well as the right to inherit property on an equal basis with men. They are also guaranteed equal access to employment, healthcare, and family welfare. The UAE has been recognized as a regional pioneer, serving as a model of equality in the areas of economy, governance, education, and health³.

Today in the UAE, more women than men receive secondary education and are admitted to universities and other higher education institutions. As a result, over 77 percent of Emirati women pursue higher education after secondary school and make up more than 64 percent of university graduates in the country. In public universities, women account for approximately 41 percent of graduates in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. These advancements have contributed to the UAE's female literacy rate reaching 95.8 percent⁴.

Women also play a significant role in various positions across the private sector. They enjoy equal rights to economic resources, including equal wages, property ownership, land and asset management, access

¹ GIWPS, United Arab Emirates, "United Arab Emirates's Ranking 22/177", Index score 0.868, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/country/united-arab-emirates/> (18.02.2025).

² GMI Research Team, "United Arab Emirates (UAE) population statistics 2025", April 7, 2025, https://www.globalmediainsight.com/blog/uae-population-statistics/#UAE_Population_2025_Key (09.04.2025).

³ Embassy of United Arab Emirates Washington DC, "Women in UAE", <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae> (18.02.2025).

⁴ UAE USA United, "Changing the Equation: UAE Women Take the Lead in STEM", <https://www.uaeusaunited.com/stories/uae-women-lead-stem?ga=2.203313489.1990280959.1709913058-113539686.1708248299> (03.08.2025).

to financial services, inheritance, and natural resources – all protected under national law. Reflecting this progress, Emirati women made up the largest national group on Forbes magazine’s 2023 list of the Arab World’s Most Influential Women, with 15 women featured. Female entrepreneurs comprise around 10 percent of the UAE’s private sector; approximately 25,000 businesswomen manage organizations valued at over 60 billion dirhams. Nationwide, women occupy about 15 percent of industrial and commercial leadership roles. In 2021, the UAE Securities and Commodities Authority mandated that all publicly listed companies must include at least one woman on their boards of directors¹.

One of the most significant and impactful areas is the public sector and state-level positions, where Emirati women are actively represented. Approximately two-thirds of public sector employees in the UAE are women, with 30 percent holding leadership roles. The UAE stands out as the only Arab country to have achieved parliamentary-level gender equality and ranks 35th globally for women’s political participation and empowerment, according to the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2023². Additionally, women are actively engaged in diplomacy, comprising 42.5 percent of the diplomatic corps, eleven of whom have been appointed as ambassadors and consuls general³.

To emphasize gender equality in political dialogues, the UAE has established the Gender Balance Council, which is a federal body responsible for developing and implementing measures and initiatives aimed at gender equality. The Council’s goal is to narrow the gender gap in all government sectors and to achieve gender equality in decision-making positions⁴.

¹ Reuters, March 15, 2021, “UAE listed companies must have at least one female board member: regulator”, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-companies-women/uae-listed-companies-must-have-at-least-one-female-board-member-regulator-idUSKBN2B71NI/> (03.08.2025).

² Global Economic Forum, June 20, 2023, “Global Gender Gap Report 2023”, <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-gender-gap-report-2023/> (03.08.2025).

³ Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, March 2023, research analysis, “2023 Women in Diplomacy Index”, https://www.agda.ac.ae/docs/default-source/2023/women-diplomacy.pdf?sfvrsn=6189673b_3 (03.08.2025).

⁴ Embassy of United Arab Emirates Washington DC, “Women in UAE”, <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae> (18.02.2025).

Women's Rights and Legal Frameworks Supporting Them

The United Arab Emirates has made significant changes regarding women's rights in recent years. The reform period began with the introduction of new regulations to address domestic violence. Although domestic violence was previously regulated, women's and girls' rights remained limited, and discriminatory practices persisted. Due to numerous legal gaps, it was often easier for men to circumvent the law and avoid sentencing—or even the death penalty—when killing female relatives.

On February 26, 2021, Human Rights Watch presented a report to the Emirates' national committee, examining discrimination against women in the UAE and presented the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)¹. The committee scheduled a session during the first week of March to present the list of issues and questions it intended to address to UAE authorities prior to reviewing UAE's submissions².

Human Rights Watch senior women's rights researcher Rothna Begum³ notes: "The UAE's recent women's rights reforms are a step in the right direction, but in reality they don't go far enough to eliminate the deep discrimination against women in legislation and practice."

Women's rights in the UAE largely went unnoticed until videos began being published featuring Dubai ruler's daughter, Sheikha Latifa, describing her forced detention conditions after her abduction and forced return to the UAE in 2018. She also requested investigation of her sister Sheikha Shamsa's abduction and forced return from the United Kingdom to the UAE in 2000⁴.

