

SUMMARY

According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), the UAE has a highly competitive economy but ranks poorly in terms of gender equality. In the WEF's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) 2007, the UAE ranked 105 out of 128 countries. The country performs relatively well in terms of equal access between men and women to health and education resources, as well as in terms of political participation. However, women lag far behind men in regards to economic opportunity and integration into the labor force. This brief examines reasons behind the UAE's ranking and score on the GGGI 2007, noting inaccuracies in some of the data mentioned. The brief recommends changes in labor policies to stimulate the economic inclusion of women, and calls for improvements in data collection, analysis and dissemination. With more accurate and timely information, a truer picture of gender equality in the UAE will emerge and policy solutions can be more effectively formulated.



GENDER EQUALITY IN THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES: A DRIVER FOR INCREASED COMPETITIVENESS?

By Christine Assaad – Research Associate

INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) performs well in international comparisons of competitiveness. For example, it ranked 37 out of 131 countries in the World Economic Forum's 2007 Global Competitiveness Index (GCI). Furthermore, the UAE's national strategy aims to improve its competitive position. To be competitive in the long term, however, the country needs to utilize the full potential of its human capital. This involves making use of the education, skills, and productivity of its entire population, including women.

In this regard, the WEF's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) indicates that women in the UAE are far from

fully integrated into the economic life of the country. According to the 2007 GGGI, the UAE ranks only 105 out of 128 countries in gender equality. Numerous studies indicate that sustainable development is dependent on improving the economic and political status of women and that reducing gender inequality enhances productivity and economic growth.¹ This relationship is suggested in the correlation between competitiveness and gender equality (Figure 1).

While it has its failings, the GGGI is a useful benchmarking tool, providing a framework to track gender inequality in regard to socioeconomic and political criteria.² The GGGI evaluates countries on how equitably they distribute resources and opportunities between

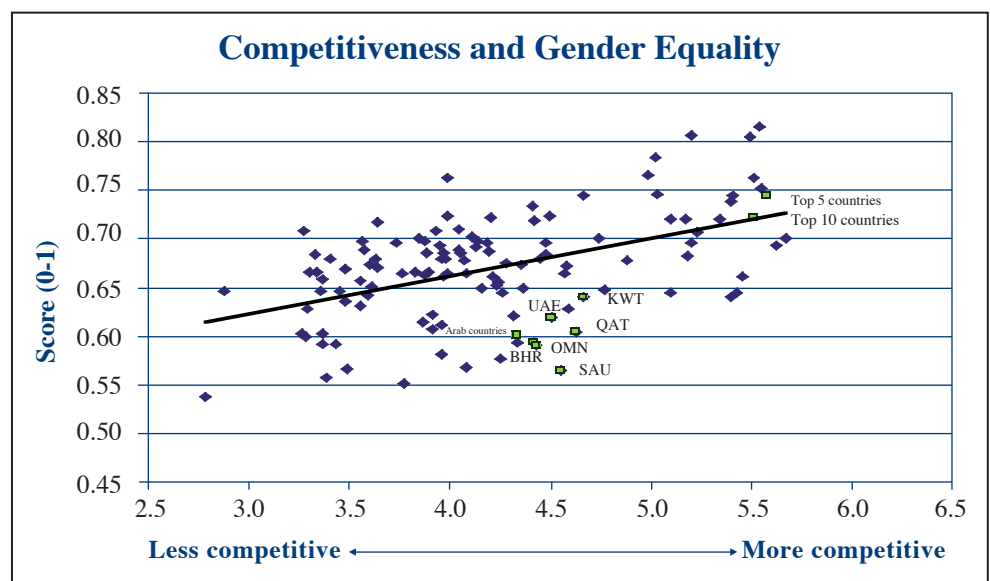


Figure 1 : Correlation between Gender Gap Ratings and Competitiveness



women and men, assessing gender gaps in four main areas: education, economic opportunity, health, and political participation. It highlights best performing countries to catalyze change among policy makers. This policy brief analyzes the GGGI’s 2007 findings on the UAE. Paying attention to both the overall rankings and sub-indices used to calculate them, the brief identifies the most significant issues to be addressed in order for the UAE to improve its competitiveness while promoting gender equality. At the same time, the brief highlights discrepancies in data used by the GGGI, emphasizing that the index may not present a complete picture of gender equality in the UAE.

