

SUMMARY

An increasing number of global comparison studies rank countries on everything from carbon footprint to educational performance to gender equality. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), a focus on improving competitiveness has coupled with growing attention to gender issues to ensure that two reports published annually by the World Economic Forum (WEF) have received significant attention. While useful in many respects, global comparisons such as the WEF's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) and the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) fail to capture a growing gender gap in education that is adversely affecting males in the UAE.

This brief will examine current trends in gender and education in the UAE, as well as possible explanations for the male gender gap. It will outline why a gender gap which adversely affects males should be of concern to policy makers in the UAE and the region at large, highlighting some of the problems surrounding the use of global comparison reports. The brief concludes with recommendations on how to address the situation.



The Hidden Gender Gap in Education in the UAE

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The World Economic Forum (WEF) publishes two annual reports which compare countries in terms of competitiveness and gender equality. The Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) ranks countries by their attractiveness to foreign investment in the short term and capacity for economic growth in the long term, while the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) assesses equality of access for women in the areas of economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment and how these are linked to sustained competitiveness.

While the GGGI ranks the UAE a low 105 out of 130 countries in regard to gender equality, it places the UAE at first place in terms of secondary and tertiary education gender parity due to the tremendous strides Emirati women have made in regard to educational enrollment.¹ In fact, this first place ranking is misleading, as it fails to take into account a significant gender gap that exists in the United Arab Emirates, with males performing markedly lower than females

in several key areas. While the WEF's *Global Gender Gap Report* highlights the "large gains in educational attainment" made by the UAE, it fails to note that men have not been making the same gains as women and in some cases are being left behind.

Gross enrollment figures for the UAE reveal that while there has been an unprecedented increase in overall enrollment for both boys and girls in the last 30 years, there are growing inequalities. Table 1 shows that at the preparatory and secondary education levels, enrollment rates are notably higher for girls than boys. At the tertiary level, only 12 percent of males have attended school compared with nearly 40 percent of females.

The gap between boys and girls is even more pronounced in data that includes only Emirati boys and girls. The National Admissions and Placements Office (NAPO) of the Ministry of Higher Education states that only 27 percent of Emirati males are attending higher education, compared with over 70 percent of Emirati females.²

Table 1: UAE Gross Enrollment Figures, 2007

School Type	% of Males	% of Females	Gender Parity Index	Total
Primary	85	82	0.97	71
Preparatory and Secondary	62	66	1.05	64
Tertiary	12	39	3.24	22

Source: UNESCO, *EFA Global Monitoring Report 2008*. Web site: <http://www.unesco.org/en/efareport>

Emirati males are also performing poorly in school and university compared with females. In 2007, the Ministry of Education (MOE) announced that girls had outperformed boys in all subjects in the final Grade 12 exams held at the end of the 2006/07/ academic year. The same data show that ten percent of boys from grades 10 to 12 failed their examinations in comparison to only five percent of girls. In the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, the MOE reported that girls outperformed or equaled boys in every grade and subject, while in the Emirate of Sharjah the failure rate for boys was twice that of girls.³

In addition to underperforming, males are also dropping out of school and university at greater rates than females. For instance, 14 percent of boys dropped out of Grade 10 in Ras Al-Khaimah in 2007 (see Table 2), while in Sharjah there was a dropout rate of around eight percent for males in secondary schools in 2004.⁴ High dropout rates are associated with particular grades and sections. Dropout rates for males peak in Grade 10, the first non-compulsory year of schooling,

making this an ideal year in which to target boys to help them stay in school. In Grades 11 and 12, the differences between male and female dropout rates in the science section are negligible. However, in the arts section, which is typically chosen by less able students, a large gap between male and female dropout rates is evident. This distinction points to the need for intervention targeted at less academically able boys, rather than at boys in general.

The main reasons males in Ras al Khaimah gave for dropping out were either to find work or for “extended absences.” While it is not clear what these absences relate to, it could well be that they are due to family obligations or to schooling being perceived as an increasingly irrelevant activity. Coupled with high “no-show” rates at the higher education level for admitted males, these figures present a worrying picture of male participation in both secondary and tertiary education, particularly since a significant percentage of males will not even have the option of considering higher education.

