



# Measuring the Gender Responsiveness of the UAE's Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements

Dr Damyana Bakardzhieva & Dr Sara Chehab

**Disclaimer:** The views expressed in this publication are solely those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, an autonomous federal entity, or the UAE Government.  
Copyright: Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy 2024.

## About the Authors:



### **Dr Damyana Bakardzhieva**

is the Senior Research Fellow leading the 'Economic Diplomacy' research programme at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA). With a dual PhD in Economics from the University of Nice Sophia-Antipolis (France) and Sofia University (Bulgaria), Dr Bakardzhieva has taught Economics and Sustainable Development in Bulgaria, France, Monaco, the United States, and Egypt. Prior to joining AGDA, she was Chief Sustainability Consultant for Global Economics and Finance Consulting (Monaco) and Associate Department Chair and Director of Graduate Programmes at the Department of Economics of the American University in Cairo. She is the Senior Editor, Economics, for the International Journal of Emerging Markets. Her research focuses on international macroeconomics, comparative economic studies, and sustainability.



### **Dr Sara Chehab**

is a Senior Research Fellow at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA). Dr Chehab curates the 'Women and Diplomacy' research programme at AGDA. She also trains diplomats on the Women, Peace and Security agenda and contemporary global and economic affairs. She is the lead researcher and author of the annual 'Women in Diplomacy Index', a unique measure of women ambassadors around the world. Prior to this role, Dr Chehab was Assistant Professor at Zayed University in Dubai.

## Summary

- As the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is set to host the World Trade Organization's (WTO) 13th Ministerial Conference (MC-13) in February 2024, this Insight explores the texts of four Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs) signed by the UAE between 2022 and 2023 and analyses if they are used effectively in trade policy as a tool to empower women.
- Since 2021, CEPAs have become a key instrument in the UAE's economic diversification and economic diplomacy arsenal. While the UAE's ability to sign Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) remains within the wider Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) framework, CEPAs have given the UAE the economic autonomy it requires to lower and remove trade and investment barriers with key states and to significantly increase commercial ties with leading and emerging economies across the world.
- The inclusion of gender provisions in trade agreements promotes women's empowerment across various economic sectors. The 2017 Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment, which the UAE has endorsed, makes CEPAs an ideal avenue for promoting gender equality in business and trade. While the UAE has reached a leadership position regionally on several gender equality indicators, women remain underrepresented in the private sector. Agreements such as CEPAs thus become an important avenue to promote women's economic empowerment.
- This Insight finds that the four CEPAs with India, Israel, Indonesia, and Türkiye, which have already come into force in 2022 and 2023, contain gender provisions in their texts, signalling a clear commitment to include women and use growing trade and investment ties to promote women-owned businesses. Nonetheless, gender mainstreaming in these CEPAs remains limited to encouraging women-owned and women-led small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and, except for the UAE-India CEPA, have limited responsiveness when it comes to addressing the gender imbalances and inequalities that women in business face.
- The first section of this Insight looks at the general nexus between trade and gender equality. The second explores the best practices in gender provisions in FTAs. The third section zooms in on the UAE and analyses the texts and supporting documents of the UAE's existing CEPAs that have entered into force in the 2022–2023 period. The Insight then measures the gender responsiveness of each CEPA deal across 10 key metrics to try and gauge each agreement's level of responsiveness towards gender issues.
- With four CEPAs already ratified, and several others at different stages of negotiations (see Tables 1 and 2), the Insight lists some policy recommendations which could ensure that women businesses remain an important cornerstone of the UAE's economic diplomacy and economic diversification efforts. These recommendations include:
  - aligning CEPAs with domestic gender equality strategies by strengthening gender provisions in future texts and referring to existing international conventions;
  - making explicit mention of gender provisions in different sections of the CEPAs' texts;
  - including provisions related to skills development of women in all CEPAs;
  - acknowledging the importance of corporate social responsibility in the CEPAs;
  - setting up a specialised committee that can monitor the gender responsiveness of the CEPAs during the negotiations process and beyond;
  - compiling trade and gender-related data using best practices;
  - involving or consulting with the UAE's Gender Balance Council and other entities in the process of negotiating future CEPAs;
  - raising awareness, through training courses and publications, that trade policies and agreements can be used as tools to empower women.

## The Issue

Since 2022, the UAE has signed six Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreements (CEPAs). Of these, four had come into force or were ratified by the end of 2023. While not called free trade agreements (FTAs), CEPAs have come to encompass similar goals such as removing or lowering barriers to investment and trade, enhancing market access, and simplifying customs procedures to boost the UAE's economy and solidify its position as the Gulf region's leading trade hub. By including provisions related to investments, services, and disputes settlement mechanisms, CEPAs are in effect broader than a trade agreement. In addition to the six CEPAs that were signed in 2022 and 2023, as illustrated in Table 2, the UAE is currently negotiating 16 other agreements.

**Table 1: List of Signed and Ratified CEPAs**

Country	Date	CEPA Ratification or Signing
India	May 2022	Entry into force
Israel	April 2023	Ratification
Indonesia	September 2023	Ratification
Türkiye	September 2023	Ratification
Cambodia	June 2023	CEPA signed
Georgia	October 2023	CEPA signed

Source: Authors' Compilation (2024) from Various Sources<sup>1</sup>

**Table 2: List of CEPAs and Status of Negotiations**

Country	Date	Status of Negotiation
Australia	December 2023	Negotiations launched
Chile	February 2022	Negotiations almost completed
Colombia	December 2023	Negotiations completed
Costa Rica	March 2023	Negotiations almost completed
Kenya	July 2022	Negotiations launched
Malaysia	May 2023	Negotiations launched
Mauritius	December 2023	Negotiations completed
New Zealand	September 2023	Negotiations launched
Pakistan	January 2024	Negotiations completed
Philippines	September 2023	Negotiations almost completed
Republic of Congo-Brazzaville	December 2023	Negotiations completed
Serbia	September 2023	Negotiations launched
South Korea	October 2023	Negotiations completed
Thailand	December 2023	Negotiations almost completed
Ukraine	March 2023	Negotiations ongoing
Vietnam	December 2023	Negotiations completed

