

We should be proud of the UAE's achievements in empowering women

Essam Al Tamimi - Chairman - Private Client Services / Arbitration / Litigation / Family Business
e.tamimi@tamimi.com - Dubai International Financial Centre

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Right around the world there are debates, conferences, research reports, and reviews taking place to address the problem of levelling the playing field between men and women; and, importantly, ensuring women have the proper support they need – whether cultural, social or regulatory – to reach their full potential and succeed in work.

By way of a reminder, the workplace is not a level playing field at present. This is the case on an international scale, not just in the Middle East, where there is often foreign criticism of the role of women in society, usually linked to poorly-informed religious arguments.

By way of an example, if you look at the UK specifically, just 5% of the top 100 chief executive officer roles available in the country are filled by women. That is not a particularly impressive statistic for a nation that dates back hundreds of years. But, in fact, the UK is considered a leading Western nation in the empowerment of women in the workplace, and it is a subject that now exercises their law makers on a near daily basis.

If that is indeed the case, one wonders why the UAE's significant achievements in empowering women, particularly in business and government, are not more widely celebrated. Generally speaking, in a region that has a largely negative reputation for the role and treatment of women in society, the UAE stands out as a shining light.

A recent meeting with the Dubai Foundation for Women & Children was a stark reminder of how much has been achieved in just 43 years since the unification of the Emirates. The Foundation is the first licensed not for profit shelter in the UAE for women and children victims of domestic violence, child abuse and human trafficking. Established in 2007, it offers victims immediate protection and support in accordance with international human rights obligations, and it works hard to promote community awareness of these important social problems.

The Foundation's strapline is a quote from His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum, UAE Vice President, Prime Minister and Ruler of Dubai. It reads: "A place without women is a place without spirit". That comment alone sends a powerful message across the whole of society: in private homes and businesses, within government authorities, and in the public arena more generally.

It shows that the UAE understands the contribution women can make to society. So, if anyone ever questions whether the country's leaders appreciate what women can offer, they need only remind themselves of the sincere intent behind this quote. There is a very clear and active desire to see more women participating in all areas of society, and particularly in the workplace.

In step with His Highness' sentiment, the UAE Government has continually encouraged the promotion of women in business and into key leadership positions. It recognises that the different skills and approach women can bring to tasks and management are critical, especially if the country is to truly achieve its vision of becoming an innovation-led economy, and a happy, welcoming and peaceful society overall.

To ignore gender specific skills – like patience, focus and sensitivity, which are often found in more women than men – is simply limiting your potential to solve problems, to grow, learn, and to be a more creative nation. This isn't just anecdotal evidence either, with a 2012 Credit Suisse report showing that female business leaders can boost a large, listed company's share price performance by 26% over six years when compared to businesses without women in a position of power.

Of course, actions speak louder than words, and the UAE was the first Gulf state to appoint a woman to a Ministerial position. Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna Bint Khalid Al Qasimi joined the Federal Government in 2004 as Minister of Economy. In 2008, she was appointed Minister of Foreign Trade, and in 2013 as Minister of International Cooperation and Development – a role she still holds today.

The country's drive for further female empowerment actually started long before Sheikha Lubna's rise to become the world's most powerful Arab woman. It actually started 40 years ago this month, in August 1975, with the founding of the General Women's Union and Her Highness Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak's pioneering chairmanship.

Fast forwarding to 2015, and across the public sector, women have been taking an increasingly prominent role, to the extent that they now make up approximately 66% of the workforce, with around 30% in senior positions. There are now eight women in the Federal National Council and four women in Ministerial posts.

In our overseas Embassies and Consulates, there are several Emirati women in the top Ambassadorial posts, and in the traditionally male only military, Mariam Al Mansouri is the face of the air force and actively defending her country from extremist threats.

In business and culture women have made considerable progress, and there are plenty of impressive female role models for the next generation to be inspired by, such as Dr Amina Al Rustamani, CEO of TECOM Investments, Raja Easa Al Gurg, Managing Director of Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group, and Noura Al Kaabi, CEO of twofour54.

Sheikha Lubna, too, had a stellar business career before joining the Government, having previously been appointed by Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid as Chief Executive of Tejari, the electronic B2B marketplace.

Companies in the private sector have benefited from the lead the public sector has taken, making strides to change their corporate culture and bring on female talent. In banking, a critical sector for the economy, Emirati women account for over 65% of the local banking sector's employees and 43% of all bank jobs.

More broadly, studies on women in business in the Gulf consistently show that the UAE tops the region in terms of company ownership and leadership, workforce participation, employment opportunities, and in education. Female literacy in the UAE stands at over 90%, higher than the male literacy rate.

Clearly, there is still more to be done for the UAE to reach the levels of female employment that match those seen in the West, but the gap against men is closing fast. Ongoing collaboration, cultural change, good leadership and information will all play a part in making this a reality. We will get there. However, the UAE's progress over just four decades is substantial.

We should celebrate this remarkable progress and continue to encourage the important role of women in all aspects of our society. We should also thank organisations like the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children for the vital role they are playing in tackling important social problems and ensuring that our communities remain places full of spirit.