Table 2: Dropouts in the Emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, 2006-07

Reason	Grade 10		Grade 11 Science		Grade 11 Arts		Grade 12 Science		Grade 12 Arts		Total Number	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
Absent	148	14	5	1	22	5	7	1	34	2	216	23
Work	25	0	1	0	8	0	0	0	10	1	44	1
Marriage	0	10	0	1	0	5	0	1	0	9	0	26
Sick	0	1	0	1	0	1	2	0	1	0	3	4
Total (% of students)	14.2	3.8	3.3	1.4	5.6	2.5	3.0	1.3	8.2	2.0	14.0	2.5

Source: UAE Ministry of Education, Ras Al Khaimah Zone, 2007

Why the Male Gender Gap?

The male gender gap in education in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) results from factors related to schooling, family background and the perceived economic returns to education. Each of these is explored below.

Schooling

The role of schools in creating an environment in which boys want to succeed should not be underestimated. Studies on school quality in the UAE have found boys' schools to be places lacking in warmth, creativity and engagement, with teachers expecting little from students and giving back little in return. The relationship between the mostly expatriate teachers and local students was found to be ambivalent at best and openly hostile at worst. In contrast, girls' schools were welcoming places of engagement, with high expectations of students.⁵

Lower dropout rates and higher grades for girls are evidence that something is being done better, or at least differently, in girls' schools. In a survey of 250 students, Ridge (2008) found that girls were more likely to rate their school as "excellent" than boys, who were more likely to rate their schools as "good" or "average." A survey of students in Sharjah also found that boys reported lower levels of motivation and liking for school than girls.⁶ Much of this can be attributed to teacher quality, so policy makers must consider the impact of factors such as teacher training, teacher salaries and teacher gender upon student achievement and engagement in UAE schools.

Family Expectations

In the United Arab Emirates, the family, not the individual, is the primary building block of society. This means that communal interests usually override individual ones. The role of the male in this society is typically that of the "breadwinner," and males are expected to provide not only for their immediate family but

also for their extended family, in particular for unmarried sisters and widowed, divorced or marginalized mothers.

Gender roles and expectations are changing as women start to work more outside the home. However, expectations for men to provide for their families still exist, despite an increase in the number of working women. For young men from poorer regions in the UAE, this may require leaving school early to get a job to support their family or going straight into paid employment as soon as they complete school rather than continuing their education.

The impact of polygamy and/or divorce on young males also deserves attention. Some studies have shown negative effects of polygamy on prior wives and children, including poor performance at school.⁷ If the father leaves an earlier wife or adds a new one, there is often a burden placed on the oldest son of the previous wife to look after his mother and siblings, especially in poorer families. Ridge (2008) found that male students from outlying villages in the Northern Emirates lived in families with up to 23 siblings. Many students reported that their father was either retired or unemployed, with 25 percent of students reporting that their father had two or more wives. In these cases, the eldest son may face greater pressure to find work in order to ensure the well being of the family, unlike his sisters who will usually be encouraged to complete school to improve future prospects of work or marriage.

Family socioeconomic status also influences whether males stay in school or go on to higher education. Young men from the poorer regions of the UAE, in particular the rural areas of the Northern Emirates, face the double challenge of familial/cultural expectations and the disadvantages of coming from low income families. Males from Ras Al Khaimah, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm Al Quwain and Fujairah tend to score lower on the Common Educational

Table 3: Inter-Emirate Differences in Income, Test Scores and No-Shows

Emirate	Per capita income in dirham (2007)	Average male English CEPA scores (2007) ⁸
Abu Dhabi	267,948	153
Dubai	153,256	159
Sharjah	77,622	145
Fujairah	61,869	140
Ras Al Khaimah	61,059	143
Umm Al Quwain	60,635	145
Ajman	42,522	144

Source: IMF, *United Arab Emirates: Statistical Index*, Country Report 09/120, 2009. UAE National Admissions and Placement Office, 2007.

Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) examination than young men from the wealthier, more urbanized emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi (see Table 3 above). The CEPA is used for university admittance, and students who fail to score 150 or higher will either not be admitted or forced to take a foundation year.

Coupled with school quality concerns, family and cultural influences can add to the burden that young men—especially those from poorer families—face. In turn, this means that young men may have to leave school early or be unable to continue their education.

Perceived Returns to Education

Perceptions of the potential returns to education also contribute to poor retention rates for Emirati males. Returns to education are typically measured in the form of income; that is, given every additional year of schooling, how much extra income will a person earn? For the individual—in this case young males—the perception of the returns to education is shaped by the attractiveness of alternative choices, and most importantly by the possibility of obtaining work without further education. Studies have shown that in societies where the quality of education is low and public sector employment is high, individuals often make distorted educational choices, as they perceive that there are no real gains to further education.⁹

In the UAE, nationals account for roughly 85 percent of the public sector workforce but only around one percent of the private sector. This ratio may offer some explanation for the low enrollment and high dropout rates of Emirati men in school and university. The attraction of the public sector for UAE nationals is a result of both high wages and superior working conditions. Nationals tend not to enter the private sector, where there is much greater competition for jobs due to an abundance of cheap foreign labor and, as a result, lower salaries.

