

Women Empowerment and Gender Balance: Soft Power Tools in UAE Foreign Policy

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Summary

- The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has attracted an increasing number of women into its diplomatic corps, thus cementing state-led efforts to include women in various political roles. With a gender-balanced staff composition within its Ministry of Foreign Affairs, where women constitute 46% of the employees, and a growing number of ambassadors and deputy chiefs of missions abroad (21 women in 2023), the UAE's push for the political inclusion of women across all government sectors has steadily reached diplomacy.
- This has taken place in parallel with a foreign policy that has increasingly focused on promoting gender parity and women empowerment through foreign aid with over \$2.35 billion allocated to women-centered projects around the world in the 2017–2022 period, and on actively championing the principles of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda both domestically and internationally.
- This Insight finds that with the UAE in a leading position on several global indices, the dual-focused approach of increasing female representation in its diplomatic corps and pushing for women empowerment abroad has invariably shaped the way the country is perceived around the world, thereby increasing its reputation, familiarity, and soft power.
- In addition, the UAE's commitment to gender mainstreaming in its foreign assistance strategy and its active promotion of women-centered projects through its bilateral relations and other United Nations institutions echo several of the practices that states with official feminist foreign policies have adopted.
- The Insight argues that while women's representation at the junior and mid-career levels is present within the UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, gender parity at the senior ambassadorial rank has yet to be achieved. Several challenges and concerns may indeed hinder Emirati diplomats' ability to reach the top posts and, if not addressed, this gender imbalance may hamper the UAE's efforts to position itself as a gender and WPS champion in various multilateral forums.
- This Insight offers various policy recommendations on how the UAE can maintain its steadfast commitment to gender equality and women empowerment both within its ministry of foreign affairs and globally. Some of these recommendations include:
 - Researching and keeping track of retention challenges within the diplomatic corps
 - Continuous mentoring and coaching of women diplomats
 - Implementing policies for spousal employment and family integration while abroad
 - Appointing and promoting more women ambassadors to non-European states
 - Addressing the gender imbalance during the recruitment process

The Issue

The increased representation of women in diplomacy in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has happened in parallel with embracing foreign policy objectives that stress women empowerment and gender-focused foreign aid globally. This approach to gender equality and women empowerment within the realm of diplomacy and foreign policy did not evolve in a vacuum but occurred within a domestic context where women empowerment was placed as one of the key pillars of the UAE's development efforts.

State-led initiatives to invest in women's education and include them in the public sector made women's recruitment into the foreign service a natural extension of the UAE's overall development. With time, women's inclusion into the political domain at home – whether at the ministerial, parliamentary and diplomatic levels – spilled into the foreign policy arena, with the empowerment of women, promotion of gender equality and adoption of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda principles becoming important foreign policy objectives.

The advancements made thus far by the UAE have made the Emirati diplomatic corps more gender-equal, its foreign aid strategy more gender-focused, and its foreign policy more inclusive of women-centered issues. It has also helped the UAE advance on several global rankings, including the 2023 Global Soft Power Index where the UAE was ranked 10th globally – up 5 positions since 2022 – and 1st regionally¹. Gender parity and the empowerment of women are inherent to several soft power indicators,² so having women diplomats at the forefront of the UAE's international endeavors not only cements the country's commitment to gender equality but also contributes to enhancing its influence and power abroad.

While the UAE's efforts to embed gender equality and women empowerment as core objectives in its diplomacy and foreign policy put it on par with several countries that have officially declared a feminist foreign policy, more needs to be done to address the gender imbalance that exists as women rise through the diplomatic ranks. In addition, harnessing on the successes of existing WPS initiatives that the UAE has undertaken both at home and at the United Nations (UN) is crucial to effectively position the country as a regional leader in peacemaking, peacebuilding and mediation.

Gender Equality: Spillover and Soft Power

The recruitment of Emirati women into the foreign service happened as a natural extension of the UAE's state-led efforts to enhance women's economic, educational, social and legal rights and their inclusion in key government positions. The creation of several government agencies dedicated to this goal helped, and taken together, led to the UAE being ranked 35th globally and 1st regionally on the 'Political Empowerment' sub-index of the World Economic Forum 2023 Global Gender Gap Report.³ The UAE is also highlighted as the least unequal country in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and the 22nd globally according to the 2021–2022 Georgetown University WPS Index, which looks at women's inclusion, security and justice.⁴ Today, the UAE boasts of seven prominent organisations that work to enhance women's economic and political inclusion. These are: the General Women's Union (or GWU, established in 1975), the Dubai Women Establishment (2006), the UAE Gender Balance Council (or GBC-2015), the NAMA Women Advancement Establishment (2015), and three prominent women business councils in Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah.

