

SUMMARY

Studies have shown that the gender and identity of political leaders have a noticeable effect on their policy decisions, with policies prescribed by them often geared toward the needs of their own gender.¹ To create balanced and effective policies, therefore, it is vital to ensure gender balance within the political decision making process. Greater inclusion of women in this process is not only a United Nations Millennium Development Goal, but also an essential step in representing 50 percent of the population, resulting in gender-balanced policy formulation and implementation, as well as more equitable allocation of resources.

This policy brief intends to clarify the extent of women's political participation in the United Arab Emirates by analyzing its ranking in the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI),² a standard benchmarking tool which ranks countries on gender equality by measuring gaps in their levels of gender equity. This brief focuses on the Index's "political empowerment" sub-index in order to provide recommendations which may facilitate a more gender-balanced political environment, thereby contributing to the formulation of policies which better reflect the needs of both men and women in the UAE.

Closing the UAE's Political Gender Gap: Measures for Effective Policy Change

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The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) ranks countries on gender equality, measuring gaps in gender equity rather than overall attainment. By providing quantifiable measures of complicated concepts, its sub-indices provide a tool to assess the gaps between men and women in terms of health and survival, political empowerment, educational attainment and economic participation.

The GGGI's political empowerment sub-index assesses women's political participation and gender gaps based on three indicators: the percentage of women in parliament, the percentage of women in ministerial positions and number of years with a female head of state. The political empowerment sub-index is the only measure on the UAE's GGGI that is comprised solely of data from the UAE National population.

In 2008, the UAE received the second highest rank in the MENA region on the GGGI's political empowerment sub-index, ranking 72 out of 130 countries (Table 1).³ This is a substantial improvement from 2006, when the country ranked 112 out of 115 countries. In 2007, the country leaped to

number 65 out of 128 countries measured, after the entry of women into the UAE's Federal National Council (FNC)—a half-elected/half-appointed consultative body akin to a parliament—during the country's first-ever elections in 2006.

On a global scale, women have managed to close only 16 percent of the political empowerment gender gap. By 2008, the UAE had closed 11 percent of its political empowerment gender gap, and appears to be on target to reach the global average. However, in comparison with other countries listed on the Index, the UAE's ranking still remains relatively low on political empowerment.

Factors of political change in the UAE

Looking closer at the UAE's 2008 rankings, the country scored 101 out of 130 countries on the "women in ministerial positions" indicator; however, this ranking does not take into account the appointment of a new federal cabinet in 2008 which increased the number of women in ministerial positions from two to four. This should further boost the UAE's ranking on the sub-index in future reports.⁴ The "female heads of state" indicator, however, significantly

Table 1: 2008 GGGI Political Empowerment Rankings for the MENA Region

Country	2008 Political Empowerment Sub-Index Rank	% of Gap Closed on Political Empowerment Sub-Index	2008 Global Gender Gap Index Rank
Mauritania	66	12	110
United Arab Emirates	72	11	105
Tunisia	73	11	103
Morocco	86	9.5	125
Jordan	108	6	104
Syria	112	6	107
Algeria	115	5.5	111
Oman	123	2	118
Egypt	124	2	124
Kuwait	125	2	101
Qatar	126	2	119
Bahrain	127	2	121
Yemen	129	1.5	130
Saudi Arabia	130	0	128

Source: WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2008

reduces the country's ranking as, alongside almost 70 percent of the countries on the Index, the UAE has not had a female head of state in the past 50 years.

The UAE ranked 39 out of 130 countries on the "women in parliament" indicator, improving its score since 2006 relative to the increased number of countries represented in the Index.⁵ The leap on this indicator, and on the political empowerment sub-index more generally, was

directly related to women's entry into the FNC in 2006. In that year, a government-picked electoral caucus of 6,595 voters was allowed to vote, for the first time, for half of the 40 members of the FNC. The Electoral College consisted of nearly one-fifth women, and women comprised nearly 15 percent of the 465 candidates that ran for office. Even though women were underrepresented in the electoral process, one female candidate from the nation's capital, Abu Dhabi, won an elected seat.

Box 1: Limitations of the GGGI Political Empowerment Sub-Index

An acknowledged shortcoming of the political empowerment sub-index is the lack of emphasis placed on women's involvement at local levels of government, primarily due to a dearth of readily available information. The World Economic Forum (WEF) has noted the drawback, as well as the need to incorporate local political involvement in future reports when the necessary information becomes available.

Another limitation of the political empowerment sub-index is that it assigns almost half of its weight to the presence (or not) of a female head of state during the last 50 years. This variable only works in favor of approximately one-quarter of the 130 countries on the Index, none of which lie in the MENA region. Disproportionate emphasis given to the presence of a female head of state leads to the conclusion that only 16 percent of the political empowerment gap has been closed globally, a wider gap than that reported for the economic participation, educational attainment, or health and survival sub-indices.

