**Implementation of Gender Policies by the Private Sector in the UAE:**

**Challenges and Opportunities**

Mashael Al Fardan and Belisa Marochi

# Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) Vision 2021 set a timeline to be one of the top 25 countries in gender equality by the year 2021. The government launched a gender balance agenda to achieve this goal. However, the private sector faces challenges in the implementation of these national gender policies. While many of the multinational entities in the country are leading and paving the way for gender equality in the private sector, the implementation of gender policy is a challenging feat. This research shows the cooperation between private entities and government is often fragmented. Ten interviews with professionals in UAE-based companies suggest businesses face challenges in gender policy implementation due to the lack of transparency, reporting, and accurate data on gender issues within both the private and public sector. This article shows that businesses require guidance and measures to be more transparent to advance gender issues in the UAE.

**Keywords:** gender policy, implementation, UAE, private sector, women, UN Sustainable Development Goals

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# Introduction

The UAE Vision 2021 is a set of national priorities including becoming one of the top 25 countries for gender equality by 2021.[[1]](#footnote-1) This goal of gender equality was celebrated in 2020 when the UAE ranked 18th globally in the UNDP Human Development Report 2020 Gender Inequality Index.[[2]](#footnote-2) The same report shows women make up 50% of seats in Parliament in the UAE.[[3]](#footnote-3) The constitution of the UAE states that both men and women are equal in rights and obligations according to the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Report, and the UAE is ranked one of the first in gender equality in the Middle East region.[[4]](#footnote-4) The participation of women in the labor market in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has been steadily increasing and changing throughout the years. Women have gone from occupying traditional positions such as housewives, tailors, and craftswomen to participating in the marketplace and occupying leadership positions in government and businesses alongside men.[[5]](#footnote-5)

To achieve this goal of gender equality, the UAE government developed various policies that included the establishment of a Gender Balance Council in 2015, followed by the Equal Pay policy in 2018 and a more recent mandate for corporations and government entities to include women on their boards of directors. The UAE is the second country in the world to implement mandatory participation of women on boards after Norway.[[6]](#footnote-6) Becoming the happiest and best governed country in the world by 2071 are also some of the ambitious goals of the UAE.

The UAE aims at harnessing the untapped potential of women in the country through a list of practical actions. These include actions to implement commitment and oversight for gender balance, integrate gender into policies and programs, and engaging personnel towards gender balance. The actions also include the implementation of gender balance in leadership positions and finally, actions to implement gender sensitive communication.[[7]](#footnote-7) According to the OECD Gender Balance Guide, a document developed by the UAE government to assist organizations in the UAE in achieving gender equality, there are three focus areas within the guide’s national Gender Balance Indicators (GBIs). Their goal is to advance and measure progress in three key areas[[8]](#footnote-8): women in senior leadership positions, women in specialized and technical fields, and building workplaces that support gender balance. The UAE shift towards a sterner approach to gender policy comes at a time when global competitiveness and sustainable development are high in government agendas. A recent government report states that the annual GDP generated by women is 50 billion AED.[[9]](#footnote-9) These initiatives are often prescriptive and offer a set of rules, guidelines, and recommendations that the private sector can take on to advance the gender equality agenda.

The ambitious goals of the UAE include the private sector as key partners in the advancement of the gender equality agenda. However, the relationship between governments and the private sector in relation to the adaptation of gender equality is an important aspect to understand how businesses adopt these policies. Scholarly literature shows how gender policies have impacted the private sector in various countries. However, few studies have explained the challenges private organizations face when adopting government gender policies.

The case of the UAE highlights the challenges the private sector faces when adopting gender policies. These initiatives from the UAE are rarely enforced and many serve as recommendations. Through ten interviews with experts working in Human Resources and Governance and Sustainability departments within private companies, this article shows the disconnect between the public sector and the private sector with regards to gender policy implementation. Although many of the multinational entities in the country are leading and paving the way for equality within the private sector, the implementation of national policies, especially within the outlook of gender equality, is a challenging feat. While the government issues guidance on gender policies, interviews show private companies experience a lack of firm direction. Interviews also show a disconnect between the private and public sector in relation to communication, collaboration, and the ability for corporations to effectively translate national policy into corporate policy.

