

Women in the UAE

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To support and encourage these changes the UAE has instituted laws and a legal framework to safeguard women's rights, improve the business and political climate for women, and to protect women from violence.

Following is a discussion about the legal reforms and measures that have driven change and looks at what remains to be done to reach equality for women and enhance women's economic potential in the UAE.

Constitutional Protection

The UAE Constitution stresses the importance of equality for all UAE citizens. Article 14 provides that "Equality, social justice, and providing safety, security, and equal opportunities to all citizens are pillars on which the community stands. Solidarity and shared sympathies are close links that tie the Emirates together".

Article 25 further states that "All individuals are equal in Law. There shall be no distinction among the citizens of the UAE on the basis of origin, nationality, faith or social status".

Although Article 25 does not explicitly refer to gender as a protected category, there can be little doubt that women are to have an equal status to men before the Law. Furthermore, Article 7 of the Constitution states that Islamic Sharia is to be the main source of legislation in the Union, and the Quran explicit refers to the equality of men and woman before God ('I waste not the labour of any that labours among you, be you male or female - the one of you is as the other' (3:195)) .

Economic Life and Leadership

In the UAE, the government encourages women's participation in economic life and there are laws and policies that affect women's economic opportunities in a positive way.. Women have equal employment rights under the UAE Labour Law, although they face partial employment bans such as working at night and jobs considered too hazardous for women. These restrictions are in place to protect women.

Equal pay is an essential legal incentive that encourages women to work. Federal Decree No. 30 of 1996 mandates equal remuneration for women and men for work of equal value. Further, Article 32 of the UAE Labour Law specifically provides that a 'working woman shall be entitled to the same wage as that of a working man, if she does the same work.'

Efforts to increase leadership roles for woman continue. Earlier this year, Sheikh Mohamed Bin Rashid, Vice President and Ruler of Dubai, established the Gender Balance Council, chaired by Sheikha Manal bint Mohamed Al Maktoum, to help increase the role of young Emirati women in building the future of the nation. Sheikh Mohamed said that "the impact of a significant female presence in leadership roles has wide-ranging benefits on the economy, on governance and on society at large".

The Council's work will complement the work of other institutions and foundations in the UAE which have been set up to support women, such as the General Women's Union and the Family Development Foundation.

A new law has also been passed to encourage companies to appoint more women to their Board of Directors. According to Ministerial Resolution 225 of 2015, (amending some provisions of the Ministerial Resolution 518 of 2009 concerning Governance Rules and Corporate Discipline Standards), the Board of Directors (managing a joint stock company) must comprise of at least one woman. This is important as it enables a more equitable representation of women in leadership positions and means more equitable representation of women's interests in decision-making. Interestingly, the 30% Club, established in the UK in 2010 with the vision of promoting gender balance on boards to encourage better leadership and governance, recently launched in the UAE.

International Conventions

The UAE has signed and ratified a number of conventions that either directly or indirectly support women. The most significant is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. This Convention is one of a cluster of human rights treaties developed and administered by the United Nations, and in 2011, on the UAE's 40th National Day, President Sheikh Khalifa decreed children of Emirati women and non-Emirati men could become citizens.

It is important to note that women's rights are human rights and the UAE has signed and ratified the Arab Charter on Human Rights which reaffirms the principles of the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This Charter undertakes to "ensure to all individuals... the right to enjoy all the rights and freedoms recognized herein... without any discrimination between men and women."

Violence Against Women

There is no accurate information or statistics regarding violence against women in Emirati households. In a recent policy study, it was found that only 9.5 per cent of women who had been victims of sexual crimes had reported them. This may be due to family and cultural pressure. There is also a problem with criminal justice agencies not recording reported attacks on women, however the UAE government is working to improve this.

Women are often victims of human trafficking, and the UAE has taken steps to combat this. Human trafficking is prohibited under UAE law (Federal Law 51 of 2006 Combating the Crimes of Trading in Humans; Article 33 of Federal law 13 of 1996). The Ewa'a Shelters (for women and children victims of human trafficking) were established in the UAE to combat human trafficking and support human rights, and to provide safe refuge to victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. These shelters provide victims with health and psychological care as well as social support. According to the Abu Dhabi Judicial department, human trafficking cases referred to the courts declined between 2012 and 2013. However, more needs to be done in the UAE and around the world to combat human trafficking.

Another important foundation for women is the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC), the first licensed non-profit shelter in the UAE for women and children victims of domestic violence, child abuse, and human trafficking. It was established in July 2007 to offer victims immediate protection and support services in accordance with international human rights obligations.

Institutions and foundations such as the ones mentioned above are essential in providing support to women and spreading awareness in the community.

Legal Reform

There are economic benefits in reforming laws, but also important social benefits. Currently women receive a statutory minimum of 45 days in the UAE, the lowest in the GCC, and we would suggest that this needs to be improved to help women balance their career and family life and encourage more to remain in work if this is what they wish to do.

There also remains a lack of representation of women in political institutions and other decision making positions. The adoption of special measures such as quotas will definitely help change this.

The UAE has a bright future, but it will only reach it with the help and participation of women. There is much to do, but the UAE should be proud of what it has achieved so far. This article first appeared in Gulf News, 14 November 2015. Magazine - International Briefing Egypt.