¹ "Human Rights Watch Submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women on the United Arab Emirates", March 4, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/03/04/human-rights-watch-submission-committee-elimination-discrimination-against-women> (11.03.2025).

² United Nations Human Rights Treaty Bodies, Treaty Body Database, "Sessions for CEDAW – Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women", https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/TreatyBodyExternal/SessionsList.aspx?Treaty=CEDAW (11.03.2025).

³ Human Rights Watch, "Rothna Begum, Associate Director, Women's Rights Division", <https://www.hrw.org/about/people/rothna-begum> (11.03.2025).

⁴ Alberge, D., November 28, 2023, "Princess Latifa abduction ordeal to be turned into TV drama", <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/nov/28/dubai-princess-latifa->

On March 8, 2015, on the 40th anniversary of the General Women's Union's establishment, Emirati Women's Day was celebrated for the first time in the Emirates as a national holiday, emphasizing women's role in society. The same year launched the 2015–2021 Emirati Women's Empowerment National Strategy under Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak's leadership.

In the October 2019 Federal National Council elections, 200 out of 555 candidates were women, resulting in seven women among the twenty elected members, making the UAE one of the first countries where women are included in national council or assembly compositions¹.

Parallel to promoting women's involvement in the public sector, the state does not leave the private sector unattended either. In 2012, the Emirates government established a law granting women the right to occupy leadership positions in federal and private bodies and organizations².

In 2015, the Gender Balance Council was established with the aim of ensuring that women continue to participate in decision-making and hold leadership positions in the country's development. The Council's goal is to review the legal system and policies, as well as to create and implement programs promoting gender equality in the workplace³.

Characteristically, on the path of women's involvement, development, and gender equality, the Emirates actively cooperates with other states and bodies, such as the European Union. In 2013–2015 and 2016–2018, the Emirates was elected as a member of the UN Women Executive Board, an organization dealing with gender equality and women's empowerment issues⁴.

tv-drama-the-escape#:~:text=The%20daughter%20of%20Dubai's%20ruler,was%20returned%20to%20her%20father. (11.03.2025).

¹ "Women's Rights", United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/the-ministry/the-foreign-policy/women-rights> (01.04.2025).

² "Emirati women's day", The official portal of the UAE Government, <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/women#:~:text=In%20December%202012%2C%20the%20Government,federal%20bodies%2C%20companies%20and%20institutions.&text=As%20of%202015%2C%20women%20occupy,of%20the%20highest%20proportions%20worldwide> (01.04.2025).

³ "Gender balance", The official portal of the UAE Government, <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/gender-equality/gender-balance> (01.04.2025).

⁴ "Women's Rights", United Arab Emirates Ministry of Foreign Affairs, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/the-ministry/the-foreign-policy/women-rights> (01.04.2025).

Since 2017, special parking spaces and carriages have been allocated for women in Dubai's public transport. In the Women's Global Peace and Security Index, the Emirates ranked 24th based on 2021–2022 results, which is considered the best result for the Middle East and North Africa¹.

Mother of the Nation

Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak is the wife of Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the founding father of the UAE, and is widely recognized as the “Mother of the Nation” for her tireless efforts in advancing women's empowerment and social progress. She actively works toward empowering women through education. She encouraged, supported, and believed in the power and influence that women have in supporting the state's development.

In 2015, Sheikha Fatima was recognized as Person of the Year by Forbes Middle East for her active contributions to healthcare, education, and social program development processes. It is noted that her contributions to UAE's socio-economic and political life are so significant that she is called the “Mother of the Nation” in the Emirates. Sheikha Fatima is not simply a leader or noble. She is a person who has completely devoted herself to society and their needs².

“In Sheikha Fatima's words, progress occurs when literally all members of society develop equally. In the United Arab Emirates we have that, and women are equal partners,” – noted Sheikha Moza bint Thahoun al Nahyan, advisor to the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, during the Women's Global Summit held in Abu Dhabi in February 2023³.

¹ Митечкина А., «Абайя - это статус»: есть ли у женщин в Дубае права и свободы», 15 июня, 2023, <https://www.forbes.ru/forbes-woman/490927-abaja-eto-status-est-li-u-zensin-v-dubae-prava-svobody> (04.03.2025).

² Серкова Ю., Известные люди: Бин Мубарак Фатима: Незаходящее солнце Эмиратовъ, 2015, <https://www.goldmustang.ru/magazine/heroes/people/4442.html> (04.04.2025)

³ Al Nowais, S., “Sheikha Fatima Key to making UAE's model in equality”, march 2, 2023, Pressreader, https://www.pressreader.com/uae/the-national-news/20230302/281612424603776?srsIid=AfmBOorHx7X5H6O91EA0_jBDQGimDP_EEKmsmPnTaV1qY7fExYSJsrGH (26.03.2025).

