International United Nations watch

Women's Rights in the Gulf

Progress, Challenges, and the Road to Equality

Report September 2025

PARTNERS

Center of Gender and Disaster

International United Nations Watch

Georgian Technical University

Charisma Works

About us

International United Nations Watch (IUNW) is an international platform aiming to support and advance human rights standards, everywhere, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status.

IUNW brings together political campaigners, unionists, and human rights activists to promote, support, and advance human rights standards. That includes both civil and political rights, as well as economic social and cultural rights.

To this end, the IUNW systematically monitors UN member states to ensure they adhere to standards of rights to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, defined by International Human Rights Law. IUNW also monitors UN organs and agencies to ensure that the principles set by the Charter of the United Nations and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are upheld and advanced at all times and to the same standard.

Mission

To ensure that human rights standards are universal, binding UN members and UN agencies to the same expectations.

Authors

Zahra Khan

PhD, is an author, entrepreneur, and gender activist. She is currently an associate at the Center of Gender and Disaster. She also co-founded WanderHER, a social enterprise empowering women in sustainable tourism. She advocates for gender equality in STEM and sustainable solutions to the climate crisis.

Karina Iskandarova

is a political scientist, researcher, and consultant specializing in anti-terrorism, human trafficking, and gendered labor rights. Her work explores how global security frameworks, migration flows, and systemic inequality shape the lived experiences of vulnerable populations, particularly women. She has conducted in-depth research on transnational trafficking networks from Eastern Europe to the Middle East, as well as on the barriers and challenges facing female entrepreneurs in the Middle East, with a forthcoming publication on women's economic rights in the region.

In her consulting work, Karina advises NGOs, development actors, and policy institutions on gender equity, risk analysis, and rights-based strategies. She is also the founder of CharismaWorks, a separate initiative focused on leadership and communication development. As a public speaker, Karina challenges audiences to confront the structural blind spots in policy and power, pushing conversations beyond surface-level inclusion toward systemic accountability.

Authors

Emilia Alaverdov

PhD in Political Science, head of International Relations Bachelor's program, associate professor, Faculty of Law and International Relations. She received her bachelor's degree in Languages and Literature, has been awarded a qualification of Philologist of English Language and Literature and Spanish Language and Literature, Ilia Chavchavadze State University, Tbilisi, Georgia. Has a master's degree in International Relations and Politics from the Diplomatic Academy of Georgia. Member of Editorial Board of 10 International Journals, the editor of 4 books, author of about 20 scientific papers and co-author of 6 books, participant of 8 Erasmus + Projects and more than 50 international scientific conferences (majority abroad), and organizer of various international scientific events. Her research interests are religion, migration, religious tourism, and European and Russian studies. She is fluent in the following languages: English, Russian, Georgian, Azerbaijani, Armenian, and Greek.

Table of Contents

Women's Rights in the Gulf: A Tectonic Shift Beneath the Sand

By The International United Nations Watch Board

In a region where tradition often casts a long and immovable shadow, the Gulf states are navigating a quiet but consequential transformation. Women—once sidelined from public life, politics, and markets—are emerging as agents of reform, beneficiaries of cautious state-led modernization, and, increasingly, as architects of their own destinies. Yet for every headline about female ministers or CEOs, there are enduring legal codes and cultural expectations that remind us just how far there is to go.

This report by the International United Nations Watch offers a rare, balanced look at the state of women's rights across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). It neither romanticizes the progress nor dismisses it. Instead, it cuts through the top-down rhetoric to examine what has truly changed—from Saudi Arabia's splashy Vision 2030 to Kuwait's democratic stumbles, and Bahrain's early forays into political inclusion. The results are uneven, often paradoxical: record-high female university enrollment paired with low labor force participation; women leading global organizations while their counterparts at home face barriers to opening a bank account without male approval.

What is clear is that state reforms, however genuine or performative, have collided with the grassroots awakening of a younger generation, increasingly assertive and tech-savvy. Social media has become both megaphone and microscope, allowing women to challenge outdated norms while exposing the superficiality of reforms that fail to reach the most marginalized—particularly migrant and rural women.

This is not a revolution; it is a recalibration. As Gulf monarchies grapple with economic diversification and global scrutiny, they are discovering that gender equity is not just a moral imperative—it is a strategic one. But until personal status laws are overhauled, guardianship systems dismantled, and civic spaces opened to dissenting voices, the promise of equality will remain aspirational.

The road ahead is long. But it is no longer a mirage.

Women's Rights in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Country-by-Country Analysis of its History, Progress & Challenges

Dr. Zahra Khan, Associate, Center of Gender and Disaster, Co-Founder, WanderHER, United Kingdom.

Progress, Pitfalls, and the Path Forward

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)—comprising Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—represents a distinct socio-political bloc in the Middle East, unified by shared religious, cultural, and historical frameworks. Across these nations, women's rights have undergone significant transformation, driven by economic modernization, state-led reforms, and varying degrees of civil society activism.

While advances have been made, the journey toward gender equality in the GCC remains uneven. This essay provides a country-by-country analysis of women's rights in the Gulf, highlighting both commonalities and national distinctions in the historical context, present challenges, and future outlook.

Women's rights are foundational not only to the achievement of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) but to the broader goal of building just and equitable societies. Empowering women enhances economic growth, improves public health, and enriches civic life. These rights are enshrined in international treaties, yet key issues—from reproductive rights to gender-based violence and climate resilience—remain insufficiently addressed in the Gulf.

Progress is evident: Women in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia gained the right to vote in the past two decades. Reforms have expanded women's freedom of movement, political participation, and access to the workforce. In many cases, women now dominate higher education statistics and boast high literacy rates. Yet deep-seated cultural expectations and patriarchal norms continue to shape daily life. Structural gender inequality, particularly in decision-making spaces, persists. Gender-responsive policies are not always matched by tangible outcomes or meaningful shifts in power dynamics.

Governments across the GCC have implemented strategies to support women, but legal systems often lag behind in protecting their rights. Some countries have moved faster than others, with varying degrees of institutional and social reform. Uniform progress remains elusive.

Legal frameworks in the region are heavily influenced by religion. Sharia law, often misunderstood outside the region, underpins much of the GCC's legal infrastructure. While some interpret Islamic law as inherently restrictive, it also contains provisions for women's protection and dignity. Crucially, the interpretation and application of Sharia are not monolithic. Cultural norms often override Islam's more egalitarian principles. Although Sharia is becoming less visible in everyday civic affairs, it still operates as a political and moral anchor.

Mainstream Western discourse frequently misrepresents the realities faced by Gulf women, portraying them as uniformly oppressed or lacking agency. Such narratives ignore the diversity and intersectionality within GCC societies, where women's experiences are shaped by social class, race, nationality, and migrant status. Not all Gulf women are marginalized to the same degree. It is inaccurate and counterproductive to apply a singular feminist framework or assume that secular Western values offer the only path to liberation.

A growing movement of Islamic feminism is challenging dominant interpretations from within, offering culturally grounded pathways to reform. These feminists reject the imposition of Western ideals and instead seek equity through faith-based reinterpretation, promoting agency while preserving religious integrity.

Since the 20th century, women's rights organizations in the region have gained traction, often emerging at the intersection of post-colonial activism and domestic reform. Civil society, together with government-led initiatives, has helped improve access to education, healthcare, and professional opportunities. Maternal mortality rates have declined, and secondary and tertiary education enrollment among women in many GCC countries rivals or exceeds that of OECD nations. Still, economic participation remains a challenge, with women making up less than 20% of the workforce in some states.

Understanding women's rights in the GCC requires more than tracking statistics—it demands a nuanced analysis of social structures, religious interpretations, legal frameworks, and cultural shifts. Change is under way, but the pace is uneven. True progress lies not just in visibility or representation but in women's genuine empowerment—where they are not only present in leadership roles but hold the authority to drive impact.

Bahrain's Balancing Act: Progress and Paradox in Women's Rights

The Kingdom of Bahrain has long stood out among Gulf nations for its relative progress on women's rights. As a small island nation shaped by a history of trade, education, and reform, Bahrain offers a case study in both the gains and the ongoing struggles of gender equality in the Arab Gulf.

The foundations were laid early. In 1928, Bahrain became the first Gulf state to open a formal school for girls—an unprecedented step that helped reframe societal perceptions and set the stage for future advancements. During the oil-fueled modernization of the 1950s to 1970s, Bahraini women began participating more visibly in civil society, though within the bounds of prevailing conservative norms.

A turning point came in 2001 with the National Action Charter, approved by referendum. The charter enshrined principles of equality and non-discrimination and paved the way for sweeping constitutional reforms. In 2002, Bahrain became the first GCC country to grant women full political rights, including the right to vote and stand in elections.

Since then, women have run for parliamentary and municipal office, though societal conservatism, tribal voting dynamics, and limited campaign financing have hampered their electoral success. In response, the state has actively appointed women to high-ranking roles. Bahraini women now serve as ministers, ambassadors, judges, and members of the Shura Council (the upper house of parliament), ensuring their presence in national policymaking.

The 2001 establishment of the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) further institutionalized gender reform. Chaired by Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, the SCW advises the government on gender policy, monitors implementation, and offers training and advocacy programs to promote women's empowerment.

Education remains a cornerstone of Bahrain's gender progress. Since the launch of girls' schooling in 1928, women have achieved high literacy and educational attainment. Following independence in 1971, access to education expanded rapidly. Today, Bahraini women outperform men in university enrolment and are especially prominent in fields such as medicine, science, and education.

These gains have translated into growing workforce participation, particularly in the public sector. Women are highly visible in healthcare, education, government administration, and increasingly in finance and entrepreneurship. Supportive policies—such as maternity leave and training programs—have helped, though challenges persist in wage equity, leadership representation, and work-life balance.

A major sticking point lies in the legal domain. Bahrain operates a dual family law system: Sunni Muslims follow a codified law enacted in 2009, while Shi'a Muslims are subject to uncodified religious rulings. This sect-based legal disparity means women's rights in matters like marriage, divorce, and custody vary depending on religious affiliation. Sunni women benefit from clearer, state-administered legal pathways, while Shi'a women face inconsistent and often less favorable outcomes.