Emirati women's economic and political empowerment occurred in tandem with an increased emphasis on women's education. Today, 95.8% of Emirati women are educated and women make up 70% of university graduates.⁵ Out of these, 56% earn degrees in science, math, and engineering.⁶ The UAE Cabinet currently comprises 9 women ministers (out of 32)⁷ and in 2015, elected the first woman, Dr Amal Al Qubaisi, as Speaker of the Federal National Council (FNC – the UAE's parliament). Al Qubaisi was also the first woman to ever be elected to the FNC in 2006.⁸

In 2019, the FNC became one of the few gender-equal parliamentary bodies in the world, with 50% of its seats allocated to women.⁹ Furthermore, in 2022 the UAE was the first country in the Arab world to close its gender gaps, according to the Global Gender Gap Index report, and the first on the sub-index of political empowerment owing to the gender parity that exists at the FNC/parliamentary level.¹⁰ Today, Emirati women make up 41% of all leadership positions within the federal government, 69% of all educational and support sector positions within the public system and 73% of the medical and support staff employed in public hospitals and clinics.¹¹

In 2004, the UAE ratified the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)¹² and through the work of its mission at the UN in New York, has consistently voiced its support for creating gender-balanced policies. In 2017, the GBC hosted the first high-level panel meeting on women's economic empowerment in the MENA region and in 2022, created a centre of excellence for gender balance, in cooperation with the World Bank, to further study and enhance gender parity across all government entities.¹³

Indeed, the inclusion and empowerment of women lead to an improved reputation abroad, as evidenced by the fact that many countries with high soft power scores are also the ones that have managed to close most of their gender gaps. In turn, soft power can help foster cordial bilateral relations between states by emphasizing cooperation, dialogue and peace. As such, achieving gender parity at home and placing women diplomats at the front and centre of the country’s international endeavours maximizes soft power and pays off over time.

Emirati Women Diplomats: Ready, Steady, Growth

The representation of women within the UAE’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA) happens at several levels, ranging from the attaché level to the minister of state level, and has steadily increased over time. In early 2016, the Ministry of International Cooperation and Development merged with MoFA to form the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MoFAIC).¹⁴ The merger resulted in the appointment of Reem Al Hashimy as Minister of State for International Cooperation, and she has been responsible for coordinating the UAE’s foreign aid and humanitarian action policies at MoFAIC since then. In 2023, Noura Al Kaabi was appointed as minister of state, making her and Al Hashimy the two highest ranking women diplomats in the UAE.¹⁵ While the ministry changed its name back to Ministry of Foreign Affairs in May 2023,¹⁶ it still oversees and coordinates the UAE’s foreign aid, humanitarian assistance, and international cooperation efforts.

At the ambassador level, the UAE appointed its first women ambassadors in 2008, with Hissa Al Otaiba and Najla Al Qassimi being posted in Spain and Sweden, respectively.¹⁷ As of September 2023, the UAE has 10 women ambassadors and 2 permanent representatives posted in key states and missions, one consul general, and 8 women deputy chiefs of missions, as listed in Table 1.¹⁸ Two women also serve as assistant ministers within MoFA.

Table 1: Emirati Women in Senior Diplomatic Posts (September 2023)

	Posting
Ambassadors	
1. Amna Fikri	Finland & Estonia (non-resident)
2. Eman Al Salami	Tunisia
3. Fatima Al Mazrouei	Norway
4. Hanan Al Alili	Latvia
5. Hend Al Otaiba	France
6. Hessa Al Otaiba	Switzerland
7. Lana Nusseibeh	United Nations in New York
8. Mariam Al Kaabi	Egypt
9. Nabila Al Shamsi	Montenegro
10. Nariman Al Mulla	Armenia
11. Nawal Al Hosani	Permanent Representative to IRENA (Abu Dhabi)
12. Roudha Al Otaiba	Costa Rica
Consul General	
1. Amna Al Mheiri	New York City (USA)
Deputy Chiefs of Mission	
1. Ameira Al Hefeiti	United Nations in New York
2. Amna Al Hammadi	China
3. Amna Al Suwaidi	Australia
4. Fatema Al Dahmani	Oman
5. Lubna Al Bastaki	United Nations in Geneva
6. Mouza Al Hosani	Turkey
7. Sandra Oweida	Belgium, Luxembourg & the European Union
8. Shaima Al Hebsi	Indonesia