ASSESSING THE GENDER GAP IN THE UAE

As noted above, the 2007 GGGI ranks the UAE at 105 out of 128 countries in overall gender equality. This rank is based on a calculated score of 0.61 (scale of 0 - 1), meaning that the UAE has closed 61 percent of the gap between men and women in regard to education, economic opportunity and participation, health outcomes, and political participation. While this score is fairly low, the UAE has improved since 2006, when it ranked 101 out of 115 countries, with a score of 0.59, meaning that only 59 percent of the gender gap had been closed.³

The UAE’s improvement in gender equality lies in some of the indicators used to calculate GGGI scores for economic participation and political empowerment. Wage inequality for similar work decreased, as did the gap between the estimated earned income of men and women. In regard to political participation, the UAE’s first elections were held at the end of 2006. Nine women entered parliament, gaining 22.5 percent of the seats and placing the UAE fairly high in political participation among women.

GENDER EQUALITY IN THE UAE: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

As seen in Table 1, when the UAE is compared to only Arab and Gulf countries in gender equality, it is surpassed only by Kuwait, Tunisia, Jordan and Syria. However, when compared to the ten most competitive economies in the world (as measured by the GCI), the UAE ranks far below any of them. In the global context, the UAE’s overall gender gap ranking is low.

DATA CONCERNS

Although the GGGI is a useful tool for analyzing gender equality, it is important to remember that there are several discrepancies in the data used to calculate the index. This is due to the lack of reliable data collected and made available by the UAE. Data within government agencies is neither

ARAB COUNTRIES	CGI RANK 2007	GGGI RANK 2007	MOST COMPETITIVE ECONOMIES	CGI RANK 2007	GGGI RANK 2007
Kuwait	30	96	United States	1	31
Qatar	31	109	Switzerland	2	40
Tunisia	32	102	Denmark	3	8
Saudi Arabia	35	124	Sweden	4	1
UAE	37	105	Germany	5	7
Oman	42	119	Finland	6	3
Bahrain	43	115	Singapore	7	77
Jordan	49	104	United Kingdom	9	11
Morocco	64	122	Netherlands	10	12
Egypt	77	120	UAE	37	105
Syria	80	103			
Algeria	81	108			
Libya	88				

Table 1: UAE Competitiveness and Gender Rankings Compared

integrated nor coordinated, and available data is not disseminated adequately to international organizations. In addition, because the index uses aggregate data that does not distinguish between nationals and expatriates, the available data does not reflect the socioeconomic reality of Emiratis themselves.

EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT IN THE UAE

The UAE ranks fairly high in terms of gender equality in educational attainment (68 out of 128 countries). Almost 99 percent of its education gender gap is closed, suggesting that access to educational opportunities and resources for men and women is largely equitable. The educational gender gap in the UAE resembles that of other Gulf countries, and surpasses the world average of 92 percent.

In looking at the proximate causes for this high ranking, one sees from Table 2 that there is near complete equality between the genders in primary and secondary enrollment rates, and women surpass men in tertiary enrollment. Adult literacy for the total population is about 77.9 percent, near the Gulf regional average and higher than the Arab regional average. Notably, women in the UAE maintain higher rates of literacy than men, at 82 percent compared to 76 percent.

Gender equality in access to primary and secondary education is quite high, with the UAE having closed 97 percent and 100 percent of the respective enrollment gaps, exceeding the worldwide average in both regards. However, overall enrollment rates for primary school and

secondary school in the UAE are low. According to the WEF, only 70.5 percent of school-age children are enrolled in primary school, with only 57.4 percent enrolled in secondary school. This compares poorly with the Gulf average of 84.1 percent and 75.9 percent respectively.

In tertiary education, the gross enrollment rate in the UAE is 23 percent.⁴ This ranking is fair when compared to the regional average of 24 percent. Importantly, tertiary enrollment rates are much higher for women (39 percent) than for men (12 percent). However, the figure for male enrollment is lowered by the large number of young male expatriate laborers of university age in the UAE. Also, local men tend to leave the education system earlier to join the workforce or to study abroad (not counted in national enrollment data). UAE women are also motivated to secure higher degrees, as they connote social status and make women more employable in culturally-appropriate jobs. Notably, positive educational outcomes for women have not been translated into a large increase in female labor force participation, indicating that the UAE is not reaping the full benefits of its educational investments.