Calls for a unified personal status law have grown louder but face resistance rooted in religious sensitivities and political caution. Although Bahrain's constitution prohibits discrimination, enforcement remains patchy. Legal gaps persist in areas such as guardianship, inheritance, and protection from domestic violence. A 2015 domestic violence law marked a milestone, but implementation has been uneven, with many women still struggling to access justice.

Despite the advances, structural and cultural barriers continue to impede full gender parity. Women's representation in elected office remains low. Legal inequalities under personal status laws persist, and a comprehensive framework guaranteeing equal rights for all women—regardless of sect—remains elusive. Meanwhile, social expectations, particularly in conservative or rural communities, continue to restrict women's autonomy.

Bahrain's experience illustrates both the potential and the limitations of state-led gender reform in the Gulf. While institutional support and political will have yielded progress, deep-rooted cultural and legal complexities still stand in the way of substantive, inclusive equality.

Kuwait's Women: Educated, empowered—Yet Constrained

Among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, Kuwait is notable for its relatively open civil society, history of political activism, and slow but steady gains in women's rights. Though Kuwaiti women have achieved high levels of education and growing economic participation, progress toward full gender equality remains hindered by conservative social norms, legal constraints, and underrepresentation in politics.

Kuwaiti women have long contributed to national development, particularly after the discovery of oil in the mid-20th century. In 1959, the government introduced public education for girls, and by the 1970s, women were entering professional fields and academia in growing numbers. Yet despite these advances, women were excluded from the political sphere for decades. After sustained pressure from activists, women finally secured the right to vote and run for office in 2005—much later than their gains in education and employment would suggest.

This milestone marked a turning point. In 2009, four women were elected to the National Assembly—an unprecedented achievement in the GCC. But progress since has faltered. No women were elected in 2013 or 2016, and female representation remains sparse. The absence of political parties, entrenched tribal loyalties, and societal conservatism have limited women's electoral success. Still, female politicians, academics, and civil society leaders continue to push for reform and broader inclusion.

Education stands out as a success story. Kuwaiti women are highly educated, often outnumbering men in university enrollment and dominating in fields such as medicine, education, and law. Nearly half of public sector employees are women, and female participation in managerial roles is rising. However, the private sector presents more challenges, where gender biases and unequal advancement persist. Legal protections for working mothers, wage equity, and workplace safety remain underdeveloped.

The legal system continues to pose significant barriers. Kuwait's family law is based on Islamic jurisprudence and maintains discriminatory provisions in matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Women often need male guardian approval for personal decisions, and domestic violence protections are weak. A 2020 law criminalizing domestic abuse was a step forward, but implementation is inconsistent, and access to shelters and legal support remains limited.

Social change is brewing, driven by a new generation of women challenging gender norms. Activists and NGOs have used social media to highlight issues such as sexual harassment, citizenship inequality—Kuwaiti women cannot pass nationality to their children as easily as men—and broader legal discrimination. These movements have sparked national debate, although not without pushback from conservative factions.

The path forward will require both legal and cultural shifts. While education and public sector employment have empowered many women, a lack of comprehensive legal reform continues to hinder progress. Addressing family law disparities, ensuring anti-discrimination protections, and enabling more robust political participation would mark meaningful advances.

Kuwaiti women have demonstrated resilience, agency, and leadership. As youth-led activism grows and international norms exert greater influence, the momentum for gender equality in Kuwait is unlikely to stall. Whether the state translates that momentum into durable legal and institutional change remains the central question.

Oman's Slow but Steady March Toward Women's Empowerment

The Sultanate of Oman, long known for its cautious but deliberate path to modernization, has made notable—if measured—progress on women's rights. Anchored in a deeply traditional society, Oman's gender reforms have been largely driven from the top, reflecting a state-led vision of inclusion rather than bottom-up activism. While Omani women have gained ground in education, employment, and government appointments, key legal and cultural barriers continue to limit full equality.

The modern trajectory of women's rights in Oman began in earnest under the late Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who came to power in 1970 and ushered in a national renaissance. His approach to development placed women within the broader framework of economic modernization. By the 1980s, Omani women were accessing education, healthcare, and employment, albeit within a socially conservative context that emphasized modesty and family roles.

Education served as the cornerstone of this transformation. Once facing illiteracy rates above 80%, Omani women have seen a dramatic reversal. By the early 2000s, women accounted for nearly half of all university students, and they

became increasingly visible in fields such as science, technology, and medicine. Today, female students often outperform their male peers at nearly every academic level.

Politically, Oman broke ground in 2004 by becoming the first GCC country to appoint a female minister—Sheikha Aisha bint Khalfan—to a cabinet post. Women have had the right to vote and run for office since 1994, but electoral success has been modest. The partially elected Shura Council has rarely included more than one or two female members per term. Still, women have been appointed to senior positions, including ambassadorships, undersecretary roles, and seats on the State Council (Majlis al-Dawla).

These developments reflect Oman's top-down model of reform. Most gender advancements have come through royal decrees and state planning—not through grassroots pressure or independent feminist movements. This approach has helped avoid political backlash but has also limited the emergence of civil society organizations capable of sustaining and deepening reform.

In the workforce, Omani women have made steady gains, especially in the public sector, where state policies offer comparatively favorable maternity benefits and job security. Women are well represented in health, education, and public administration. A growing cohort of female entrepreneurs is also emerging, supported by state-backed business incubators. Still, women face persistent challenges in the private sector, including wage gaps, occupational segregation, and workplace discrimination.

Legally, Oman's framework remains a patchwork of civil and Islamic law, producing uneven protections. Women can own property, work, and travel, but the 1997 Personal Status Law grants broad authority to male guardians in matters of marriage, divorce, and child custody. Inheritance laws and guardianship norms continue to favor men, and Oman lacks a specific law criminalizing domestic violence—although general provisions in the penal code can be applied.

Reporting abuse is fraught with stigma, and institutional support remains limited. Nevertheless, the rise of social media and global awareness of women's rights have prompted more public conversations around gender-based violence, legal reform, and workplace equity. Women are increasingly vocal, even if formal advocacy channels remain restricted.

Oman's long-term development blueprint, Vision 2040, lists women's empowerment as a strategic goal. The plan calls for greater female leadership, economic diversification, and stronger legal protections. Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, who assumed power in 2020, has reaffirmed this agenda by emphasizing human capital development and expanding opportunities in sectors such as technology, tourism, and sustainability.

Yet meaningful change will require more than policy declarations. Legal reforms—particularly in family law and anti-discrimination protections—are necessary to ensure equal rights. Cultural expectations, especially in rural areas, continue to restrict women's autonomy. Expanding political participation and fostering civic engagement will be vital to sustaining momentum.

Oman's progress on women's rights reflects a careful balancing act between tradition and reform. Education and public sector inclusion have empowered many women, but legal inconsistencies and conservative norms remain obstacles. As Vision 2040 unfolds, the challenge will be to turn formal gains into structural equality—making gender inclusion a foundation, not just a feature, of Oman's development strategy.

Progress Within Tradition: The Evolving Role of Women in Qatar

Qatar, one of the world's richest nations per capita, has undergone a rapid transformation fueled by oil and gas wealth, catapulting itself onto the global stage through investments in infrastructure, education, and diplomacy. As the country redefines its identity amid globalization, the role of women has evolved markedly. From education and employment to limited political participation, Qatari women have gained visibility and agency. Still, legal and cultural constraints remain, revealing a country that is modernizing quickly—but selectively.

In the mid-20th century, before oil wealth reconfigured its economy, Qatar was a tribal society governed by conservative Islamic traditions. Gender roles were sharply defined: men worked in fishing and pearling; women ran households. The discovery of oil set the stage for sweeping modernization—including the establishment of the first girls' school in the 1950s, a symbolic and practical milestone for gender inclusion.

Since then, education has been Qatar's most successful vehicle for empowering women. Today, Qatari women not only enjoy equal access to education but consistently outperform men in higher education enrollment. Qatar University and branch campuses of elite international institutions at Education City—an initiative spearheaded by the Qatar Foundation—have positioned women at the center of the country's knowledge economy.

This academic progress has translated into a growing, if uneven, presence in the workforce. Women are increasingly visible in healthcare, education, finance, and public administration. The government has actively encouraged female employment, particularly in the public sector, where flexible hours and generous benefits make jobs especially appealing to women. Still, female labor force participation—hovering around 37%—lags behind that of men, and workplace advancement remains hampered by enduring gender norms and societal expectations.

Qatar has been a regional pioneer in some aspects of political inclusion. In 1999, it became one of the first Gulf states to grant women the right to vote and run in municipal elections. Since then, women have held roles on the Central Municipal Council and served as ministers, ambassadors, and judges. In 2017, four women were appointed to the Shura Council, the country's legislative advisory body.

However, structural limitations curb the impact of these milestones. The Shura Council remains largely appointed by the Emir, and the broader political system limits public participation—male or female. As a result, women's influence in policymaking remains mostly symbolic rather than substantive.

Qatar's Constitution guarantees equality before the law, and women enjoy considerable freedoms in public life. But in practice, family law—based on Islamic jurisprudence—continues to circumscribe women's rights. Under Law No. 22 of 2006, women require male guardian approval to marry, face more hurdles than men in divorce and child custody, and receive smaller inheritance shares. These provisions reflect the enduring tension between legal equality and cultural tradition.

One of the most pressing issues is the lack of a dedicated domestic violence law. While the state has established support services, including the Qatar Foundation for Protection and Social Rehabilitation, legal protections remain fragmented. Social stigma discourages reporting of abuse, and mechanisms for redress are limited. The government's reluctance to legislate more comprehensively reflects

a broader balancing act between progressive optics and conservative norms. Another contentious area is nationality law. Qatari women cannot pass citizenship to their children or foreign spouses, unlike their male counterparts—a policy that has drawn criticism for its impact on thousands of families. Advocates have called for reform, but the issue remains politically sensitive. Qatar's approach to women's rights is shaped by a desire to preserve cultural authenticity while embracing selective modernity. Women's empowerment is often framed in terms of complementarity rather than equality, reinforcing traditional family roles even as women rise in education and professional life.