Source: Authors' Compilation (2024) from Various Sources<sup>2</sup>

CEPAs, much like other FTAs, have the potential to boost the UAE economy significantly. For instance, trade between the UAE and India grew by 10% in the first year after signing a CEPA with the volume of non-oil trade increasing as well.<sup>3</sup> In addition, the UAE expects that the agreements it signed with India, Indonesia, and Israel would expand its economy by 2.6% by 2030.<sup>4</sup> Taken together, all CEPAs are projected to increase UAE exports by 33% and add \$42 billion to the country's GDP by 2031.<sup>5</sup> As such, CEPAs constitute a core element of the UAE's economic diversification strategy and play a vital role in the country's economic development efforts geared towards doubling the GDP by 2031 through enhanced non-oil exports and tourism, among other sectors.<sup>6</sup>

Based on the December 2017 Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment,<sup>7</sup> which was launched at the WTO's 11th Ministerial Conference, countries that have endorsed this declaration – like the UAE – are bound to ensure, when negotiating and signing a trade agreement, that participation of women in trade increases. The Declaration aims to remove barriers faced by women in entering the global marketplace and trade agreements are a key avenue for ensuring that women are not left behind.

Despite solid advances in women's economic empowerment in the UAE, the current gender provisions found in the CEPAs are limited to women-owned and women-led SMEs. This represents a missed opportunity, especially considering the significant economic contributions that women entrepreneurs can make. The texts and the gender provisions found in the CEPAs with India, Indonesia, Israel, and Türkiye do not fully echo the country's clear commitment to addressing gender issues in its national decision-making and policymaking.

The current texts of the CEPAs exhibit a degree of gender responsiveness that may benefit from further enhancement, as indicated by several metrics (see Table 4). There is an opportunity available to address this situation positively. With more CEPAs currently being negotiated and two of them waiting to enter into force, the UAE can still ensure that the commitment to gender equality and women empowerment it has espoused, both at the domestic and global levels, is included across all its bilateral economic deals.

## The Trade Policy and Gender Nexus

Gender inequality is recognised as a significant challenge to economic development, and achieving economic empowerment for women has become a cornerstone of sustainable development, as recognised by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5 on Gender Equality.<sup>8</sup> Women's participation in trade provides openness and sustainability for economic growth. Economies with better opportunities for women are more competitive<sup>9</sup> and women's economic empowerment has a positive spillover effect on society, leading to better female literacy rates, lower maternal mortality and increased well-being of women and children.

Despite the positive correlations between women's economic empowerment and economic growth, women globally still face a variety of barriers in trade and commerce that prevent female entrepreneurs from internationalising. Around the world, there exist cultural and regulatory biases, such as the legal limitations on women's right to work, to own assets or to inherit them. Further, there are the maternity-related obstacles (lack of paid maternity leave), employment restrictions, lack of access to capital and productive resources, skills mismatch and inadequate market information and business networks.<sup>10</sup>

Trade liberalisation can thus be a powerful force towards closing gender gaps by providing new opportunities for women's empowerment through opening new markets for their products and through providing formal employment to many women.<sup>11</sup> As such, trade policy could be a strategy to increase women economic participation and the achievement of the positive spillovers it brings. Seen in this light, CEPAs can be a catalyst by ensuring the inclusion of women across all the economic sectors that the deals cover.

## Gender Provisions in Free Trade Agreements

The gender-responsiveness of any FTA depends on a multitude of factors, including the explicit or implicit mention of gender issues within the texts of the agreements, the frequency and place of those references, the type of gender provisions and their designated areas, the creation of institutions to monitor the implementation of such provisions, the funding of such institutions, and the mechanisms for dispute settlements around gender issues, among others.

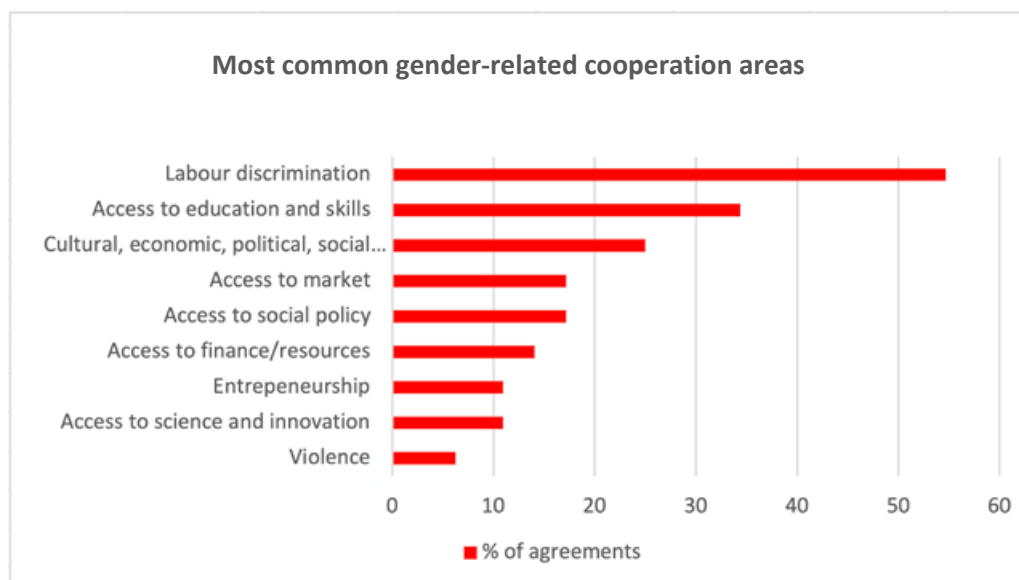
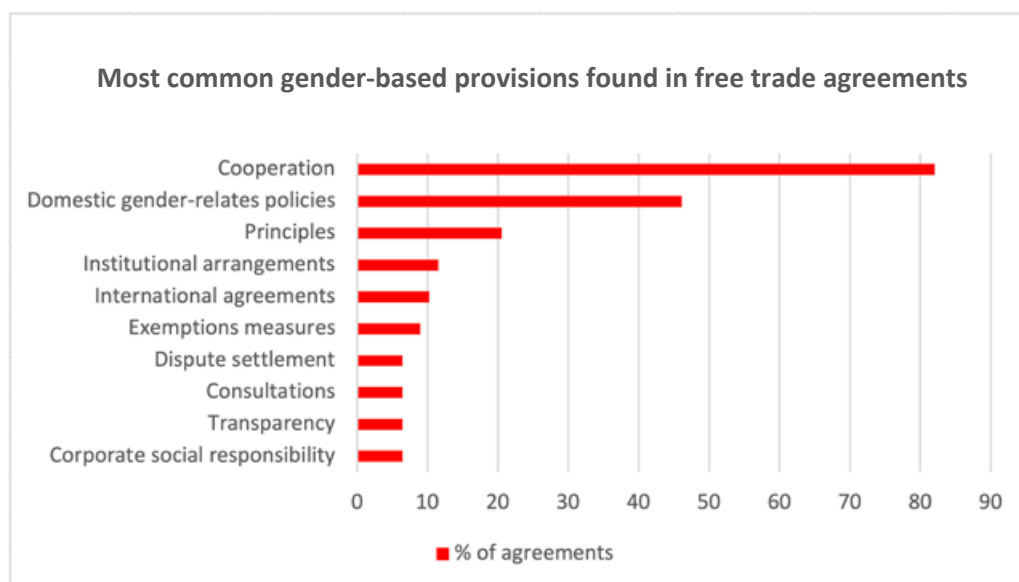
FTAs have a rather long tradition of including 'non-trade concerns' in the text of the agreements, such as labour non-discrimination, fair trade, corporate social responsibility, human rights, rights of vulnerable people, and environmental protection. Gender equality and women's empowerment are included in most FTAs implicitly as reference to some of those non-trade concerns mentioned above. However, explicit text in trade agreements addressing the issue of gender equality can increase government commitments and provide an avenue for civil society and citizens to hold the government responsible for gender-equality in their implementation.<sup>12</sup> The 1957 Treaty of Rome that established the European Economic Community included the very first explicit gender-related article in a free trade agreement and it required all member states to guarantee equal pay for women and men.

