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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Visit to the United Arab Emirates

Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem^{*}, ^{}**

Summary

The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem, conducted an official visit to the United Arab Emirates from 9 to 19 December 2024. In the present report, she assesses the situation of gender-based violence against women and girls in the country; examines the legal and institutional framework for the prevention of violence against women and girls and the assistance for and protection of victims; and makes recommendations to strengthen the national efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls in the State.

* Agreement was reached to publish the present document after the standard publication date owing to circumstances beyond the submitter's control.

** The summary of the report is being circulated in all official languages. The report itself, which is annexed to the summary, is being circulated in the language of submission and Arabic only.



Annex

Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem, on her visit to the United Arab Emirates

I. Introduction

1. The Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences, Reem Alsalem, conducted an official visit to the United Arab Emirates from 9 to 19 December 2024, at the invitation of the Government. The main objective of the visit was to assess the situation of gender-based violence against women and girls in the country, and to provide recommendations to strengthen the efforts by the United Arab Emirates to prevent and respond to such forms of violence.

2. The Special Rapporteur would like to extend her sincere appreciation to the Government for the invitation and for the excellent cooperation before and during her visit and is looking forward to continuing the constructive engagement to follow up on the recommendations contained in the present report.

3. During her visit, the Special Rapporteur met with representatives of various State authorities, including the Ministry of Community Development,¹ the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, officials responsible for the Emirates Humanitarian City, the Ministry of Health and Prevention, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation, the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Justice (National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking), the Ministry of Tolerance and Coexistence, the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre, the Federal National Council in Dubai, the General Women's Union, the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood, the UAE Gender Balance Council, the Abu Dhabi Judicial Department and the Abu Dhabi Labour Court. She also met with representatives from various organizations, including relevant United Nations agencies, the National Human Rights Institution, civil, business and professional associations, grass-roots and charity organizations, academics and Emirati and foreign women and girls. In addition, the Special Rapporteur visited key facilities, including those providing shelter for women and children, Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy, a Housekeeping Domestic Workers Services centre, Latifa Hospital, the Penal and Correctional Institution in Dubai and the Sheikhha Fatima Fund for Refugee Women.

4. The Special Rapporteur also extends her appreciation to the United Nations agencies in the United Arab Emirates for their support, particularly the United Nations Resident Coordinator and United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and to the representatives of the diplomatic corps in the United Arab Emirates with whom she met.

II. Context and national framework

5. The United Arab Emirates is a federal State established in 1971 by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, who played a pivotal role in uniting the seven emirates – Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Sharjah, Ajman, Umm al-Quaywayn, Ra's al-Khaymah and Fujayrah – into a single nation. It is home to over 200 nationalities, with 89 per cent of the population comprising foreign nationals,² primarily seeking economic opportunities. Since its formation, the State has focused on strengthening national unity and governance, leveraging its natural resource

¹ In December 2024, it was announced that the Ministry of Community Development would become the Ministry of Community Empowerment.

² See <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/the-uae/facts-and-figures#:~:text=There%20are%20more%20than%20200,other%20Asians%2C%20Europeans%20and%20Africans.>

wealth to drive economic diversification and social development. A key priority has been channelling State revenues into a comprehensive welfare system, ensuring the well-being of Emirati citizens and fostering long-term national growth.³

A. International legal responsibilities

6. At the international level, the United Arab Emirates is party to five of the nine core instruments of international human rights law, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, acceded to in 1997 and 2004, respectively. Nevertheless, the State has still not ratified key instruments, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families or the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

7. The State has also submitted reservations to two key United Nations conventions, namely the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment⁴ and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The reservation to the latter Convention concerns family law, particularly in the areas of divorce and custody, limiting the Convention's applicability in cases involving women's family rights.⁵

B. Constitutional, governmental and legislative framework

8. In accordance with the Constitution, federal law takes precedence over local law. Of the 152 articles in the Constitution, 70 define the powers of the federal system, while only four outline the powers of the individual emirates. The Constitution, therefore, places greater emphasis on the structure and authority of the federal Government and its five "authorities".⁶ In addition, each emirate, which has a consultative body, has the authority to enact laws in areas not expressly reserved for the federal Government or in matters where the federal Government has not legislated.⁷

9. The United Arab Emirates is governed by a federal system, with Abu Dhabi as its capital; in practice, the ruler of Abu Dhabi serves as the President, and the ruler of Dubai serves as the Vice-President. Federal structures are responsible for foreign affairs, security, education, public health, nationality, residence, immigration, census affairs and statistics. The emirates regulate their own security and order and provide public utilities, among other services.⁸

10. The Constitution (art. 14) provides that equality, social justice, the provision of safety and security, and equality of opportunity for all citizens form the basis of the community. Article 25 of the Constitution states that all persons are to be equal before the law and that there is to be no discrimination between citizens on the basis of race, nationality, religious belief or social position. There is no specific prohibition of gender-based discrimination in the Constitution.

³ Economic analysis provided by the United Nations country team.

⁴ CAT/C/ARE/CO/1, para. 40.

⁵ Zeyad Jaffal, Faisal Shawabkeh and Ali Hadi Al Obeidi, "Toward constructive harmonisation of Islamic family law and CEDAW: a study on the UAE's reservation to CEDAW article 16 and equal rights to marriage and family relations", *Australian Journal of Human Rights*, vol. 28, No. 1 (2022), pp. 139–162.

⁶ These are the Supreme Council, the Cabinet, the President, the Federal Judiciary and the Federal National Council.

⁷ The United Arab Emirates does not have an independent legislative body, although it has a formal popular representation of citizens through the 40-seat Federal National Council. Half of the Council's seats are appointed; the other half are directly elected.

⁸ Economic analysis provided by the United Nations country team.

C. National policies on the promotion of women's equality, empowerment and participation

11. The United Arab Emirates has introduced various federal legislative measures aimed at promoting equality between men and women and enhancing women's participation in all aspects of life. These significant developments were also confirmed in the Gender Inequality Index published by the United Nations Development Programme in 2024, in which the United Arab Emirates ranked seventh globally and first regionally.⁹ The country also achieved a score of 82.5 out of 100 points in *Women, Business and the Law 2024*, a report published by the World Bank.¹⁰ These efforts were recognized by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women in its concluding observations on the fourth periodic report of the United Arab Emirates.¹¹

12. The Special Rapporteur commends the United Arab Emirates for its strong commitment to the advancement of women's rights, emanating from the highest level of the country's leadership, which has been directive for government and society alike. Almost all stakeholders with whom she met were aware of statements made by Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan and Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak (considered the "Mother of the Nation") underscoring the need to empower women. This commitment has been swiftly and firmly translated into policy and action. One example is the establishment of the UAE Gender Balance Council in 2015 to reduce gender gaps across all government sectors and improve the country's global standing in gender equality indices.