Overall, there are several problems posed by the education data used by the GGI. The Index relies on 2005 data from the World Bank's "EdStats" database, which have since been updated and harmonized with new UNESCO data. Revised data suggest that the figures used by the 2007 GGI underestimate UAE primary and secondary enrollment by 15-20 percent. Similarly, literacy rates for both men and women

	RANK (/128)	SCORE	WORLDWIDE AVERAGE SCORE	WOMEN (%)	MEN (%)
Total education	68	0.99	0.92		
Literacy rate	1	1.00	0.85	82%	76%
Primary enrollment	99	0.97	0.97	70%	71%
Secondary enrollment	1	1.00	0.92	59%	56%
Tertiary enrollment	-	-	0.81	39%	12%

Table 2: Education Sub-indices



have been revised upwards by nearly 10 percent. UNESCO data provides evidence that the UAE’s total enrollment and literacy rates are higher than reported by the WEF, and are generally on par with those of the Gulf states.

ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION AND OPPORTUNITY

The UAE’s gender equality in the economic participation and opportunity index is poor, ranking only 119 out of 128. The country has closed only 42 percent of its gender gap, which is low in comparison with the worldwide average of 58 percent. This connotes an unequal distribution of economic resources and opportunities between the sexes. The UAE is similar to most other Arab countries, and is surpassed only by Kuwait and Syria.

The proximate causes for this ranking are linked to poor gender equality outcomes in labor force participation and the percentages of women occupying professional, technical and management positions. Wage equality for similar work and earned income has improved, yet only slightly.

The sex ratio in labor force participation remains low, with only 42 percent of the gender gap in the UAE closed, far below the worldwide average of 69 percent. The UAE scores lower than Kuwait (58 percent) but higher than most of its Gulf neighbors. As reported by the WEF, female labor force participation in the UAE is only 39 percent compared to 92 percent for men, indicating a significant gap.

Labor force participation should be viewed in the context of the UAE’s unique demographic structure. Nearly 80 percent of the country’s total population are expatriates, and nearly 70 percent of the population are men, indicating that the number of working males in the population far exceeds the total female population. In addition, in the UAE, female labor force participation rates are driven by the role of foreign female workers, who work either as professionals or as low-skilled service workers. At the same time, labor force participation rates among national women, who represent only two percent of the total labor force, are low. Thus, the gap in women’s and men’s labor force participation denotes an even larger gap when it comes to UAE national men’s and women’s labor force participation.

Outcomes in regard to gender equality in managerial and technical positions also contribute to the low ranking of the UAE in the economic opportunity indicator. According to the WEF, only eight percent of legislators, senior officials and managerial positions are women, and 25 percent of professional and technical workers are women. These indicators are below the worldwide average (Table 3) but similar to most Gulf countries.

To explain the low presence of women in managerial positions, one should note that GGGI figures include aggregate data for all women in the country. However, most expatriate women work in the service industry, which explains the low overall share of women in management. On the other hand, while national women represent

	RANK (/128)	SCORE	WORLDWIDE AVERAGE SCORE	WOMEN	MEN
Total Rank	119	0.42	0.58		
Labor force participation	115	0.42	0.69	39%	92%
Legislators & senior managers	102	0.09	0.26	8%	92%
Professional & tech. workers	94	0.33	0.68	25%	75%
Earned Income	121	0.24	0.50	\$7,630	\$31,788
Wage Equality	29	0.74	0.64	None	None

Table 3: Economic Sub-indices:

a small share of total labor force, those in the workforce do hold fairly senior positions. This is not reflected in aggregate statistics.

According to UAE official statistics, one-third of national women in the labor force are in middle and senior management positions. National women constitute 66 percent of the government workforce, of which 30 percent are in decision making positions.⁵ Furthermore, according to the WEF's Executive Opinion Survey, the UAE scores 4.79 out of 7 in regard to "women's ability to rise to leadership positions," demonstrating the potential for national women, backed as they are by the UAE leadership, to achieve important positions in the labor market.

Moreover, the low percentage of women in professional and technical work is partly a result of limited opportunities for women in technical schooling, which is only offered to men at the high school level.⁶ Even when technical degrees are offered to women, cultural constraints restrict study in these fields. Another factor lowering women's participation in technical fields is the perception of these jobs as being more demanding and perhaps conflicting with women's traditional family duties.

The low percentage of women in technical and leadership positions reflects itself in the ratio of estimated female-to-male earned income. In this indicator, only 24 percent of the gender gap is closed; this is low compared to the worldwide average of 50 percent. In other words, men in the UAE earn four times more than women overall. In interpreting this data, however, it is important to note that women generally occupy lower-waged sectors (such as administrative positions

and education), while men tend to fill higher-waged technical and managerial positions.