References to women and gender can be made either directly in the FTA document (such as in the preamble, in a non-specific article, or in a specific article or chapter), in a side document (side letter, joint statement, memorandum, or protocol) or in a post-FTA document (a joint declaration, directive, resolution or another agreement).

After analysing 560 FTAs, of which 298 had entered into force and were notified to the WTO, economist Jose-Antonio Monteiro<sup>13</sup> made the following observations:

- Inclusion of gender-related provisions is not a recent phenomenon, with some provisions dating to pre-1990. Implicit gender provisions are way more common than explicit ones, with 243 agreements incorporating them and only 78 FTAs having explicit provisions as of 2019.
- While most agreements have between 1 and 10 gender-related provisions, some recent (post-2016) particularly North-North agreements have more than 30 provisions, significantly expanding the scope of gender issues covered.

**Figure 1: Most Common Gender-Related Provisions in Free Trade Agreements**

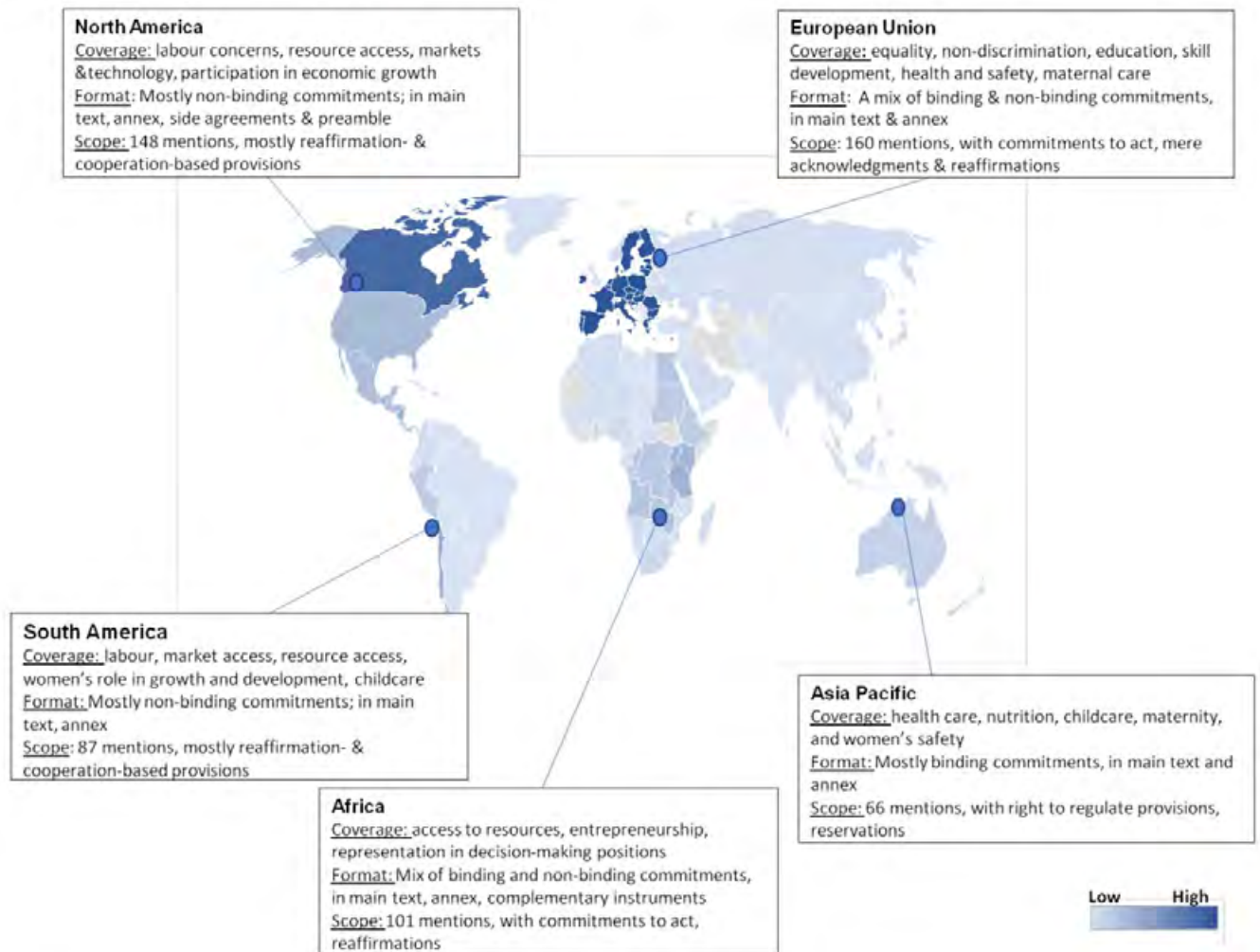


Source: Authors' compilations based on Monteiro (2018)

As displayed in Figure 1, gender-related provisions do not follow a specific and unique template, but most share at least one common type – the one related to cooperation, more specifically on gender-based labour discrimination which is found in approximately 55% of trade agreements. Access to education and skills are the second most common area of cooperation found in 35% of trade agreements while the cultural, economic, political, and social development provisions are found in approximately 25% of trade agreements.

In addition, a 2021 comparative international study by Amrita Bahri identifies notable variations in the incidence of gender-responsiveness in agreements across various continents. As illustrated in Figure 2, the European Union is leading in the field, with 78% of its trade agreements being gender-responsive, while for North America the share is 38%, 32% for Africa, 20% for South America and only 14% for Asia Pacific.<sup>14</sup> These regional differences can be considered when the UAE is pursuing CEPA negotiations with countries from different parts of the world. In addition, there is clearly room for the UAE to take a leadership role in mainstreaming gender in the Asia-Pacific trade agreements.

**Figure 2: Gender Mainstreaming in Trade Agreements Across Continents**



**Notes:**

\*The colour code reflects the aggregation of the number of times gender-explicit words are used in all WTO notified

Source: Figure adapted from Bahri (2021)

A recent example of a commitment to address gender equality in a free trade agreement can be found in the Canada-Chile Free Trade Agreement. While adopted in 1997, the agreement was amended during the 2017-2019 period to create a more open, inclusive, and progressive rules-based trading environment that includes women. The modernisation included the creation of a new Trade and Gender Chapter, a first for Canada's free trade agreements and a blueprint for mainstreaming gender issues in FTAs.<sup>15</sup>

## Women Economic Empowerment in the UAE

The UAE has made solid strides to empower women in the private sector and to ensure their equal participation and treatment in the workforce. For instance, a 2021 law requires that every listed company in the UAE appoints at least one woman to its board of directors to ensure that gender equality is reflected at the highest echelons.<sup>16</sup> The UAE also prides itself on having the highest number of women on the 2023 Forbes list of the "100 Most Powerful Arab Businesswomen", with a total of 15 women in the ranking and two Emirati women in the top five.<sup>17</sup> However, when it comes to ownership, women in the UAE constitute approximately only 10% of business owners in the private sector.<sup>18</sup> There was a noticeable increase in the number of women working in the private sector in 2023,<sup>19</sup> yet progress is slow. The inclusion of women-specific provisions in the CEPAs that are currently being negotiated could help tilt the balance and ensure greater representation.