Source: AGDA compilation (2023)

In 2023, women made up approximately 46% of MoFA's workforce, and 61% of the graduates in its affiliated diplomatic training programme at the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA).¹⁹ Within the ministry, 19 women currently serve as heads of departments and deputy heads of departments.²⁰

In 2010, Ambassador Lana Nusseibeh set up MoFA's Policy Planning Department (PPD) and became its first director. She served as PPD's director until 2013 before becoming the UAE's Permanent Representative at the UN in New York, a post she has occupied until now. In 2021, Nusseibeh was also appointed as Assistant Minister for Political Affairs, a position she holds in addition to her responsibilities at the UN, becoming the first woman assistant minister at MoFA.²¹

Today, the 19 women who serve as directors of important sectors at MoFA include the American and Pacific Affairs department and the Strategic Communication department. Various others serve as deputies in other key departments, such as the Strategy and Future department and the Economic and Trade Affairs department.²² With a consistent stream of women joining the junior diplomatic ranks in the 2016 – 2023 period, one can expect that more women will be promoted to senior positions in the coming years once they complete their first promotion cycles.

Postings: Where do women go?

In terms of where women diplomats are posted, previous research found that states tend to send male diplomats to locations that are deemed more economically and militarily important, and women are posted in states of less strategic significance.²³

While the academic literature prioritises economic and military relations as the basis upon which to determine the strategic importance of a state vis-à-vis another, it does not include priority "issue areas" when weighing or ranking the vitality of a certain state towards another. As such, what constitutes a strategic and important ambassadorial post may be the nature of the issue at stake, and not only the size of the economic and military relations or the clout that certain countries have in global affairs.

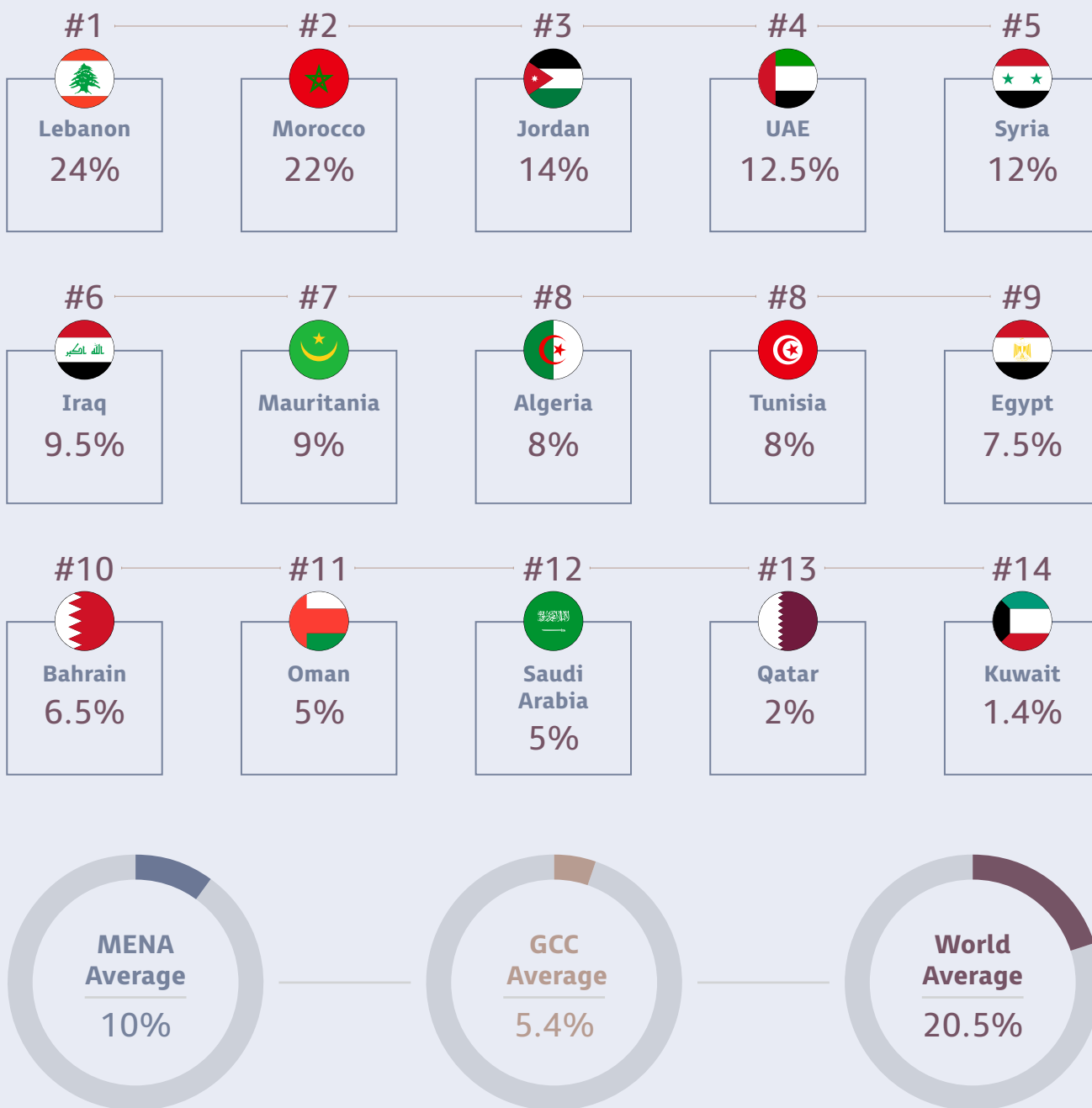
For instance, in the case of the UAE, food security is a crucial issue that is at the top of the country's national security agenda.²⁴ The UAE has identified Brazil as an important country for farming and food security and appointed a woman ambassador there in the 2018–2020 period (Hafsa Al Olama) to boost trade and commercial relations between the two countries. France, Switzerland, Egypt, and the permanent mission at the UN in New York are also deemed as strategic postings given these missions' importance for the UAE and they are currently headed by women.