Civil society remains tightly regulated, and independent women's rights organizations are scarce. Advocacy typically operates within government-sanctioned bodies such as the Qatar Foundation or through academic platforms. Nonetheless, a new generation of women—activists, scholars, and social media voices—is beginning to challenge norms and push boundaries, often subtly but with increasing visibility.

Qatar's National Vision 2030 lays out an ambitious agenda centered on human development, innovation, and gender inclusion. Women are increasingly visible in leadership positions at elite institutions and on global stages—from diplomacy to technology and entrepreneurship. The country's high-profile hosting of international forums has showcased female professionals and underscored the government's desire to project a forward-looking image.

The prospects for gender equality in Qatar rest with its educated youth, committed leadership in elite circles, and evolving global partnerships. If accompanied by legal and institutional reform, these forces could transform Qatar's gains from symbolic milestones into systemic progress. For now, the country offers a complex case study in how tradition and modernity collide—and occasionally converge—in the Gulf.

Rights from Above: How Reform Replaced Representation in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, long considered one of the most restrictive countries for women, has undergone a series of headline-grabbing reforms over the past decade. Under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and his sweeping Vision 2030 initiative, the Kingdom has made women's empowerment a centerpiece of its modernization narrative. While the reforms have captured global attention—from allowing

women to drive to easing restrictions on mobility—they mask deeper structural inequities that remain largely untouched. Despite improvements in access to education, employment, and public life, Saudi Arabia's approach to gender reform is top-down, tightly managed, and constrained by enduring patriarchal norms.

Historically, Saudi Arabia enforced one of the world's most draconian gender systems, shaped by an ultraconservative interpretation of Islamic law known as Wahhabism. Women were excluded from most aspects of public life. They needed male permission to travel, marry, or even undergo some medical procedures. Girls' education only began in the 1960s, and it wasn't until decades later that women began to slowly gain access to public and professional spheres.

Meaningful change did not begin until the early 2000s, when women gained the right to hold ID cards and enter select professions. The appointment of women to the Shura Council in 2013 signaled a symbolic opening, but the real turning point came in the late 2010s with Vision 2030. Spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the reform plan aims to diversify the oil-dependent economy and modernize Saudi society. Women were positioned as both symbols and instruments of this modernization.

Some of the most visible reforms have included lifting the ban on women driving in 2018, easing male guardianship rules for travel and business, and allowing women to attend sports events. Women can now open businesses without male approval and are visible in new professional roles, from law to aviation. Public rhetoric around women's inclusion has shifted, and government-backed initiatives promote female entrepreneurship and workplace integration.
Yet these reforms are accompanied by caveats. Legal and structural barriers continue to limit women's autonomy:

- ·Guardianship Laws: While travel restrictions have eased, male guardianship remains embedded in legal practice, particularly in personal status cases involving marriage, divorce, and child custody.

- ·Personal Status Law: Introduced in 2022, the law codifies certain rights for women but ultimately preserves male dominance in family affairs. It institutionalizes gender hierarchies rather than dismantling them.

- ·Political Repression: Women who have demanded reforms—including the now-legal right to drive—have been imprisoned, tortured, and silenced.

Loujain al-Hathloul, a prominent activist, was jailed for nearly three years. The state has sought to present reforms as gifts from the monarchy, while punishing those who demand change from below.

Token Political Inclusion: Women were allowed to vote and run in municipal elections in 2015, but meaningful political participation remains elusive. The Shura Council, though it includes women, is unelected and advisory in nature.
The uneven application of reforms reveals a deep urban-rural divide. Women in Riyadh and Jeddah, particularly those with wealth or global exposure, have benefited most. In more conservative or rural regions, traditional norms continue to dominate, and many reforms have yet to reach everyday life. Migrant women, especially domestic workers, remain outside the purview of these changes entirely. They continue to suffer under the kafala system, with little legal recourse or protection.

The reform agenda also reflects a tightly controlled strategy: gender equality is framed within religious bounds to avoid upsetting the clerical establishment. Independent feminist movements and NGOs remain banned or heavily restricted, making sustained, grassroots advocacy nearly impossible. The state dictates the terms of change, stifling public discourse and portraying progress as the result of royal benevolence, not civic struggle.

While younger generations are more open to gender equality, and cultural norms are evolving, societal conservatism remains deeply rooted. Dress codes, though technically relaxed, continue to be enforced through social pressure. Gender segregation is still common in many spaces, and the absence of open civic debate limits the scope for real transformation.

Saudi Arabia's reforms have garnered international praise and boosted the Kingdom's image. But beneath the surface, the changes remain partial and uneven. Without legal overhaul, independent institutions, and genuine political participation, the promise of gender equality will remain more about optics than reality.

Front-Row Seats, Back-Stage Limits: Gender Equality in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) often stands as a beacon of modernization in the Gulf, with women's rights prominently woven into the state's narrative of progress. Since its founding in 1971, the UAE has swiftly built its economy and infrastructure, while opening doors for women in education, employment, and public life. From the outset, leadership—especially the nation's founding father, Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan—emphasized women's role in national development. Early investments in female education have borne fruit: today, Emirati women outnumber men in higher education and excel in professions such as law, medicine, and engineering.

This commitment to women's empowerment is visible in both policy and public messaging. The 2015 establishment of the Gender Balance Council aimed to elevate female representation across government and the economy. A 2019 presidential decree mandated gender parity in the Federal National Council, with women now making up half of this advisory body—one of the highest such ratios globally. Women hold ministerial posts, serve as ambassadors, lead business councils, and even direct space exploration programs. Equal pay laws, entrepreneurship initiatives, and revisions to family and labor laws align with the UAE's broader goals of innovation and economic diversification, helping to cement its image as a forward-looking, globally competitive state.

Yet beneath these advances lies a carefully curated landscape. The UAE's reforms remain top-down, unfolding within a tightly managed environment that constrains independent civil society, political dissent, and feminist activism. State-backed campaigns celebrate female leadership and entrepreneurship, but space for autonomous organization or critical dialogue about lingering structural inequalities is limited. Family law, grounded in Sharia principles, continues to vest men with authority over marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance. Although recent reforms have improved women's access to justice, personal status laws still uphold male guardianship in key areas and reinforce patriarchal norms within the home. The 2020 updates to laws on cohabitation, alcohol, and honor crimes may signal a more progressive veneer, but they fall short of a substantive overhaul of the gendered legal framework.

An intersectional view reveals uneven distribution of these benefits. Emirati women in urban centers and from privileged backgrounds disproportionately gain from empowerment programs—accessing scholarships, leadership roles, and international platforms. By contrast, working-class women from smaller emirates

or conservative families often face tighter restrictions and fewer opportunities. More strikingly, migrant women—dominating sectors such as domestic work and low-wage labor—remain largely excluded from gender equality protections. Bound by the kafala sponsorship system, these women's legal residency depends on employers, exposing them to exploitation, abuse, and limited recourse. This reality underscores a sharp racial and class divide within the UAE's gender landscape.

The state's focus on projecting a modern image often instrumentalizes women's empowerment as a branding exercise rather than a rights-driven agenda. While high-profile female appointments are touted as markers of progress, the absence of genuine mechanisms for grassroots policymaking signals a divide between appearance and reality. Restrictions on freedom of expression and association marginalize critical voices—particularly those advocating on issues like gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and labor protections. Women's inclusion in national development remains conditional, aligned chiefly with state economic priorities rather than rooted in broad-based agency.

That said, the progress made cannot be dismissed. Emirati women enjoy unprecedented access to education, employment, and public life. Legal reforms and initiatives have boosted their visibility and participation, and steps have been taken to address workplace discrimination and harassment. Still, genuine gender equality requires more than symbolic appointments and surface-level legal tweaks. It calls for a fundamental restructuring of family law, robust protections for migrant workers, expanded civic space, and inclusive policymaking that embraces women across all social strata. Until such measures are realized, the UAE's gender reform model will remain partial—progressive in presentation, selective in practice.ed as a model of modernisation in the Gulf region, and women's rights have played a prominent role in its state-led narrative of progress.

However, a closer and more critical examination reveals that these reforms are largely top-down and highly curated. Women's rights in the UAE are promoted within a tightly controlled environment that limits independent civil society, political dissent, and feminist activism. Although state-backed campaigns celebrate women's leadership and entrepreneurial success, there is little space for women to organise autonomously or critique the structural inequalities that remain embedded in the legal system. Family law, based on Sharia principles, continues to grant men authority in matters such as marriage, divorce, guardianship, and inheritance. While reforms have been made to improve women's access to justice, personal status laws still allow for male guardianship in certain areas and uphold patriarchal norms within the domestic sphere. In 2020,

the UAE announced changes to laws on cohabitation, alcohol, and honour crimes in an effort to appear more progressive, yet these legal updates do not amount to a comprehensive overhaul of the gendered legal hierarchy.

An intersectional analysis reveals that the benefits of reform are unevenly distributed. Emirati women from urban centres and privileged socio-economic backgrounds are the primary beneficiaries of state-led empowerment programmes. They are more likely to receive government scholarships, occupy leadership roles, and be showcased in international forums. In contrast, working-class women, particularly those from smaller emirates or conservative families, may face greater restrictions and have limited access to the networks and resources that support empowerment. More significantly, the vast population of migrant women in the UAE—especially domestic workers and low-wage labourers from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa—remains outside the protective scope of most gender equality laws. These women are regulated under the kafala (sponsorship) system, which ties their legal residency to their employers and leaves them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and limited legal recourse. Their experiences highlight a stark racial and class-based divide within the UAE's gender landscape.