At the national level, the UAE recognises the importance of incorporating a gender perspective in its development policies, programmes, and practices. The National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women provides a framework for the government, private sector, and civil society organisations to work on the following priorities.

- Maintaining the sustainability of Emirati women's achievements and continue achieving further gains.
- Maintaining the social fabric and cohesion through integrating the roles between men and women to build a strong and cohesive society that could cope with emerging changes.
- Providing a decent and safe social welfare based on high quality foundations for women.
- Developing the spirit of responsibility and strengthening the position of the UAE's women in regional and international fora.<sup>20</sup>

In 2018, the UAE adopted a Law on Equal Wages and Salaries for Men and Women, which is part of the Strategy for the Empowerment of Emirati Women, and complements Article 4 of the UAE Labour Law that already provides female workers with equal wage to that of male workers.<sup>21</sup> Maternity leave is guaranteed under Article 30 of the Federal Decree Law No. 33 of 2021 on the Regulation of Labour Relations in the Private Sector of the 'UAE Labour Law'.

Furthermore, the UAE has a National Platform for Gender Balance and a Gender Balance Council (GBC), whose 2026 Strategy<sup>22</sup> incorporates four strategic pillars, the first of which relates to the economic participation, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion of women to close the economic gender gap, increase women's participation, retention, and leadership in the UAE economy, as well as enhance women's literacy and presence in entrepreneurial sectors. That goal positions the GBC as a strategic partner that could advise on streamlining gender provisions within the texts and applications of CEPAs.

At the international level, the UAE is a signatory since 2014 to the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), just like India, Indonesia, Israel, and Türkiye,<sup>23</sup> the four countries with which CEPAs are in force. The UAE has also signed the Hours of Work (Industry) Convention (1982), the Equal Remuneration Convention (1996), the Convention concerning Night Work of Women Employed in Industry (1982) and the Convention on Minimum Age (1996).<sup>24</sup> Yet, our analysis finds that none of those engagements are affirmed or reaffirmed in the UAE's current CEPAs.

## Gender Provisions in the UAE’s CEPAs

As of December 2023, the UAE has signed six CEPAs, four of which have already entered into force, namely India, Indonesia, Israel, and Türkiye. The UAE has also completed and signed CEPAs with Cambodia and Georgia, but these were not ratified at the time of publishing this Insight and therefore their full text is not available for analysis.

Our reading of the four CEPAs finds that all the texts contain at least one explicit gender-related provision in the main documents, as per the extracts presented in Table 3. All the provisions are listed in a non-gender-specific article, with most making references to women within the chapter on SMEs. Other provisions are also found in a chapter on cooperation activities. They are all listed within the CEPAs’ main document. No provision is present in the documents’ preambles, which is usually a signal of prioritising and streamlining gender issues in trade.