13. Pursuant to Federal Law No. 12 of 2021, the National Human Rights Institution was established with a mandate to review national legislation and follow up on human rights violations. To date, the Institution has not yet been accredited by the Global Alliance of National Human Rights Institutions. The Special Rapporteur noted that by now, it was reasonable to expect the Institution to make more concrete headway in operationalizing its strategy and workplans, particularly regarding complaints.

1. Political participation

14. The United Arab Emirates has made notable progress in political representation, achieving gender parity in the parliament in 2019, with women now holding 50 per cent of the seats in the Federal National Council. Since 2023, the country has consistently been ranked fifth globally by the Inter-Parliamentary Union with respect to women in parliament.¹² In addition, two of the seven parliamentary committees are chaired by women, one of the two deputies of the Speaker of Federal National Council is a woman, and 10 federal ministers are women. Women also make up 66 per cent of the public sector workforce and 30 per cent of the diplomatic corps,¹³ and 64 per cent of government leadership positions are held by women.¹⁴

2. Economic empowerment and participation

15. In 2012, with a view to enhancing women's economic participation, the United Arab Emirates implemented a Cabinet resolution mandating women's representation on the boards of all government institutions.¹⁵ In 2018, the Cabinet approved the Law on Equal Wages and Salaries for Men and Women.¹⁶ That same year, the Cabinet and the General Women's Union joined forces and launched several women-focused initiatives to increase women's economic participation in investment funds and representation in leadership positions, such as the National Policy for Empowerment of Emirati Women 2023–2031 and

⁹ See <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/global-report-document/hdr2023-24reporten.pdf>.

¹⁰ Available at <https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/wbl>.

¹¹ CEDAW/C/ARE/CO/4.

¹² See https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking/?date_month=3&date_year=2025.

¹³ See <https://u.ae/en/information-and-services/social-affairs/women/women-in-politics>.

¹⁴ Statistics shared by the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre.

¹⁵ See <https://www.gbc.gov.ae/legislations.html>.

¹⁶ See <https://uaecabinet.ae/en/news/mohammed-bin-rashid-approves-new-law-on-equal-pay>.

an initiative aimed at increasing women in leadership by 2030, which is implemented together with 70 private companies. In addition, the Nama Foundation¹⁷ was created to promote women's entrepreneurship and leadership through institutional grants. Such a concerted effort to increase women's participation in economic life has translated into approximately 23,000 Emirati businesswomen managing projects worth over 50 billion dirhams and holding 15 per cent of board positions in chambers of commerce and industry nationwide.¹⁸

16 Several policies have been adopted with the objective of retaining new mothers in the workforce. For example, Cabinet resolution No. 19 of 2006 required companies to establish nurseries in companies with more than 50 women employees. In 2022, the United Arab Emirates extended maternity leave for private sector employees from 45 to 60 days.¹⁹ Additionally, the State introduced paid parental leave for private sector employees, granting five days of leave to either parent within six months of the child's birth.²⁰ This initiative positions the United Arab Emirates as the first Arab nation to adopt such a policy.

17. The Ministry of Community Development provides economic, social and housing support, primarily for Emirati women, while capital for income-generating opportunities is channelled through local businesswomen associations at the emirate level, in collaboration with emirates' chambers of commerce. Several governmental and private-sector initiatives, such as the Ma'an initiative, facilitate the registration of social enterprises.

18. At the local level, for example, the Ajman Businesswomen Council, established in 2005, works to advance women's economic participation through business development and market access initiatives. The Council has signed 300 partnership agreements, providing Emirati women in Ajman with business licences, commercial partnerships and logistical support for selling and distributing their products. This model could be scaled up to other emirates or serve as an example for similar initiatives nationwide to enhance women's economic empowerment.

3. Participation of non-Emirati women in economic and social life

19. Most economic and social support initiatives remain restricted to Emirati citizens, largely excluding foreign women, including migrant workers, who are often in a situation of increased vulnerability. The lack of economic support for non-Emirati women can leave them with limited options for financial survival, pushing some into exploitative or precarious work, including prostitution.

20 Expanding the eligibility of social and economic programmes to include all women, particularly those who are vulnerable, would strengthen financial independence and resilience across all communities. During the visit, the Special Rapporteur identified examples of good practices in grass-roots, community-based initiatives that recognize and target those who are the most vulnerable, irrespective of nationality or sex, and that seek to enhance their resilience and economic autonomy. One such example is the Fujairah Charity Association. Such community-based efforts and need-based approaches must be scaled up and replicated in a more deliberate manner to benefit more vulnerable persons across the United Arab Emirates.

4. Harassment at the workplace

21. In an effort to tackle sexual harassment in the workplace, the United Arab Emirates introduced key labour reforms in 2022 under Federal Decree-Law No. 33 of 2021, the first legislation in the country to explicitly prohibit sexual harassment, bullying and any form of verbal, physical or psychological violence against workers by employers.²¹ The reforms

¹⁷ See <https://namawomen.ae/en/about-nama>.

¹⁸ See <https://www.uae-embassy.org/discover-uae/society/women-in-the-uae>.

¹⁹ Federal Decree Law No. 33 of 2021.

²⁰ See <https://global.lockton.com/us/en/news-insights/united-arab-emirates-introduces-a-new-labor-law?>.

²¹ See <https://www.migrant-rights.org/2021/11/uae-labour-reforms-include-flexible-employment-options-but-details-remain-unclear/>.

also ban discrimination based on race, religion, national origin and ethnicity. Despite these important efforts, the Special Rapporteur notes with concern that women continue to face discrimination and harassment in public and work environments, particularly in the private sector.²² Lower-tier female employees in male-dominated industries report sexist attitudes, barriers to career advancement and limited protections against workplace harassment, including sexual harassment. Victims rarely report, with few women pursuing legal action due to fear of retaliation or societal stigmatization.²³

D. Protection of the family

22. In November 2019, the United Arab Emirates launched the Family Protection Policy, aimed at strengthening social ties in the country's families and communities. The policy spelled out six forms of domestic abuse, namely: physical abuse, verbal abuse, psychological/mental abuse, sexual abuse, economic/financial abuse, and negligence. The Special Rapporteur welcomes such an expanded definition of domestic violence and encourages the Government to consider using this definition for situations of violence occurring outside of the family context to include violence caused by an intimate partner.

23. The policy prioritizes specific groups that are at risk of abuse, such as women, children, older persons and persons of determination,²⁴ through a multisectoral approach aimed at preventing and responding to abuse, bolstering legal protections, raising awareness and enhancing research and the knowledge base on the protection of the family.

24. Further advancing its commitment to family welfare, the United Arab Emirates announced, in December 2024, its plan to establish the Ministry of Family, with a view to enhancing family cohesion, stability and national identity.²⁵ Its mandate includes a remedial role, carried out through specialized social centres that provide support beyond a security-based approach to domestic violence, and a preventive role, carried out through data collection and the design of data-informed strategies. While the Special Rapporteur welcomes the ambitious programme, she emphasizes the importance of ensuring that violence against women is not addressed solely through the family lens and that the needs of a woman who is experiencing violence are assessed in her own right.