According to 2005 statistics on no-shows to public universities from the National Admittance and Placement Office (NAPO), the largest percentage (33 percent) of Emirati men who did not pursue higher education joined either the police or military, both of which require minimal education, while the second highest percentage (30 percent) were “staying at home or looking for work.”¹⁰ In simple terms, there is no clear link for Emirati men between wages and education, especially in the public sector. When public sector employment options are plentiful and education is seen to be of little relevance, it is only natural that young men will forgo education past a certain point. As a result, enrollments fall and the percentage of males entering the workforce rises.

For national women, the situation is different. Their high enrollment in tertiary education indicates that they and their families perceive real returns to education as compared with the alternatives.¹¹ Women do not have the same access to jobs in the military and police, or in other highly male-dominated fields such as the petroleum industry. It would appear that greater competition for scarce jobs prompts women in the UAE to place greater value on higher education, as evidenced by higher tertiary enrolment rates.

The Importance of Addressing the Male Gender Gap

Despite their low education levels, unemployment rates for males are still much lower than for females. The question often asked then is: "If men are finding opportunities in the labor force, why is educational inequality problematic?" There are two reasons: first, males matter in terms of enhancing economic competitiveness, and second, there are social gains from educating males that benefit all who live in the UAE.

National Competitiveness and Economic Sustainability

A well-educated labor force of both men and women is crucial to enhancing the competitiveness of the UAE. The WEF states, "Quality higher education and training is crucial for economies that want to move up the value chain beyond simple production processes and products."¹² Based on the indicators used for the GCI the emphasis it places upon a well-educated, flexible labor force, the disparity in male tertiary enrollment levels provides a great cause for concern. The UAE ranked 41 out of 134 countries in terms of higher education and training in 2008-2009, well below all innovation-driven economies.¹³ In terms of tertiary enrollment, the UAE ranked 79 out of 134 countries. If competitiveness is dependent on a well-educated populace, then the UAE is bound

to be adversely affected by the small numbers of males undertaking tertiary studies.

The relative ease with which most Emirati males have found work in the past has also created increasingly unrealistic expectations among youth. Conditions are changing in the public sector, and jobs will become scarcer as more young people enter the labor market. Meanwhile, men who joined the police or army 20 years ago now face early retirement and the prospect of starting a second career without transferable skills. While the Emirati males who have been educated abroad may find themselves increasingly in demand, they are few in number. If local capacity is not improved, and if citizens do not have flexible and lifelong learning skills, then progress will be dependent on expatriate labor, jeopardizing long-term plans for sustainable Emiratization.

Social Benefits

In addition to enhanced competitiveness, there are also social returns to education which benefit families, communities and the nation as whole. While "gender gaps" usually entail a lack of access or opportunity for women in relation to men, the nature of gender means that male gender gaps also influence the well being of women, children and society in general.

The gradual erosion of UAE men's traditional role as "provider," coupled with the increased prevalence of women in the workforce, is having an impact on UAE society. The decline in marriage rates in the UAE and the increase in the number of women not marrying point to a variety of issues, some of which relate to difficulty in finding a suitable match. There has also been an increase in crime and drug use among young males which will impact families and communities in the UAE as a whole.¹⁴

Social returns to educating males come in the form of lower crime rates, improved health and

a more productive labor force.¹⁵ These reduce the economic burden on the government and improve the overall quality of life for all people in the UAE. Even if individuals perceive the returns to education to be too low to pursue, there is still a strong social case for encouraging boys to stay in school.

Policy Recommendations

Research the Factors Driving Young Men away from Education

Serious investigation is required into the impact of family and social factors on young males and their decisions to forgo higher education in favor of entering the workforce. What effects do divorce or polygamy have on young men with regard to their educational choices? What impact does a family's socioeconomic background have, and how can interventions be targeted to help the most needy (and vulnerable to drop out) in Emirati society?

Policy makers also need to have a better understanding of the role of schools in helping students to reach their full potential. Further studies should be undertaken to determine the less obvious aspects of girls' schools in the UAE that foster a positive learning environment, as well as how these can be replicated in boys' schools. Why is schooling so unpopular for boys, and how can we make schools enjoyable and inspiring places of learning?