As side documents to the official texts of the agreements, the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) has published non-technical handbooks presenting the main provisions and benefits of the CEPAs, addressed to the domestic business community. Even though the UAE-India CEPA comes out as the most gender-responsive of the four that were analysed in this Insight (see Table 4), the CEPA Handbook with India does not feature the women-related provisions from the original CEPA document.

The India-UAE CEPA is the only one to mention entrepreneurship education for women, which is one of the ways to demonstrate specific commitment to removing gender-based barriers to trade and providing access to resources for women. While it doesn’t explicitly focus on fields that can translate to high-paid job opportunities, such as STEM and ICT, entrepreneurship education goes beyond traditional education and skill development in farming fisheries, textiles, teaching, nursing, or handloom, for example.

In addition, the India-UAE CEPA is the only one to create a specialised committee to monitor the implementation or operation of provisions that include gender concerns among other areas – the Committee on SME Issues. Besides having clearly defined role and functions, and having scheduled annual meetings, this committee is directly in charge of one of the gender-based provisions of the agreement, namely facilitating “the exchange of information on entrepreneurship education and awareness programmes for youth and women to promote the entrepreneurial environment in the territories of the Parties”.

As illustrated in Table 3, while references to women are found mostly in the chapters on SMEs, except for the UAE–Israel CEPA, the other three CEPAs lump together gender-related provisions with others relating to youth in the texts of the agreements. As such, references to women-led SMEs appear in the same article and sentence as youth-led SMEs. Gender provisions are, therefore, not exclusive or given specific attention in the texts of the CEPAs with India, Indonesia, and Türkiye.

**Table 3: Gender Provisions in UAE’s CEPAs and their Supporting Documents**

CEPA	Agreement Provisions	Handbook Provisions
<p><b>India</b> Signed 18/02/2022</p> <p>Entered into force 01/05/2022</p>	<p>CHAPTER 13: MICRO, SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES <sup>25</sup> Article 13.2: Cooperation to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs With a view to more robust <b>cooperation</b> between the Parties to enhance commercial opportunities for SMEs, each Party shall seek to increase trade and investment opportunities, and in particular shall: [...] (b) strengthen collaboration with the other Party on activities to <b>promote SMEs owned by women</b> and youth, as well as start-ups, and promote partnerships among these SMEs and their participation in international trade; [...]</p> <p>ARTICLE 13.4 <b>Committee on SME Issues</b> 1. The Parties shall establish the Committee on SME Issues (SME Committee) comprising representatives of each Party. 2. The SME Committee shall: [...] (l) <b>facilitate the exchange of information on entrepreneurship education and awareness programs for youth and women</b> to promote the entrepreneurial environment in the territories of the Parties; [...]</p>	n/a <sup>26</sup>

<p><b>Israel</b> Signed 31/05/2022</p> <p>Ratified 01/04/2023</p>	<p>CHAPTER 13: SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES <sup>27</sup> Article 13.2: <b>Cooperation</b> to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs With a view to more robust cooperation between the Parties to enhance commercial opportunities for SMEs, the Parties may: [...] (b) collaborate on activities to <b>promote SMEs owned by women and their participation in international trade [...]</b></p>	<p>Strengthens cooperation to enhance commercial opportunities for SMEs by: - Encouraging collaboration on activities to <b>promote women-owned SMEs</b> and their participation in international trade <sup>28</sup></p>
<p><b>Indonesia</b> Signed 01/07/2022</p> <p>Ratified 01/09/2023</p>	<p>CHAPTER 13: SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES <sup>29</sup> Article 13.2: <b>Cooperation</b> 1. The Parties shall strengthen their cooperation under this Chapter, which may include: [...] (b) strengthening their collaboration on activities to <b>promote SMEs owned by women</b> and youth, as well as start-ups, and [...]</p>	<p>Strengthens cooperation between dedicated SMEs centres, incubators and accelerators, export assistance centres, <b>SMEs owned by youth and women</b> and start-ups <sup>30</sup></p>
<p><b>Türkiye</b> Signed 03/03/2023</p> <p>Ratified 01/09/2023</p>	<p>SECTION 13-B: COOPERATION <sup>31</sup> ARTICLE 13.8: <b>Cooperation</b> Activities and Initiatives The Parties shall endeavour to cooperate on the subject matter covered by this Chapter, such as through appropriate coordination, training and <b>exchange of information between their respective intellectual property offices</b>, or other institutions, as determined by each Party. Cooperation activities and initiatives undertaken under this Chapter shall be subject to the availability of resources, upon request, and on terms and conditions mutually agreed upon between the Parties. Cooperation may cover areas such as: [...] d) <b>intellectual property issues relevant to: [...]</b> and (iv) empowering women and youth;</p> <p>CHAPTER 15: SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES ARTICLE 15.2: <b>Cooperation</b> to Increase Trade and Investment Opportunities for SMEs With a view to more robust cooperation between the Parties to enhance commercial opportunities for SMEs, each Party shall seek to increase trade and investment opportunities, and in particular shall: [...] (b) strengthen its collaboration with the other Party on activities to <b>promote SMEs owned by women</b> and youth, as well as start-ups, and promote partnership among these SMEs and their participation in international trade [...]</p>	<p>Strengthens cooperation to enhance commercial opportunities for SMEs by: - Encouraging collaboration on activities to <b>promote women-owned SMEs</b> and their participation in international trade <sup>32</sup></p>

Source: Authors' Compilation (2024)

## Gender Responsiveness of UAE CEPAs: Findings and Analysis

A 2020 examination by the International Trade Centre (ITC) of 73 FTAs across 25 Commonwealth countries revealed that only 35% explicitly mentioned gender.<sup>33</sup> The study also found that 67% of FTAs had a limited level of gender responsiveness, meaning that they failed to mainstream gender concerns, and were therefore “gender-blind”. Barely 5% of the reviewed accords<sup>34</sup> had an advanced level of gender responsiveness.