E. Sexual and reproductive health rights

25. One of the notable reforms in reproductive rights came with the issuance of Cabinet resolution No. 44 of 2024 concerning cases of permissible abortion. This resolution removed the requirement for spousal consent for emergency abortions, allowing women to make independent decisions regarding their reproductive health in urgent medical situations. Furthermore, the law permits licensed private clinics to perform the procedure, increasing accessibility to safe medical services. In addition, the resolution provides for abortion in cases of rape or incest. The Special Rapporteur welcomes that emergency abortions can proceed without requiring consent from a husband or guardian.

26. Moreover, the United Arab Emirates has invested in enhancing the quality and accessibility of reproductive healthcare. The Special Rapporteur visited Latifa Hospital in Dubai, a key facility specializing in maternal and child healthcare, which provides a range of reproductive health services. The hospital also plays a role in health education, conducting research and raising awareness in schools on reproductive rights. While the hospital attempts to provide services in languages other than Arabic, it must increase the

²² Mohamed Osman Shereif Mahdi Abaker, Helen Louise Patterson and Boo Yun Cho, "Gender managerial obstacles in private organizations: the UAE case", *Gender in Management: An International Journal*, vol. 38, No. 4 (2023), pp. 454–470.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ In the United Arab Emirates, persons with disabilities are officially referred to as persons of determination.

²⁵ See <https://www.emaratalyout.com/local-section/other/2024-12-09-1.1903462> (in Arabic).

availability of counselling and service provision in more languages and do so more systematically.

27. The hospital follows protocols for cases of sexual violence, although details of their implementation remain unclear. Victims of rape are referred to forensic medicine services, under the Ministry of Interior, for examination. While the administrative department of the hospital is kept informed about the progress of follow-up by police and the justice department, the Special Rapporteur noted with concern that details from the medical report may be shared by the hospital with the relevant authorities without necessarily informing the patient or obtaining the patient's consent, raising concerns about privacy, confidentiality and informed consent.

28. The Special Rapporteur was informed that child victims of sexual violence are referred to Al Jalila Children's Hospital for specialized care. The hospital has also dealt with cases of trafficking in persons and pregnancies outside of marriage, including among minors. In some cases, such as pregnancies resulting from incest, the police are immediately notified, and babies are taken away after birth. For children born outside marriage, a court decision is required for birth certificates, with the mother needing to prove her ability to provide for the child. There is no centralized information system in the United Arab Emirates with data on how many unmarried women who delivered children outside of marriage are affected.

29. The Special Rapporteur welcomed the dedicated psychological services that are provided to women, including women experiencing miscarriages and those who attempt suicide.

F. Birth registration and citizenship laws

30. Matters relating to citizenship and naturalization are governed by Federal Law No. 17 of 1972, concerning Nationality and Passports, and the subsequent amendments thereto. This legal framework exhibits significant gender-based disparities, particularly concerning the ability of Emirati women to transmit nationality to their children and spouses. Under the current law, children born to Emirati men automatically acquire United Arab Emirates citizenship, regardless of the mother's nationality. In contrast, Emirati women married to non-nationals face substantial legal hurdles when seeking to transmit their nationality to their children. While amendments in 2017 introduced provisions allowing Emirati mothers to apply for citizenship for their children, the applications are subject to stringent conditions and are not granted automatically, placing the children of Emirati women at a heightened risk of statelessness, especially if the father's nationality is not transmitted.²⁶

31. In the United Arab Emirates, full citizenship is granted only to those who can prove ancestral ties to the country dating to before 1925, documented through the *khulasat al-qaid* certificate. Without this certificate, naturalized citizens may receive passports issued by individual emirates rather than the federal Government, restricting their rights and benefits to the issuing emirate rather than conferring equal status across the United Arab Emirates. This inconsistency discriminates against women in marital relationships with foreigners.²⁷

32. Children of unknown parentage are granted Emirati citizenship, ensuring their access to rights and services. Federal Decree-Law No. 24 of 2022 outlines the care and custody of such children, emphasizing the provision of support in the area of health and with regard to psychological, social, educational and recreational areas. The Ministry of Community Development oversees childcare homes and facilitates the placement of children with eligible foster families capable of providing comprehensive care.²⁸ The Special Rapporteur welcomes that, at least in some instances, these children can also be granted citizenship. The United Arab Emirates has recently enacted legal reforms to

²⁶ See https://files.institutesi.org/UPR43_UAE.pdf.

²⁷ See <https://mei.edu/publications/breaking-citizenship-taboo-uae>.

²⁸ See <https://www.rubertpartners.com/adoption-uae/>.

recognize and protect the rights of children born to unmarried parents (article 410 of Federal Decree-Law No. 31 of 2021). Additionally, article 6 of Federal Decree-Law No. 10 of 2022 stipulates that a birth certificate serves as proof of birth but does not establish paternity. The Special Rapporteur encourages the Government to ensure that these laws are applied nationwide.

G. Women, peace and security

33. The United Arab Emirates has invested in leveraging the implementation of Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) worldwide, starting with joining the group that founded the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network.

34. In 2021, the United Arab Emirates launched its national action plan to implement resolution 1325 (2000) – the first by any Gulf Cooperation Council country.²⁹ In the same year, it signed an agreement with the United Nations whereby it contributed over \$800,000 to fund projects that enhance women’s representation and participation in peacekeeping and post-conflict recovery.³⁰

35. Since 2016, the United Arab Emirates has invested over \$2 billion in 113 countries to support initiatives aimed at protecting and empowering women and girls, underscoring its dedication to addressing gender disparities on a global scale. In addition to financial contributions, it has launched targeted programmes to build the capacity of women in peace and security roles, including through joint training with the United Nations in military and peacekeeping for 600 women from 10 countries on three continents.³¹

36. A central initiative supporting the women, peace and security agenda, relaunched in 2020 as the Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak Women, Peace and Security Initiative, trains and empowers women for roles in peacekeeping, security and conflict resolution.³² In 2021, the United Arab Emirates established the Women, Peace and Security Centre of Excellence as a hub for knowledge-sharing, training, and policy development to enhance women’s contributions to global peace and security.³³

37. The Special Rapporteur commends the United Arab Emirates for its strong international support for the women, peace and security agenda and urges it to apply the same community-based, operational approach domestically through its national action plan to support vulnerable women and girls, including non-Emiratis.

H. Gender-responsive humanitarian and development programmes

38. The United Arab Emirates is a generous donor of humanitarian and development assistance, with a strong focus on women and children affected by conflict and other complex emergencies.³⁴ It supports underfunded emergencies and major crises, promoting women’s participation in peacebuilding, conflict resolution and humanitarian response.