The findings reveal that companies face challenges adapting gender policies due to the informality informal of certain rules, lack of senior executive involvement and prioritization, as well as the lack of accountability and reporting requirements. The first section explains the role of businesses in the promotion of gender equality arguing that the implementation and adaptation of these policies requires coordination between government and the private sector. The second section explains the theoretical framework, methodology, and methods. The third section presents the analysis including showing the role of formal and informal rules, senior executive involvement, and prioritization as well as the importance of accountability, transparency, and reporting. Findings show that companies could be willing to collaborate further with the UAE government but often navigate unspoken rules and assumptions based on vague policy wording. In addition, more efficient senior management backing and communication as well as commencing mandatory reporting and benchmarking may be the key to more robust gender policy implementation.

# Gender Equality and the Role of the Private Sector

The United Nations and UN and government agendas all over the world have been placing more and more emphasis on the role of gender and the importance of gender equality to reach sustainable development. According to the World Bank, gender equality has grown to be a desirable trait that customers and investors search for when making business decisions.[[10]](#footnote-10) Education is a key factor in evening the playing field, especially in the developing world.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Current debates argue collaboration between governments, businesses and civil society is paramount to reach the goal of gender equality. The United Nations 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the goal of reaching sustainable development. A core difference in these global goals is the involvement of businesses and civil society in the development initiatives. Governments are no longer seen as the main actor to reach the goals and civil society as well as the private sector are key partners for development.

Businesses are key partners in promoting gender equality in the current debates of sustainable development. Corporate social responsibility has been an avenue for firms to enhance competitiveness through engaging the community while focusing on social issues of society such as women’s empowerment.[[12]](#footnote-12) The role of corporations, giving women equal access to jobs and opportunities through CSR initiatives, is key for development and has a rippling effect on economic development, health, education, and child nutrition.[[13]](#footnote-13) Proof of the effect of equality on economic development often encourages policy makers to derive more gender-based policies towards the goal of achieving gender parity.

Often, policies that focus on gender within businesses have been placed within the field of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), Corporate Responsibility, Human Resources, People or Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. These fast-changing fields have been mainly concerned with policies and initiatives that can impact gender within the workplace, marketplace, and the community.[[14]](#footnote-14) However, observing how these changes in government legislation and policies can translate into corporate policy is important and contextual.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Businesses, due to the nature of the private sector operates at arm’s length of the public sector, face challenges in translating the goals of gender equality to their activities and are often slow to act and intrinsically motivated. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim argue that demands for social equality and human rights are contextual and not universal.[[16]](#footnote-16) Achieving gender equality and development can happen through policy changes or through bottom-up changes to economic development.

Despite the importance of international and national agendas for gender policies, scholars argue that changes in perceptions of gender roles in the corporate world change through agency and institutionalization. Agency can allow individuals to create authentic changes and question traditional norms and practices.[[17]](#footnote-17) Discourses of gender asymmetry and prescribed gender roles can can impact attitudes and occupational aspirations.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, scholars show institutional innovation can hold an immense role in changing organizational culture.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Traditional pre-existing notions about gender roles and masculinity versus femininity create biases that are often implicit and hard to identify within businesses and organisational culture.[[20]](#footnote-20) Women’s access to education and the labor market has been significantly inferior to men, only increasing their vulnerabilities.[[21]](#footnote-21)  Researchers agree that agency and institutionalization can promote gender equality, however the process of changing and adapting to new government policies is often challenging and unclear for private companies.

# The Relationship Between Government Policy and the Private Sector

Government gender policies include the private sector as a key partner to promote equality, parity, and balance supporting the empowerment of women in society and in the workplace. Research shows governments and policy-makers should develop policies to ensure that gender equality and economic development go hand in hand throughout all phases of policy development.[[22]](#footnote-22)

Research focuses on the role of public-private partnerships on various society issues such as health and the environment however, research on partnerships for gender policies are fewer and newer. Most research on gender equality and the private sector focuses on the issues of work-life balance. Arguments have been made that using economic development and feminism to drive policy does not address the real needs of women.[[23]](#footnote-23) Research calls for policy makers to consider both employment and care work, as neoliberal policies can penalize childbearing and promote conservative family ideals that require sacrificing career for family.[[24]](#footnote-24) Studies show that gender policies supporting women in the workforce often aim to decrease the burden of child and household care and contribute to lower levels of gender inequality in healthcare.[[25]](#footnote-25) Research also shows that gender equality policies should be maintained and improved over time while including the voices of women.