To measure the gender responsiveness of the UAE’s CEPAs, we use the ITC framework which measures each trade agreement using 10 dimensions related to gender equality. The framework then yields three possible results: ‘limited responsiveness’ (for agreements that do not mention or consider a particular element of the framework within the text, displayed in red in Table 4), ‘evolving responsiveness’ (for agreements that do take gender into account albeit in a limited capacity, displayed in yellow), and ‘advanced responsiveness’ (for agreements that mainstream gender across the entire text and subsequent agreements, highlighted in green).

As illustrated in Table 4, our analysis finds that all four UAE CEPAs under study fall within the range of evolving to limited responsiveness to gender. The UAE–India CEPA is the most gender responsive, although on average, it has an evolving level of gender responsiveness. The UAE–Türkiye CEPA is the second CEPA in our ranking to have an evolving level of gender responsiveness. The CEPAs with Indonesia and Israel have the lowest levels of gender responsiveness and mainstreaming. Overall, no gender-sensitivity is registered enough in any of the four CEPAs to assess them as being advanced in their level of gender responsiveness.

Among the 10 dimensions of the assessment framework, three represent areas for potential improvement for the UAE as they all displayed a limited level of gender responsiveness and are highlighted in red in Table 4. The first area is review and funding (dimension 7), because none of the CEPAs establish mechanisms needed to ensure the implementation of the commitments and understandings related to gender specifically. Assessing the impact of implementing the gender provisions in the CEPAs is important to inform future economic diplomacy initiatives and collecting gender-specific trade data is a crucial prerequisite for this.

The second area is settlement of disputes (dimension 8). While all UAE CEPAs have outlined dispute settlement mechanisms, those do not apply to areas related to cooperation activities and therefore are not applicable to the gender-specific provisions as those only appear under cooperation activities. A solution to this would not entail creating different dispute settlement methods but would rather imply that gender-specific provisions make their way to some of the other areas of the CEPAs. Those could include the agreements’ principles, institutional arrangements, domestic gender-relates policies or exemptions measures.

The third area leaving room for significant improvement is the area of minimum legal standards (dimension 10). The current UAE CEPAs do not mandate standards such as equal pay, reproductive rights, care work, representation, or gender-based anti-discrimination and anti-violence. In any case, UAE laws already strive to empower and promote social inclusion for all, and already address issues such as equal pay and maternity leave. As already mentioned, the country has a Gender Balance Council, whose objectives are to reduce the gender gap across all government sectors, enhance the UAE’s ranking in global competitiveness reports on gender balance and promote gender balance in decision-making positions.<sup>35</sup>

**Table 4: Assessment of Gender-Responsiveness of UAE CEPAs**

Dimension	India	Indonesia	Israel	Türkiye
<b>I. Frequency of relevant provisions</b>				
1. Does the given FTA (main text, side instruments or annexes) mention the term gender/women/female/girl/sex/mother/maternity (referred to as gender-related term)?	Green	Green	Green	Green
2. How many times is a gender-related term (gender/women/female/girl/sex/mother/maternity) mentioned in the given FTA including side instruments, footnotes and/or annexes (excluding mention of products)?	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
<b>II. Location of relevant provisions</b>				
3. Is there a mention of gender-related concerns in the given FTA's preamble?	Red	Red	Red	Red
4. In which part of the given FTA are 50% or more of gender-explicit provisions located?	Green	Green	Green	Green
<b>III. Affirmations and reaffirmations</b>				
5. Does the agreement demonstrate members' willingness or commitment to incorporate gender perspectives into their economic growth and development, policies, programmes, decision-making, policymaking and practices at the national level?	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow
6. Are there any references or affirmations or re-affirmations to existing international conventions or declarations or other international instruments directly or indirectly related to gender issues?	Red	Red	Red	Red
<b>IV. Cooperation activities</b>				
7. Does the given FTA contain provisions that prescribe cooperation activities aimed at the elimination or reduction of barriers to trade for women and enhancement of women's empowerment (such as cooperation on access to education, access to finance, formation of business networks and others)?	Green	Green	Green	Green
8. Does the given FTA among its cooperation activities incorporate women's access to education or skill development?	Green	Red	Red	Red
<b>V. Institutional arrangements</b>				
9. Is there a committee or any other institution to monitor the implementation or operation of gender-focussed provisions?	Yellow	Red	Red	Red
10. Does the agreement define duties, functions, meeting frequencies, and other organizational requirements of the committee or any other institution created for the implementation or operation of gender-specific provisions?	Green	Red	Red	Red
<b>VI. Procedural arrangements</b>				
11. Does the agreement create procedural tools to address gender issues such as action plans, frameworks, dialogues, information exchange, exchange of best practices and experiences, programmes or legislation?	Green	Red	Red	Green
12. Do the members encourage or seek to collaborate on study, research or publication relating to gender and trade?	Red	Red	Red	Red

<b>VII. Review and funding</b>				
13. Does the agreement contain a provision that requires: (i) the review of the implementation of gender provisions and/or (ii) the assessment of gender impact of the agreement?				
14. Have members provided funding or identified measures to finance gender-related plans, processes, institutions, activities and other related commitments?				
<b>VIII. Settlement of disputes</b>				
15. Is there any consultation or discussion mechanism to resolve gender-specific conflicts (excluding the ones arising from cooperation activities)?				
16. Are a majority of gender provisions (excluding the ones mentioned in cooperation activities) in the given FTA subject to a dispute settlement mechanism?				
<b>IX. Waivers, reservations, and exceptions</b>				
17. Does the agreement establish an exception referring to gender concerns?				
18. Does the agreement contain provisions to encourage industries/enterprises to incorporate minimum standards on corporate social responsibility explicitly related to gender?				
<b>X. Minimum legal standards</b>				
19. Does the agreement establish minimum legal standards explicitly related to gender for the countries' respective domestic law?				
20. Does the agreement contain provisions to encourage industries/enterprises to incorporate minimum standards on corporate social responsibility explicitly related to gender?				
	<b>Limited Responsiveness</b>			
	<b>Evolving Responsiveness</b>			
	<b>Advanced Responsiveness</b>			

Source: Authors' Compilation (2024) based on ICT Framework (2020)

## Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

The UAE has already made solid strides in advancing the economic rights of women since the formation of the federation in 1971. It has also established solid mechanisms and institutions to ensure that progress continues on the legal and political fronts. In parallel, the UAE has recognised the importance of economic diversification and has placed prosperity as one of the core objectives of its foreign policy.<sup>36</sup> With the signing of CEPAs becoming a key pillar in the country's economic growth strategy, it is important that these accords align with the country's gender equality strategy.