39. Four countries and areas have particularly benefited from that humanitarian support, namely the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, and Gaza. In the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, programmes funded by the United Arab Emirates have focused on improving maternal health and expanding educational opportunities for girls.³⁵ According

²⁹ See <https://www.wam.ae/ar/details/1395302922705> (in Arabic).

³⁰ See <https://tinyurl.com/3ss5wjwv> (in Arabic).

³¹ See <https://press.un.org/en/2024/dsgsm1947.doc.htm>.

³² See <https://unitedarabemirates.un.org/en/127557-women-peace-and-security-training-programme-renamed-sheikha-fatima-bint-mubarak-women-peace>.

³³ See <https://yousefaltaiba.com/insights/women-peace-and-the-security-centre-of-excellence/>.

³⁴ See, for example, <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2024/9/14/14-9-2024-uae-chad>.

³⁵ Ali Al Mokdad, “Role of civil society and non-governmental organizations in addressing developmental disparities in the Middle East: empowering communities for sustainable development”, in *Unveiling Developmental Disparities in the Middle East*, Mohamad al-Mokdad, ed. (IGI Global Scientific Publishing, 2025).

to the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, the United Arab Emirates donated over \$500 million in 2023 to support Palestinian relief efforts. For 2024, as of July of that year, the State was the second-largest donor, having contributed over \$200 million. Its efforts have included the establishment of a 150-bed field hospital, five bakeries and six desalination plants in Gaza and a maritime hospital at the Arish port in Egypt, and the delivery of aid, such as sanitary and maternity kits, including through airdrops. The Emirates Humanitarian City in Abu Dhabi is also currently hosting 2,127 children from Gaza, including cancer patients and injured children, as well as 547 women.

40. Since the outbreak of conflict in the Sudan in April 2023, the United Arab Emirates has announced a total of over \$600 million in humanitarian aid to support the Sudanese people, both within the Sudan and in neighbouring countries hosting Sudanese refugees, many of whom are women and children.³⁶

41. Through initiatives such as the Sheikha Fatima platform for refugees, the United Arab Emirates has provided critical support for displaced women and girls, ensuring their access to education, healthcare and livelihood opportunities. The Government has also invested over \$41 million in the Emirates Technical Assistance Program, benefiting 743,534 women in Egypt, Jordan and Uzbekistan. In addition, the United Arab Emirates has committed \$9.2 million to combat trafficking in persons and \$10 million to address sexual violence, with Yemen being the largest beneficiary of those efforts. In 2018, the State pledged \$500 million to support the reconstruction of Iraq.³⁷

I. Mitigating the gendered impact of the climate crisis

42. The Special Rapporteur commends the United Arab Emirates for implementing several initiatives aimed at addressing the gendered impact of the climate crisis, and that emphasize the empowerment and active participation of women and girls in creating sustainable solutions to climate action. These have included the Climate Change and Gender Equality initiative led by the General Women's Union and UN-Women, the implementation of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change gender action plan, and the Women in Sustainability, Environment and Renewable Energy initiative.³⁸ She also welcomes the efforts to engage adolescent girls in climate action. In 2023, the United Arab Emirates appointed a young Emirati woman as Youth Climate Champion for the twenty-eighth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, held in Dubai, to promote youth inclusion. During her visit, the Special Rapporteur also met a 13-year-old Emirati girl who had been the youngest environmental activist at the Conference in Dubai.

J. Data on discrimination and violence against women and girls

43. While the Government established the Federal Competitiveness and Statistics Centre under the Ministry of Cabinet Affairs in 2020 to systematize data collection across various sectors, the lack of key disaggregated data continues to be a significant challenge. There are gaps in data on, among other things, the prevalence of rape and other forms of gender-based violence. Where statistics are collected, they are often not disaggregated by nationality, type of crime, location of the crime and the profile of the perpetrator. Additionally, data on victims and perpetrators or the number of persons referred for assistance and protection are not standardized across the Emirates or service providers, limiting the effectiveness of interventions.

44. Moreover, information on the prevalence of female genital mutilation remains scarce, and information on incarcerated individuals, including women on death row, is not

³⁶ See <https://www.mofa.gov.ae/en/mediahub/news/2025/2/14/14-2-2025-uae-sudan>.

³⁷ See <https://www.arabianbusiness.com/politics-economics/389968-uae-offers-500m-to-support-reconstruction-of-iraq>.

³⁸ See <https://masdar.ae/en/news/newsroom/women-playing-transformative-role-in-uaes-sustainability-drive>.

systematically recorded or disaggregated. Similarly, data on child marriages, the number of stateless individuals and the challenges they face, and persons identified as victims of trafficking, are incomplete. The lack of reliable estimates regarding individuals engaged in prostitution, including those identified as victims, further exacerbates the challenge of addressing sexual exploitation.

45. The Special Rapporteur considers the absence of disaggregated data on discrimination and violence against women and girls as one of the most significant obstacles to effective prevention and response policies. Addressing this gap is essential for ensuring accountability and developing evidence-based measures to combat gender-based violence and discrimination.

K. Law and policies affecting specific groups of women and girls experiencing violence

46. In the course of her visit, the Special Rapporteur assessed the situation of specific groups of women and girls who encounter multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and experience higher rates of all forms of violence against them. She also examined the relevant legal and policy framework applicable to them.

1. Women in the contexts of marriage and of domestic and intimate partner violence

(a) Personal Status Law

47. The Personal Status Law, enacted in 2005, governs matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody, guardianship and inheritance for nationals of the United Arab Emirates. While the law applies to non-nationals unless they request the application of their own country's laws, Abu Dhabi has also enacted a separate Personal Status Law for non-Muslims, reflecting some regional variation. Additionally, in 2020, reforms to the Penal Code decriminalized consensual relationships outside marriage.

48. The United Arab Emirates has introduced several legal reforms to enhance women's rights under personal status and criminal laws. In 2016, a welcome amendment to article 53 of the Penal Code removed spousal "discipline" as a legally permitted act of violence. In 2019, the State eliminated the requirement of a wife's "obedience" to her husband, replacing it with a framework of mutual respect, compassion and good treatment, and introducing provisions to guarantee a wife's right to complete her education. In 2020, the Government repealed article 334 of the Penal Code, which had previously allowed lenient sentences for so-called honour killings. Further progress was made in 2021 when the Government decriminalized premarital sex and cohabitation.³⁹

49. Building on these reforms, the United Arab Emirates introduced a law allowing the issuance of birth certificates for children conceived outside of marriage,⁴⁰ ensuring their legal recognition and access to essential rights. However, challenges remain for nationals from countries where extramarital relations are criminalized, potentially complicating the registration process.⁴¹ In practice, at least the Emirate of Sharjah does not apply federal laws on children with unknown parentage or those born outside of marriage, refusing to issue identity documents in such cases, citing sharia considerations.