Another important issue of concern for the UAE is climate change and renewable energy. Since 2018, the permanent representative to the International Renewable Energy Agency (IRENA) is a woman (Nawal Al Hosani).²⁵ The UAE is also hosting COP28 in November–December 2023 and two women were appointed to serve within the presidency team: Shamma Al Mazrui, the current UAE Minister for Community Development, serves as the youth climate champion and Razan Al Mubarak, the Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi, is now the UN Climate Change High Level Champion.²⁶ Women also comprise 50% of the COP28 management team as a whole. Seen under this light, while more Emirati women could be appointed to serve in economically and militarily strategic states, the UAE has already placed women representatives in various countries and missions around the world and has appointed others to lead on important initiatives that bolster the UAE's foreign policy and soft power.

Regional Comparisons

As seen in Table 2, in 2023, the UAE fares better than many Arab countries and all Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states when it comes to women's representation in senior diplomatic posts. Nonetheless, its share of women ambassadors – along with the rest of the MENA region – is still below the world average of 20.5%.²⁷ Indeed, with a mere 10% share of women ambassadors, the countries spanning the MENA region have the lowest number of women ambassadors and permanent representatives when compared to other regions of the world. Together, the six GCC states have an even lower share – 5.4%.

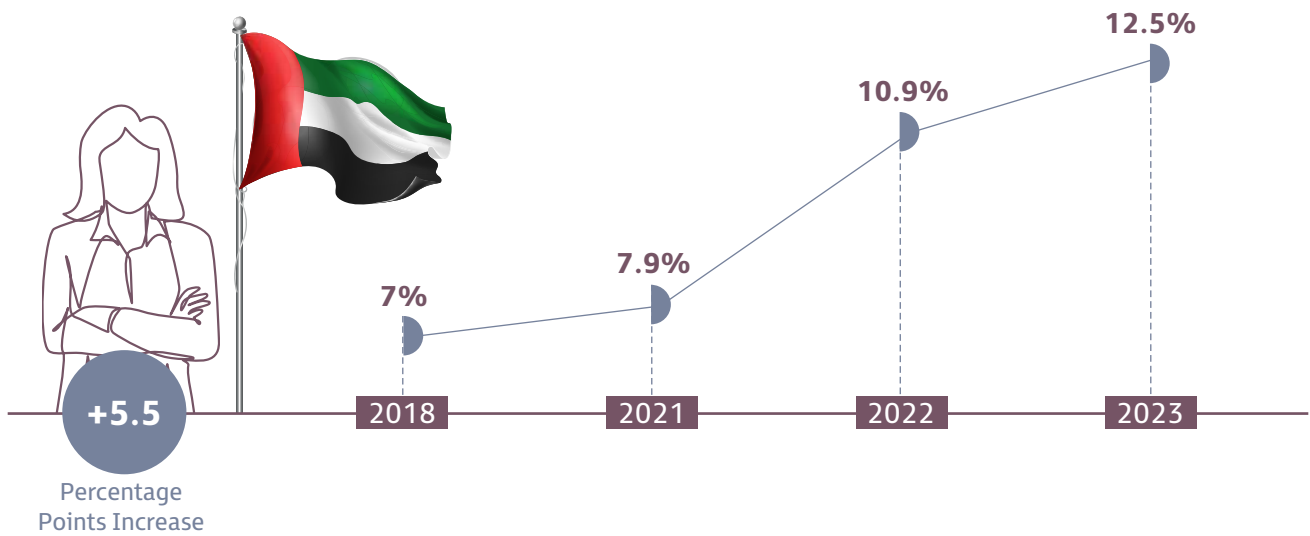
Table 2: Percentage share of women ambassadors in the MENA and GCC regions (2023)