Educating women not only advances gender equality but also contributes to economic development and improvements in living standards, helping to lift communities and nations out of poverty.

Sheikha Moza also noted that in the Arab region, and generally at the international level, the UAE is an example in women's advancement. Women comprise about 70 percent of university graduates, particularly in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields. Additionally, women comprise about 44 percent of the state's researchers¹.

"In 50 years we achieved everything that requires centuries," – Sheikha Fatima noted during the conference, "Women today are judges, astronauts, ambassadors, doctors, engineers, pilots, and decision-makers"².

In 1973, Sheikha Fatima founded the Abu Dhabi Women's Development Foundation, the first organization in the UAE dedicated to women. This was followed by the establishment of the General Women's Union in 1975, the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood in 2003, and the Family Development Foundation in 2006. Sheikha Fatima serves as the chief financier and governing authority of these institutions.

In addition to the aforementioned institutions, the Arab Women's Organization and Sheikha Fatima's Foundation were also established to promote the development of refugee women and women in neighboring Arab states³. The foundation's presence and activities clearly demonstrate that the title "Mother of the Nation" extends beyond the Emirates to the entire Arab world. Indeed, Sheikha Fatima commands the same respect and authority across Arab societies as she does in the UAE. She has implemented—and continues to implement—a range of development programs in regional countries aimed at promoting the advancement of local Arab women, ensuring access to education and healthcare for all.

¹ Al Nowais, S., "Sheikha Fatima 'led the way' for girls' education from the beginning", February 28, 2023, The National, UAE Education, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/education/2023/02/28/sheikha-fatima-led-the-way-for-girls-education-from-the-beginning/> (26.03.2025).

² Al Nowais, S., "In 50 years we achieved what takes centuries, says Sheikha Fatima", UAE Government, The National, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/government/2023/02/21/in-50-years-we-achieved-what-takes-centuries-says-sheikha-fatima/> (26.03.2025).

³ "Balance for Better: A comprehensive overview of gender balance in the UAE", UAE Gender Balance Council, https://www.gbc.gov.ae/ENG_GBC_Report.pdf (01.04.2025).

Sheikha Fatima was born in a Bedouin family in the Al Hayer community of the Al Ain region. She grew up in a conservative, religious family, which helped shape her future views. In 1960, marrying Sheikh Zayed, who was then the regional leader of Al Ain, they moved to Abu Dhabi, where Sheikh Zayed ruled from 1966. A strong bond was formed between Sheikh Zayed and Sheikha Fatima, and it is noted that Sheikh Zayed was not only a husband but also a teacher and inspiration for Sheikha Fatima, and on December 2, 1971, after the Emirates' creation, that bond only strengthened. Being a devoted wife and mother, as well as following Sheikh Zayed's political practice, Sheikha Fatima developed a strong character and worldview. Sheikha Fatima continuously educated herself – studying the Quran, learning law and literature, history, diplomacy, and more¹.

In 2005, a gold coin worth one thousand dirhams was issued in honor of H.H. Sheikha Fatima. The coin features Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan on one side, and a flower symbolizing Sheikha Fatima on the reverse, accompanied by the inscription “Mother of the Nation”² (see Appendix 1).

Abu Dhabi is home to the world's second-largest mosque, which bore the name of Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed until 2017. In that year, it was renamed the “Maryam, Mother of Jesus” Mosque (‘Maryam Umm Issa’ Mosque) (see Appendix 2) by order of Abu Dhabi Crown Prince and UAE Armed Forces Supreme Commander Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. The name change was intended to symbolize peace and solidarity between Christians and Muslims³. It is also important to note that this was another step in demonstrating the significance, importance, and status of women in Emirati society. Moreover, this act resonates with the Crown Prince's mother, Sheikha Fatima's, title as the “Mother of the Nation,” once again emphasizing the vital role of motherhood.

¹ “Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak, “Mother of the Emirates”, Chairwoman of the General Women's union, Chairwoman of the Supreme council for motherhood and childhood, Supreme chairwoman of the Family development foundation, UAE government website, https://www.gwu.ae/hh_resume?lan=ar (04.04.2025).

² “1000 Dirham - Khalifa: Mother of the Nation”, Numista, <https://en.numista.com/catalogue/pieces91860.html> (09.04.2025).

³ “Abu Dhabi mosque named after Mariam, mother of Prophet Isa”, June 14, 2017, <https://www.gdnonline.com/Details/220093/Abu-Dhabi-mosque-named-after-Mariam> (09.04.2025).