50. Despite the progress made, several aspects of the Personal Status Law remain concerning, particularly the unequal legal status of Emirati women in marriage, family relations and divorce, highlighting the need for further reforms. While having separate provisions for non-Muslims is commendable, the Personal Status Law continues to treat women as subordinate to men within the family. For example, a woman, regardless of her age, must obtain the consent of a male guardian (*wali*) to enter into marriage. If the guardian refuses to consent, the woman may seek authorization from a judge. However,

³⁹ See <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RS21852>.

⁴⁰ Federal Decree-Law No. 10 of 2022.

⁴¹ See <https://www.lexology.com/library/detail.aspx?g=eda5e56f-3166-4dbe-b57a-5d32d3bffb30>.

women often face significant barriers in bringing such cases to court, as it requires them to challenge male authority figures within their families, risking social ostracization or retribution. Even when cases are successful, they can face delays of up to two years, and the law does not provide clear criteria for judges to accept or reject such requests, leaving decisions to judicial discretion.

51. Furthermore, the law invalidates marriages contracted without a guardian's consent, even if the marriage has been consummated, and does not require the woman's wishes to be considered in the annulment process. This leaves women vulnerable to coercion and control, particularly in tribal or remote settings. The law also lacks provisions to annul marriages contracted under coercion or to penalize forced marriages, which further exacerbates women's vulnerability.

52. The Personal Status Law grants men significant privileges in marriage, including the right to marry up to four wives without the need to inform or obtain consent from existing wives. While the law encourages husbands to treat all wives fairly, it does not provide women with meaningful protections or recourse in polygamous arrangements. Women cannot seek divorce solely on the grounds of their husband marrying another wife unless they had explicitly included such a condition in their marriage contract. Although reports indicate a decline in polygamous marriages, the practice continues to have detrimental effects on the well-being of women and children in such unions.

(b) Domestic violence laws and policies

53. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the series of legislative reforms that the United Arab Emirates has adopted to define the crime of domestic violence and improve the response to it. Federal Decree-Law No. 10 of 2019 marked a significant step forward in addressing domestic violence, introducing comprehensive measures to protect survivors and hold perpetrators accountable. The law defined domestic violence broadly, encompassing physical, psychological, sexual and economic harm, and established protection orders to ensure the safety of survivors and their children by requiring abusers to keep a specified, safe distance from the victims. These protection measures included restraining orders to prevent perpetrators from approaching victims or entering specific locations, supported by penalties such as fines and imprisonment for violations. Additionally, the law provided access to support services, including shelters and psychological assistance, aimed at creating a comprehensive safety net for survivors.

54. Despite these advancements, the Decree-Law fell short of international standards in several key areas. Article 10 mandated that the public prosecution offer a "reconciliation" option to victims, which raised concerns that the requirement could discourage survivors from seeking accountability and instead succumb to pressure to return to abusive households. Furthermore, the Special Rapporteur noted with concern that the Decree-Law's definition of domestic violence was vague, stating that acts of violence were those that exceeded the perpetrator's rights in guardianship, maintenance, authority or responsibility. Such phrasing implicitly justified certain acts of violence within the bounds of a perpetrator's perceived authority and was not in line with international definitions of domestic or intimate partner violence.

55. The United Arab Emirates tightened legislation aimed at curbing domestic violence by adopting Federal Decree-Law No. 13 of 2024 to clamp down on offenders and offer greater protection to victims and their families. Pursuant to the new Decree-Law, it adopted effective communication channels, including an electronic system, for receiving reports of domestic violence. The Decree-Law mandates publicizing these channels and raising awareness to ensure accessibility for all members of society. It also allows anyone who knows of an incident of domestic violence to report the incident immediately and to several entities, including police stations, the competent authority or social support centres. Those who breach the new law face stiff penalties, with more severe punishments for repeat offenders or cases involving minors, pregnant women, or persons with special needs. The law includes a penalty of 50,000 dirhams for anyone who coerces victims to withdraw their complaints, and provides for the establishment of an electronic registry recording all domestic violence cases.

56. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the fact that the national laws enable victims to obtain restraining (protection) orders. The public prosecution may issue an initial 30-day protection order, renewable for an additional 60 days, after which a court must approve further extensions, with a maximum duration of six months. The Special Rapporteur notes, however, that the full potential of these protection measures is limited by the tight time frames stipulated in the laws, and by the lack of awareness, social stigmatization and lack of confidence of victims of violence. Targeted outreach and sharing of information on protection and assistance mechanisms were limited among non-Emirati women, particularly domestic workers. Furthermore, although violations of such protection orders, and specific acts of domestic violence, are punishable by fines and imprisonment,⁴² it remains unclear how many protection orders have been violated and whether perpetrators of violence were held accountable.

(c) Access to justice

57. While victims can formally pursue justice, they often face challenges in reporting abuse confidentially, as mediation is often prioritized over legal action.⁴³ Moreover, victims of domestic violence may face pressures from both legal and familial sources to avoid pursuing charges, especially in cases that could bring shame upon the family.

58. In addition, while law enforcement officials are receiving training on handling domestic violence cases, they continue to hold a gender bias,⁴⁴ which can discourage victims from reporting abuse or seeking shelter services. The lack of publicly available statistics on prosecution outcomes makes it difficult to determine whether survivors receive adequate legal protection or whether perpetrators are consistently held accountable.

59. The Special Rapporteur nevertheless notes with appreciation that the United Arab Emirates has appointed women judges who preside over cases involving sharia law, including in matters of personal status such as marriage, divorce and child custody.

(d) Identification and referral of survivors for assistance

60. Federal and local authorities have developed various programmes and activities to assist survivors of violence, ensure access to services and provide referrals to protection and legal aid mechanisms. At the national level, the Ministry of Community Development oversees federal initiatives, resource allocation and compliance with international obligations. As such, the United Arab Emirates has established several shelters in major cities, including the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children, shelters for victims of trafficking in persons in Abu Dhabi, Sharjah and Ra's al-Khaymah, and the Aman Shelter for Women and Children in Ra's al-Khaymah; offering safe housing, vocational training and psychological support to survivors. Some of these shelters offer comprehensive and highly specialized support.

61. Nevertheless, the Special Rapporteur notes that inconsistencies in service provision across the emirates remain a concern, in part due to the disparities created in resource distribution. While Abu Dhabi and Dubai benefit from specialized family protection units and integrated shelter services, smaller emirates struggle with funding and infrastructure limitations, making access to justice and support services more difficult. Moreover, according to one source, the quality and package of assistance and services offered by shelters nationwide vary considerably, in part because the federal decree-law on domestic violence does not specify the operational mechanisms for shelters. Some shelters require a police report or official referral before admitting victims, a process that can deter survivors, especially those reluctant to engage with law enforcement owing to fear of retaliation, deportation or loss of employment. All the shelters the Special Rapporteur visited indicated

⁴² Federal Decree-Law No. 13 of 2024, arts. 21 and 23.