It is critical to understand that there are numerous concerns in regard to the accuracy of data used to calculate the GGGI's economic participation and opportunity rankings for the UAE. For labor force data, the WEF depends on the International Labor Organization.⁷ The ILO, in turn, relies on official country data drawn from labor force surveys or population censuses. However, in reporting labor data on the UAE, the ILO must depend on 1995 census data, the latest official UAE data made publicly available. Although another census was conducted in 2005, most of its detailed labor statistics have yet to be distributed to international organizations like the ILO. Also, the UAE has not conducted a national labor force survey to date. With the fast-paced economy of the UAE, where demographics change rapidly, the total population has doubled since 1995, making this information outdated and misrepresenting the reality in the UAE. Similarly, due to a lack of wage data in the UAE, gender-based wage differentials estimate the female-male ratio based on observed international norms.

HEALTH AND SURVIVAL

The overall ranking for the UAE in the health and survival sub-index is 110 out of 128, with 96 percent of the gender gap closed, a score similar to the world average. The UAE is doing well in terms of gender equality in access to health sector resources. This is reflected in two of the three indicators used to calculate the health and survival sub-index: healthy life expectancy and maternal mortality. The WEF reports healthy life expectancy in the UAE as 64 years for both women and men, fairly high in comparison to

	RANK	SCORE	WORLDWIDE AVERAGE SCORE	WOMEN	MEN
Total	110	0.96	0.96		
Sex ratio at birth	1	0.94	0.92	49%	51%
Healthy life expectancy	117	1.00	1.04	64	64

Table 4: Health and Survival Sub-indices



other Arab countries and surpassed in the region only by Kuwait (67 years). For sex ratio at birth, equality between women and men has also been established.

It should be noted that the UAE has a high maternal mortality rate of 54 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, higher than that of Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan and Saudi Arabia. However, this is based on estimates developed by WHO, UNICEF and UNFPA in 2000 which, considering the growth and changes in the UAE population and the advancement in medical treatment in the country, could be an outdated figure.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION⁸

Political participation is a new phenomenon in the UAE, which held its first elections ever in 2006. The overall ranking of the UAE for this indicator is fairly high (65 out of 128), a significant improvement since 2006 (prior to the elections), when it ranked 112 out of 115. The UAE has closed ten percent of the gender gap in political participation, compared to a worldwide average of 14 percent. The UAE’s ranking outperforms all other Gulf and Arab countries, and the average for the Arab region is about seven percent.⁹

The 2007 GGGI takes into account the nomination of eight women and the election of one woman to the UAE’s Federal National Council, an historic occurrence and a positive transformation for women in the UAE. The result of this was a 22.5 percent representation of women in parliament. Furthermore, the UAE has four women in ministerial positions: Lubna Al Qasimi, Minister of Foreign Trade; Mariam Al Roumi, Minister of Social Affairs; and Maitha Al-Shamsi and Reem Al-Hashemi, Ministers of State.

IMPROVING GENDER AND COMPETITIVENESS IN THE UAE: RECOMMENDATIONS

Gender equality is one of the main drivers for the sustainability of the UAE’s competitive economy. Therefore, it is in the strategic interest of the UAE to increase efforts to close its gender gap and to integrate gender equality as a main part of the national strategy of the country. There are strong synergies between closing the gender gaps in the areas of education, health, and economic and political participation. While a holistic approach is required, particular attention should be given to women’s economic participation, as it is the weakest area of gender equality in the UAE according to the GGGI.

There are many structural, cultural and contextual factors that act as barriers of entry and retention for women in the labor force. While a full analysis of these is beyond the scope of this brief, the GGGI indicates specific areas wherein policy changes can affect better outcomes for women, particularly in the area of economic participation. These factors need to be addressed to close the gender gap and maximize human capital usage in the UAE.

Labor Policies

Labor policies must make employment attractive to women through more accommodating work arrangements across the public and private sectors (working hours, internships, career counselling and benefits) that are compatible with their multiple roles. The UAE ranks low in regard to the length of maternity leave and the availability of publicly-subsidized childcare.¹⁰ Government-funded child care and longer maternity leave would decrease the time costs for

	RANK	SCORE	WORLDWIDE AVERAGE SCORE	WOMEN (%)	MEN (%)
Total Rank	65	10%	14%		
Women in Parliament	35	0.29	0.19	23%	78%
Women in Ministerial positions	110	0.06	0.13	6%	94%

Table 5: Political Participation Sub-indices

women associated with joining the labor force. Harmonizing these benefits across all sectors would ensure women's entry and retention in the workforce (particularly the private sector) while making hiring women more attractive to employers.