Furthermore, the state's emphasis on projecting a modern image often instrumentalises women's empowerment as a tool for international branding, rather than as a rights-based objective. High-profile appointments of women to government and diplomatic roles are showcased as evidence of progress, but the lack of mechanisms for women to participate in policymaking from the ground up suggests a gap between image and substance. The absence of freedom of expression and association means that critical voices—especially those raising concerns about gender-based violence, reproductive rights, or labour rights—are marginalised. Women are included in national development strategies insofar as they align with state priorities and contribute to economic goals, but their agency in shaping the direction of reform is constrained.

Despite these limitations, it would be inaccurate to dismiss the progress made. Women in the UAE today enjoy greater access to education, employment, and public life than ever before. Legal reforms and strategic initiatives have improved their visibility and participation, and the government has taken steps to address issues like workplace discrimination and harassment. However, true gender equality requires more than high-profile appointments and surface-level legal changes. It demands structural reform of family law, protection for migrant workers, greater freedom of expression, and the inclusion of women from all

backgrounds in shaping national policy. The empowerment of women must be rooted in rights, not public relations. Until the UAE expands space for civic engagement and addresses the intersectional dimensions of inequality, its model of gender reform will remain limited in scope and depth—progressive in appearance, yet selectively applied.

Progress on the Horizon, but Deep Challenges Remain

Across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the status of women's rights has witnessed notable shifts over the past decade. Yet these changes are uneven—varying not only in pace but in depth and substance. Countries such as Oman and Qatar are moving forward with ambitious reforms, while Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) adopt more cautious, tightly managed approaches. Despite high-profile announcements and international accolades, persistent patriarchal laws, limited legal protections, and constrained civic space continue to impede genuine progress. Civil society organizations working on women's issues face funding shortages, regulatory hurdles, and political sensitivities, underscoring that legal reform alone cannot guarantee sustainable change without cultural transformation.

In Saudi Arabia, recent reforms—part of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030—have lifted some long-standing restrictions: women can drive, travel abroad without male guardian approval, and enter new professional fields. However, these measures remain carefully calibrated within existing patriarchal frameworks. Guardianship laws still govern key aspects of women's lives, including marriage, divorce, and child custody. Political dissent and activism for women's rights are met with repression; prominent activists have been jailed and silenced. Meanwhile, the reforms are unevenly experienced—urban, affluent women benefit the most, while those in rural areas and migrant domestic workers remain vulnerable under exploitative systems like kafala. The state frames women's empowerment as a top-down gift from the monarchy, rather than a product of civic struggle, limiting genuine grassroots participation and open public discourse.

The UAE has similarly positioned itself as a regional beacon of modernization and women's empowerment. The country boasts high female participation in education and government bodies, including a mandated 50 percent female representation in the Federal National Council. Women hold ministerial and diplomatic posts and lead initiatives in business and innovation. Yet this progress masks structural limitations. The UAE's legal framework—rooted in Sharia—

continues to grant men significant authority in family law, preserving male guardianship in key areas. The state's promotion of women's rights is tightly controlled, leaving little room for independent feminist activism or critical voices on gender-based violence and labor rights. Migrant women, who comprise a large segment of the workforce, remain largely excluded from protections, trapped in the kafala system and vulnerable to abuse.

Across the GCC, ambitious state modernization agendas—Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, the UAE's Vision 2021 and 2050, Qatar National Vision 2030, and parallel strategies in Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain—signal a concerted push to advance gender equality as a key economic and developmental priority. These initiatives recognize women as crucial contributors to national growth and global competitiveness. However, their implementation often prioritizes economic inclusion and international image-building over comprehensive social and legal reform. Women's empowerment is packaged as a pillar of national branding, with high-profile appointments and campaigns spotlighting female success stories, while structural inequalities remain largely intact.

Amid these dynamics, a promising force for change is emerging within the religious and intellectual sphere. Female Muslim scholars are challenging patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts from within the tradition, arguing that many restrictions attributed to Islam derive instead from male-dominated historical readings and sociocultural customs. By reclaiming interpretive authority, these scholars promote a vision of Islam that affirms justice, equity, and dignity for women —asserting that gender equality is consistent with authentic Islamic values rather than a Western imposition.

Education and digital activism provide additional grounds for hope. Younger generations across the Gulf are increasingly open to gender equality, leveraging social media to raise awareness and organize discreetly in restrictive environments. Yet, the broader societal embrace of these ideals remains tentative, with conservative social norms, gender segregation, and limited freedom of expression continuing to circumscribe women's agency.

Ultimately, the trajectory of women's rights in the GCC will depend on the extent to which Vision 2030 and similar plans move beyond surface-level reforms to tackle entrenched legal and cultural barriers. True gender equality demands structural overhaul—reforming family law, protecting migrant workers, expanding civic space, and ensuring women from all backgrounds can actively shape policymaking. Until the region commits to inclusive, rights-based approaches

rather than symbolic gestures, its models of gender reform risk remaining progressive in appearance but selective in application.

While the Gulf's women have made undeniable strides, their full emancipation awaits a more comprehensive reckoning with the region's patriarchal legacies.

Women's Rights in the Middle East: Progress, Challenges, and the Road to Equality

(On the Example of the Islamic Republic of Iran)

Professor Emilia Alaverdov, Head of International Relations Bachelor's program, Faculty of Law and International Relations, Georgian Technical University.

Abstract

The article deals with the problem of creating equal conditions for self-realization for the population of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which has become acute after the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Mainly based on the method of observation, it highlights that the problem of gender equality is an integral part of human rights, and claims that achieving gender equality is a condition for the progressive development of human society, ensuring peace and harmonious development of the individual.The work examines the results of the revolution and proves that such deplorable conditions, in the field of human rights, were created by the hands of women themselves. Then, after four decades of such a harsh policy toward human rights awakened the fighting spirit in women was awakened. Even those who followed the religion and put up with the situation agreed that a change in public consciousness was necessary for women's basic rights to be protected, which led to a new wave of women's activism.

Keywords

Human Rights, Women's Equality, Revolution, Islamization, Politics

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country where, even in the 21st century, the issues of democracy, human rights, and especially women's rights, remain acute. Women have always made up the largest part of society, but they have always been in the minority, experiencing constant discrimination in many countries and always standing at the lowest social level. In the modern world, the protection of human rights is a rather topical issue, and no one is surprised by the presence of a female politician in the developed world. However, at the same time, the situation is radically different on the other side of the world. Discrimination against women is still ongoing in Islamic countries (Botello 2024). It is interesting to see how the Islamic religion and traditions influence the role of women in political life. In today's world, democratic countries boast of equal rights, but Islamists admit that they are far from democracy, that their basic behaviors and rights are based on their religion and tradition, where the role of women is precisely defined - a woman is born for the family, she is not perceived as a member of society. Such a decline in the role of women became the reason for further manifestations and protests. It was this process that gave rise to Islamist feminism, which was able to significantly weaken certain dogmas and religious norms.

We have to admit that before the Islamic Revolution, Iran was a completely different country than it is today. It was a Western-oriented country with cultural freedom. It may sound unbelievable that women back then followed modern fashion trends, could wear dresses as well as pants, and even showed skin under their clothes.

Theoretical and Methodological Background

Nowadays, it is clear that socio-philosophical and political concepts largely prepared the conception and development of feminist and Islamic theories. In this regard, first of all, it is worth highlighting Khomeini's theory, known as the basis of Islamic governance, that combines the messianic doctrine of Shiism and the classical theory of the inseparability of spiritual and secular power in Islam, for instance, theocracy. During the struggle against the Shah's regime, Khomeini relied on the concept of the illegitimacy of secular power, declaring that the Shah's rule was "not sanctioned" from above, and therefore illegal. This interpretation of Shiite dogma received broad support from the population, which, combined with the deteriorating social and economic situation in the country, as well as the discrediting of the Shahanshah regime, led to the victory of

the Islamic revolution (Naraghi 2015).

Another notable theory of the topic is the Liberal-reformist direction, which mainly continued the ideas developed during the Age of Enlightenment and later by Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill. Feminists saw the cause of women's inequality in the lack of certain civil and legal rights, therefore, they considered socio-economic and legal reforms as a means of solving this problem (Wollstonecraft 2016).

A certain impact on the paper has the socialist movement, which synthesized Marxist and feminist views. The main reasons for discrimination against women were considered to be private property and the class structure of society. Such ideas were expressed as early as the 19th century by F. Engels in his work "The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State". However, unlike F. Engels, who considered the existence of a special women's movement separate from the proletarian one inadmissible, socialist feminists insisted on the separation of women's problems from class and general social problems (Kiknadze & Donadze 2006).

According to the ideas, the most prominent and influential was the radical movement, which explored the general, deep-rooted foundations of women's oppression. According to the followers of this trend, such a system is patriarchy - a system of male domination over women. The feminist movement of that period achieved many successes (Gordon & Kinna 2019). The effectiveness of the movement is evidenced by the amazing changes in public consciousness and the real shifts in the political structures of Western countries: the increase in the representation of women in the highest echelons of government (including parliaments, governments, and leading party bodies) and the field of production management.

Nowadays, there are three main directions in the Islamic movement. The first direction is occupied by religious figures who take part in non-political actions and believe that the main sphere of their activity is education, culture, and social life, since the religious upbringing of youth, especially girls, ensures the Islamic future of the country. The second direction is the so-called "Reformers", whose number is quite large, are supporters of political actions and place the reform of the state and society at the center of their political activity. The third group includes radical Islamists who are ready to come to power by any means (political or armed). It was this group that paralyzed the Algerian state and society in 1995. Their extremism creates quite difficult barriers to solving the "women's issue" (Mohajan 2022).

The chapter is based on the fundamental scientific works of scientists and specialists in the field of Islamic studies and gender policy.