Source: 2023 AGDA Women in Diplomacy Index

The UAE has made moderate progress since 2018 by gradually appointing more women to diplomatic top posts. As seen below, the UAE's share of women ambassadors and permanent representatives increased by 5.5 percentage points since 2018, indicating the country's commitment to steadily increasing women's representation in senior diplomatic positions.

Percentage points increase of women ambassadors in the UAE (2018–2023)



Recruitment and Integration of Women into the Diplomatic Corps

The UAE's MoFA has ensured a steady stream of trainee and entry-level women diplomats and has not faced difficulties recruiting women into the foreign service. In fact, in the 2015–2023 period, most applicants to MoFA have been women, according to admissions records from AGDA. A diplomatic career has become an attractive career option for women for several reasons. First, a Bachelor's degree is a requirement for joining MoFA. Since 2016, a Grade Point Average (GPA) requirement of 3.0 over 4 (or its equivalent) and a strong command of English were set as the points of entry to elevate the quality of new joiners.²⁸ Since Emirati women constitute 70% of university graduates in the UAE, based on 2021 statistics and 66% of all public sector employees,²⁹ women are thus more eligible to join the foreign service as a public sector job that requires higher educational attainment than others.

Second, the recruitment campaigns and procedures of MoFA have, since 2017, emphasized the inclusion of women diplomats. Campaigns include videos of female alumni, women ambassadors and senior women diplomats, and this practice has encouraged women to apply. Once candidates are screened and selected for an interview, the admissions committee – a joint committee comprised of senior decision makers within MoFA and AGDA – has also ensured the presence of female members during all interview processes. The committee is responsible for interviewing and selecting candidates based on academic and general knowledge questions that test the candidates' critical thinking and analytical skills.³⁰

After selection, candidates undertake several tests (in both Arabic and English) before being admitted into a 9-month post-graduate diploma programme at AGDA focusing on international relations and diplomatic skills.³¹ Trainees who successfully pass the 9-month programme with a minimum GPA of 3.0 (out of 4) can become diplomats. As such, a high GPA is a pre-requisite to apply and join MoFA after finishing their training. Upon graduation, a joint committee convenes to determine where each trainee should be assigned based on their academic strengths, analytical and linguistic abilities, recommendations from AGDA, department vacancies, and personal preferences.³² Gender is not a factor when determining diplomatic assignments as women are placed in various departments across the ministry.

With ever more female trainee diplomats entering the Emirati foreign service, women have indeed shifted the scales and ensured that – at 46% female diplomats in 2023 – the Emirati diplomatic corps has become almost gender-equal at the junior and mid-career levels. Whereas more needs to be done to secure their retention and promotion, the +5.5 percentage points increase over a six-year period is a positive harbinger of what's to come.

Women Empowerment and UAE Aid

Emirati women's inclusion and representation in junior and senior diplomatic roles has taken place in parallel with an increased emphasis on promoting a foreign policy that is attuned to the requirements of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, to the stipulations of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG5) on Gender Equality, and to several recommendations of the feminist foreign policy framework. Through the active promotion of the WPS agenda and the development of a gender-focused foreign aid strategy, the UAE has ensured the promotion of women empowerment as a distinct foreign policy objective.

The WPS Agenda

The UAE has taken an active role in promoting the WPS agenda within the UN system and domestically and has placed the WPS agenda at the centre of its multilateral engagements, emphasizing and re-iterating in several statements and positions the country's belief that women must be included in peace processes and considered equal partners in all security efforts.³³ This commitment was recently displayed at the 78th UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2023 with women empowerment in international peace and security being one of the UAE's six objectives at UNGA.