⁴³ For example, the Family Care Authority, a governmental body affiliated with the Emirate of Abu Dhabi, prioritizes mediation prior to referral to prosecution. See also <https://hzlegal.ae/real-life-examples-successful-mediation-cases-in-uae-family-law-disputes/#introduction-OROCaWTtOA>.

⁴⁴ See, for example, <https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/pijpsm-12-2016-0174/full/html>.

that they were required to inform the police upon the arrival of an alleged victim of violence. This mandatory reporting requirement can disproportionately affect migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, who may fear that seeking shelter could lead to their deportation or other legal consequences, discouraging them from seeking access to protection. Additionally, language barriers, lack of awareness about available services and cultural stigma surrounding domestic violence further hinder victims from seeking support.

62. During the Special Rapporteur's visit, shelters did not appear to be hosting any beneficiaries, and the overall number of beneficiaries, as presented during meetings, was strikingly low. This raises concerns about the accessibility and effectiveness of shelter services, particularly for vulnerable groups in need of immediate protection. The absence of a standard operating procedure between shelters and law enforcement agencies nationwide, and a mechanism for sharing practices between shelters, further undermines the effectiveness of engagement on behalf of victims. The lack of coordination and clear referral pathways may result in inconsistent responses, delays in providing essential services and missed opportunities to offer adequate protection and support to survivors of violence.

(e) Outreach activities

63. Access to shelter remains limited, particularly for non-Emirati women, who make up most victims seeking protection. While some, such as the shelter in Aman, do host and assist victims who are non-Emirati, the numbers of beneficiaries are quite low when compared with the estimated number of foreign women and girls who are likely to be victims of discrimination and violence. Although comprehensive figures are lacking, data collected by some foundations shed light on the scale of domestic violence perpetuated among non-nationals. For example, statistics shared by the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children showed that, in the period 2022–2024, the Foundation had referred 275 cases to courts, with 213 involving non-Emirati women (77 per cent of the total cases). Out of the cases referred to courts, 242 (88 per cent) were related to domestic violence. Furthermore, the statistics indicated that access for non-Emirati women, particularly those who are undocumented or stateless, remains restricted in practice.

64. The Government has established several hotlines and digital platforms to provide support to victims of violence, including the Hemayati (Arabic for "Protect me") application launched by the Ministry of Interior in 2018, and the responsibility centre operated by the prosecution service. The Special Rapporteur also notes the formal role that the General Women's Union, in collaboration with the Government, plays in conducting nationwide advocacy and awareness campaigns to support and protect victims of violence. The Union also facilitates referrals to shelters and other services, such as a family counselling portal.

65. Nevertheless, challenges in outreach, identification and referral persist, especially due to the persistence of cultural and social stigma and limited awareness among women, particularly migrant-worker women. The Special Rapporteur notes for example that there is considerable scope for the General Women's Union to assume a more active and operational role in that regard, improving its outreach and programmatic implementation on the ground. Moreover, all relevant actors could strive to include women from migrant communities to which potential and actual foreign victims belong, as their language skills and understanding of these women's backgrounds and current realities would greatly improve outreach and identification processes.

2. Women and girls with disabilities

66. As of 2016, 15,782 persons were registered with disability cards in the United Arab Emirates, 62 per cent (9,869) of whom were nationals of the United Arab Emirates; the remaining 5,913 were foreign expatriates.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See <https://u.ae/-/media/About-UAE/Strategies/National-Policy-to-Empower-People-of-Determination.pdf>.

67. The United Arab Emirates enacted Law No. 29 of 2006, which strengthened the rights of persons with disabilities by ensuring their access to support services, promoting their inclusion in society and safeguarding their rights in areas such as education, employment, government posts and accessibility. Law No. 2 of 2014 protects persons with disabilities against discrimination and abuse, neglect and exploitation. The United Arab Emirates also adopted the Strategic Plan for the Rights of Children with Disabilities 2017–2021, which is commendable. Nevertheless, the plan does not reflect a gendered assessment of the needs and experiences of girls with disabilities. The Special Rapporteur welcomes the reference by the United Arab Emirates to persons with disabilities as “persons of determination” and acknowledges the Government’s efforts to reframe societal perceptions of them, emphasizing their resilience and willpower.

68. One study showed that, while women with disabilities continue to face unique challenges owing to traditional gender roles and societal expectations, recent social policies in the United Arab Emirates aimed at supporting people with disabilities have significantly improved their life satisfaction.⁴⁶ When compared with men with disabilities, women with disabilities report lower levels of satisfaction with their physical health, mental health and their ability to perform daily life activities, and slightly higher anxiety levels. However, the differences in levels are not significant. At the same time, women with disabilities report higher levels of satisfaction with healthcare facilities and social connections.⁴⁷

3. Emirati and foreign girls

(a) Physical violence, abuse and neglect

69. In 2016, the United Arab Emirates adopted the emblematic Federal Law No. 3, known as Wadeema’s Law, named after a girl who, tragically, was killed by her father. It introduced comprehensive legal safeguards for all children in the country against all forms of abuse, neglect, exploitation and ill-treatment, and mandated teachers and healthcare professionals to report cases of abuse, reinforcing child protection measures across institutions. To implement the law, the Ministry of Interior established the Child Protection Centre, which leads prevention, intervention and response efforts, as well as reporting mechanisms, while focusing on training and advocacy programmes, such as anti-bullying campaigns in schools in collaboration with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Wadeema’s Law strengthened the role of social workers in monitoring students with unjustified absences, including through home visits to ensure that absent children are not subjected to abuse. In addition, the Dubai Police human rights department focuses on strengthening training and education on child protection issues, including training on child interview techniques. The police also support the children of women in detention by ensuring their well-being and access to resources.⁴⁸

70. Several governmental initiatives have focused on counselling and providing information on where to seek assistance and protection. For example, the Hemayati application, operated by the Child Protection Centre of the Ministry of Interior, has received 8,010 reports since its launch in 2023. Other hotlines are operated by the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood and the Family Development Centre in Sharjah. While such hotlines help expand outreach, it is important to complement online mechanisms with sufficient face-to-face confidential consultation opportunities.

71. The Family Development Centre in Sharjah carries out case assessments for children at risk in an attempt to provide support for children facing abuse and neglect. Around 70 per cent of those benefiting from the services are Emirati. For example, the Emirates Child Protection Association, established in 2017, contributes to investigating cases of child abuse and violence. The Family Care Authority in Abu Dhabi, established in 2024, serves

⁴⁶ Tatiana Karabchuk and Osman Antwi-Boateng, “Predictors of wellbeing for women with disabilities in the United Arab Emirates”, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, vol. 26, No. 6 (2024).

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ See <https://www.wam.ae/ar/details/1395302762077> (in Arabic).

as a one-stop service hub, primarily for cases of sexual and physical violence, handling an average of one to two cases per day.

72. While the relevant entities serve both Emirati and foreign children, the Special Rapporteur regrets that financial support is available mainly for Emirati citizens. Some grass-roots and volunteer organizations help fill the gap by targeting non-Emiratis. Tailored activities and outreach efforts for migrant children, including girls who may be more invisible because of their legal or economic status in the United Arab Emirates, need to be strengthened.