To harness the slew of economic benefits that CEPAs bring to the economy and society of its signatories, ensuring a higher level of gender mainstreaming in these agreements becomes crucial. To that end, several policy recommendations could pave the way towards making sure that women's economic empowerment finds its way to the 16 CEPAs that are currently being negotiated and the others to follow in the future. These recommendations include the following:

- **Align CEPAs with domestic gender equality strategy by strengthening gender provisions in future texts and making references to existing international conventions:** Adding in future CEPAs' texts gender provisions and referrals to existing international conventions on women that the UAE has signed will not only ensure that they are more gender responsive but will also ensure that CEPAs are more aligned with the UAE's domestic objectives on gender equality. The economic and social benefits of gender equality within economic growth are immense and should be embedded in the texts of these agreements and in other economic agreements.
- **Make explicit mention of gender provisions in different sections of the CEPAs texts:** While most trade agreements mention gender equality implicitly, including explicit and clear provisions related to women would go a long way towards enhancing the gender responsiveness of the CEPA. Frontloading gender provisions by including them in the preamble, for instance, would signal the UAE's clear commitment to women's economic empowerment. By the same token, adding gender provisions in sections that go beyond SMEs, which is where most current provisions are included, would widen the scope of the type of cooperation activities where women could be involved.
- **Include provisions related to skills development of women in all CEPAs:** While the UAE– India CEPA clearly includes a section on women's skill development as one area of cooperation between the two states, the other CEPAs do not. Education, training, and continuous professional development of women in business are integral parts of their careers and these should be facilitated through CEPAs. Emphasis on STEM education and digital literacy would also be important.
- **Acknowledge the importance of corporate social responsibility within CEPAs:** The CEPAs should encourage industries and individual companies to include standards of corporate social responsibility that are explicitly related to gender in their internal policies and procedures. Leveraging this corporate self-regulation would allow governments to ensure a consistent and sustainable application of gender-related best practices at least by companies involved in international trade.
- **Set up a specialised committee that can monitor the gender responsiveness of CEPAs during the negotiations process and after the agreement's implementation:** To ensure that effective gender mainstreaming happens at every stage of the negotiation process, setting up a specialised committee that can oversee matters related to women and ensure that the CEPA is in line with all international conventions and domestic strategies would ensure the full alignment of every CEPA with the UAE's gender equality goals. This committee could also formulate potential enforcement remedies in case some of the gender provisions are not respected by one of the parties, as well as mobilise funds for the implementation of the gender-related commitments.
- **Involve or consult with the UAE's Gender Balance Council and other entities in the process of negotiating future CEPAs:** One way of increasing the gender provisions in CEPAs or other trade agreements is to engage the national ministries of gender equality or similar government agencies in the formal or informal negotiation process.<sup>37</sup> The GBC has the explicit responsibility to review current legislation and to coordinate with MoFA on gender-related cooperation agreements, which makes it natural to extend its activities in the

field of international trade negotiations. Other government entities such as the General Women's Union and the Women Business Councils operating in several emirates could also be consulted.

- **Compile trade and gender-related data using best practices:** Collecting gender-specific trade data and information could help in identifying gaps and opportunities related to women entrepreneurs, career development and skills. These can then be used and included in the CEPA with relevant countries. Approaching already-established institutions like the Gender Balance Council and using their research could help facilitate information gathering, while guidelines for data compilation are provided by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.<sup>38</sup> The data shall then be used to carry out periodic impact assessments of the effect of having women-related provisions in the CEPAs on women's participation in international trade and general women empowerment.
- **Raise awareness, through training courses and publications, that trade policies and agreements can be used as tools to empower women:** Through different universities and academies, the UAE boasts a large roster of training courses related to women's economic empowerment and economic diplomacy in general. Including a gender perspective in all those trainings and publications would help to raise awareness on the importance of trade agreements, and in this case CEPAs, for increased women empowerment.