The UAE's work on the WPS agenda takes several forms – starting with co-sponsoring UN Security Council (UNSC) resolution 2242 in 2015,³⁴ which called for improving the implementation of the first UNSC resolution on WPS (1325), being a founding member of the UN National Focal Points Network for WPS in 2016,³⁵ and hosting a panel series to commemorate the 15th anniversary of UNSC resolution 1325, in partnership with Georgetown University, which explored various aspects of women's involvement in peace and security issues.³⁶ Moreover, in the 2013–2019 period, the UAE allocated approximately \$55 million to various projects that apply the WPS agenda.³⁷ Part of the funds were also used to pilot a training programme for Arab female peacekeepers in 2019 at the Khawla Bint Al Azwar School in Abu Dhabi.

This programme, now called the Sheikha Fatima Bint Mubarak Initiative for Women, Peace and Security and undertaken in partnership with MoFA, the General Women's Union (GWU) and the UN Women liaison office in Abu Dhabi, has been in place since 2019. In its first phase, it trained more than 100 women peacekeepers from seven Arab countries. Since then, the programme graduated more than 500 women cadets from the Middle East, Africa and Asia. The programme mainly aims to equip women peacekeepers with the skills needed to participate in UN peacekeeping operations and in various security operations within their own national armies and communities. The Abu Dhabi-based training programme has ensured the greater inclusion of women in local and global peacekeeping operations, an important pillar of the WPS agenda and a priority for the UNSC.³⁸ In 2021, based on the Initiative's success in its first two years, a centre of excellence for WPS was launched to explore offering more training courses and mainstream the WPS agenda locally, regionally and internationally.³⁹

In addition to the above, the UAE drafted and adopted its National Action Plan (NAP) for WPS in 2021, becoming the first country in the GCC region to do so and one out of 8 Arab countries to implement it.⁴⁰ The plan outlines the various actions and initiatives that the government will undertake in line with the WPS agenda's four pillars: protection, prevention, participation, and relief and recovery.

The UAE NAP emphasizes four objectives:

1. Integrating women into all foreign policy initiatives (including humanitarian assistance and foreign aid) and in political circles at home;
2. Increasing women's participation in conflict prevention and peace building efforts while building the capacity of policy makers in the UAE and the Gulf to integrate women empowerment in their own work;
3. Continuously training women peacekeepers and professionals and developing female cadets working in the security sector, especially to address key issues such as sexual exploitation during conflict; and
4. Increasing women's participation in combatting and preventing violent extremism.

The UAE's NAP, valid until 2024, also identified key stakeholders and domestic entities that will be involved in its implementation, with MoFA being a key player.⁴¹

The UAE has also taken several steps to address and prevent gender-based violence (GBV) in conflict settings, a key pillar of the WPS agenda. With Norway and other international organisations, the UAE co-hosted the 'End Sexual Violence against Women during Humanitarian Conflicts' conference in Oslo in 2019 and in June 2021, provided more than \$1.2 million to the Swiss Cross Foundation to support victims and survivors of GBV in Iraq.

The UAE also signed an agreement with the UN Population Fund in March 2022 to provide \$2 million to support the prevention of GBV and other emergency-response services for the Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar. In the 2021–2022 period, the UAE contributed more than \$1.2 million to the Nadia Murad Initiative to help with the reconstruction of Sinjar, Iraq, and help victims of GBV return home. As of 2023, the UAE has helped, through the UNFPA, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and other agencies, more than 2.3 million women and girls in Yemen, Syria, Mali, and Niger.⁴²

During its tenure on the UN Security Council (2021–2023), the UAE identified gender equality in general and the WPS agenda in particular as key priorities and foreign policy objectives. To that end, the UAE co-chairs the informal experts' group on WPS with Switzerland in 2023 and regularly convenes meetings to address WPS-related matters.⁴³ On the Council, the UAE has pushed for the appointment of women into leadership roles within peacekeeping and conflict resolution processes and has lobbied for women's organisations to get further funding and development aid.⁴⁴

In March 2022, the UAE convened a high-level ministerial meeting to discuss emerging partnerships and how to advance the WPS agenda globally.⁴⁵ In September 2022, it reinforced its commitments by organizing the first high-level international conference on WPS in Abu Dhabi. The conference gathered hundreds of decision makers, civil society organisations, academics, activities and diplomats over the course of two days to discuss efficient and effective ways to implement WPS mechanisms in the region and globally.⁴⁶ Using its position as a non-permanent member on the UNSC, in February 2023, the UAE mission in New York and the UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs organized a training for 30 participants on WPS,⁴⁷ and in June 2023, organized a high-level ministerial open debate on the nexus of climate change, peace and security.⁴⁸