(b) Online violence against children

73. The United Arab Emirates has made great strides in combating online abuse of and cybercrimes against children, integrating strict penalties under the Penal Code, where crimes are considered to entail aggravating circumstances if committed against women and children. Courts can pursue perpetrators even if they are abroad, using international cooperation mechanisms such as the International Criminal Police Organization (INTERPOL). The smart system for child protection of the Ministry of Interior plays a critical role in detecting and addressing online threats. The United Arab Emirates is actively engaged in global task forces combating cyberexploitation, particularly through monitoring driven by artificial intelligence and through law enforcement collaboration.

(c) Child marriage

74. In 2020, the Council of Ministers issued guidelines to regulate petitions for marriages involving children under 18 years old. These guidelines provided for the establishment of a committee to evaluate such requests, requiring the consideration of factors such as the potential harm to living standards, the suitability of the marriage based on age and social standing, the groom's ability to provide financial support and the bride's ability to continue her education. Additionally, the committee must verify that the child has reached puberty, obtain a medical report to assess any health risks associated with early pregnancy and confirm the girl's consent and understanding of her marital duties. While these guidelines have introduced some restrictions on child marriage, the prevalence of the practice is difficult to assess.

(d) Female genital mutilation

75. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that the United Arab Emirates has not yet adopted legislation to criminalize female genital mutilation, despite evidence that the practice remains prevalent in the country. While comprehensive national statistics are lacking, a study conducted between 2016 and 2017 found a prevalence rate of over 41 per cent among female participants. More than 69 per cent of participants viewed female genital mutilation as a social custom, while only 5 per cent considered it a religious obligation; 20 per cent saw it as a recommended act. Nevertheless, approximately 73 per cent of participants opposed the practice.⁴⁹

4. Women migrant workers, particularly domestic workers

76. The United Arab Emirates has implemented several policies to address the working conditions of domestic workers, most of whom are women. Their precarious situation was particularly highlighted during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Federal Decree-Law No. 9 of 2022, concerning domestic workers, introduced some improvements, such as expanded sick leave and a mandatory weekly day off, but critical gaps remain. For instance, domestic workers are still subject to a 12-hour-maximum workday – 4 hours longer than other workers under the labour law. Additionally, the law does not establish a minimum wage, facilitating inconsistent pay. Sick leave, while expanded, requires a medical report, which is often difficult for workers to obtain.

⁴⁹ Shamsa Al Awar and others, "Prevalence, knowledge, attitude and practices of female genital mutilation and cutting (FGM/C) among United Arab Emirates population", *BMC Women's Health*, article No. 79 (2020).

77. These notable reforms fall short of providing adequate protections or addressing systemic issues embedded in the *kafala* system, which continues to tie workers' legal status to their employer. Domestic workers cannot change jobs without their employer's consent unless the employer breaches contractual obligations. The employer can mandate a job change or deportation, although there are no clear criteria for decision-making. This system leaves domestic workers, particularly women, trapped in abusive or exploitative situations. Employers can also file absconding charges against workers who leave their jobs, further disincentivizing complaints.

78. The recent establishment of Tadbeer centres, public-private partnerships aimed at regulating the recruitment and employment of domestic workers, represents a step towards standardizing the sector. However, these centres have been criticized for perpetuating wage disparities based on nationality, with African workers often earning significantly less than their Asian counterparts. Moreover, the centres' housing conditions and monitoring mechanisms remain opaque. While Tadbeer centres provide temporary accommodation for workers in disputes with employers, this provision does not extend to undocumented workers or those recruited before the centres' full implementation in 2021.

79. Domestic workers are also excluded from key labour protections available to other workers, such as the Wage Protection System, which ensures timely payment of wages, making them more vulnerable to wage theft and delayed payments. Furthermore, domestic workers are not covered by the country's unemployment insurance scheme, introduced in 2022, leaving them without a safety net in cases of job loss and thus exacerbating their economic vulnerability.

80. Recognizing the shortcomings, the United Arab Emirates has made some efforts to improve conditions for domestic workers. The 2022 domestic workers law prohibits physical and sexual harassment, providing greater legal protections for domestic workers. However, without robust enforcement mechanisms, access to temporary shelters and the ability to change employers freely, the impact of these protections remains limited. The failure of the United Arab Emirates to ratify the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189) of the International Labour Organization further underscores the gap between its labour policies and international standards.

5. Women and girls' who are victims of trafficking and exploited in prostitution

81. The United Arab Emirates has made notable strides in combating trafficking in persons, particularly through legislative measures and institutional frameworks. Federal Decree-Law No. 24 of 2023 imposes severe penalties, including temporary imprisonment of at least five years and a fine of no less than 1 million dirhams for trafficking offences. In cases involving aggravating circumstances, the penalty increases to life imprisonment and a fine of at least 5 million dirhams.

82. In addition, the United Arab Emirates established the National Committee to Combat Human Trafficking in 2007,⁵⁰ and Dubai has a dedicated police unit to assist trafficking victims. The United Arab Emirates has a national strategy to combat trafficking in persons that is based on five pillars – prevention, prosecution, punishment, victim protection and international cooperation – aligning with the United Nations Global Plan of Action to Combat Trafficking in Persons. The Government also operates a hotline, accessible in four languages, to report trafficking and labour violations. The Aman Shelter for Women and Children and the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children have played an active role in raising awareness, and supporting victims, of trafficking in persons in the United Arab Emirates. A national referral system for trafficking victims is scheduled to be launched in 2025, including a reintegration fund to support survivors.

83. Despite these achievements, the number of victims identified continues to be very low. For example, only 12 reports of trafficking in persons were received by the Aman shelter's hotline between 2022 and 2024. Challenges also persist in the areas of labour trafficking and the protection of vulnerable migrant workers. The country remains a major

⁵⁰ See <https://u.ae/en/about-the-uae/human-rights-in-the-uae/combating-human-trafficking>.

destination for women trafficked from Asia, Africa and former Soviet Union countries for sexual exploitation, as highlighted in a 2024 investigation. In 2024, the Department of State of the United States of America rated the United Arab Emirates as a “Tier 2” country in the context of trafficking in persons, for the thirteenth consecutive year, acknowledging the country’s efforts but noting that it does not fully meet the minimum standards for eliminating trafficking.⁵¹

84. Furthermore, the country’s narrow definition of trafficking deprioritizes labour trafficking, focusing instead on trafficking for sexual exploitation. The underreporting can also be attributed to the vulnerability of undocumented workers and those on “visit visas”, who are excluded from the protections of the domestic workers’ law. Forced labour and wage theft are often treated as administrative violations rather than criminal offences under anti-trafficking laws, resulting in no reported convictions for labour trafficking in 2020 or 2021. This approach leaves many migrant workers, particularly women, without adequate protection or recourse. The Government’s fund for victims, intended to aid trafficking survivors, remains inaccessible to many women subjected to forced labour, as they are rarely identified as victims. Women in precarious economic situations are particularly vulnerable to coercion and deceptive recruitment practices. These systemic vulnerabilities are frequently overlooked during legal proceedings, with courts failing to consider economic coercion as a factor in trafficking cases. Many migrant women lack legal knowledge, face language barriers and cannot afford legal representation, leaving them without a fair defence or access to justice.