Islamic Revolution and Its Results

The 1979 Islamic Revolution overthrew the Shah's rule in Iran and ushered in a new era in the history of both the Islamic Republic and the women's movement and Iranian feminism. During the Islamic Revolution, women were one of the most active forces. They fought selflessly against the Shah's regime, and Khomeini, in turn, promised that Islam could offer women much more than Western feminism. Women declared themselves revolutionaries (Majid 2007). During the first decade of the 1980s, women were banned from working in many areas in the Islamic Republic of Iran. For example, in the judiciary. The family laws passed by the Shah were abolished. In return, the new government drafted a Sharia-based family code that severely hindered and stalled women's emancipation. Their rights in education, work, and public life were restricted. They needed permission from the head of the family or their spouse to start a job, travel, or obtain a passport. Girls were not able to study at certain faculties (Keddie 2006). Gender-segregated schools were established. Due to such a policy, many women were forced to go to the private sector. Female athletes found themselves in a difficult situation. Such harsh policies in the first decade after the revolution once again awakened the fighting spirit among women. Even religious women concluded that a change in public consciousness was necessary if at least women's basic rights were to be protected. A new wave of women's activism began in the 1980s, and it was during this period that the concept of Islamic feminism emerged. Islamist women also became active. Khomeini himself facilitated this process, trying to replace pro-Shah feminists with Islamist women's organizations that would prevent the political formation of forces supporting the old regime and would also try to propagate Islam. The Women's Society of the Islamic Revolution was established, headed by Ayatollah Khomeini's daughter, Zahra Mostafavi Khomeini. The main goal of this organization was to bring Iranian women into communion with authentic Islam. She claimed that Islam did not oppress women in any way, and that they could be equal to men, but only within the limits of their capabilities (Moghaddam 2024).

The Iran-Iraq war opened the way for women to become active in other fields. They went to the battlefield, cared for the wounded, and brought medicine and food to the soldiers. The conscription of men into the war created jobs for women,

mainly in the health and education sectors. It was during this war that women demanded amendments to the Family Code regarding child custody, so that they too could obtain custody of their children. In 1985, at the request of Khomeini, the Majlis abolished the article that did not allow women to obtain custody of children in the event of widowhood. Women gradually emerged in the economy and politics. In particular, in the second convocation of the Majlis (1984-88), 4 women were elected, and during Khatami's presidency, 10.

After Khomeini's death (1989), during Rafsanjani's presidency (1989-1997), reforms were carried out, and certain areas were liberalized. Women became even more active. Protests against discrimination against women were already actively expressed in the press. Articles were published that reflected their difficult situation in families (Keddie 2000).

An even more active phase of the women's movement was the presidency of Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005). The vote of women was decisive in his victory. During Khatami's presidency, important measures were taken, changes were made in the field of human rights protection, and family legislation. The marriage age of girls was increased from 9 to 13 years. During Khatami's time, the first woman was elected - Masoumeh Ebtekar - to the position of Vice President. Also, a woman was appointed as an advisor on women's issues (Zahra Shojai). They were the first women to hold such a high-ranking position since the Islamic Revolution.

Many professions are forbidden to them, they are deprived of the opportunity for promotion at work. They do not even enjoy equal rights in court. The testimony of one man is equal to the testimony of two women. All kinds of violence against women's rights are reinforced by the theological legislators in Iran. Thus, the girls do not get even a secondary education (Higgins 1985).

The Islamic Revolution in Iran has left a deep mark on the social and political aspects not only of Iran but also of the entire Muslim world. I think that a religious authoritarian regime has a destructive effect and does the opposite - it makes people lose faith. It accustoms them to lies, because with so many prohibitions, a person can't survive physically and even more so psychologically, without the pleasures of life that their ideology prohibits. Accordingly, they have to live in a lie, as if they obey the rules. The Revolution in Iran led to the establishment of the Islamic Republic and brought about fundamental changes in the country's domestic and foreign policies. As a result of the Islamic Revolution, the country's political form of government changed - the secular monarchical form of government was replaced by a theocratic Islamic Republic. The country fell into

de facto international isolation. Large Western firms left Iran one after another, and diplomatic missions and embassies were closed at the same time.

Islamization Brought by the Hands of Women

The total Islamization of society implied strict gender segregation, numerous prohibitions and restrictions, the violation of which was severely punished by law. For some particularly serious crimes, the highest punishment was provided - the death penalty. In particular, the practice of stoning people found guilty of adultery was reintroduced. This innovation attracted the attention of the UN Human Rights Commission: the issue of the infringement of women's rights in Iran was discussed at the international level. The legislation also affected the regulation of women's rights, because of which Iranian women lost their hard-won freedoms. The new government repealed the laws introduced by the Shah, including the Family Law of 1967, according to which women were granted the right to divorce. In 1980, the authorities restored the institutions of temporary and polygamous marriages, which infringed on the rights and lowered the status of women (Dunaeva 2012). Educated women, who felt their political power, organized protests. The goal of such demonstrations was not to expand rights, but to preserve the status they had achieved. Thus, on March 8, 1979, Iranian women staged a five-day demonstration, and in December of the same year, they held a Conference of Women's Unity. Numerous protests did not prevent Ayatollah Khomeini from issuing a decree to abolish all laws introduced by the Shah. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) became a new test for the people and had severe economic consequences for the country (Dunaeva 2019). Iranian women used this period of crisis as an opportunity to realize their political ambitions. As a result, women were allowed to undergo military training in the elite military-political formation - the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. A women's society appeared under the Islamic Republic Party, and four women became deputies of the Majlis of the Islamic Council. Since the 1990s, we can talk about a significant expansion of political freedoms for Iranian women - during this period, laws were adopted that ensured their civil and political rights. However, it should be noted that Iran has not acceded to the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (Gordon & Kinna 2019). In addition to the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the rights and freedoms of women are regulated by the Civil Code, the ideological basis of which is the laws of Sharia, which form the religious conscience and moral values of Muslims. In 2005, the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution adopted the “Charter of the Rights and

Duties of Women in the Islamic Regime," developed based on the Constitution and the philosophical views of the leader of the Islamic Revolution, Imam Khomeini. The main provisions of this document formed the basis of the Law on the Rights and Duties of Women, approved by the Majlis in 2006. This law requires the Social and Cultural Council of Women to assess the situation of women in the country every six months and submit a report on the study to the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution (Berezina 2022). After much debate and revision, a new Family Law was adopted in 2012. The above laws regulate women's participation in the political, economic, social, and financial life of the country, as well as family relations. Given the growing presence of women in the civil-political field, the legislation is being revised to expand and supplement the relevant legal framework regulating this area. Insufficiently developed legal norms for ensuring women's socio-political rights often cause disputes and protests. In Iran, there has been a debate about women's greater involvement in the state apparatus, access to work in certain positions, and the need to observe the hijab as a dress code (Dunaeva 2019).

The world community has been paying great attention to the issue of women's status in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). Efforts are being made to improve those laws and regulations that do not sufficiently take into account the need to respect women's rights. According to the Constitution of Iran, women have received equal rights with men, considering the observance of Islamic norms and the guarantee of favorable conditions for the development of the individual. In 2005, the Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution adopted the Charter of the Rights and Duties of Women under the Islamic Regime, the main provisions of which were included in the Law on the Rights and Duties of Women, approved by the country's parliament in 2006 (Inozemtseva 2010). These documents regulate in detail issues related to women's rights in the family, socio-economic, and financial spheres. Although Iran has not yet acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, it agrees with its content in most cases, with some reservations.

Ayatollah Khomeini, who came to power, proclaimed that from then on, the ideal woman would be considered Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, due to her spiritual qualities: fear of God, modesty, devotion, and fidelity to her husband. Total Islamization of society implied strict gender segregation, numerous prohibitions and restrictions, the violation of which was severely punished by law. For some particularly serious crimes, the highest measure of punishment was provided - the death penalty. In particular, the practice of stoning people found guilty of adultery was reintroduced. This innovation

attracted the attention of the UN Human Rights Commission: the issue of infringement of women's rights in Iran was discussed at the international level (Gachechiladze 2018).

Adherents of Islamic feminism, in turn, accuse Western feminists of neglecting the interests of the family and society in favor of the ideas of extreme individualism. Secular feminists are also accused of not accepting the political regime of the Islamic Republic, being indifferent to spiritual values, and having a desire to devalue the institution of the family (Berezina 2021).

Turning Point and Awakening of Islamic Feminism

The event that triggered the protest activity in 2022 was the detention of Mahsa Amini by law enforcement officers on September 13 at the exit of the Tehran metro. The girl was detained for “wearing the hijab incorrectly.” A few hours after her arrest, Amini fell into a coma, and just a few days later, on September 16, the girl died. Some people claim that Amini was beaten in a police van, but law enforcement officials say that her death was caused by a heart attack. On September 24, the Iranian Interior Ministry released the results of a medical examination, according to which Amini was not beaten. Following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, Iran has been engulfed in full-scale protests against police brutality and the oppression of women. Quite quickly, the protests took on a radical, extremist character. The protesters were insisting on the resignation of Iran's supreme leader, Ali Khamenei. To suppress the protests, the Iranian police used tear gas and firearms. In some provinces of Iran, Internet access was periodically lost (Gritten 2022). However, this did not stop Iranian women, they continued to post photos and videos online of themselves burning scarves and cutting their hair. Iranian women have been fighting for forty years to regain some of their basic rights and freedoms, including the right to study certain subjects and choose a profession. However, Iranian law currently recognizes the husband as the head of the family, and the wife must obey him in all matters, including employment, which significantly complicates the situation for 40 million Iranian women (Botello 2024). The Iranian government has effectively ignored the issue of women's legal status, failing to provide them with even a minimum set of rights. As a result, the death of Mahsa Amini led to the women of Iran deciding to take part in mass active protests that received international support. The high level of protest activity prompted the authorities to meet the protesters halfway. The morality police, which detained Mahsa Amini and monitored compliance with

Sharia law, were abolished. In December 2022, it was also announced that the law on the compulsory wearing of the hijab could be revised. In February 2023, some details of the future bill emerged, according to which women who appear in public places without covering their heads will not have access to social services. The authorities are going to track offenders using CCTV cameras and then issue them fines. Until the fine is paid, they will not be able to receive any social services. The government is not ready to repeal the law on compulsory wearing of the hijab, at least short. Moreover, information about the gradual stabilization of the situation in Iran came in late November 2022. The protests gradually began to fade, without achieving any noticeable results. We have to highlight that disagreement with the state policy cost many protesters their lives (Melnik 2024).