Improved Information Collection and Dissemination

Improving data availability and quality is also of importance. The effectiveness of any government policy in regard to gender issues would be improved by the availability of more accurate data on women and economic conditions more broadly. Quality data would provide a more realistic, representative picture of gender gaps, and would inform policy makers in devising effective policies. The government must take the lead by producing and disseminating such data.

Improved data in regard to gender issues can be collected by adapting standard, annual household surveys (or labor force surveys) and adding conceptually-driven modules, such as a "gender module" which includes questions on women's education, employment and socio-economic status. A similar module could be adopted for collecting data that distinguishes between the

priorities of nationals and expatriates. The resulting data would allow policy makers to develop a more targeted policy approach towards gender equality.

Some data does exist at the national level. For example, the census is administered by the Ministry of Planning, with execution at the emirate level. Also, each ministry or agency collects data relevant to its function. But no centralized hub for statistics gathering has been developed yet, and coordination on data is hampered by the decentralized nature of government services in the UAE. Integration and coordination of data is critical for developing a clear picture of the gender situation in the UAE and creating effective policy in this regard.

Finally, data produced by the UAE needs to be accessible to various international agencies. It is in the country's interest to make the latest and most reliable information available to organizations like the World Bank, United Nations agencies and the ILO in order to accurately reflect the UAE's image in the international arena. It fails to do so at its own expense, as reflected in its low standing in the GGGI 2007, a standing that may be far lower than actual gender outcomes in the country. ♡

ENDNOTES

- 1 Ricardo Hausmann, Laura D. Tyson and Saadia Zahidi, "The Global Gender Gap Report 2007," World Economic Forum, 2007, 20.
- 2 The GGGI is different than other indices such as the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), the Gender, Institutions and Development Database (GID) and the Gender and Development Index (GDI), in that it analyzes gender equality and not women's empowerment. It also measures gender gaps regardless of a country's overall level of development.
- 3 In the 2007 index, 13 new countries were added. Using the 2006 list of countries (115), in 2007 the UAE reaches the rank of 94 out of 115.
- 4 World Bank, "World Bank Development Indicators 2007," from *EdStats United Arab Emirates Country Profile*. (2005 data) Accessed at <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/TOPICS/EXTEDUCATION/EXTDATASTATISTICS/EXTEDSTATS/html>. The same (2005) data is available in the UNESCO Institute for Statistics' *Education in the United Arab Emirates Information Sheet*.
- 5 *UAE Yearbook 2007*, 245-246.



- 6 Federal National Council of the UAE, "Education and Gulf Women: The Example of the UAE," Parliamentary Discussion Paper, 2006, 2-3.
- 7 International Labour Organization, *Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KILM)*, 2005, accessed at www.ilo.int/public/english/employment/strat/kilm/download/kilm04.pdf.
- 8 The political participation indicator is the only one which focuses exclusively on the Emirati population, as they are citizens with the right to vote or be nominated for positions in the Federal National Council.
- 9 "Women in Parliaments," International Parliamentary Union Web site, www.ipu.org/wmn-e/world.htm, April 2007.
- 10 In fact, the GGGI overestimates the length of maternity leave in the UAE to be three months and not the official 45 days.

Christine Assaad is a Research Associate at the Dubai School of Government, where her research focuses on women and gender equality in the Gulf and gender and public policy institutions in the Middle East. Please send any comments to christine.assaad@dsg.ae.

The views expressed in this policy brief are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the trustees, officers and other staff of the Dubai School of Government.

© 2008 Dubai School of Government

About the Dubai School of Government

The Dubai School of Government is a research and teaching institution focusing on public policy in the Arab world. Established in 2005 under the patronage of HH Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, in cooperation with the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, the School aims to promote good governance through enhancing the region's capacity for effective public policy.

Toward this goal, the Dubai School of Government also collaborates with international institutions such as the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, the World Bank, the UNDP and the Brookings Institution in its research and training programs. In addition, the School organizes policy forums and international conferences to facilitate the exchange of ideas and promote critical debate on public policy in the Arab world.

The School is committed to the creation of knowledge, the dissemination of best practice and the training of policy makers in the Arab world. To achieve this mission, the School is developing strong capabilities to support research and teaching programs including

- applied research in public policy and management;
- master's degrees in public policy and public administration;
- executive education for senior officials and executives; and,
- knowledge forums for scholars and policy makers.

To receive a quarterly newsletter about events, publications and news at the Dubai School of Government, sign up online at www.dsg.ae.

DUBAI SCHOOL OF GOVERNMENT
Convention Tower, Level 13
P.O. Box 72229
Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Tel: 971-4-329-3290
Fax: 971-4-329-3291