Public-private partnerships for implementing gender policies are recommended by the United Nations. The UN includes Gender Equality as one of the 17 UN Sustainable Development Goals. The United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) recommends a tool called the SDG Compass as a guide to help corporations align the goals with the core of their business. This tool helps businesses measure advancements in gender issues, as the tool provides direction and support towards gender equality. The UN initiative titled Women’s Empowerment Principles was launched in 2010 and was the very first explicit gender perspective or women’s principles in the Global Compact Agenda. The principles aim to point out best practices and promote good corporate citizenship in the gender sphere, the UN Global Compact, and the role of businesses in sustainable development. A CEO Statement of Support for the principles has been signed by over 4,000 chief executives of companies around the world.[[26]](#footnote-26)

These initiatives are often translated into the national agendas according to specific national and local contexts. Local governments have adopted gender policies for businesses. The Canadian city of Ottawa worked toward developing an “Equity and Inclusion Lens Handbook” that works as a guide for the private sector on questions of equity and inclusion. While these questions are used to promote reflection on all forms of diversity, the questions can also be applied to gender and used to promote reflective thinking on gender balance within the private sector.[[27]](#footnote-27)

Research shows implementing global agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals is much more challenging than reaching an agreement on the adoption of policies.[[28]](#footnote-28) However, these initiatives surrounding women’s empowerment tend to focus on what women can do for development rather than the other way around.[[29]](#footnote-29) Translating goals at a macro level into more focused targets for a local level proves to be difficult for businesses. Areas to consider include the socio-economic context and concrete initiatives that play a large role in implementation.

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# Implementation of Government Gender Policies by the Private Sector

The private sector faces many challenges implementing gender policy. Research shows that the most pressing gender-based policy issues faced by the private sector are most often related to equal pay, equal opportunity, maternity, and retirement. Examples include research of the Finnish private sector and how equal pay has been implemented by law in the country, but the pay gap still differed depending on the type of sectors and occupation groups.[[30]](#footnote-30) Benchmarking policies against both competitors and other industries is important and allows for comparison into the market. The evaluation of these benchmarks can be long or short-term depending on the goals or policies set.[[31]](#footnote-31) This also helps entities clearly express and communicate their objectives.

Lack of communication in terms of government policy and guidelines regarding policy implementation and enforcement is also common. Research shows there is a need to manage interactions between the private and government sectors.[[32]](#footnote-32) Cooperation between government and private entities is often fragmented and often warrants the question of how collaboration can be efficient. Moreover, policies often can go unchecked. The equal employment policy in Germany, for example, has shown to have gaps because it is often the social partners that voluntarily assess and regulate private entities on behalf of the government. This can be managed through a more strategic method of implementation reporting and enforcing.[[33]](#footnote-33) Another way to ignite collaboration between the public and private sectors is to work through partnerships that can benefit both parties with strong incentives and can bring new ideas for designing programs, projects, and even policies.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Civil society and other governmental organizations also add to the pressure of implementation of gender policy in businesses. These pressures tend to be driving forces on whether policies, CSR strategies, or voluntary regulation are developed.[[35]](#footnote-35) Pressure in turn affects how vigorously companies implement gender policy. A principal example of a soft approach strategy in the implementation of government policy is the case of New Zealand, where the regulation approach is in the form of advocacy and encouragement of equal employment opportunity policies, awareness-raising, and benchmarking. However, in Norway a hard approach to policy application uses legislation in the form of quotas and affirmative action programs in their corporate governance.[[36]](#footnote-36)

Accountability, reporting and disclosure on performance and targets on gender policies are also challenges for the private sector. Businesses require government guidance in the case of benchmarking and reporting.[[37]](#footnote-37) In terms of gender information, reporting is often reactive and due to changing the expectations of company behavior by various stakeholders and market actors such as potential employees, benchmarking agencies, and investors. Research shows the implementation of gender policy in the private sector tends to occur through grand statements that are made in favor of change but are often not backed with any real commitment or resources. Using gender equality as a tick-box exercise gives stakeholders the notion that corporations have a genuine commitment to change when they often are creating policies that are not fully enforced and are instead for the sole purpose of maintaining appearances and securing stakeholder funding.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Enforcing transparency and benchmarking in the partnerships can make companies more accountable. An example of is the implementation of the World Bank’s Gender Mainstreaming Strategy that partnered with twenty-one global private entities around six commitments to gender equality.[[39]](#footnote-39) The strategy aimed to strengthen the connections between the World Bank and the private sector by spotlighting best practices, benchmarking gender policies, and making various large-scale commitments to promote both women’s economic empowerment and gender equality in support of a wider gender action plan.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The institutionalist perspectives show companies operate within a set of both formal and informal rules.[[41]](#footnote-41) Where formal rules are enforced through official channels like policy documents, informal rules are often enforced through corporate culture and power structures. While both have their place in an organization, informal rules can be biased and used to undermine formal rules. Informal rules still consistently play an important role, especially when it comes to the role of certain narratives in enforcing change.[[42]](#footnote-42) Issues arise when there is a disparity between the informally expressed core values of a company and the policies they are actively trying to enforce.

Moreover, gender policies are often easily overlooked as they are not made corporate priorities.[[43]](#footnote-43) For example, research from Australia shows certain practices like long work hours clash with attempts to support flexible working hours for employees. Scholars show the gender policies can have a larger impact if companies are offered sanctions or rewards for achieving policy objectives.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The involvement of executive leadership is critical when addressing resistance to policies in companies. However, not all policies are of high enough priority to be included in the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of senior executives. Alternatively, various policies depend upon a high reliance on individual line-manager discretion. Policies that are in line with a corporation’s values and are enforced successfully are robust. Moreover, policies which are flexible in their application and have adapted from lessons learned tend to be revisable.[[45]](#footnote-45) The case of gender policies in corporations can fall into the same difficult position of implementation and adaptation. Research shows policies should be integrated as formal rules to ensure enforcement. To ensure that informal rules of gender are not biased, formal rules along with senior executive support are essential.[[46]](#footnote-46) As scholars suggest, achieving policy objectives on gender policies might require sanctions or rewards.[[47]](#footnote-47) Moreover, scholars show the combination of both revisability and robustness is critical to implementing new policies and driving change; in this case, the change being to gender practices.[[48]](#footnote-48)

# Gender Equality and Balance in the UAE Workforce

The UAE has acted as a pioneer in promoting gender policies for the private sector in the Middle East however, little research focuses on the challenges faced by the private sector as companies adopt government recommendations. Women in the UAE make up the majority of university graduates and the UAE recognizes that women make the future of the country’s workforce and economic development.[[49]](#footnote-49) The vision of the UAE government for gender equality is framed as “gender balance” and aims at making the UAE a global role model by achieving the following objectives:

* Reduce the gender gap across all government sectors.
* Increase the country’s ranking on gender gap within global competitiveness reports.
* Achieve gender balance in decision making positions.
* Promote the UAE’s status as a benchmark for legislation on gender balance.[[50]](#footnote-50)

The Gender Balance Council was launched in 2015 to be the taskforce in charge of achieving these goals. To help encourage and foster this change, the government also has various awards and recognitions in place for companies supporting gender balance in the UAE. However, achieving this goal requires the introduction of initiatives and legislation that will help change the foundation. Some initiatives so far have been the introduction of the gender balance guide, the national political empowerment program, the equal pay law, an increased maternity leave (three months total), and a mandatory female presence in boardrooms.[[51]](#footnote-51)

The UAE ranks first in literacy rate as well as enrollment of females in secondary and tertiary education in the region. The UAE also has a number one ranking in the social progress index report under the category of “women treated with respect.” In STEM fields, 56% of UAE graduates are women. The women of the country also make up 50% of Parliament representation as well as 29% of ministerial roles.[[52]](#footnote-52) The UAE government is also working with the World Economic Forum, United Nations Development Program, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development to work on a gender equality index, research, studies, and a global gender gap report.[[53]](#footnote-53)

The case of the UAE is particularly important to observe because the government plays a leading role in gender balance in the region. Women in roles of power such as judges and ministers, make the UAE a role model to both the private sector and governments in the Middle East.[[54]](#footnote-54) The political framework consists of both federal and local branches but also considers the federal national council and the cabinet. Traditionally, the UAE has a decentralized federal political system and all seven emirates must agree to pass new laws.[[55]](#footnote-55) Despite a weak and still growing civil society, the UAE government has taken several steps to advance the issue of women’s representation, education and participation in the labor market under the umbrella of ‘Gender Balance.’

Apart from the Gender Balance Council’s role, other women’s entities in various emirates are involved in the process of creating gender-based policies. These entities include the General Women’s Union in the capital of Abu Dhabi, Dubai Women’s Association, Um El Moameneen Association (Ajman), Association of Women's Renaissance (Ras Al Khaimah), Umm Al Quwain Women Association, and the Women Union Association (Sharjah).[[56]](#footnote-56) This collaborative environment supports the achievement of the nation's gender balance targets.

Research on the role of Emirati women focuses on gender roles but fails to address the impact of public agendas on gender issues in the workplace. The literature explores cases of women in specific industries in the private sector, the difficulties in climbing the corporate ladder, problems of gender disparity at senior levels, and issues with job retention and turnover.[[57]](#footnote-57) For example, Marzouqi and Foster conducted qualitative research on the lack of representation of Emirati women in the IT sector.[[58]](#footnote-58) Other similar research about the workplace such as Hutchings et al. explains Arab women’s perceptions of barriers and facilitators of entry into international management positions.[[59]](#footnote-59) Al Waqfi and Al Faki focus on the gender-based differences in employment conditions in the GCC, especially the UAE working environment.[[60]](#footnote-60)

Research on cultural norms focuses on specifics of culture on gender in the workplace. Kemp and Zhao press upon culture and traditions in the UAE that influence cultural orientations on Emirati women’s careers whilst mapping out how family influence and traditional culture play a role in the education, work, and social lives of Emirati women.[[61]](#footnote-61) Farrell also explores the impact of Emirati culture on the workforce participation of women in the UAE private banking sector.[[62]](#footnote-62)  Ibrahim and Al Marri explore the role of gender and organizational support in work-family conflict for accountants in the UAE.[[63]](#footnote-63) Farrell explores the importance of UAE family culture and work life balance in relation to job satisfaction and retention of Emirati women in companies.[[64]](#footnote-64) Most research focuses on traditional and cultural norms and the impact of these roles on specific professions for women. However, the research on the UAE does not reveal how corporations implement gender initiatives.

Researching how the private sector adopts gender policies in the UAE is important to reveal challenges in the implementation process. To ensure that national policies and a gender balance agenda are implemented into women’s everyday lives, correspondence between government entities, policy makers, and the private sector is essential.[[65]](#footnote-65) International organization agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are also promoting gender equality in the country. The OECD has also published reports regarding the UAE and gender parity in a global comparative in a collection titled the “UAE’s OECD gender guide”[[66]](#footnote-66) for employment in the Middle East.[[67]](#footnote-67) This article reveals the challenges and issues of integrating these policies into the private sector. Translating national policy into corporate policy is especially challenging because policies are recommended and not enforced.

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# Theoretical Framework

Understanding how the private sector implements, adopts, and adapts to gender policies from governments is important. Governments all over the world have been following global and national initiatives toward gender equality. However, little research explains the issues the private sector faces when collaborating with governments and supporting these initiatives. Research focuses on the concept of changing mindsets and pre-existing notions about gender roles.[[68]](#footnote-68) Understanding attitudes and biases on gender roles is also important to address changes. [[69]](#footnote-69) Despite the support from the private sector on women’s empowerment in terms of decision making and spending power, research highlights the importance of providing women a fair and just platform.[[70]](#footnote-70) This article explores how national policies on gender are applied to the private sector.

This article explores how UAE corporate entities play their role in adapting to and implementing the policies within the UAE vision toward gender balance. This study identifies individuals who are responsible for gender policy or gender policy experts within companies to understand their role in contributing to the country’s gender balance agenda. Understanding how corporations implement national policies on gender and how they implement these policies into their corporate policies is essential to fill a gap in understanding the underlying issues of implementation. Through the lenses of formal and informal rules[[71]](#footnote-71), senior executive involvement, prioritization, [[72]](#footnote-72) and the role of accountability [[73]](#footnote-73) and reporting [[74]](#footnote-74), this article shows how companies adapt to gender policies in the UAE.

# Methodology

This article shows how the UAE vision for gender balance is adopted into the private sector through a qualitative study that revealing the challenges and opportunities in relation to gender policy adaptation. A qualitative study allows for an in-depth understanding of the challenges of implementation. [[75]](#footnote-75) To understand the challenges and opportunities s of implementation, ten in-depth semi-structured interviews representing a mix of private multinational, semi-private multinational, and government companies form the analysis. Interviews with the departments of Human Resources or Governance and Sustainability within various types of private companies in Dubai were conducted to learn about the private sector’s adaptation of the UAE vision towards gender parity. The selected companies are two SMEs with 2 and 300 employees, one local public company with 2,800 employees, and six large international companies ranging between 57,000 and 284,000 employees. The companies represent various industries such as financial institutions, telecommunications, logistics, media, and manufacturing.

The interviews were conducted individuals responsible for adaptation of gender-focused government policies as well as international agendas such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), UN Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs), and OECD frameworks into corporate policy in 2018. Individuals were identified via selective sampling and were invited to participate due to the nature of their role and expertise in Human Resources, Diversity and Inclusion, CSR and/or Sustainability in the companies they work. Seven women and three men, originally, from a total of eight countries within Europe, South Asia, and the Arab world were interviewed about the issues faced by companies when adapting to the country’s vision for gender policy.

Participants were asked questions about the process of implementation of the Emirati government gender policies. The gender policies of focus of the study included the Vision 2021, the gender balance agenda as well as UN SDGs and UN Women’s Empowerment Principles that were recommended by UAE government and in the process of being adopted by companies. The companies and the names of the individuals are omitted to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

# Analysis

The findings from the interviews show the challenges companies face when adapting gender policies from the UAE government. The analysis focuses on formal and informal rules [[76]](#footnote-76), senior executive involvement and prioritization[[77]](#footnote-77), and the role of accountability [[78]](#footnote-78) and reporting [[79]](#footnote-79) to show the issues companies are facing to adapt to gender policies in the UAE. The findings show that due to the lack of government guidelines and direction in implementing gender policy, companies struggle in the adaptation.

# Formal and Informal Rules

Organizational culture has a great influence on the implementation of policies within the workplace, especially when implementing concepts that are difficult to measure such as formal and informal rules. A few of the participants stressed the importance of formal and informal rules in organizational culture to influence corporate policy. Participants also refer to unspoken rules or assumptions based on vague policy wording and show formal rules could ensure enforcement. As per the literature, informal rules of gender require formal rules along with senior executive support for implementation.[[80]](#footnote-80)

Participant VII mentions how changes are difficult to track. “There is a requirement to change the policy within the private sector…there are some activities or approaches that are done on the record and there are some that are done off the record. So that takes a lot of time.” (Participant VII).

Participant III explains gender policy recommendations from the UAE government do not work if policies go against the corporate culture and if management does not fully endorse policies:

How do we actually influence organizational culture within the private sector to be inclusive for women? It's not sufficient to have a work-life balance policy in the workplace or a daycare because… your manager will tell you, for example, where are you going, are you leaving early today? Then… that policy basically means nothing. There should be a supporting environment and that will not just be created by policies or by leaders who advocate for women empowerment.

Where formal rules are enforced through official channels like policy documents, informal rules are often enforced through corporate culture and power structures. Family influence and traditional culture still play a big role in UAE societies.[[81]](#footnote-81) Policies that support flexible working times for women are important, but even more so is having an organizational culture that allows for changes. While both have their place in an organization, informal rules can be biased and used to undermine formal rules.[[82]](#footnote-82) Other participants describe facing issues with unfair gender discriminatory policies and practices. Participant IV mentions:

I was working with a previous company where some of the policies state we do not discriminate based on gender, nationality and religion. Then there were situations within the policies for instance some allowances were given to the head of household, by default it is assumed that the head of household is the man. The female head of household was only accepted in the case of a divorcee or widow. No! Why is that fair? (Participant IV).

Informal rules still consistently play an important role, especially because certain narratives of traditional gender roles are present and therefore, change is more difficult. Issues are more likely to arise when there is a disparity between the informally expressed core values of a company and the policies they are trying to enforce. [[83]](#footnote-83)

# Senior Executive Involvement and Prioritization

Implementation is still left to the discretion of line managers. Organizational culture is difficult to change and can become barriers to adopting the gender balance agenda. While companies can support and adopt policies within their organizations, creating the environment where these policies are engrained into the corporate culture can be a challenge. Participant V gives an example of how managers need to walk the walk on policy implementation.

We have work-from-home and flexible hours policies for whoever wants to use them, but there are still managers who are resistant to these policies and don't allow for it and give their employees a hard time when they ask for these benefits. They are set in the mindset of - if you work from home, you really don't work, you’re in a more relaxed environment. You’re not under pressure, your kids are around. How can you focus? So, if you don’t have the management act and drive these initiatives and do it themselves. It's very difficult to start implementing it across a big organization. So, it always has to come from top - down…Otherwise the juniors get eaten up, unfortunately. (Participant V).

Various issues on the gender balance agenda depend on the discretion of individual line managers. Policies that are in line with a corporation's values and are enforced successfully are robust. This shows that if policies appear to be lower on the list of corporate priorities and left to the discretion of line managers, policies are easily overlooked.[[84]](#footnote-84)

Advocating for gender policies is vital to engrain them into the corporate culture and make sure policies are implemented.

There are working groups set in place, there are councils set in place, but if you were to ask an average private sector corporate executive or even someone working within the sustainability department whereby that's their mandate and within their KPIs (Key Performance Indicators), they often will still find, have ambiguity around the policy...there's a policy, we understand that, and we understand there's a priority in the UAE, but unless it’s advocated and pressed for by the senior leadership, it won’t work, and that conversation and dialogue doesn't happen often enough. (Participant VII).

As the literature shows, gender policies should be designed in a robust and revisable manner.[[85]](#footnote-85) The findings show that robustness and revisability still require advocacy and senior leadership involvement.

We need leadership to push for more change because we're in a society which is hierarchical and if you have the person in the top saying it, others will listen. They may not always follow through. But they will at least listen to what they have to say (Participant VI).

The push for senior executive involvement is also reinforced by Participant X - “Mindsets take forever to change and the leadership team is critical, absolutely critical, and they need to fully understand why we're doing it and then they need to cascade it down.” Interviews show that overall, the involvement of executive leadership is critical when addressing resistance to policies in companies. However, not all policies are high enough priority to be included in the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of senior executives.[[86]](#footnote-86)

# The Role of Accountability and Reporting

Many of the participants associated the enforcement of gender policy with the need for more transparency and reporting requirements from the UAE. The research shows that gender policies that are enforceable and require reporting are more likely to succeed, as Koch explains. [[87]](#footnote-87)

They (companies) need to report on implementation and stats because the government needs to know who is slacking and who is ahead of the curve and what the person or corporate that's lacking can learn from the corporate that's ahead of the curve…The level of reporting that currently happens to the government, I think, is minimalistic. (Participant II).

 Participants described and supported benchmarking as a slow approach that can be long or short-term depending on the goals or policies set. [[88]](#footnote-88)

However, due to a lack of transparency and data about the gender gap in the region, there still needs more recorded information and statistics. I think the problem we have within implementation is that there are no proof points or statistics. So, I don't know what the gender pay gap is, for example, between men and women here… I think just the general impression I get is that there is still much to be done. Again, it’s good to see women in high positions in the government sector, but I don't see that being replicated in the private sector. (Participant VI).

Participants also valued better communication, accessibility, and transparency between the private and public entities. “If the public sector wants the private sector to be engaged, they need to be more accessible and they need to be comfortable to talk to the private sector. They need to be open to partnerships” (Participant VII).

Research supports that cooperation between private and government entities is often fragmented which can cause legislation to go unchecked.[[89]](#footnote-89) This is often due to a lack of resources and the independent nature of the private sector in society. Certain policies are more often recommended rather than enforced on the private sector. This links back to Koch’s thoughts on how equal opportunity is a major part of a country’s laws and should include a more strategic method of implementation, reporting, and enforcing.

Government can ensure that corporations are being transparent about their pay structures for women, men, and various ethnicities. I think that would be a wakeup call for corporations that will make them realize that there's actually somebody we need to tell about this. We can't just do whatever we want to do (Participant II).

According to Grosser and Moon[[90]](#footnote-90), businesses require government guidance, benchmarking, and reporting requirements. In terms of gender information, reporting is often reactive and due to changing expectations of company behavior by various stakeholders and market actors such as potential employees, benchmarking agencies, investors, civil society, and other government organizations.

We also need to spend time and be confident and secure in sharing our areas of growth for the weaknesses in an honest and authentic way. If we're actually going to improve, that's a little more on the record rather than off the record. So you'll get a bunch of sustainability professionals together and they'll be somewhat honest about it in a safe space, but if we are going to make some systemic changes, you need to be able to share those findings with the government sector and the private sector, the public sector. And we can't do that unless we're comfortable in sharing (Participant VII).

The findings show public authorities play a large role in ensuring gender equality in their workplaces. Through policy making, regulation and enforcement, procurement, and monitoring and reporting progress should be carefully implemented.[[91]](#footnote-91) “The only way to enforce gender policy is by having a reporting system for companies to update their efforts and benchmark in terms of gender equality” (Participant III).

Interviews show the importance of companies benchmarking policies to understand whether the companies are moving in the right direction. Benchmarking and evaluation of benchmarking is a role corporations can play to help adapt the country’s gender balance vision. [[92]](#footnote-92)

If companies are forced to report to the government on gender policy and pay imbalances, we will begin to see a difference... I don't think we're going to have much movement because it's nice to make a sweeping statement and it makes for good PR (Public Relations) headlines but reporting and benchmarking will make it more concrete (Participant VI).

The lack of accountability and reporting requirements on gender policy create challenges for the private sector. Clear and transparent communication can create opportunities for the gender balance. The private sector may resist transparency due to the nature of the sector as distinctive from the state. However, to move forward with gender policies, findings show companies require data collection, transparency, and reporting on gender issues to enable implementation of policies.

# Conclusion

Although many of companies in the UAE are leading and paving the way for gender equality, the implementation of international agendas and national gender polices is a challenging feat. Not only does the implementation of gender policies require years of awareness, education, and changing mindsets, but these policies also require a change of organizational culture within the private sector and alignment between the private sector and the government.[[93]](#footnote-93)

Findings from ten interviews with individuals responsible for implementing gender balance and gender equality agendas in the UAE show that there is willingness from the private sector to collaborate further with government in the implementation of gender policies. The interviewed participants understand the importance of UN agendas and government gender policies for development. This shows an opportunity for the UAE to further collaborate with the private sector in the field of gender balance.

Results show the most pressing issues faced in the UAE with gender policy implementation are a lack of transparency, reporting, and accurate data on gender parity and pay gaps within the private and public sector. This study shows corporations are willing to receive more guidance from the government to measure and manage gender data providing an opportunity for the UAE government to advance gender policies.

While corporations are willing to publicly announce supporting gender policy, steps such as senior management involvement, organizational change and public-private communication are still barriers for change. The research shows much of the implementation is at the discretion of line managers who may restrict the advancement of gender policies and organizational change. Senior management has an opportunity to create an environment in which these policies are engrained in the organizational culture.

The case of the UAE shows the challenges and opportunities faced by the private sector to advance the government gender balance agenda. Unspoken rules and vague policy wording in gender policy can impede the advancement of gender policies. This research shows that regardless of government gender policy recommendations, organizational culture still triumphs without clear government guidance, transparency, accountability, and reporting mechanisms.

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