Table 2: 2008 GGGI Political Empowerment Indicators and Rankings

United Arab Emirates	Rank	Female	Male
Political empowerment sub-index	72	-	-
Women in parliament	39	22.5%	77.5%
Women in ministerial positions	101	8%	92%
Years with female head of state (last 50 years)	40	0	50

Source: WEF Global Gender Gap Report 2008

Importantly, eight women were appointed to the FNC by the governing rulers of the remaining emirates, excluding Umm Al Quwain. Government appointments were therefore a necessary mechanism for including women in the FNC, and for creating a benchmark for their future participation in the political process at the federal level. Women now comprise nearly a quarter of seats in the FNC (22.5 percent), the highest female representation in the GCC region. The UAE has closed 29 percent of its gender gap in the “women in parliament” indicator, above the global average of 21 percent.

Dubai managed the highest representation: its three appointed members represented 37 percent of the eight seats reserved for Dubai. However, there were no female parliamentary representatives from the Emirate of Umm Al Quwain. While the inclusion of nine women among the 40-member FNC was undoubtedly

a major gain for women within the UAE, the process was neither systematic nor representative of all emirates.

The Arab World in Perspective

Political participation in the Arab states is the lowest in the world, with women representing just 9.1 percent of all members of parliament in the region in 2007.⁶ Likewise, the MENA region has only closed approximately five percent of its political empowerment gender gap; again, this is the poorest showing of any region in the world. The election of only one woman to the FNC mirrors electoral trends elsewhere in the Arab world, which are generally unfriendly to women unless quotas have been applied.⁷ Factors which influence rates of women’s political participation include culture and traditional practices, legal and constitutional rights, economic challenges, the role of the state, and electoral processes and quota systems.⁸

Table 3: Percentage of Female Representation by Emirate within the FNC

Emirate	Total number of seats (N=40)	Number of female representatives	Female representation (%)	Male representation (%)
Abu Dhabi	8	2	25	75
Dubai	8	3	37	63
Sharjah	6	1	17	83
Ras Al Khaimah	6	1	17	83
Ajman	4	1	25	75
Fujairah	4	1	25	75
Umm Al Quwain	4	0	0	100

Even though the UAE has only recently commenced a parliamentary process, it has already outperformed many countries in the region who had granted women suffrage and political rights long before the UAE. Although the country has far to go, the UAE has taken broad strides in closing the gender gap in political participation.

Future Directions for Change

Reserved seats and quotas (top-down)

In order to further increase women's visibility in the UAE's political arena and improve the country's score on the GGGI, steps need to be taken towards the implementation of reserved seats. Although opponents of quotas feel that it is an unnatural intervention, causes stigmatization and may sideline women, quotas and reserved seats can prove to be an important mechanism for guaranteeing women's presence in office, whether elected or appointed. Also, setting a baseline standard for women's political participation sets a "minimum floor," establishing women's presence as a norm rather than an exception.⁹

Research has shown that there are numerous benefits to implementing reserved seats for women. First, exposure to female leaders reduces bias against other female leaders over time, thereby improving the overall "electability" of women in general.¹⁰ Women's entry through reserved seats is therefore essential for recognizing their competencies as policy makers. Moreover, randomized policy experiments conducted by researchers of the MIT Poverty Action Lab found that women in rural India have different policy preferences than men, and tend to represent the needs of their own gender better in terms of the provision of public goods.¹¹ It seems evident that the existence and availability of more female

legislators provides a channel for male and (especially) female constituents to articulate their concerns and affect legislation and policy that is more sensitive to and inclusive of the needs of women. These measures increase women's participation both as voters and candidates, thus increasing their influence when making policy decisions.¹²

Within the context of the UAE, Al-Dabbagh et al. surveyed all FNC members and 55 candidates who ran for office, finding that 81 percent of their female respondents endorsed the use of quotas, as compared to 57 percent of the men they surveyed. While quotas are not a panacea, they provide a temporary catalyst to lay the foundation for greater gender equity and expanded "electability" for women.¹³ The guaranteed inclusion of women into the political process in the UAE ultimately creates a baseline for their participation, in addition to changing discriminatory attitudes in the long term.

Diversity through participation in local government (bottom-up)

In addition to their growing role in the FNC and federal ministries, women have also made strides in other branches of the UAE government. The amendment of UAE law to allow women to serve in the judiciary was followed in 2008 with the appointment of the first woman, Khulood Al-Dhaheer, to serve as a federal judge. The federal government also recently appointed two women to ambassadorships. This data is not taken into account in the GGGI.

At the local level, the governing structures of the seven emirates vary widely. "Governing" or "consultative" councils are chaired by the ruler of each emirate, with various municipal departments and authorities operating at the local level. The overwhelming majority of high positions are filled by appointment. While female representation is non-existent

Box 2: Why Establish a Baseline?