Gender-Focused Foreign Assistance

The UAE foreign aid and humanitarian assistance strategy outlined women empowerment, the protection of women and girls, and gender equality as key objectives.⁴⁹ In 2018, the UAE cemented this commitment by announcing a "100% Women Policy" to ensure the integration of gender mainstreaming and gender-focused mechanisms in all the country's foreign assistance initiatives. In the 2017–2022 period, the UAE allocated approximately \$2.35 billion to various foreign aid projects targeting women and girls globally, or 7.7% of its total foreign assistance.⁵⁰

The UAE's strategy has focused on gender equality (especially in education and healthcare), empowerment (economic, social and political) and the protection of women and girls against all forms of violence and abuse as its three core pillars. In the 2016–2020 period, the UAE spent \$1.68 billion (or 7% of its total foreign aid) on various women-focussed initiatives and organisations that work on women empowerment. This increased in 2019, with the government allocating 11% of its foreign assistance budget (or \$851 million) to projects aimed at women empowerment.⁵¹ These programmes included \$1.5 billion investments in 113 countries on programmes related to women's education, health, nutrition, vocational training, and fighting sexual violence, \$9.2 million on projects to fight women trafficking in various countries such as India, Pakistan, Ethiopia, and Morocco, and \$10 million for organisations working on combatting sexual abuse against women during wars. In 2017, the UAE – through the UAE Red Crescent – pledged \$68 million to assist women and girl refugees in Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, in partnership with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.⁵²

To increase women's participation and training, the UAE has also invested \$41 million in its Technical Assistance Programme in Jordan, Egypt and Uzbekistan to enhance women's professional competence by organizing various workshops, courses, and trainings for them.⁵³ In partnership with the UN Population Fund, the UAE earmarked \$30.5 million to provide reproductive health clinics, obstetrics services and primary healthcare centres in various countries around the world.⁵⁴

The UAE has also been a strong supporter of UN Women and is one of UN Women's top ten donors, with more than \$41 million allocated to the organisation since 2015. The UAE also funded the UN Women Liaison Office, located in Abu Dhabi since 2010, and in 2018 alone, financially supported the organisation with \$5 million to undertake several projects in the region. In 2017, the UAE's Permanent Representative at the UN, Lana Nusseibeh, presided over UN Women's Executive Board and has continuously echoed the UAE government's commitment to the organisation.⁵⁵ Tellingly, the UAE foreign affairs minister, Sheikh Abdullah Bin Zayed Al Nahyan, was the first Arab foreign minister to pledge his support for UN Women's "HeForShe" campaign in 2014, which meant to engage Emirati men and boys as active advocates of gender equality.

The UAE's assistance to women and girls was also extended through granting \$50 million to the Women Entrepreneur Finance Initiative (We-Fi), to support women-led SMEs in Pakistan, Yemen, Iraq, Cameroon, Gambia, Senegal, and the Pacific and Caribbean Islands. The country also signed an agreement with the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) in April 2022 and pledged \$4 million to support food security initiatives

for rural women in Liberia.⁵⁶ Lastly, in May 2023, MoFA, in collaboration with the GWU, UN Women and the Mohammed Bin Zayed Academy for Agriculture and Environment, launched the Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Initiative to Empower Africa's Rural Women in the Agriculture Sector.⁵⁷ In its first phase, the initiative is meant to train 30 trainees from Senegal and Ethiopia in the UAE for various agricultural tasks aimed at tackling food insecurity and climate change. The second phase of the project will expand the training to 20,000 women and men on the ground.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

The number of women in senior positions is slowly but steadily increasing worldwide and the inclusion and representation of women across all levels of the diplomatic ladder is becoming a policy priority to many states. Gender mainstreaming, a foreign aid strategy that focuses on the empowerment and protection of women and girls, and a focus on the WPS agenda are becoming the norm globally as more countries openly declare feminist foreign policies and commit to these goals.