Thus, in the fall of 2022, Iranian statehood was once again under threat - the world began talking (mainly Western media and pro-Western people within Iran) about the "beginning of a revolution" after "four decades of patriarchal oppression and violence against women in the Islamic Republic". The death of Mahsa Amini was a kind of match brought to a keg of gunpowder. This "keg" was the decline in the population's standard of living as a result of the harsh anti-Iranian sanctions of the United States, and internal political contradictions that led to the expulsion of reformist forces from the political field. Protests in Iran have not subsided for several months. Demonstrations against the compulsory wearing of the hijab took place in dozens of cities, becoming a manifestation of the mood of Iranian youth against strict control over everyday life. In Iran, despite significant progress in the status of women compared to the first decade after the Islamic Revolution, some of their rights, stipulated by the requirements of Sharia, do not meet "international standards" (the right of inheritance with priority for a male heir, the right to vote in court, equal to half of a man's vote, restrictions on many professions and sports, etc.) (Ghattas 2022).

In this case, it is worth mentioning that in December 2001, Iran's pro-reform government, led by Mohammad Khatami, decided to join the 1979 international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. This document, based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, states that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth therein, without distinction of any kind, including distinction based on sex." However, according to Article 4 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the specific implementation of the principles of this Convention is made dependent on the decisions of the Supervisory Council, which determines the compliance of a particular Law with Islamic norms. And the observance of the Islamic form of clothing (hijab) by women, as in the first years after the Islamic Revolution, is still

considered an inviolable norm. To slow down the escalation of the conflict, on December 4, 2022, Attorney General Mohammad Jafar Montazeri, as part of the “explanatory jihad” initiated by Rahbar Ali Khamenei, announced the abolition of the morality police in the country and the creation of a joint commission of the Parliament and the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution to “revise” the issue of mandatory hijab (Gritten 2022).

From December 8, 2022, to May 19, 2023, seven young people were executed in Iran on charges of killing law enforcement officers during the autumn protests of 2022. All this caused tension in Iranian society, and although its degree had noticeably decreased by the beginning of March 2023, the leadership of the IRI understood that in six months, on September 16, 2023, there would be the anniversary of Mahsa Amini's death, and, following Iranian traditions, new demonstrations under the slogans "Woman, Life, Freedom" could be expected. Even though a significant portion of the youth advocates for a relaxation of the rules of wearing clothes, the Iranian authorities cannot decide on the “free wearing” of the hijab, since this not only requires a revision of fundamental provisions in the legislation, but could be regarded by the “enemies of Islamic Iran” as weakness and serve as a catalyst for increased unrest. By order of Ali Khamenei, back in February 2023, on the occasion of the 44th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, 22,000 participants in the autumn riots were amnestied20. This, of course, contributed to the decline in protest sentiments among the population and became one of the reasons that prevented the resumption of mass demonstrations on the anniversary of the death of Mahsa Amini in the fall of 2023. It is noteworthy that since the beginning of 2023, the Majlis of the IRI has not ratified the bill "Support for Hijab and Chastity Culture" in the form proposed by the judicial authorities in December 2022 (Polishuk 2024).

The law has caused protracted discussions in the government. Although the Supreme Leader of the IRI never tires of repeating that "all three branches of government must be unanimous, cooperate, and complement each other," high-ranking officials are afraid to take responsibility for the unpopular law.

In response to these events, a resolution to exclude Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women for the remainder of its 2022-2026 term was proposed by the United States at the UN Economic and Social Council, focusing on Iran’s oppression of women and girls. The resolution aims to “exclude the Islamic Republic of Iran from the Commission on the Status of Women for the remainder of its 2022-2026 term,” expressing grave concern over Tehran’s “continuously eroding and increasingly suppressing the human rights of women and girls often

through the use of excessive force.” The document was adopted by 29 votes in favor, 8 votes against, and 16 abstentions. In a statement before the vote, US Ambassador to the UN Linda Thomas-Greenfield said: "The Commission cannot do its important work if it is undermined from within. Iran's membership is an ugly stain on the Commission's credibility at this time." After the horrific incident was reported by journalists Niloufar Hamedi and Elaheh Mohammadi, who the Iranian government has since also jailed for “plotting against national security,” crowds gathered outside the hospital and demanded that those responsible be held accountable. The civil unrest grew and resulted in ongoing protests across the country. The protests have been led by women who have taken off and burned their hijabs in front of crowds shouting “Women, life, freedom” (Tehran Times 2022). The international community has largely supported Iranian women’s demands for equal rights. Iran’s exclusion from the CSW is just one of many examples of global support. In November, the UN Human Rights Council launched an investigation into alleged human rights abuses in Iran. Hashtags featuring Amini’s name have been shared hundreds of millions of times on social media. Demonstrations in support of Iranians fighting government oppression have taken place in Afghanistan, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Chile, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Lebanon, the Republic of Korea, South Africa, Switzerland, Tunisia, Turkey, the UK, and the US. Such a reaction from the international community may be one of the factors that influenced Iran's supreme leader to pardon "tens of thousands" of prisoners, including some arrested during recent anti-government protests.

Conclusion

In modern Iran, the women's issue is viewed in a political and legal context, and the main goals of Iranian women remain gaining economic independence from men and access to higher professional education. As a result of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran appeared on the political map of the world. By this time, Iranian women were considered an influential political force. Many Iranian women supported the revolution, seeing in the change of the political system an opportunity to realize their rights and improve their social status. The black chador, which Iranian women wore when they went out to demonstrate, became a symbol of support for the revolutionary movement and the coup d'état.

It is too early to talk about gender equality in Iran, and if current trends continue, gender asymmetry in the country will persist shortly. However, the positive result of the efforts of women's movements in Iran is obvious: the country is moving

very slowly but surely toward raising the status of women and recognizing their freedoms. Although gender equality has not been achieved in the modern world, it is worth noting the significant result of the efforts of the general feminist movement to overcome such inequality, revise opinions, and strengthen the social role of women. In addition, it is obvious that the reason for this wave of protests is the death of a young woman; the real reason is the political and economic problems that have accumulated in the country over the years. Since there is no prosperity and human well-being without human rights.

References

Botello, C. 2024. "Women's Collective Action and Human Rights in Iran: Mobilizing Pain through Revolution." Madrid: Universidad Rey Juan Carlos.

Berezina, A. 2022. Cultural Analysis of the Poetry of Farrochzad and Simin Bekhbahani in the Context of Women's Problems Identity. Moscow: Moscow State Institute of International Relations (University) of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation.

Berezina, A. 2021. "Feminism in Iran: Genesis and Evolution ." Concept: Philosophy, Religion, Culture 114-130.

Dunaeva, E. 2012. "Gender Situation in Iran and Islamic Modernism//Muslim Space along the Perimeter of the Borders of the Caucasus and Central Asia." Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science 252-258.

Dunaeva, E. 2019. "Islamic Revolution and a new role of Iranian women (to the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution) // Iran in the context of new geopolitical realities." Sadra 192-194.

Gachechiladze, R. 2018. The Middle East – Geographical and Historical Landmarks. Tbilisi: Sulakauri.

Ghattas, K. 2022. A Whole Generation Revolts Against the Iranian Regime. October 2. Accessed April 20, 2025. https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2022/10/whole-generation-revolts-against-iranian-regime/671631/.

Gordon, U. & Kinna, R. 2019. Introduction: Radicalism: Situating Contemporary Movement Practices. Loughborough: Loughborough University.

Gritten, D. 2022. Iran police battle protesters in Tehran as unrest over a woman's death spirals. 09 22. Accessed 04 20, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-62994003.

Gritten, D. 2022. Iran schoolgirls remove hijabs in protests against the government. 10 04. Accessed 04 20, 2025. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-63128184.

Higgins, P. 1985. "Women in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Legal, Social, and Ideological Changes." Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 477-494.

Inozemtseva, E. 2010. "To the Question of Women's Rights in Iran on the Modern Stage." Power 135-137.

Keddie, N. 2006. Roots and Results of Revolution. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Keddie, N. 2000. "Women in Iran since 1979." Social Research 405-438.

Kiknadze, T., Donadze, N. 2006. Gender – Social and Political Studies. Tbilisi: Center for Social Science.
Majid, M. 2007. "Iranian Women and the Civil Rights Movement in Iran: Feminism Interacted." Journal of International Women's Studies 1-21.

Moghaddam, R. 2024. "The Roots of the Revolutionary Women's Movement in 2022 in Iran: Women, Life, Freedom." Journal of Middle East Women's Studies 132-140.

Melnik, A. 2024. "The modern socio-political and legal status of Iranian women as a factor in protest movements of 2022–2023 in Iran." Scientific school 96-105.

Mohajan, H. 2022. "An Overview on the Feminism and Its Categories." Paradigm Academic Press 11-26.

Naraghi, A. 2015. "Ayatollah Khomeini's Theory of Government." In Politics and Culture in Contemporary Iran: Challenging the Status Quo, by Abbas Milani and Larry Diamond, 15-32. Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers.

Polishchuk, A. 2024. "About Movement Against Hijabs in Iran ." Middle and post - Soviet east 35–48.

Tehran Times. 2022. Tehran says UN political resolution is 'devoid of legitimacy'. December 16. Accessed 04 20, 2025. https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/479779/Tehran-says-UN-political-resolution-is-devoid-of-legitimacy.

Wollstonecraft, M. 2016. "Wollstonecraft, Mill, and Women's Human Rights." In Introduction: Women's Human Rights as Integral to Universal Human Rights, by E Botting, 1–25. New York City: JSTOR.

Women in Business Across Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia

Karina Iskandarova, Communication Consultant, Founder, Charisma Works, Greece.

Summary

Gender inequality remains a multilayered global challenge, with its dynamics varying significantly across diverse national contexts, influenced by income levels, governance structures, legislation, cultural norms, institutional practices, and labor market regulations.