Although only one woman was elected, and the ruling heads of each emirate appointed the remaining eight women to the FNC, the inclusion of women as almost one-quarter of the legislature marks a baseline establishing them as a permanent part of the UAE political landscape. Drawing from previous studies such as that by Beaman et al., we can posit the likelihood that exposure to female FNC members will change discriminatory attitudes toward female legislators, thereby increasing the likelihood that women can be elected directly without recourse to the appointment system.¹⁴ Al-Dabbagh et al. showed that the attitudes of FNC members and electoral candidates toward women's political participation improved markedly as a direct result of the current percentage of women in the FNC and government.¹⁵

Therefore, the government of the UAE has shown a commitment to expanding women's political participation by using state appointments to foster positive attitudes towards gender equality in the political arena.

at the “governing” or “consultative” council levels—with the exception of Sharjah, which counts seven female members on the 40-member Consultative Council—an increasing number of women have been appointed to executive positions, especially in Abu Dhabi and Dubai. Women occupy senior positions at the Abu Dhabi Chamber of Commerce and Industry, as well as on the economic, health, arts and educational councils of Abu Dhabi. In Dubai, women are present in senior positions in a variety of governing authorities, including those related to education, social and community development, arts and culture and health.

A detailed analysis of women's participation at the emirate and local levels is beyond the scope of this brief, but it is vital to note the increasing visibility of women as decision makers throughout various levels of government within the UAE.

Recommendations

Parliamentary quotas

The UAE can create greater gender parity within the FNC by establishing constitutionally mandated gender-neutral

quotas for each emirate. A minimum percentage of seats should be reserved for women from each emirate; if voters of an emirate fail to elect the mandated number into the elected half of the FNC, the minimum number of women would then be assigned to the FNC by the governing body of that emirate. Quotas provide a more systematic and transparent approach to securing at least a minimum proportion of female representation.

These recommendations are also reflected in the study on women's political participation in the UAE, which revealed that nationwide gender-neutral quotas would provide more inclusive representation of women of all Emirates.

Increased representation within the Electoral College

Political participation would be increased for all citizens—men and women—by the establishment of universal suffrage. If inclusion into the Electoral College is to remain by appointment only, however, then the proportion of women should be increased to avoid underrepresentation. It is likely that a higher proportion of female electors

would elect greater numbers of female parliamentarians, lessening the need for appointment from above to ensure inclusion. Ideally, the pool of women within the Electoral College should reflect their overall proportion in society (half).

Ministry quotas

In order to lessen the gender gap in the UAE cabinet, a baseline minimum number of cabinet seats reserved for women should be mandated by the Constitution.

Include data from local government

Since women occupy many senior positions at the local and individual emirate government levels, inclusion of data from this domain could significantly improve the UAE's ranking on the GGGI's political empowerment sub-index. This would significantly boost the UAE's ranking on the GGGI.

Encourage experience building

Policy makers should stress the importance of women working at local levels of government prior to entering the federal legislature and senior levels of decision making. The training of a cadre of qualified women with decision making experience, an effective network of contacts, and day-to-day knowledge of the real needs of their fellow citizens will eventually result in their inclusion at higher levels of government. While experience at the local level is important for both female and male policy makers, it is particularly important for women, as they are faced with the challenge of preexisting biases.

In addition, women at the local government level should be encouraged to attend parliamentary sessions and international conferences to increase their exposure beyond the realm of local government, in addition to providing an opportunity for networking.

Research-driven policy making

In general, research-driven policy making is in a nascent stage throughout the Arab world. Research on women's political experiences in the UAE, and their effect on policy change, is still needed. Once empirical data on the consequences of women's political participation becomes available, solid research can contribute to formulating better policy, as well as to increasing public awareness of the effects of women in the decision making process.

Conclusion

Within the UAE, government plays an extremely important role in creating opportunities for women to lead. By appointing women to the FNC and to senior decision making posts, UAE leaders have helped to foster a culture where women leaders are rapidly becoming an accepted norm, rather than the exception. Taking into consideration the experiences of other countries, as well as formulating policy based on local research, the UAE should take further steps towards increasing the political participation of women and reducing the gender gap that exists in this area. By mandating a required percentage of female representatives in the FNC and at the ministry level, research shows that public exposure to women in senior decision making positions can eradicate bias towards them and lead to more "natural electability" without the need for quotas. Greater female inclusion in the political process will boost the UAE's position on the GGGI political empowerment sub-index. More importantly, it will facilitate the creation of more gender-balanced policies and better representation of the overall population.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Raghabendra Chattopadhyay and Esther Duflo, "Women as Policy Makers: Evidence from a Randomized Policy Experiment in India," *Econometrica* 72,5 (2004).
- 2 Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson and Saadi Zahidi, *The Global Gender Gap Report 2008*, (Geneva: The World Economic Forum, 2008), <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2008.pdf>.
- 3 The UAE ranked 105 out of 130 countries on the overall Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI).
- 4 The new UAE federal cabinet reshuffle brings the total number of women ministers to four of 22 cabinet members. In addition, one woman was appointed as the cabinet's secretary-general. The federal cabinet is now 18 percent female, an improved showing over the previous eight percent reported in the 2008 GGGI.
- 5 In 2006, 115 countries were represented in the GGGI. This number increased to 130 in 2008.
- 6 Inter-Parliamentary Union, *Women in National Parliaments*. Inter-Parliamentary Union, <http://www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm>, accessed July 2009.
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- 14 Beaman et al.
- 15 Al-Dabbagh et al.



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