The UAE is no stranger to these conversations and has, over the years, taken the right measures to ensure a greater representation of women in its diplomatic corps and a larger focus on women empowerment and gender equality through its foreign policy. With a steady increase in the number of Emirati women joining the foreign service and becoming ambassadors, permanent representatives and deputy chiefs of missions, the UAE has created a solid recruitment and retention platform that focuses on women's representation across several levels. With women occupying almost half of MoFA's staff, the UAE's foreign ministry has almost become a gender-equal entity. In parallel, partly owing to a domestic environment where gender parity and women's empowerment are central to the state's overall development, the UAE has adopted serious measures to ensure that it follows through on its SDG5 and WPS-related commitments globally. It has also designed and implemented a foreign aid and humanitarian assistance policy that is feminist in nature, where the protection and empowerment of women and girls across the world are key priorities.

These advancements, which have impacted various parts of the UAE's foreign policy establishment, have pushed the UAE to leading positions on several gender parity and soft power indices. They have also helped shape the image of the country as a committed broker of cooperation, empowerment and peace.

To capitalise on the progress that the UAE has already made over the years, adopting the following policy recommendations could further enhance the UAE's gains:

- **Researching retention challenges and keeping track of data:** Data internal to MoFA must be gathered to understand why some diplomats are leaving the foreign service and what challenges they are facing, either personal or professional. Metrics that keep track of women's retention and promotion rates are also needed. These metrics must go beyond simple numbers and statistics and must also account for the various concerns and challenges that may hinder diplomats' retention at MoFA.
- **Ambassadorial postings and reaching the world average:** Appointing more women to ambassadorships abroad is important for the UAE to increase its percentage share of women ambassadors and reach the world average of 20.5%. More women must also be posted in states and missions of strategic importance to break the adage that male ambassadors get the more economically and militarily strategic postings.
- **Implementing policies for spousal employment and family integration while abroad:** Another key issue is the employment of women diplomats' husbands abroad. For many, the inability of their husbands to find job opportunities abroad is a main issue that threatens the stability of their family life and their partners' careers. This may either lead to separating the family for long stretches of time, divorce or women abandoning their diplomatic careers. Solid policies to support male spouses' employment must be put in place to encourage women to move abroad with their family.
- **Mentorship and coaching programmes:** Mentorship and coaching programmes done individually or in groups by retired or active senior women ambassadors could be useful for junior diplomats who feel more comfortable sharing concerns with and getting advice from other women. While such mentorship initiatives may happen naturally or informally, formalizing them could prove useful to ensure retention rates of women remain high.
- **Addressing the gender imbalance in the recruitment process:** Because more women have applied to become diplomats in recent years, policies to ensure the recruitment of men must be put in place to maintain a gender-balanced diplomatic corps and ensure an equal representation at the more junior levels. Understanding why a diplomatic career may not seem attractive to some men is important to avoid this happening across the board with time.

- **Breaking the Europe stereotype:** Appointing women ambassadors to Asian and African countries could help galvanise the UAE's position and break the tradition that most women get sent to Europe, where living conditions could be construed as more appealing to women.

- **Continue the practice of implementing gender-responsive department and embassy budgets:** Making department and embassy budgets conditional on how much they implement gender-inclusive practices and programmes within their departments and missions must continue to ensure that women empowerment initiatives are trickled through all sectors at MoFA and all missions abroad.

- **Training and education:** Making training courses on the WPS agenda and women's representation in diplomacy and foreign policy compulsory for newly appointed ambassadors and senior diplomats is important to raise awareness on the issues at stake and familiarise diplomats, regardless of posting or mandate, on the importance of integrating a gender dimension into all their projects.

Endnotes

1. Brand Finance, "The Global Soft Power Index 2023", p. 6. <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2023-digital.pdf>
2. The Soft Power Index looks at 4 indicators: Soft Power Pillars, Familiarity, Reputation, and Influence. Eight sub-indicators constitute the soft power pillars. These are: Culture and Heritage, International Relations, Governance, Business and Trade, Media and Communication, Education and Science, People and Values, and a Sustainable Future. Source: Brand Finance, "The Global Soft Power Index 2023", p. 33. See: <https://static.brandirectory.com/reports/brand-finance-soft-power-index-2023-digital.pdf>
3. The UAE is ranked 71st overall on the World Economic Forum's 2023 Global Gender Gap Report. Source: World Economic Forum, "Global Gender Gap Report 2023", 20 June 2023. <https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023/in-full/benchmarking-gender-gaps-2023/#:~:text=The%20Global%20Gender%20Gap%20score,compared%20to%20last%20year%27s%20edition.>
4. Women, Peace and Security Index 2021 – 2022 Summary Report, Georgetown University, p. 2. <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/WPS-Index-2021-Summary.pdf>
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