In developing countries, gender gaps have been visible in labor markets, along with political inclusion, and household power dynamics. Developed countries, however, contend with challenges such as the underrepresentation of women in leadership roles, a wage gap, and unequal access to financial resources. A plethora of literature focuses on gender inequality and its impact on the economic growth of a country. However, in emerging literature, there is a discussion that emphasizes factors beyond the scope of basic economic growth models; they explore the development of interventions that aim to reduce gender inequality.

This report explores key themes essential for understanding the socio-economic status of business women in the GULF region, more specifically, Bahrain, Saudi

Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). This will be done via an in-depth analysis of the evolving role of women in business, examining the complex interplay of socio-economic dynamics, deeply rooted cultural influences, and progressive policy frameworks that are shaping female entrepreneurship and leadership in the Middle East. While significant efforts have been made particularly in recent years through ambitious national visions and reforms challenges persist in achieving full gender parity in economic participation and business leadership. In many cases, women are encouraged primarily in solopreneurial ventures or in sectors seen as "acceptable" for women, while real leadership remains restricted to those with elite family affiliations. Even as Gulf women rise to leadership roles abroad, they often remain marginalized within their home economies. This report highlights both the notable progress and the persistent barriers, offering insights into the unique trajectories of each nation.

Introduction: The Changing Landscape of Women's Economic Empowerment in the GCC

In recent years, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have witnessed advancements in women's educational growth, often exceeding that of their male counterparts in comparison to the past where women were solely occupied with household and child-bearing. Across these countries, women are consistently enrolling in and graduating from higher education institutions at rates that surpass men, particularly in fields such as business administration, engineering, and the sciences. This trend has been creating a stronger foundation for entrepreneurship and workforce integration, ultimately contributing to economic diversification and empowerment. However, many women are primarily encouraged to enter sectors considered non-traditional for men, or to operate as solopreneurs rather than in collaborative or leadership-based business ventures. Leadership roles are often limited to women from prominent families. Worryingly, while Gulf women may rise to leadership positions in global organizations, they frequently remain sidelined in their own countries' business ecosystems.

Socio-Economic Dynamics: Drivers and Barriers to Female Participation

The growing prominence of business women aligns with broader regional objectives of economic diversification beyond oil revenues. As Bahrain, Saudi

Arabia, and the UAE pursue ambitious development strategies, promoting and protecting women's entrepreneurship emerges as an essential catalyst for sustainable economic growth and social reform. While all three nations have invested heavily in female education, leading to high literacy rates and a substantial pool of educated women, translating this educational attainment into active economic participation has been a gradual process. This introduction sets the foundation for a detailed analysis of how educational achievements, legal reforms, cultural dynamics, and institutional support intersect to influence the evolving socio-economic landscape of business women in these Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states.

Education and Human Capital

Women in the GCC consistently outperform men in tertiary education enrollment. This creates a highly skilled and capable female workforce. For instance, in Bahrain, girls have shown to perform better than boys in learning outcomes, and a significant percentage of working women are interested in technological initiatives like fintech (Zaidan & Ehsan, 2025). This strong educational foundation provides a crucial human capital advantage for female entrepreneurship and leadership.

Labor Force Participation Rates

Despite educational achievements, female labor force participation rates in the GCC have historically been lower than global averages. However, there has been a notable upward trend, particularly in Saudi Arabia under Vision 2030. In 2021, women in Kuwait had the highest labor force participation (25%), followed by Bahrain (21.1%) and Saudi Arabia (20.4%), while the UAE stood at 16.6% (World Bank, cited in Almoaibed, et al.p.3). More recent data indicates higher figures for the UAE and Saudi Arabia due to rapid reforms. Saudi Arabia's female workforce participation surged from 17% in 2017 to 37% in 2023, surpassing initial projections (Hasan, 2025.). This increase is a direct result of comprehensive gender inclusion reforms. Bahrain has also seen a rise in female employment due to its initiatives, with Bahraini women's participation rate in the national workforce reaching 42.8% as of 2021 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2021). The UAE's female labor participation reached 54.1% in 2024 (World Bank, n.d.-a), a significant increase from previous years, driven by initiatives to boost women's representation in corporate boards and leadership.

Access to Finance and Resources

despite recent legal reforms aimed at reducing gender-based discrimination in credit access. Women are still far more likely to rely on informal funding sources, such as friends and family, rather than securing institutional loans (Zaidan et al., 2025). In Bahrain, for instance, while 75% of women hold bank accounts, female borrowing remains 15% lower than male borrowing rates. This gap is largely attributed to stricter collateral requirements and the risk-averse approach many banks adopt toward women-led enterprises. Lenders often perceive these businesses as higher risk due to their smaller scale, limited operating history, or weaker credit records.

These barriers are reinforced by societal stereotypes and a persistent "trust gap" between financial institutions and women entrepreneurs. As highlighted by the Wilson Center, this trust gap undermines women's ability to secure both start-up capital and scale-up funding (Wilson Center, 2022). A major challenge remains access to physical collateral, as many women do not own land or assets typically required for traditional loan guarantees particularly in conservative societies or among younger entrepreneurs. However, there are emerging solutions. Saudi Arabia has introduced dedicated funds, soft loans, and equity financing mechanisms specifically for women entrepreneurs through institutions like Monsha'at. Similarly, the UAE's Mohaftha platform helps streamline access to financial services for women-led startups. A number of regional banks have also launched specialized credit products for female entrepreneurs with reduced collateral requirements. Moreover, crowdfunding platforms and angel investor networks are gaining traction, offering alternative capital channels more attuned to the needs of women entrepreneurs and helping to bridge the financing gap in a more inclusive manner. It is also important to recognize that some women, whether of Arab origin or not, are managing the assets of their wealthy husbands international magnates or local elites rather than creating independent ventures. This underscores the need to distinguish between empowered business leadership and derivative asset management.

Emerging Sectors and Digitalization

The shift towards digitalization and the growth of new sectors like fintech offer significant opportunities for women entrepreneurs, as these industries often have fewer traditional barriers. In Bahrain, for example, 70% of working women are

interested in fintech, and 18% of founders in Bahrain are female, which is above the global average (Atlantic Council, 2023; Andra Public Relations, 2020). Social media has also become a powerful tool for women entrepreneurs, allowing them to market their businesses and build networks while aligning with cultural and social values.

Stereotypes and Their Impact on Career and Entrepreneurship

In most GULF countries, conventional expectations primarily assign women the responsibility of managing household duties and unpaid care work, including childcare, eldercare, and domestic tasks. This disproportionate burden significantly limits the time and energy women can dedicate to professional pursuits or entrepreneurship. For instance, a 2021 study on Bahraini women entrepreneurs highlighted that balancing family obligations with business demands remains one of the most formidable challenges they face, contributing to reduced working hours and constrained business growth (UNI ScholarWorks, n.d.). Similarly, in Saudi Arabia, despite reforms under Vision 2030 encouraging female labor participation, societal attitudes continue to reinforce the expectation that women prioritize family roles. This cultural framework often limits women's mobility and networking opportunities, as public spaces and professional settings are sometimes perceived as male domains. Even with the lifting of the driving ban and anti-harassment policies enhancing mobility and safety, many women still face informal pressures and skepticism when pursuing ambitious career paths.

Even worse, female entrepreneurs are often perceived as less assertive or less business-savvy compared to their male counterparts, which undermines their credibility and limits investor confidence. In the UAE, although institutional support and government programs promote women’s entrepreneurship, cultural stereotypes still lead to subtle biases in hiring practices, financing opportunities, and professional networking. These perceptions contribute to challenges in raising capital, accessing mentorship, and expanding business networks, all critical for business scalability and sustainability. For example, according to a recent Wilson Center report, female entrepreneurs in the GCC report facing a “trust gap” where partners and financiers may question women's business legitimacy or long-term commitment, adversely affecting their ability to secure contracts or loans (Wilson Center, 2022). On the other hand, in Bahrain, women comprise a large part of the business community, whether as business owners, investors, or entrepreneurs

breaking in a way societal biases. In fact, “about 43 percent of active Commercial Registrations (CRs) are owned by women, 17 percent of board seats in private companies are held by women and make up 35 percent of the total workforce in the private sector as well as hold 35 percent of managerial positions, according to the SCW” (Jahani, 2022).

Networking and Social Capital

Traditional gender segregation in some social settings can limit women's networking opportunities, which are crucial for business development and career progression for a new entrepreneur to succeed and expand their circle; yet businesswomen in the Middle East often find challenging to access such opportunities in male-dominated business ecosystems (Adzahar et al, 2024). Informal gatherings (like majlis or diwaniya) where business connections are often made are traditionally male-dominated. This necessitates the creation of alternative, women-centric networking platforms and mentorship programs to bridge this gap (Adzahar et al., 2024.).

COUNTRY BY COUNTRY

United Arab Emirates: Institutional Support and Policy Promotion

The UAE has demonstrated based on local sources a commitment to gender equality through both policy and institutional reform, yet there is still a long way to go. The Gender Balance Council, established in 2015, has played a key role in shaping inclusive policies. One of its major achievements includes mandating a minimum 20% female representation on the boards of publicly listed companies. As of January 2025, women hold 14.8% of board seats a regional high (Farraj, 2025). The UAE also ranks among the top countries globally in wage equality for similar work and educational attainment, underscoring its dedication to equal opportunity. In terms of entrepreneurship, the UAE has emerged as a regional hub for women-led businesses. Government-backed programs such as the Dubai Women Establishment offer tailored mentorship, networking platforms, and access to funding. Additionally, regulatory reforms now permit 100% business ownership by women, eliminating the need for male sponsorship and significantly boosting women's economic autonomy. Supportive measures also include simplified business licensing processes and the development of dedicated free

zones aimed at small and medium enterprises (SMEs), making it easier for women to launch and scale their ventures. Legal protections against workplace discrimination further enhance the business environment for women. Despite this progress, the UAE like its GCC counterparts still faces challenges related to traditional gender norms, limited access to finance, and the digital divide for female entrepreneurs. However, its proactive and forward-looking stance continues to narrow these gaps and align national frameworks with international best practices.

