

Women in the Gulf

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A contemporary view of Women in the UAE

By Cinzia Bianco

Given its geographic and demographic size, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has had to cope with an array of security, political and economic challenges.

Among the core challenges that the UAE identified, since the state's formation (1971) was that the country's biggest challenge was probably going to be overcoming its relatively small-size population would make it vulnerable.

Confronting this challenge was one of the main reasons why the leadership sought to include women in all sectors of society. Another key reason for promoting women's inclusion was that, as an integral part of its national identity, the UAE has nurtured one of the most open and inclusive society in the Arab region: **integrating women into the workforce and in leadership position represented a political move**. A key goal has been to build a society that could be a model for how Islam should not be exclusively associated with obscurantism, an antidote against the trend disseminating across the Arab world that, since the 2000s, saw the rise of extremist groups with fundamentalist ideology.

This policy of inclusiveness begun through expanding opportunities for women in education and training. **Since the early 2000s the UAE started providing scholarships and internship programmes for women in science, technology, engineering, and maths**. The leadership also encouraged the establishment of associations such as the General Women's Union and Dubai Women's Establishment, which seek to promote women's education, employment, and gender equality.

A high-impact move was the decision, in 2005, to launch a programme which provided for extensive maternity leave and eliminated gender-based discrimination against women in the public sector - the primary employer of Emiratis. Women are also included in the most sensitive public sectors, including justice. Currently, the country has four women judges and two public prosecutors, as well as other judicial officials.

2016 represented a watershed as female inclusion passed to the field of politics: for the first time some women were enfranchised and allowed to run for public office.



However, as in other GCC countries, female candidates encountered significant challenges in being accorded the trust of the electorate, and female voices are thus far more common in the royal-appointed parliamentary chambers. For instance, both in the 2011 and 2015 Federal National Council elections, only one woman was elected, while six and eight women were among the 20 appointed members in 2011 and 2015 respectively. However, within the elected Federal National Council, parliamentarians elected their first female colleague, Amal Al-Qubaisi, Deputy President in 2011 and President in 2015 - becoming the first female leader of a national assembly in the Arab world.

At the cabinet level, the UAE had appointed **its first female Minister to a key position already in the early 2000s**, when **Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi**, took the key job of Economics and Planning Minister. After the last cabinet reshuffle (February 2016), nine women were promoted and now serve among the 29 ministers, including the then-22-year-old Shamma bint Suhail bin Faris al-Mazrui who was, appropriately enough, made minister for youth. **Crucially, women represent an important percentage, 20% in 2017, of the UAE diplomatic corps.** The UAE government says 166 women now work in the diplomatic and consular corps at the Foreign Ministry's headquarters, and 29 women serve in diplomatic missions overseas, including ambassadors and consuls in strategic posts from Europe to China. Since 2013, Lana Nusseibeh has served as the UAE's permanent representative to the United Nations. The choice of promoting women to representative posts is instrumental in portraying abroad the image that the UAE has been nurturing domestically.

In terms of female empowerment, the UAE armed service has been the centrepiece of international attention in recent times. In fact, Emirati bombing raids against Daesh targets were particularly noted because of the **poetic justice in the key role played by the country's first woman combat pilot, Major Mariam al-Mansouri, in attacking a terrorist group that has specialised in systematic rape and institutionalised sex slavery.** Al-Mansouri is not the only female pilot of the Emirati Air Force: an elite group among an effective armed service. Generally speaking, national military service is optional for women, but those who volunteer must serve for nine months, as long as their male colleagues.

Undoubtedly, the move to include women in defence is unusual in the contemporary Arab context.

Amid such progress, there are, nonetheless, significant obstacles in place for Emirati women. The country still faces continued tensions between the need to maximise its human capital (both male and female) and some conservative elements in society.

However, it is clear that the UAE remains committed to women empowerment and equality. While reforms take time, it is important to see the speed of development since the UAE is among the fastest changing and most liberal places in the Arab and Islamic worlds.