Women in politics: United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), a federation of seven Islamic monarchies (Abu Dhabi, Ajman, Dubai, Fujairah, Ra’s al-Khaimah, Sharjah, and Umm al-Qaiwain), is often cited by foreign governmental and human rights organisations as the Gulf country in which gender equality is most advanced. This view is confirmed by the Global Gender Gap Index in which the UAE is the best placed in the Arab world.

While the UAE has signed the UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), it made reservations related to possible conflicts with Sharia law, in particular as regards the right to divorce. Its reservations are less broad, however, than those of Saudi Arabia, for instance. A significant step against discrimination was the 2011 decree allowing Emirati women married to foreigners to pass their citizenship on to their children. To develop the position of women in society, in 2012, the Government made it mandatory to have women on the management boards of government bodies and private companies. Women currently represent two-thirds of university graduates, but less than one-third of women are in the workforce.

In respect of the federal institutions, one symbol is the fact that since September the UAE’s permanent representative to the United Nations has been a woman, Lana Nusseibeh. Another prominent Emirati woman on the international scene is Lubna Al Qasimi, the Minister for Development and International Cooperation, one of four female ministers in the UAE.

The Federal National Council, a parliament with consultative powers, is composed of 20 appointed members and 20 members elected by limited suffrage. Women gained the vote only in 2006, and for the 2011 elections, half of the 129 000 voters were women. There were 85 female candidates but only one of them was elected. Six more women members were appointed. Among them, Amal Al-Qubaisi was designated deputy speaker. In January 2013, chairing a session, she became the first woman to preside over a parliamentary assembly in the Arab world. “Today, Emirati women are a model for Gulf or Arab women”, she declared.

Women’s rights organisations have been set up in the UAE: they are fighting for better legislation against domestic violence and male abuse, which they say are still treated too leniently by police and the justice system. In July 2013, they gained international attention over the case of a young Norwegian woman charged with extramarital sex, because she had been raped by a male colleague; she was pardoned a few days later. Nevertheless, women’s organisations are treated no better than other civil society defenders of human rights. A July 2013 statement by 50 rights organisations accused the UAE and other Gulf states of targeting activists, to weaken women’s groups.

**Indicators:**

- Fertility rate: births per woman 1.82
- Literacy rate females / males 1.02
- Enrolment in tertiary education females / males n.a.
- Labour force participation females / males 0.48
- Women in ministerial positions females / males 0.22

Source: World Economic Forum; all figures 2012 or latest.