Raise Expectations of Boys

Without high expectations from parents, teachers and the education sector in general, boys will continue to perform poorly in line with existing low expectations. Higher expectations require taking pride in schools and appropriate discipline for poor behavior, cheating or incomplete work. It also means adopting more rigorous assessment methods in order to ensure that the boys are really achieving, and assisting them if they are not.

Improve Male Teacher Quality

In the current educational system, boys past Grade 10 are taught only by male teachers; however, there is a serious shortage of male Emirati teachers. This leads to a heavy reliance on poorly trained Arab expatriate teachers in boys' secondary schools. In order to improve the quality of male teachers in the UAE, there needs to be better recruitment standards, the introduction of performance-related salaries, and more effective professional development for expatriate teachers focused on pedagogy once they arrive in the UAE. This is particularly important in the case of male English language teachers, many of whom are currently unable to speak, let alone teach, English.

Finally, more attention needs to be given to attracting high-quality Emirati males to the education sector. Selection of teachers and administrators should be based on academic performance, as in countries like Finland (the top performing country on the PISA¹⁶), where teachers are selected from the top-performing graduates. Appropriate salaries and continued training should be given to exceptional teachers in order to encourage them to stay in the education field and to encourage others to join.

Conclusion

Low male participation rates in higher education, combined with high dropout rates and poor performance at the secondary level, should give cause for concern in the UAE. The male gender gap in education should be addressed not only in order to improve competitiveness but also due to the many resulting social benefits. If this problem is not given the attention it requires, there could be serious long-term consequences, not only for Emirati males but for everyone living in the UAE.

The prolonged economic downturn now facing the world has prompted an increasing number of layoffs of expatriate workers in the UAE.

This is likely to lead to a greater demand for motivated, well-educated Emiratis than ever before. There is hope for all young UAE men to be productively employed, but this requires

substantial attention to policies which will improve the school learning environment while motivating them to pursue higher levels of educational attainment.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This skewed finding is due to the fact that the GGGI uses a one-sided measure which fails to capture inequality for males. See the WEF's *Global Gender Gap Report 2008*, <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2008.pdf>.
- 2 The difference in the figures arises as UNESCO calculates both citizens and expatriates residing in the UAE, while NAPO only counts Emirati nationals.
- 3 Elia Zuriek, "Explaining anomalies in educational attainment," presentation delivered at Sharjah Women's College, Higher Colleges of Technology, May 2005.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Natasha Ridge, "Privileged and Penalized: The Education of Boys in the United Arab Emirates," (Ed.D. diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 2008).
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Salman Elbedour, Anthony J. Onwuegbuzie, Corin Caridine and Hasan Abu-Saad, "The Effect of Polygamous Marital Structure on Behavioral, Emotional and Academic Adjustment in Children: A Comprehensive Review of the Literature," *Clinical Child and Family Psychology Review* 5, no. 4 (2002): 55-71.
- 8 A CEPA score of 150 is required for entry into any bachelor program in UAE public universities. The lowest score possible is 100 while the highest is 200.
- 9 Zeki Fattah, Imed Liman, and Samir Makdisi, "Determinants of Growth in Arab Countries," paper commissioned by the Global Development Network for the Global Research Project on Explaining Growth, 2000.
- 10 National Admissions and Placement Office for Higher Education (NAPO), *Fourth Annual Survey of No Shows*. UAE Ministry of Higher Education: Abu Dhabi, 2005.
- 11 Fatma Abdulla, "Emirati Women: Conceptions of Education and Employment," in *Soaring Beyond Boundaries: Women Breaking Educational Barriers in Traditional Societies*, ed. R.O. Mabokela, (The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2007).
- 12 World Economic Forum, *The Global Competitiveness Report 2008-2009* (Geneva: World Economic Forum, 2009), <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/GCR08/GCR08.pdf>
- 13 The *Global Competitiveness Report* views an innovation-driven economy as one which achieves high rankings in terms of business sophistication and innovation, where businesses compete on the basis not only of new and different goods, but also in terms of the most up-to-date methods of production (i.e., less labor intensive).
- 14 Siham Al Najami, "Study takes a close look at addiction," *Gulf News*, August 16, 2009.
- 15 Lance Lochner and Enrico Moretti, "The Effect of Education on Crime: Evidence From Prison Inmates, Arrests, and Self-Reports," *American Economic Review* 94, 1 (2004): 155-189.
- 16 PISA is the OECD Program for International Student Assessment. It assesses students from across the world on mathematics and reading.

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