Bahrain: Supreme Council for Women and National Strategy

Bahrain is recognized as a regional leader in gender equality, with a strong institutional and legal foundation supporting women's empowerment (Raincode, 2024). Central to this effort is the Supreme Council for Women (SCW), chaired by HRH Princess Sabika bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa. The SCW has promoted the National Women Empowerment Strategy, which integrates women across economic, social, and political spheres. The country's Economic Vision 2030 explicitly targets gender-balanced employment, while anti-discrimination laws protect women's rights in the workplace and ensure equal access to credit and financial services. Reforms have also simplified business registration procedures, easing market entry for women entrepreneurs. These measures collectively promote an enabling environment for female-led enterprises.

As of January 2025, Bahrain had the second-highest percentage of women on boards in the GCC, at 8.5% (Farraj, 2025). Further reforms, such as equal procedures for opening bank accounts and accessing loans, have enhanced women's financial autonomy. Nonetheless, traditional societal expectations and caregiving responsibilities continue to create challenges. While legal barriers have largely been removed, practical issues like lack of collateral and support systems still hinder women's full participation in entrepreneurship.

Saudi Arabia: Vision 2030 and New Legal Measures

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 marks a pivotal shift in the country's social and economic landscape, placing women's empowerment at the center of its reform agenda. Significant legal changes such as the partial removal of the male guardianship system have allowed women to drive, travel, and access services

without male consent, greatly enhancing mobility, safety, and independence. Additionally, reforms mandating equal pay and prohibiting workplace discrimination have improved the professional environment for women. Programs like the Human Capability Development Program and the Quality of Life Program focus on building women's skills and increasing their public participation.

Women's representation is also growing in decision-making bodies like the Shura Council, and female participation is rising in traditionally male-dominated fields such as technology, engineering, finance, and construction. Notably, legal amendments now allow women to start businesses without a guardian's approval, supported by policies that expand credit access and encourage financial inclusion for women-led enterprises. However, challenges persist particularly around collateral requirements, childcare support, and cultural attitudes that still limit women's full economic engagement. Continued progress depends on addressing these practical and societal barriers alongside the legal reforms already in place.

Comparative Progress and Remaining Gaps

Across these three countries, notable progress in legal reforms has translated into greater economic participation and entrepreneurship opportunities for women. However, when measured against global standards, several gaps remain. These include: implementation and enforcement, where laws supporting women's entrepreneurship exist but often face inconsistent enforcement or lack comprehensive accompanying support systems; access to childcare and social services, as the absence of widespread institutional childcare limits women's ability to balance entrepreneurial engagement with familial responsibilities; financial inclusion challenges, where despite reforms, disparities in credit access and collateral requirements persist, constraining the growth potential of women-led enterprises; and continuing socio-cultural barriers, as prevailing gender norms and stereotypes still influence women's participation, limiting the full realization of legal reforms' benefits. Overall, legal and policy reforms in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE constitute essential foundations for empowering women entrepreneurs. These frameworks, coupled with ongoing institutional and societal changes, chart a transformative path forward for female economic inclusion in the Gulf region.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia have made progress in comparison to their past, in advancing the role of women in business, driven by high educational attainment, strategic legal reforms, and expanding institutional support. These factors have collectively enhanced women's entrepreneurship and workforce participation, positioning them as critical aspects of the region's socio-economic transformation. Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 outlines an ambitious framework that aspires to promote gender inclusion through legal autonomy, mobility improvements, and financial access reforms. Bahrain's long-standing gender equality measures and the UAE's comprehensive institutional ecosystem further illustrate diversified pathways fostering women's business empowerment. However, it is still early to evaluate its long-term effects. While legal changes have been enacted, the real impact may not become evident until after 2032–2035. Getting an education and a job are basic human rights, and there is a long way to go for countries in the Middle East when it comes to real freedom of choice and female empowerment. Observers must remain cautious of overly optimistic interpretations, particularly those coming from domestic sources facing constraints in openly critiquing government policy.

Nevertheless, persistent challenges remain, notably socio-cultural norms that impose unpaid care responsibilities, restrict mobility, and limit women's business prospects. Access to finance also continues to be a major barrier, with many women entrepreneurs facing stricter collateral requirements, trust gaps, and limited credit histories. Lastly, societal stereotypes further hinder the full economic integration of women.

Recommendations

- laws, especially regarding equal pay, workplace protection, and non-discriminatory access to credit.

- Improve Financial Inclusion: Design financial products tailored to women's needs, simplify loan procedures, reduce collateral requirements, and promote alternative financing like crowdfunding and angel investment.

- Support Work–Life Balance: Expand affordable childcare, parental leave, and flexible work arrangements to reduce the "double burden" on working women.

- Challenge Cultural Biases: Launch gender-sensitive awareness campaigns and integrate inclusive education to address stereotypes about women's capabilities in business and leadership.

- Promote Diversity Across Sectors: Encourage women's participation in high-growth, male-dominated fields such as tech and finance through targeted incentives and skill-building programs.

- Boost Mentorship and Networking: Invest in professional networks, business incubators, and mentorship programs that connect aspiring female entrepreneurs with role models and investors.

- Expand Digital Access: Provide access to devices, digital training, and support for women-led tech initiatives.

- Institutionalize Role Models: Consistently highlight successful female leaders to inspire future generations and normalize women's economic leadership in public discourse.

- Continue Gender-Disaggregated Data Collection: Ensure transparent monitoring of gender equality progress to inform and adapt future policies.

- Train men on household duties and child-care: Integrate mandatory training for men on household duties and childcare into workplace wellness programs, premarital counseling, or national service modules. This helps redistribute unpaid labor and supports women's full participation in the economy.

By consistently addressing these areas, Bahrain, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia can encourage the economic potential of their female populations, contributing to more diversified, resilient, and prosperous economies. The journey toward complete gender parity in business is ongoing, but the foundation for significant and sustainable change has been finally laid. With continued commitment and cross-sector collaboration, along with ideological societal changes of women's roles, the region can move toward a more inclusive and innovative future breaking out from old traditional norms that restricted women from using their feminine power and their leadership abilities besides the household arena.

References

Adzahar K., Saharan M., Yaakub M. et al. (2024, October). Cultural Influences on Women Entrepreneurs: A Comparative Literature Review. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from https://rsisinternational.org/journals/ijriss/Digital-Library/volume-8-issue-10/1130-1136.pdf

Andra Public Relations (2020, January 13). Bahrain, a FinTech ecosystem for women. Retrieved from https://andrapr.com/bahrain-a-fintech-ecosystem-for-women/

Almoaibed H., Al-Wahaibi S., & Al-Saif B. (2023). Women in the GCC: Negotiating Leadership, Power, and Change. Retrieved from https://www.gulfresearchmeeting.net/documents/63c4e82a5c4aeWK9WorkshopDescription.pdf

Atlantic Council (2023, November 1). The impact of fintech on women's financial inclusion in Bahrain. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/the-impact-of-fintech-on-womens-financial-inclusion/

Atlantic Council (2022, December 5). The impact of societal norms and structures on women's economic empowerment in Saudi Arabia. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/event/the-impact-of-societal-norms-and-structures-on-womens-economic-empowerment-in-saudi-arabia/

Farraj Y. (2025, April 29). UAE tops GCC in women's board representation in 2025: Report. Retrieved from https://economymiddleeast.com/news/uae-tops-gcc-in-womens-board-representation-in-2025-report/

GOV.SA. (n.d.). Women Empowerment. Retrieved May 18, 2025, from https://my.gov.sa/en/content/women-empowering

Government of Dubai Media Office (2025). UAE Gender Balance Council. Retrieved from https://www.mediaoffice.ae/

Hasan A. (2025, April 6). Women Empowerment in the Saudi Workforce:Progress, Challenges, & What's Next. Retrieved from: https://blog.zenhr.com/en/women-in-the-saudi-workforce

Jahani, S. (2022, March 8). Bahrain's Comprehensive Approach to Advancing Women in Business. Retrieved May 20, 2025, from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/blog-post/bahrains-comprehensive-approach-advancing-women-business

Mastercard (2025). Mastercard Index of Women Entrepreneurs (MIWE) 2025. Retrieved from https://www.mastercard.com/news/media/phwevxcc/the-mastercard-index-of-women-entrepreneurs.pdf

Ministry of Human Resources and Social Development (n.d.). Women Empowerment in Vision 2030. Retrieved from https://www.hrsd.gov.sa/en

Raincode (2024). Bahrain: A Regional Leader in Advancing Women's Education and Employment. Retrieved from https://raincode.tech/?news=bahrain-womens-education-employment-leadership

UBP. (2025). The Rise of Women in Business in the UAE. Retrieved from https://www.finews.com/news/english-news/63656-ubp-guy-de-picciotto-first-half-year-2024-profitability-aum-assets-under-management-geneva-switzerland

UNI ScholarWorks (n.d.). Factors Influencing Female Entrepreneurship in Bahrain. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.calstate.edu/

World Bank (n.d.-a). United Arab Emirates - Gender Data Portal. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/united-arab-emirates

Wilson Center (2022, June.). Understanding and Overcoming Barriers to Entrepreneurship for Women in MENA. Retrieved from https://www.wilsoncenter.org/event/understanding-and-overcoming-barriers-entrepreneurship-women-mena

World Bank (2024). Structural Reforms and Shifting Social Norms to Increase Women's Labor Force Participation. Retrieved from: https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/2c0e4380-b9c4-427e-ba67-5a234ea377e3

World Bank (2024). Bahrain | Data. Retrieved from https://data.worldbank.org/country/bahrain

Zaidan E., & Ehsan M., (2025, May 14). Women's labor and business participation in the GCC: a comparative analysis of Qatar, Bahrain, and the UAE. Retrieved from https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23311886.2025.2499900?src=

International United Nations watch

Thank You!

Report 2025