## Endnotes

1. Sources: <https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/cepa> ; <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395303166910> ; <https://civil.ge/archives/562691>
2. Sources: <https://www.dfat.gov.au/trade/agreements/negotiations/australia-uae-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement-cepa> ; <https://www.gulftoday.ae/business/2022/02/27/uae-chile-discuss-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/uae-says-it-concludes-free-trade-agreement-with-colombia-2023-12-02/> ; <https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/-/uae-and-costa-rica-launch-preliminary-cepa-negotiations> ; <https://civil.ge/archives/562691> ; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2022/07/29/uae-and-kenya-to-begin-negotiations-on-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement/> ; <https://www.mida.gov.my/mida-news/uae-and-malaysia-discuss-strengthening-economic-and-trade-ties/> ; <https://wam.ae/article/aq9klv2-uae-mauritius-conclude-comprehensive-economic> ; <https://www.moec.gov.ae/en/-/uae-new-zealand-enter-preliminary-discussions-on-comprehensive-economic-partnership-agreement> ; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/11/25/uae-and-philippines-look-to-strengthen-economic-relations-amid-cepa-discussions/> ; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/12/28/uae-and-republic-of-the-congo-finalise-terms-of-cepa/> ; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/09/18/uae-and-serbia-launch-cepa-negotiations/> ; <https://www.reuters.com/world/uae-south-korea-complete-talks-bilateral-trade-deal-2023-10-14/> ; <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/09/19/uae-to-conclude-6-more-cepa-deals-in-next-3-months-foreign-trade-minister-says/> ; <https://www.vietnam.vn/en/viet-nam-uae-du-kien-ky-hiep-dinh-doi-tac-kinh-te-toan-dien-nam-sau-2/>
3. Source: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/02/18/uae-india-trade-grows-10-in-the-first-year-since-cepa-deal-was-signed/>
4. Source: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2022/12/05/uae-seeks-22-cepas-by-2031-as-ukraine-trade-talks-start/>
5. Source: <https://gulftime.ae/uaes-cepa-programmes-break-new-ground-in-2023/>
6. Arab News. 2022. UAE Unveils National Plan to Double GDP by 2031. <https://arab.news/2ywf>
7. World Trade Organization. 2017. Buenos Aires Declaration on Trade and Women's Economic Empowerment. [genderdeclarationmc11\\_e.pdf \(wto.org\)](https://www.wto.org/genderdeclarationmc11_e.pdf)
8. Alesina, A., Rodrick D. 1994. Distributive Politics and Economic Growth. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 109(2), 465-490. Hausmann, Ricardo, Tyson, Laura D., Zahidi, Saadia. 2010. The Global Gender Gap Report. World Economic Forum. [http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GenderGap\\_Report\\_2010.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2010.pdf)
9. International Trade Center. 2015. Unlocking Markets for Women to Trade. ITC: Geneva.
10. International Trade Centre. 2015. Unlocking Markets for Women to Trade. ITC: Geneva. [womenintradeweb1pdf \(intracen.org\)](https://www.intracen.org/womenintradeweb1pdf)
11. UNCTAD. 2017. Trade and Gender Toolbox. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development DITC 2017/1. [UNCTAD Trade and Gender Tool Box](https://www.unctad.org/TradeandGenderToolbox)
12. Luke, David. 2019. Gender considerations in FTAs, regional integration agreements and preferential trade schemes. Presentation by the Coordinator, African Trade Policy Centre, Economic Commission for Africa, at the WTO Workshop on Gender Considerations in Trade Agreements. 28 March 2019. [TITLE OF THE PRESENTATION \(wto.org\)](https://www.wto.org/TITLE_OF_THE_PRESENTATION)
13. Monteiro, José-Antonio. 2018. Gender-related provisions in regional trade agreements. WTO Staff Working Paper ERSD-2018-15. [ersd201815\\_e.pdf \(wto.org\)](https://www.wto.org/ersd201815_e.pdf)
14. Bahri, A. (2021). Gender Mainstreaming in Free Trade Agreements: A Regional Analysis and Good Practice Examples. Gender, Social Inclusion and Trade Knowledge Product Series
15. Canada-Chile Free Trade Agreement. Appendix II - Chapter N bis – Trade and Gender. [Appendix II – Chapter N bis–Trade and Gender \(international.gc.ca\)](https://www.international.gc.ca/Appendix-II-Chapter-N-bis-Trade-and-Gender)

16. Source: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-emirates-companies-women/uae-listed-companies-must-have-at-least-one-female-board-member-regulator-idUSKBN2B71NI/>
17. Source: <https://www.forbesmiddleeast.com/list/100-most-powerful-arab-businesswomen>
18. Source: <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae>
19. Source: <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/culture-society/women-in-uae-workplace-23-1-private-sector-surge-wage-equality-pregnancy-and-maternity-laws-explained>
20. UAE Government Portal. Gender Equality: Gender Balance. [Women | The Official Portal of the UAE Government](#), accessed online on December 13, 2023.
21. Source: <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302680881>
22. UAE Government Portal. UAE Gender Balance Council Strategy 2026. [UAE Gender Balance Council Strategy 2026 | The Official Portal of the UAE Government](#)
23. UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights. Status of Ratification Interactive Dashboard. - [OHCHR Dashboard](#), accessed online on December 13, 2023.
24. UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs. [Women in the UAE](#). Ministry of Foreign Affairs ([mofa.gov.ae](http://mofa.gov.ae)).
25. COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDIA AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UAE [Final+Agreement\\_UAE+India+CEPA.pdf](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
26. The India-UAE Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Handbook. [EN\\_Ministry+of+Economy+Handbook\\_FINAL.pdf](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
27. COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE STATE OF ISRAEL [IL-UAE+CEPA+Consolidated+Eng+Final.pdf](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
28. The UAE-Israel Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Handbook. [f93f5590-9d8c-ebbf-114f-19a4a18ab67f](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
29. COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT BETWEEN THE GOVERNMENT OF THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES AND THE GOVERNMENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF INDONESIA. [21b9bef3-be16-cb97-02d5-a7a22e17226e](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
30. The UAE-Indonesia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Handbook. [INDONESIA+EN.pdf](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
31. TÜRKİYE-UNITED ARAB EMIRATES COMPREHENSIVE ECONOMIC PARTNERSHIP AGREEMENT [fc3cb5bc-e677-af67-756d-9f793efb8e91](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
32. The UAE-Türkiye Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement Handbook. [TÜRKIYE+EN.pdf](#) ([moec.gov.ae](http://moec.gov.ae))
33. International Trade Centre. 2020. Mainstreaming Gender in Free Trade Agreements. ITC: Geneva. [ITC\\_Mainstream\\_Gender\\_FTA\\_20200707\\_web.pdf](#) ([intracen.org](http://intracen.org))
34. Those included the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, the Economic Community of West African States, the Canada-Israel and Canada-Chile FTAs, and the East African Community.
35. UAE Government Portal. Social Affairs: [Women Gender balance | The Official Portal of the UAE Government](#), accessed online on December 13, 2023.
36. UAE Government Portal. 2024. The Economic Principles of the UAE. [The Economic Principles of UAE | The Official Portal of the UAE Government](#)
37. Simonetti, Ignacia. 2019. Gender Considerations in Chile's Trade Agreements. Presentation of the Head of Gender Department Directorate of International Economic Relations Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Chile at the WTO Workshop on Gender Considerations in Trade Agreements. 28 March 2019. [Datos económicos \(wto.org\)](#)

38. UNCTAD. 2023. Compilation guidelines for measurement of gender-in-trade statistics. Pilot testing methodologies. [https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/stat2023d2\\_en.pdf](https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/stat2023d2_en.pdf)