In the Arab world, women have always been revered as symbols of national unity, continuity, and social cohesion. Embodied as mothers, they remain the most important pillar of state unity.

Despite recent decades of progress and increased women's rights and participation, the general worldview toward women and mothers has remained largely unchanged. The image of the mother plays a crucial role in educating future generations, closely linked to women's development and education. This explains the UAE's efforts: to build a developed and civilized state, it is essential to have educated mothers who will raise their children with good manners and instill values rooted in Emirati customs and traditions¹.

Alongside the state's continuous development and achievements, it is important to recognize that mothers bear the responsibility of passing the nation's rich culture, history, and heritage on to the younger generation². The role and significance of women within families cannot be diminished or overlooked; however, this should not restrict their professional growth or career development. Women must be empowered to balance their professional ambitions with family responsibilities, particularly in light of the UAE's vision for a technologically advanced and progressive future.

The United Arab Emirates places strong emphasis on women's rights, recognizing their vital role in society—not only as active contributors to national development but also as mothers shaping future generations. Women's empowerment programs receive substantial support and funding from both the government and private sector, reflecting a national commitment to advancing women's welfare. Acknowledging the value of women fosters a healthier, more inclusive, and diverse society. The enthusiastic participation and engagement of Emirati women in these initiatives clearly demonstrate that the UAE is moving in the right direction.

¹ "The Role of Women in Shaping Emirati Youth and an initiative to Support Mothers: Key Points of an "Open Talk" Hosted by Khalaf Al Habtoor", ALHABTOOR, <https://www.habtoor.com/en/news/26/2224/the-role-of-women-in-shaping-emirati-youth-and-an-initiative-to-support-mothers-key-points-of-an-%E2%80%9COpen-talk%E2%80%9D-hosted-by-khalaf-al-habtoor> (01.04.2025).

² Gokulan, D., "Emirati mothers are the custodians of UAE's future", Khaleej times, March 20, 2021, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/uae/emirati-mothers-are-the-custodians-of-uaes-future> (04.04.2025).

The UAE stands as a powerful example—both for Arab countries and beyond—of how a nation can achieve progress and development through the active participation and empowerment of women.

ԱՐԵՎԻԿ ՀԱՐՈՒԹՅՈՒՆՅԱՆ

«Գեղարդ» գիտավերլուծական հիմնադրամ,
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ԿԱՆԱՅՔ ԵՎ ՍԵՌԵՐԻ ՄԻՋԵՎ ՀԱՎԱՍԱՐՈՒԹՅԱՆ ՀԱՐՑԵՐԸ ԱՄԷ-ՈՒՄ

Բանալի բառեր՝ Շեյխա Ֆաթիմա, սեռերի միջև հավասարություն, կին, Էմիրություններ, իրավունքներ, արաբական աշխարհ, կանանց իրավունքներ, կանանց հզորացում:

Հոդվածում ուսումնասիրվում է կանանց խնդիրների և սեռերի միջև հավասարության առնչվող հարցերի դինամիկան Արաբական Միացյալ Էմիրություններում (ԱՄԷ): Բացի այդ, հետազոտության մեջ անդրադարձ է կատարվում Շեյխա Ֆաթիմա բինթ Մուբարաքի գործունեությանը՝ որպես կին առաջամարտիկի կերպարի՝ վերջինիս «Ազգի մայր» պետական խորհրդանիշի ընկալման համատեքստում: Աշխատանքում վերլուծվում են ԱՄԷ-ում իրականացվող քաղաքական և սոցիալական բարեփոխումները, որոնք ուղղված են կանանց իրավական և սոցիալ-տնտեսական հզորացմանը: Անդրադարձ է կատարվում սեռերի միջև հավասարության ինստիտուցիոնալ բարեփոխումներին, մասնավորապես՝ կրթության, աշխատանքի, քաղաքականության և դիվանագիտության ոլորտներում կանանց ներգրավվածությանը: Հատուկ ուշադրություն է դարձվում Շեյխա Ֆաթիմայի անձնապես նախաձեռնած և ղեկավարած կառույցներին և ծրագրերին՝ որոնք նպաստել են արաբ կանանց իրավունքների առաջ-խաղացման երևույթին ոչ միայն ԱՄԷ-ում, այլև տարածաշրջանային

մակարդակում: Աշխատանքն անդրադառնում է նաև առկա խնդիր-ներին՝ հատկապես ընտանեկան բռնությանն ու խտրականությանը օրենսդրության համատեքստում:

Appendix 1



Commemorative gold coin, Sheikha Fatima Mother of the Nation

Appendix 2



Mary, Mother of Jesus Mosque, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates