

# Country profile for the United Arab Emirates

Exploring pathways to enhance women's health and economic empowerment

This country note has been produced by the OECD Development Centre in close collaboration with the UAE Gender Balance Council and the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, and with the support of Organon.

## Social institutions matter for gender equality

Women's health and economic empowerment are fundamental pillars of gender equality, recognised by international frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and domestically through the United Arab Emirates' national policy priorities. SDG 3 on health, SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 8 on inclusive and sustainable economic growth reflect the necessity to advance women's rights and opportunities for sustainable development. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has integrated the importance of enhancing women's economic empowerment and promoting their health — including access to healthcare and the achievement of favourable health outcomes — into its overarching policy agenda, the "We the UAE 2031 Vision". It notably has a "Forward Society" Pillar, under which "an inclusive and empowering society" and "an innovative, state-of-the-art healthcare system" are essential cornerstones (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[1]</sup>).

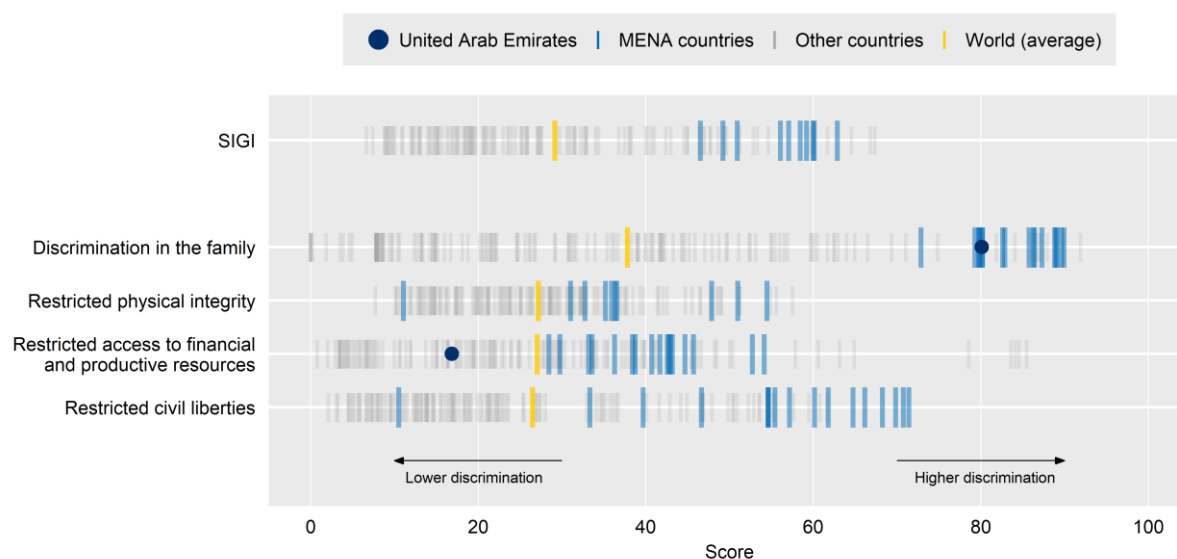
The UAE has made significant progress in promoting women's empowerment. It has made notable strides in enhancing women's rights and socioeconomic inclusion through legal reforms. This is reflected in the UAE's ranking on several indices measuring gender equality at the outcome level such as in educational attainment, standard of living and political representation. For instance, the UAE ranks first among the Arab countries in the 2023 World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap. It also ranks seventh globally and first regionally in UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, making it the leading country in the region (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[2]</sup>). At the same time, gender indices that look at underlying drivers of persisting disparities reveal some areas for improvement (OECD, 2023<sup>[3]</sup>). Often, remaining inequalities are rooted in social institutions – the established set of formal and/or informal laws, norms and practices that govern expected behaviour in society. For example, entrenched social norms can affect women's economic choices.

The OECD's [Social Institutions and Gender Inequality Index](#) (SIGI) provides a comprehensive measure of gender equality gaps in social institutions worldwide. The index encompasses major socio-economic areas that impact women and girls across their lifespan, including the family sphere, physical integrity, economic sphere, and the public and political spheres. Though no SIGI score could be calculated for the UAE in 2023 due to data gaps, available data at the more disaggregated level reveal important insights into gender disparities across these four areas – including women's economic inclusion and reproductive health (OECD, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>) (Figure 1).

### Box 1. Policy dialogue “Exploring pathways to enhance women’s health and economic empowerment in the United Arab Emirates: what are the priority actions?”

On 14 May 2024, the OECD Development Centre, with the kind support of Organon, organised two closed-door sessions: a focused policy discussion with government and development partner representatives, and a policy dialogue with civil society, private sector, and philanthropy leaders. The policy discussions aimed to celebrate progress achieved and identify and discuss remaining challenges – notably with regards to legal and social impediments – and feasible policy actions to further promote women's health and economic empowerment in the country. The outcomes of the expert discussions feed into this country profile. In addition, a third policy engagement took place on 27 November during the Global Women's Forum Dubai 2024, where key insights from the policy dialogue were shared, including findings from the dialogues that took place in Egypt and Saudi Arabia.

Figure 1. SIGI and dimensions scores for the United Arab Emirates



Note: Scores range from 0 to 100, with 0 indicating no discrimination and 100 indicating absolute discrimination. Because of data gaps in 3 out of 16 underlying variables used to compute the SIGI, no country score could be calculated for the UAE. No data were available on the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence; attitudes towards domestic violence; and attitudes capturing population's trust in the judicial system. The MENA region covers Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen.

Source: (OECD, 2023<sup>[4]</sup>), "Social Institutions and Gender Index (Edition 2023)", OECD International Development Statistics (database), <https://doi.org/10.1787/33beb96e-en>.

## Women's economic empowerment

Over the past five years, the UAE has made remarkable strides in advancing women's economic rights and inclusion. Since 2019, the country has implemented numerous laws, policies and initiatives aimed at safeguarding women's rights, removing barriers to their employability, and fostering economic opportunities for their participation in the labour market (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[5]</sup>). The UAE's commitment to enhancing women's economic empowerment is anchored in its Constitution, through article 14 which highlights "equal opportunities to all citizens" under the social and economic pillars. It is also embedded in its national strategies, particularly articulated in the "We the UAE 2031 Vision" and in the National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women 2023-2031 (United Arab Emirates, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>; United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[1]</sup>); (United Arab Emirates, 1971<sup>[7]</sup>). These national instruments are timely as women's economic inclusion is an imperative for establishing a long-term sustainable economic model that can support the UAE's increasingly diversifying economy with a skilled workforce.

In alignment with this overarching objective, the National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women 2023-2031 aims to facilitate women's integration into the labour market and enhance their skills and capacities – particularly in entrepreneurial activities (United Arab Emirates, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>). The General Women's Union is tasked with monitoring the implementation of the policy. Similarly, the "We the UAE 2031 Vision" outlines the goal of increasing Emiratis' representation in the private sector, but also places national identity and strong family values on par with an individual's capacity to contribute to the nation's economy (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[1]</sup>). Creating a work environment, in both the private and public sector, that allows women to fulfil their role within their families but also the economy is indispensable.

Table 1. Key indicators for women's economic and financial inclusion

		UAE			MENA		Source
		Women	Men	Year	Women	Men	
Share of women among new graduates in higher education (%)		51.5	48.5	2023	-	-	(UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[8]</sup> )
Labour force participation rate (%) (entire population aged 15 years and older)	Real value	54.5	90.8	2023	-	-	(UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[9]</sup> )
	Modelled estimates	56.2	93.1	2023	27.3	73.4	(ILO, 2024 <sup>[10]</sup> ). Data for all countries, incl. the UAE, are modelled estimates.
Unemployment rate (%) (entire population aged 15 years and older)		4.3	1.5	2023	18.3	8.9	UAE: (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[9]</sup> ); MENA average: (United Nations, 2024 <sup>[11]</sup> ), SDG Database, Indicator 8.5.2.
Daily time spent on unpaid care and domestic work (hours per day)		-	-	-	4.8	0.9	(OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023 <sup>[12]</sup> ). No data are available for the UAE.
Wage equality between women and men for similar work		0.79		2023	0.72		(World Economic Forum, 2023 <sup>[13]</sup> ). Data for each country, incl. the UAE, were collected through the 2023 World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey.
Share of women/men among managers (%)		23.8	76.2	2023	18.0	82.0	UAE: (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[9]</sup> ); MENA average: (United Nations, 2024 <sup>[11]</sup> ), SDG Database, Indicator 5.2.2.
Share of women/men among business owners (%)		9	91	2018	15.7	84.3	(World Bank, 2023 <sup>[14]</sup> ), Entrepreneurship survey and database. Data for the UAE were provided by the Business Registration in the Department of Economic Development, 2020.
Share of women/men who own a bank account (%)		86	84	2021	42.0	54.0	(World Bank, 2021 <sup>[15]</sup> ), Global Findex Database. Data were collected in the UAE between October – November 2021

Note: Data in the table cover the entire population in the UAE, regardless of citizenship status. International databases are used to calculate the regional average for benchmarking purposes. The indicated MENA averages are unweighted and cover the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen. For the indicator "Daily time spent on unpaid care and domestic work (hours per day)", no data are available for Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the United Arab Emirates and Yemen, and the regional average is calculated over the remaining nine MENA countries with available data. For the indicator "Wage equality between women and men for similar work", no data are available for Algeria, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip; the regional average is calculated over the remaining 13 MENA countries with available data. For the indicator "Share of women/men among managers", no data are available for Libya; the regional average is calculated over the remaining 18 MENA countries with available data. For the indicator "Share of women/men among business owners", no data are available for Djibouti, Iran, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen; the regional average is calculated over the remaining ten MENA countries with available data.

Data on wage equality between women and men for similar work is drawn from the World Economic Forum Executive Opinion Survey: "In your country, for similar work, to what extent are wages for women equal to those of men?" Data are normalised on a 0-1 scale, with the highest possible score being 1 (equality) and the lowest possible score being 0 (inequality) (World Economic Forum, 2023<sup>[13]</sup>). No comparable and representative quantitative data are available on the wage gap.

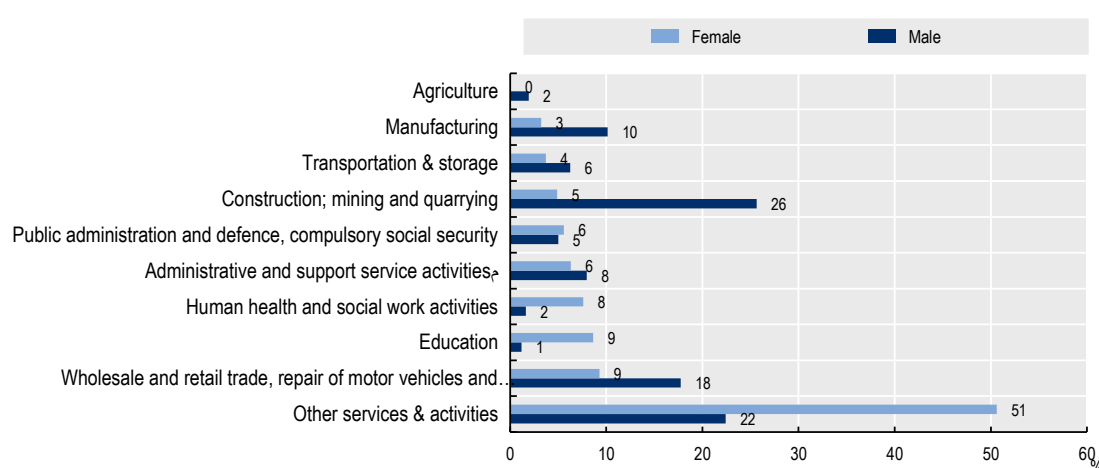
Women's economic participation in the UAE exceeds that of women in the MENA region by almost 30 percentage points (ILO, 2024<sup>[10]</sup>; UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>). Within the UAE, labour force participation varies by gender and citizenship status. For instance, in 2023, women's overall labour force participation rate in the UAE stood at 55% compared to 91% for men (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>). These disparities are particularly pronounced in the private sector. In 2023, 57% of employed women worked in the private sector compared to 86% of men (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>). While recent data indicate progress towards more gender balance with a 29.5% growth in women's employment in the private sector, this does not necessarily benefit all women alike (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>). Looking

at the latest available data disaggregated by nationality, it shows that Emirati women remain particularly underrepresented in the private sector (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2019<sup>[16]</sup>).<sup>1</sup> In light of these disparities and the fact that expatriate residents outnumber UAE nationals, the UAE has established policies to boost Emirati citizens' representation in the private sector. For instance, a number of ministerial resolutions require companies to hire a pre-determined number of Emiratis (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[17]</sup>).<sup>2</sup>

As in most economies, vertical and horizontal segregation in employment remains widespread in the UAE which can translate into remuneration gaps. Employed men and women are concentrated in specific economic sectors, with women's employment primarily clustered in sectors or professions considered as "typically female" (OECD, 2021<sup>[18]</sup>). Women work mostly in service sectors, including in real estate and administrative activities or in accommodation and food services, as well as in care sectors, comprising education, social work and health (Figure 2). For instance, women represent close to 65% of all healthcare workers in the UAE (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2022<sup>[19]</sup>). Similar gender gaps in employment are seen throughout the MENA region (OECD, 2024<sup>[20]</sup>).

**Figure 2. Women and men are concentrated in specific economic sectors in the UAE**

Distribution of employed women and men across economic sectors, Labour Force Survey 2023



Note: Some sectors were grouped based on the ISIC Rev. 4 classification into "Other services & activities": "Accommodation and food service activities", "Activities of households as employers; services-producing activities of households for own use", "Activities of extraterritorial organizations and bodies", "Arts, entertainment and recreation", "Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply", "Financial and insurance activities", "Information and communication", "Other service activities", "Professional, scientific and technical activities", "Real estate activities", and "Water supply; sewerage, waste management and remediation activities".

Source: (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>), Labour Force Survey 2023, <https://uaestat.fcsc.gov.ae>.

Vertical segregation is also important, including in sectors where women account for the majority of workers. For instance, in the healthcare sector, women hold only 45% of leadership positions. While they make up close to 80% of nursing staff, women represent less than 45% of doctors (United Arab Emirates, 2020<sup>[21]</sup>). In general, women's representation in managerial positions is lower than that of men's in line with the average for MENA countries (United Nations, 2024<sup>[11]</sup>). Combined, such horizontal and vertical

<sup>1</sup> In 2019, 11% of employed Emirati women worked in the private sector compared to 46% of employed non-Emirati women.

<sup>2</sup> Private sector companies employing 20 to 49 workers will be required, as of 2024, to hire at least one Emirati citizen and from 2025, at least two Emirati citizens. This was already previously the case for companies with 50 or more employees.

segregation can limit women's economic choices and can lead to significant remuneration gaps between women and men.

### ***The legal framework governing women's economic empowerment***

Spearheaded by the UAE Gender Balance Council, the UAE underwent a series of important reforms since 2019 with the objective of addressing the legal barriers that prevented women from fully participating in the workforce. This historical reform package included amendments to the Personal Status Law (PSL)<sup>3</sup> which were made possible through the government's close collaboration with family judges and lawyers. This process ensured that the revised PSL would comply with Sharia principles whilst following international standards. Notably, the PSL was amended to grant women the same rights as men to work outside the home (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[22]</sup>). Moreover, changes in the labour law lifted specific restrictions on women's employability and set forth provisions protecting workers' rights. These ranged from the prohibition of gender-based discrimination in employment, to penalties for sexual harassment in the workplace, to guaranteeing equal pay for work of equal value (Table 2).

The UAE has also implemented measures that promote work-life balance and encourage increased involvement of men in care responsibilities. The National Policy for Women's Empowerment 2023-2031 outlines the UAE's commitment to creating a supportive work environment for women. This initiative involves establishing systems, standards and best practices to enhance women's economic opportunities while acknowledging their multiple roles both at home and in the labour market (United Arab Emirates, 2023<sup>[6]</sup>). For instance, in 2021, the UAE made history by transitioning to a 4.5-day work week in the public sector, supporting government employees in managing their work and family commitments. Private sector companies are able to implement this policy at their own discretion (Aref and Fallentine, 2024<sup>[23]</sup>). The UAE also stands as a pioneer in the MENA region for introducing paid parental leave for employees in the private sector (United Arab Emirates, 2020<sup>[24]</sup>).

In line with its strategy to become a competitive and knowledge-based economy, the government has taken various legal steps to help the increasing number of women entrepreneurs thrive. For example, in 2019, the UAE Central Bank issued a notification to all banking and financial institutions to ensure equal treatment to both women and men when it comes to financial transactions, including bank loans. This represents an important step to boost women's access to finance and encourage their business activities. In addition, the government launched several women-focused initiatives for small and medium enterprises and home-based activities, to encourage Emirati and young women embark on their entrepreneurial journey. These include licences, allowing women to engage in paid activities from their home, as well as free zones with special economic regulations and incentives to attract business investment (UN Women, 2022<sup>[25]</sup>); (Abu Dhabi Businesswomen Council, n.d.<sup>[26]</sup>); (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[27]</sup>).

**Table 2. Legal reforms supporting women's economic empowerment between 2019 and 2023**

Year	Legal reform
2019	Federal Decree-Law No. (10) of 2019 on the Protection from Domestic Violence defines domestic violence, including economic violence.
2019	The Central Bank Notice No. CBUAE/BSD2019/3457 prohibits discrimination based on gender in access to credit and requires financial institutions to provide equal treatment to women and men regarding financial transactions, including loans and credit.
2020	Federal Decree-Law No. (5) of 2020 amended Article 72 of the Federal Law No. (28) of 2005 on Personal Status, granting women the

<sup>3</sup> The Personal Status Law governs personal matters such as marriage or inheritance. Article 1 stipulates that the provisions of the law shall apply to all citizens, except for non-Muslims who are subject to special provisions applicable to their community or religion. In 2022, the UAE issued Federal Decree-Law No. 41 of 2022 regarding Civil Personal Status which applies to non-Muslims citizens and non-Muslim foreigners residing in the country. It governs marriage divorce, inheritance and custody for non-Muslims (United Arab Emirates, 2022<sup>[31]</sup>; United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[22]</sup>) <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/law-for-personal-affairs>.

	same rights as men to work outside the home.
2020	The Federal Decree Law No. (6) of 2020 amends Articles 32 and 74 of the UAE Labour Law (Federal Law No. (8) of 1980) which was replaced by the New Labour Law in 2021 (Federal Decree-Law No. (33) of 2021). Article 32 was amended to guarantee equal pay for work of equal value and Article 74 provides for paid parental leave for private sector employees (previously, a Cabinet Decree was issued in 2018, endorsing a bill to ensure equal pay for men and women but only in the public sector).
2020	Federal Decree Law No. (15) of 2020 amending the Federal Law No. (3) of 1987 concerning the Penal Code replaces Article 359 to prohibit sexual harassment in public roads or frequented places.
2021	"Federal Decree-Law No. (33) of 2021 Regarding the Regulation of Labour Relations replaces the previous UAE Labour Law (Federal Law No. (8) of 1980). It includes several articles fostering women's economic empowerment and inclusion in the private sector: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Article 14 prohibits sexual harassment in the workplace.</li> <li>- Article 30 regulates maternity leave for private sector employees, whereby women are entitled to 60 days of leave, of which the first 45 are paid at full salary, and the remaining 15 at half salary. The same article also prohibits dismissal of pregnant workers, and provides for one or two rest periods per day for breastfeeding purposes, for a maximum of two hours per day.</li> <li>- Article 32 provides for parental leave for a period of five working days, for either the father or mother who has a newly born child. The leave can be taken a continuous or intermittent period, within (6) six months from the date of the child's birth.</li> <li>- Article 63 provides that any violation of provisions in the law will carry financial penalties</li> </ul>
2022	Articles 19 and 20 of the Federal Decree Law No. (49) of 2022 on Human Resources Law in the Federal Government regulate maternity and parental leave for public sector employees. Article 19 provides for three months of maternity leave with full pay. After the mother's return to work, she is entitled to two hours of reduced working hours with full pay, within the first six month of returning to work, to breastfeed her child. Article 20 provides for parental leave of 5 days to be taken with the first six months following the birth of the child, to be taken continuously or intermittently.
2022	Law No. (41) of 2022 on the Civil Personal Status regulates the personal status matters for non-Muslims who are national citizens of the United Arab Emirates, and to non-Muslim foreigners residing in the state. The law provides women and men equal rights in terms of marriage, child custody, divorce, testimony and inheritance. Specifically, Article 11 stipulates equal shares of inheritance with no differentiation between male or female.
2024	Coming into effect in April 2025, the Federal Law No. (41) of 2024 is the new Personal Status Law replacing the Federal Law No. (28) of 2005 on Personal Status and applying to all UAE citizens. Non-Muslim citizens and non-citizens can opt to follow their religious sect or home country's personal laws.

Note: This table features selected legal reforms related to women's economic empowerment and inclusion between 2019 and 2023.

Source: (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[28]</sup>), UAE Legislation, <https://uaelegislation.gov.ae/>; (World Bank, 2022<sup>[29]</sup>), "United Arab Emirates (UAE): Legal reforms to strengthen women's economic inclusion - Case Study", *Equitable Growth, Finance & Institutions Notes*.

Despite these historic reforms, minor legal barriers persist with potential implications for women's access to assets. In the UAE, women and men have equal rights to own and use land and non-land assets (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023<sup>[30]</sup>). One primary avenue to acquire assets is inheritance. However, Articles 211, 212 and 217 of the 2024 Personal Status Law maintain different inheritance shares for Muslim women and men - where daughters and widows are entitled to half the inheritance share of sons or widowers (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[22]</sup>). This discrepancy can present challenges for women in accessing capital, as assets can be used as collateral for bank loans, and access to credit is often essential for initiating or expanding entrepreneurial activities. A notable development occurred in January 2023 with the implementation of the Civil Personal Status Law, granting non-Muslim men and women equal shares of inheritance (United Arab Emirates, 2022<sup>[31]</sup>).

### ***Social determinants of women's economic participation***

Women's increasing educational and economic empowerment is both a result and a driver of shifting social norms. Mirroring the government's commitment and initiatives to promote women's empowerment, women in the UAE voice professional aspirations and increasingly consider work not only as a means of income, but also as a way to establish personal and professional identities and to achieve socioeconomic autonomy (United Arab Emirates, 2008<sup>[32]</sup>; Prager, 2020<sup>[33]</sup>). To showcase these achievements, in the last decade, media outlets have highlighted "female firsts" in the labour market. These include profiles of the first female judge the first female pilot, and more recently the first female astronaut. Featured successful women not only had exemplary careers but also fulfilled roles as devoted mothers and wives – thus fulfilling both modern and traditional gender roles and expectations (Prager, 2020<sup>[33]</sup>). A shift in social norms is also seen

among younger generations of women, who have grown up with working mothers or female role models that are employed outside the home. Thus, they are increasingly exposed to the benefits of working outside the home, if the right conditions are met (Dubai Women Establishment and PwC, 2018).

Translating aspirations for progress and empowerment into practice can be hindered by social norms that uphold traditional gender roles and responsibilities. While the government actively encourages women's participation in the labour market, longstanding family values and norms expect women to care, and men to protect and provide for their families (Dubai Women Establishment and PwC, 2018<sup>[34]</sup>). The “We the UAE 2031 Vision” emphasises the importance of “a well-preserved national identity, culture and unwavering values” – including family values – in a context of continuous changes linked with modernisation (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[1]</sup>).

Balancing women's and men's share of unpaid household responsibilities and establishing an enabling environment in the workplace, and particularly in the private sector, are crucial to enhance women's economic empowerment. In 2023, 67% of women who were out of the labour force cited unpaid care and domestic work at home as the main reason for not working (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023<sup>[9]</sup>). Data disaggregated by citizenship from 2019 show that this share is higher among non-Emirati (64%) than Emirati women (37%). Similarly, data show that although 80% of non-working Emirati women have an interest in working, 42% cited their role as a wife and mother as a reason for leaving the workforce, and 30% cited unsuitable working hours as the reason for opting out (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2020<sup>[35]</sup>). Moreover, women identified bias in decision-makers, a lack of mentors and sponsors, and a lack of subsidised or onsite childcare as key barriers for their career advancement in the private sector (Oliver Wyman, 2024<sup>[36]</sup>). Increasingly, there are also Emirati women who prefer to start their own businesses rather than working outside of the home (Dubai Women Establishment and PwC, 2018<sup>[34]</sup>).

Evidence further suggests that society's support or acceptance of women's active labour market participation depends on women's life stage, marital status, or family situation. For example, 83% of Emirati men find it acceptable for a married woman without children to work, but only 25% find it acceptable for a married woman with children to work. Conversely, having a child does not appear to be a key determinant for Emirati women's attitudes towards work: a similar share of women think that it is acceptable for a married woman with or without children to work (45% and 42%, respectively) (Dubai Women Establishment and PwC, 2018<sup>[34]</sup>). Despite the distinct views among men and women, data highlight the persistence of social norms that closely associate women's primary role with that of a mother. Studies also show the important role that family plays in influencing a woman's career, sometimes leading women to pursue alternative career paths than those they would have preferred, in line with their parents' wishes (Howe-walsh, Turnbull and Khan, 2020<sup>[37]</sup>).

Reconciling family and career interests requires re-organising the traditional division of women's and men's responsibilities and roles in society. Emirati women face the difficult challenge of meeting the model of a modern and successful working woman within the boundaries of longstanding societal values and norms. Yet, change seems to be underway, reflected by an increasing trend of more equitable sharing of household responsibilities between spouses. There is also an increasing reliance on domestic help – largely provided by female migrant domestic workers (Lee, Alsereidi and Ben Romdhane, 2023<sup>[38]</sup>). Emirati women today have many life choices compared to the last decade, and they are supported by the government to contribute to the economy, should they decide to do so (Dubai Women Establishment and PwC, 2018). For instance, the UAE's Gender Balance Council and the government programme NAFIS<sup>4</sup> signed an agreement to increase women's participation in the private sector, including in leadership positions (Government of Dubai, 2024<sup>[39]</sup>). To lastingly increase women's economic inclusion and ensure

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<sup>4</sup> NAFIS is a federal programme to increase the competitiveness of Emirati human resources and empower them to occupy jobs in the private sector.

the UAE's economic prosperity, it will be crucial for the private sector to offer more flexible working arrangements.

### ***Moving forward: Insights from the policy dialogue to promote women's economic empowerment***

- *Alleviate women's care burden:*
  - The government should implement a national childcare policy focusing on providing affordable access to childcare (including nurseries or day care centres) and family-friendly policies. In the private sector particularly, the guarantee of flexible working arrangements and adequate facilities that support mothers retuning from maternity leave is critical.
- *Increase women's competencies and representation in decision-making:*
  - The government, together with the private sector, should continue running mentorship programmes for women in leadership positions such as Aurora50 or Noura and consider extending these programmes to women who aspire to gain leadership skills and seek a career in non-traditional sectors, by offering training, networking opportunities and guidance for professional growth.
  - The government should collaborate with the private sector to put in place a diversity and inclusion policy and continue to invest in programmes such as NAFIS aiming to increase women's participation in the private sector and fulfil governmental pledges<sup>5</sup> to increase women's representation in leadership positions in line with the SDGs.
- *Increase women's access to capital and foster women's entrepreneurship:*
  - The government should establish a dedicated fund for women-led startups and collaborate with venture capital firms to increase investments in women-led startups.
- *Invest in targeted campaigns and programmes to promote positive shifts in mind-set and behaviours – under consideration of diverse sociocultural contexts:*
  - The government, together with civil society organisations and educational institutions, should invest in programmes and awareness-raising campaigns to support the ongoing social changes in favour of more gender-equitable roles and responsibilities. Art and edutainment have been proven to be successful strategies to address restrictive norms and promote behavioural change. Key actors could leverage these tools to promote cultural and age-appropriate change, targeting particularly the family and educational environment.
  - The government should partner with public and private key stakeholders to ensure more localised approaches and contextualised solutions across the different Emirates, in order to better respond to the different needs and sociocultural contexts across the country.
- *Invest in data collection and monitoring:*
  - More regular and continuous qualitative data collection efforts are needed to better understand the concept of women's empowerment from an Emirati perspective, and women's experience of the policies in place that support their economic empowerment.

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<sup>5</sup> In 2022, the UAE Gender Balance Council launched the "Pledge to Accelerate Gender Balance in the UAE Private Sector," aiming for 30% of women in managerial roles. The pledge focuses on equal pay, gender-equal recruitment and promotions, policy integration, and transparency. A total of 71 companies have joined, with 64 aiming to meet the target by 2025, and 7 committing to achieve it by 2028 (Emirati Times, 2024<sup>[75]</sup>).

## Women's health

The UAE has made significant strides towards the improved health and well-being of its population, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goal 3 on health and related SDG indicators. Women's access to healthcare and health outcomes have benefitted from general improvements in the UAE's healthcare system. In many key metrics of women's health, the UAE outperforms most of its MENA neighbours. Significant progress has been achieved with regards to women's reproductive health, as evidenced by low maternal and infant mortality rates (Koornneef, Robben and Blair, 2017<sup>[40]</sup>).

Recognising the significance of women's health as an integral component of societal well-being, the UAE took proactive measures to address the unique healthcare needs of women through a comprehensive national policy aimed at promoting and enhancing the health and well-being of women in the country throughout their lifecycle. The "Improving Women's Health" policy includes many pillars, including the promotion of maternal, reproductive and sexual health, the prevention and control of communicable and noncommunicable diseases affecting women, and combatting the health effects of violence against women and girls, among others (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[41]</sup>). This policy aligns with and complements the "We the UAE 2031 Vision" which incorporates health as a key pillar for development for both men and women, as well as the "National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031", which aims to make the UAE a global leader in individual and societal quality of life (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[42]</sup>). Table 4 provides an overview of relevant policies in place.

The UAE's unwavering commitment to improving quality of life goes beyond its borders. Recognizing the critical importance of health at all societal levels, the Ministry of Health and Prevention of the UAE led a historic resolution during the 75<sup>th</sup> World Health Assembly in Geneva in May 2022 (United Arab Emirates, 2022<sup>[43]</sup>). This landmark resolution called on the WHO Director-General to develop a comprehensive framework and action plan to promote well-being, and urged governments to create inclusive, equitable, and healthy societies through collaborative, whole-of-government, and whole-of-society approaches. The resolution received unanimous support from all WHO regional delegates, reflecting the UAE's influential leadership in shaping global health policies.

**Table 3. Key indicators on women's health**

		UAE		Year	MENA		Source
		Women	Men		Women	Men	
Life expectancy at birth (years)		84	82	2023	78	74	(United Nations, 2024 <sup>[44]</sup> ). World Population Prospects. Data for all countries are estimates based on historical demographic trends.
Healthy life expectancy at birth (years)		67	67	2021	63	63	(WHO, 2021 <sup>[45]</sup> ). The Global Health Observatory.
Maternal mortality rate (deaths per 100,000 live births)		5.0	-	2022	51.4	-	UAE: (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[46]</sup> ); MENA average: (United Nations, 2024 <sup>[11]</sup> ), SDG Database, (UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2023 <sup>[47]</sup> ) Indicator 3.1.1. Data refer to 2022 estimates.
Neonatal mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 live births)	Modelled estimates	2.5		2024	9.4		(United Nations, 2024 <sup>[11]</sup> ), SDG Database, Indicator 3.2.2.
	Real values	2.1		2023	-		(UAE Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, 2021 <sup>[47]</sup> )
Proportion of births attended by skilled health personnel (%)		99.9		2022	93.6		(United Nations, 2024 <sup>[11]</sup> ), SDG Database, Indicator 3.1.2. Data for the UAE stem from the Ministry of Health and Prevention.
Unmet needs for family planning (%)		17	-	2022	15.4	-	(OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023 <sup>[12]</sup> ), Gender, Institutions and Development Database. Data for all countries are based on

						2022 estimates on projections of Family Planning Indicators.
Adolescent birth rate (per 1,000 women aged 15-19)	2.8	-	2024	21.4	-	(United Nations, 2024 <sup>[44]</sup> ), World Population Prospects. Data for all countries are estimates based on historical demographic trends.
Fertility rate, total (births per woman)	1.2	-	2024	2.4	-	(United Nations, 2024 <sup>[44]</sup> ), World Population Prospects. Data for all countries are estimates based on historical demographic trends.
Cancer, new cases detected (%)	53	47	2021	50	50	UAE: (United Arab Emirates, 2021 <sup>[48]</sup> ); MENA: (Ferlay et al., 2024 <sup>[49]</sup> ), Global Cancer Observatory. Data are drawn from the national cancer registries and national rates are projected to 2022.
Anaemia (among women aged 15-49, %)	24.3	-	2019	31.4	-	(WHO, 2021 <sup>[50]</sup> ), The Global Health Observatory.
Obesity (%)	37.8	29.3	2022	38.2	25.8	(WHO, 2022 <sup>[51]</sup> ), The Global Health Observatory.

Note: Data in the table cover the entire population in the UAE, regardless of their citizenship status. When data are drawn from international databases, the metadata for the UAE are indicated in the table where available. International databases are used to calculate the regional average for benchmarking purposes. The indicated MENA averages are unweighted and cover the following countries: Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia, the United Arab Emirates, the West Bank and Gaza Strip and Yemen. No data on anaemia are available for the West Bank and Gaza Strip, i.e. the MENA average for anaemia is calculated over the remaining 18 MENA countries with data available (WHO, 2021<sup>[50]</sup>).

Healthy life expectancy refers to the average number of years that a person can expect to live in "full health" by taking into account years lived in less than full health due to disease and/or injury (WHO, 2021<sup>[45]</sup>). The Gulf Center for Disease Prevention and Control in collaboration with the UAE's Ministry of Health and Prevention, the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre and the Gulf Health Council released a report estimating the healthy life expectancy rate at birth at 73 years for women and 74 years for men. The data were not included in the table given as the estimation method used differs and would not allow for comparability with the regional average (Gulf Center for Disease Prevention and Control, 2021<sup>[52]</sup>).

Unmet needs for family planning are calculated as the share of currently married or in-union women of reproductive age (15-49 years) who want to stop or delay childbearing but are not using any method of contraception (OECD Development Centre/OECD, 2023<sup>[12]</sup>).

While contraception is available without prescription in pharmacies in the UAE, the gap between women's reproductive behaviours and desired choices remains substantial. In 2022, 17% of women of reproductive age (15-49 years) reported unmet needs for family planning, compared to an average of 15% in the MENA region. In other words, almost one in five women who are currently married or in a union do not use any contraception method despite not wanting to become pregnant. The very low adolescent birth rate (2.8 births per 1,000 women aged 15-19) suggests that family planning needs are less relevant among this age group. Moreover, although many women still declare an unmet need for family planning, fertility rates have dropped significantly in recent years, falling from 2.7 births per woman in 2000, to 1.2 in 2024 (United Nations, 2024<sup>[44]</sup>).

In line with global trends, women are more prone to experiencing non-communicable diseases as compared to men, especially those related to nutrition, diet and cancer (Al Sabbah et al., 2023<sup>[53]</sup>). Anaemia – a key factor in reproductive health – remains high among women of reproductive age, affecting 24% of women aged between 15 and 49 years (WHO, 2021<sup>[50]</sup>). Meanwhile, close to 40% of adult women live with obesity, compared to 30% of men, compared to a regional average of 38% and 26%, for women and men respectively (WHO, 2022<sup>[51]</sup>).<sup>6</sup>

Women are at a greater risk of being diagnosed with cancer and face higher cancer mortality rates than men. Overall, women face a 7.5% risk of dying from cancer before the age of 75 years, compared to a 4.9% risk faced by men (Ferlay et al., 2024<sup>[49]</sup>). In 2021, around 55% of new cancer cases were detected

<sup>6</sup> WHO obesity rates are estimates. Data from the National Health Survey 2018 report obesity rates of 25.1% for men and 30.6% for women (United Arab Emirates, 2018<sup>[76]</sup>).

among women, with breast cancer accounting for close to 37% of diagnoses, while cervical cancer is the fifth leading cancer diagnosis among women (United Arab Emirates, 2021<sup>[48]</sup>). National guidelines for breast cancer screening and diagnosis recommend women screen for breast cancer with mammograms every two years, beginning at the age 40 years, in line with international best practices (United Arab Emirates, 2014<sup>[54]</sup>; WHO, 2014<sup>[55]</sup>). Further, in 2008, the UAE became the first country in the MENA region to introduce the Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, seeking to tackle a driving cause of cervical cancer (Al-Shamsi, 2022<sup>[56]</sup>). However, the uptake of preventative measures remains limited. While official data are not available, estimates suggest that 25% of the eligible population undertakes preventative screenings for prevalent cancers, including for breast and colorectal cancer (Al-Shamsi, 2022<sup>[56]</sup>).

Violence against women is a global pandemic that carries short and long-term consequences for women's physical and mental health, as well as socioeconomic inclusion. Comparable and recent data on the prevalence of violence against women in the UAE as well as other countries of the region remain scarce. The UAE's health legislation includes provisions to protecting women from violence and combating its physical and psychological health effects. For example, any suspected case of physical abuse or exploitation or any form of violence is reported by health personnel according to the protocols in force in this regard, with a full medical report, and the necessary health care is provided to the person. Such cases are then transferred to the relevant authority, as outlined in Article 21 of Federal Law No. (5) of 2019 (Ministry of Health and Prevention, 2019<sup>[57]</sup>).

Female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C), a specific and one of the most extreme forms of violence against women, particularly puts girls' well-being at risk. This harmful practice impacts over 125 million women and girls worldwide, particular across Africa, the MENA region, and South Asia (Al Awar et al., 2020<sup>[58]</sup>). Girls and women who undergo FGM/C face increased short- and long-term health risks including severe pain, excessive bleeding, infections, or childbirth complications. Small-scale studies attest to the practice of FGM/C in the UAE, yet a lack of up-to-date data prevents a full understanding of the current situation.

### ***Strong health systems for better health outcomes***

While the Ministry of Health and Prevention is primarily responsible for the health system's regulation in the UAE, healthcare is also regulated at the level of each Emirate. For example, the Emirates Health Services regulates health systems in the Northern Emirates, while the Department of Health is responsible for Abu Dhabi, and the Dubai Health Authority oversees the healthcare sector in Dubai (United Arab Emirates, 2020<sup>[21]</sup>). Emiratis are entitled to free public health care services in all seven Emirates. Insurance coverage among non-Emiratis is over 85%, based on private insurance generally obtained through employers, as required by law (United Arab Emirates, 2022<sup>[59]</sup>).

Access to healthcare depends on multiple factors, including structural determinants such as the number of hospitals, clinics, or health personnel within reach. On average, healthcare worker density in the UAE accounted for 142 healthcare workers for 10 000 people in 2020, which is above the recommended minimum by the World Health Organization – 45 healthcare personnel per 10 000 people (United Arab Emirates, 2020<sup>[21]</sup>). The UAE's health personnel density is higher than in Saudi Arabia (84) and in line with other advanced economies such as France (155) or the United States (160) (WHO, 2016<sup>[60]</sup>; WHO, n.d.<sup>[61]</sup>). Generally, health personnel density should be understood in the context of demographics and serve to meet the population's healthcare demands. The government's "National Strategy for Nursing and Midwifery" aims, among other objectives, to encourage more citizens to join the profession, and ensure the quality of their training (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[62]</sup>).

### ***The legal and policy framework governing women's health***

Since 2019, the UAE has enacted several legal reforms and policy measures which expand women's equality and freedom to access healthcare (Table 4). Amendments to the Personal Status Law in 2019 and 2020 enhanced married women's (reproductive) rights. Yet, Article 49 of the 2024 Personal Status Law maintains that a wife shall obey her husband in line with custom and breastfeed their children, unless there is an impediment (United Arab Emirates, 2024<sup>[22]</sup>).

Recent reforms have expanded women's reproductive autonomy. The Federal Law No. (7) of 2019 guarantees women's rights to reproductive health services by regulating medical assistance techniques for reproduction and ensuring safe and fair practices in accordance with medical and legal standards (United Arab Emirates, 2019<sup>[63]</sup>).<sup>7</sup> Moreover, in 2023, the UAE expanded women's access to safe and legal abortion in cases of emergency, including, for instance, when continuing the pregnancy would put the pregnant woman's or foetus' life at risk (United Arab Emirates, 2023<sup>[64]</sup>). Previously, the consent of both spouses was required; under the new law, the pregnant women alone can provide consent. If she is unable to do so, the father can provide consent, although the requirement for consent may be waived altogether in emergency situations. The new law also increased the number of hospitals licensed to perform the procedure.

**Table 4. Legal frameworks and policies supporting women's health**

<b>Legislation</b>	
2016	Federal Law No. (4) on Medical Liability
2020	Federal Law No. (13) on Public Health
2019	Federal Law No. (7) Concerning Medically Assisted Reproduction
2020	Ministerial Resolution (257) Regarding the Implementation of Some Provisions Concerning the Implementation of Some Provisions of Cabinet Resolution No. (21) of 2018 Regulating the Marketing of Products Related to Infant and Young Child
2018	Cabinet Resolution No. (21) of 2018 regarding the breastfeeding protection system and regulating the marketing of food and products related to infants and young children
<b>National policies and plans</b>	
2017	The National Policy for Mental Health Promotion and its Executive Plan
2017	The National Plan for Maternal and Child Health; and the National Strategy for Motherhood and Childhood 2017–2021
2017	The National Plan for Promoting Adolescent and Youth Health
2018	The UAE Mother, Child, and Youth Friendly Strategy
2019	The National Policy for Combating Communicable Diseases and its Executive Plan
2019	The National Strategy for Wellbeing 2031
2020	The National Immunization Policy and its Executive Plan
2022	The National Policy for Promoting Healthy Lifestyles and its Executive Plan
2023	The National Youth Agenda 2031
2024	National Policy for the Promotion of Women's Health

Source: (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[65]</sup>) UAE Public Policies, <https://uaelegislation.gov.ae/en/policy/list>; (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[28]</sup>), UAE Legislation, <https://uaelegislation.gov.ae/>.

Note: The health of adolescents is integrated into broader national strategies but also targeted via specific initiatives. For instance, the "Masar Project" introduced by the Ministry of Health and Prevention, aims at promoting healthy lifestyles among school students.

<sup>7</sup> The law further prohibits any illegal or exploitative practices related to medically assisted reproductive technologies, ensuring the protection and dignity of women, and requires written consent by women before any procedure related to artificial insemination or medical assistance.

Existing legal frameworks risk limiting certain groups of women's access to healthcare, notably unmarried and migrant women. Although the new Penal Code of 2022<sup>8</sup> constitutes an improvement, it continues to contain provisions that could jeopardise women's access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services, notably for unmarried women. Specifically, the law establishes that women cannot obtain birth certificates for children born out of wedlock, nor if one of the parents has an expired passport, identification card, or visa. Migrant women in particular may face difficulties in officially registering the births of their children which, in turn, is a requirement for accessing post-natal care for the mother and her child (United Arab Emirates, 2023<sup>[66]</sup>).

The government has also taken steps to mitigate violence against women. The Federal Decree-Law on the Protection Against Domestic Violence, enacted in 2019, criminalised physical, psychological, economic or sexual abuse perpetrated by a family member (United Arab Emirates, 2019<sup>[67]</sup>). In 2024, the UAE published a set of policy guidelines aiming to address gender-based violence including in the online space. The guidelines notably urge technology companies to develop strategies to prevent technology facilitated violence (Government of Dubai, 2024<sup>[68]</sup>). Moreover, various public facilities have been established to expand care services for victims/survivors of domestic violence. For example, the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children provides support and psychological care to victims/survivors of domestic violence, abuse and human trafficking from all nationalities and backgrounds. Similar institutions exist in the other Emirates (United Arab Emirates, n.d.<sup>[69]</sup>). Furthermore, the Ministerial Resolution No. (14) of 2021 on the Patient's Rights and Duties Charter enhances women's rights by respecting their dignity and privacy, including victims of violence, guarantees their health and psychological protection, and women are encouraged to seek health institutions to obtain care and support without fear of stigma or discrimination (United Arab Emirates, 2021<sup>[70]</sup>).

At the same time, FGM/C, an extreme form of violence against women and girls with severe short- and long-term health risks, is not adequately prohibited. While FGM/C is not explicitly prohibited by law, the Federal Decree-Law of 2016 on Medical Liability includes provisions that forbid physicians from performing unnecessary procedures (United Arab Emirates, 2016<sup>[71]</sup>). The Ministry of Health and Prevention in UAE is currently working on updating the Public Health Law No. 13 of 2020 to include a direct ban on female genital mutilation. The proposed provisions include awareness-raising of the harms caused by female genital mutilation, and prohibition of any action that leads to female genital mutilation.

### ***Social determinants of women's health***

Social norms play a significant role in women's reproductive choices. Over the past decades, government initiatives have supported women's education and labour force participation, which has contributed to a shift in traditional gender norms (see Social determinants of women's economic participation). Higher levels of female education, as well as later age at marriage and first births have contributed to the declining fertility rates in the UAE (Shukla, Karabchuk and Al Neyadi, 2023<sup>[72]</sup>). Evidence further suggests that young people with more gender-egalitarian attitudes in terms of household responsibilities indicate a smaller ideal number of children (Shukla, Karabchuk and Al Neyadi, 2023<sup>[72]</sup>). This stresses the importance for the UAE to further strengthen institutional measures for childbearing and young parents in order to prevent too much

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<sup>8</sup> The reform of the Penal Code in 2022 raised the age of sexual majority to 18 years and partly decriminalised sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Under Article 409 of the new Penal Code, consensual sexual intercourse outside of marriage for adults aged more than 18 years remains a crime punished by jail time but is only prosecuted if the spouse or the guardian files a complaint (United Arab Emirates, 2022<sup>[50]</sup>). The Penal Code also establishes that having a child out of wedlock remains punishable with jail time (for both the man and the woman), unless the couple gets married or one or both of them acknowledges paternity of the child and obtains identity documents in line with UAE law or the law of the country of which they are nationals.

of a drop in fertility rates which can put pressure on care and social protection systems as it is already the case in many advanced economies.

In addition to socio-economic and educational factors, men's preferences and knowledge on family planning methods seem to dominate decisions about contraception and family planning, potentially hampering women's reproductive autonomy. In 2018, a small-scale study on patterns and determinants of contraceptive use in the UAE revealed that men influence their spouses' contraceptive choices in over three quarters of cases – a finding in line with other studies and social expectations according to which men should be decision-makers, including over family planning (OECD, 2021<sup>[18]</sup>; Abdulrahman et al., 2019<sup>[73]</sup>). However, these findings are not representative, and more research and up-to-date data are needed to fully understand how decision-making patterns within the couple affect women's contraceptive choices.

Finally, while change is underway, social norms uphold expectations of women to remain modest and stay in the household. Studies suggest that these norms may limit their opportunities for increased physical activity. For instance, women are on average more sedentary than men, with only 27% of women achieving recommended levels of daily physical activity, compared to 40% of men (Dalibalta et al., 2021<sup>[74]</sup>).

### ***Moving forward: Insights from the policy dialogue to enhance women's health***

- *Enhance service provision on health*
  - The private sector and philanthropies should increase their investments in services and products that target women's health gaps specifically – including mental health.
- *Institutionalise age and cultural appropriate health education:*
  - The government, together with civil society organisations and development partners should consider integrating age and cultural appropriate health education, including sexual and reproductive health, in the national curricula.
  - Governments should work with civil society organisations and philanthropies to create programmes that enhance women's knowledge about their own health, including specific health risks such as cervical and breast cancer. Implemented programmes should also seek to inform women how they can access relevant services and information.
- *Establish targeted programmes to transform social norms*
  - The government should work with civil society organisations and other key stakeholders – including philanthropies – to implement programmes that transform social norms which limit women's access to or decision-making power over their own health.
- *Invest in quantitative and qualitative data collection:*
  - The national statistical institute should regularly collect data on women's contraceptive preferences and decision patterns, as well as on the prevalence of violence against women, given limited data availability.
  - Policymakers, the private sector and philanthropies should invest in data collection on the social determinants of women's health outcomes. Specifically, nationally representative quantitative and qualitative studies – including by the different Emiratīs – should be carried out, in partnership with civil society organisations or research institutions.

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