85. While the Government has taken steps to address wage abuses, such as Ministerial Decree No. 739 of 2016, which mandates timely wage payments for employers with over 100 workers, these measures do not extend to undocumented workers, contravening the State’s obligations to protect all migrant women as described in general recommendation No. 26 (2008) of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women. Furthermore, the exclusion of migrant workers from anti-trafficking policy formulation creates significant protection gaps.

86. Pursuant to the Penal Code, the United Arab Emirates criminalizes the sale and purchase of sexual acts. In practice, however, the law is used to prosecute the prostituted women rather than those who are engaged in buying or pimping. Prostituted women and girls are among the most vulnerable to exploitation and violence. While data on the number of women and girls exploited in prostitution are not available, credible reports indicate that the United Arab Emirates is a major destination for the trafficking of women for sexual exploitation.⁵² Prostituted women and girls are assessed primarily through the lens of trafficking by the authorities, even when they do not strictly meet the legal definition. The Special Rapporteur is concerned that the national laws, such as Federal Decree-Law No. 24 of 2023, stipulate that for a woman to be considered a victim of sexual exploitation (including prostitution), she must qualify as a victim of trafficking, which requires evidence of coercion. Prostituted women and girls rarely come forward for fear of prosecution and deportation and given the difficulty of proving coercion. There is no explicit assistance or support provided for victims of prostitution (unless they are proven to be victims of trafficking) and there is no access to exit strategies.

6. Refugee and asylum-seeking women

87. The United Arab Emirates is not a signatory of the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees or the Protocol thereto, and does not have a formal asylum system. Nevertheless, hundreds of non-Emirati persons currently in the United Arab Emirates are considered to be in need of international protection, under the mandate of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. While the United Arab Emirates does not officially recognize refugees, it has allowed individuals from conflict-affected countries, such as the Syrian Arab Republic, to reside within its borders under its existing migration

⁵¹ See <https://www.state.gov/reports/2024-trafficking-in-persons-report/united-arab-emirates/>.

⁵² See <https://www.icij.org/investigations/trafficking-inc/how-torture-deception-and-inaction-underpin-the-uaes-thriving-sex-trafficking-industry>.

framework. However, these individuals are classified as migrants rather than refugees, limiting their access to certain protections and services typically afforded to refugees under international law. The Special Rapporteur is aware of the situation of a number of Afghans who have been in the United Arab Emirates since August 2021, whose resettlement to the United States has been rejected and who claim they are unable to return to Afghanistan. A humane, safe, durable solution for them should be found.

7. Women in detention

88. Federal Law No. 6 of 1973 provides for administrative detention measures in certain circumstances, including for the execution of deportation orders, as a penalty for violating immigration laws, or for other criminal measures. Women can be detained for up to three months for failing to maintain a valid residence permit, overstaying after the cancellation or expiration of their visa or failing to pay overstay fines.⁵³ Consequently, a significant number of women in detention are held for immigration-related offences rather than serious criminal conduct; moreover, approximately 90 per cent of women in detention are non-Emiratis.

89. Concerns have been raised regarding the detention of women for exercising their right to freedom of association and expression, with some facing excessive or disproportionate punishments,⁵⁴ including lengthy detention or administrative measures.

90. While it is not possible for the Special Rapporteur to assess the overall prison conditions, the conditions in the prison facility she visited appeared to meet international standards. She welcomes the efforts made to keep newborn children with their mothers and provide them with specific care. Of concern to her, however, are the long detention periods and the separation of detainees from their families. Virtual communication with family members was made available to inmates. However, Emirati women were denied in-person visits from their families, allegedly to avoid discrimination against foreign detainees whose families were unable to visit. While this approach may have been implemented in good faith, the Special Rapporteur encourages the authorities to allow in-person family visits where possible, enabling inmates to maintain family connections.

91. Support for detained nationals varies by country of origin, with financial constraints often forcing families to cover detainees' flight costs upon release, despite possible available financial support as indicated by prison administration officials. This poses greater challenges for foreign women with little or no government assistance.

92. As the majority of detainees are repatriated to their countries of origin after serving their sentences or upon being granted early release, the Special Rapporteur is concerned about the high potential for refoulement, which highlights the importance of conducting detailed risk assessments prior to repatriation and exploring alternative solutions that do not expose detainees to threats to their life, inhuman or degrading treatment in violation of article 3 of the Convention against Torture.

III. Conclusions and recommendations

93. **On the basis of the above findings and in a spirit of cooperation and dialogue, the Special Rapporteur offers the following recommendations to the Government of the United Arab Emirates to be considered in coordination with other stakeholders.**

94. **Regarding international treaties and gender-responsive humanitarian programmes, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government:**

(a) **Ratify all core treaties with a view to strengthening the rights and freedoms of women and girls in the country on the basis of internationally agreed norms and standards;**

⁵³ Federal Decree-Law No. 29 of 2021.

⁵⁴ See <https://menarights.org/en/articles/uae-call-release-amina-al-abdouli-and-maryam-al-balushi-international-womens-day>.

(b) Leverage the global influence of the United Arab Emirates to advocate for respect for international humanitarian law, emphasizing the need for parties to conflicts to protect civilians, particularly women and girls in conflict situations, and advocate for an end to the severe persecution of women and girls in Afghanistan.

95. Regarding discrimination and violence against women and girls, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government:

(a) Explicitly criminalize the crime of femicide, as well as female genital mutilation, child marriage and marital rape; and strengthen the protection of domestic violence victims in the law and eliminate provisions that prioritize reconciliation over women's safety and contribute to impunity;

(b) Adopt a standardized and harmonized approach among all relevant stakeholders for identifying victims of violence and referring them to assistance and protection mechanisms; increase the number of shelters in smaller emirates and rural areas; and establish networks among service providers offering multisectoral assistance, including shelters, to facilitate the sharing of working modalities and best practices, improving coordination and information-sharing in a victim-centred and confidential manner;

(c) Ensure the full operationalization of the National Human Rights Institution, in compliance with the principles relating to the status of national institutions for the promotion and protection of human rights (the Paris Principles), including the establishment of an independent complaints mechanism to receive and address individual cases, and strengthen its mandate to effectively promote and protect women's and children's rights;

(d) Prioritize the standardized and regular collection and publication of disaggregated data on violence against all women and children, particularly by nationality, type of crime, location, sex of the perpetrator and victim, and their relationship;

(e) Strengthen training for the police and judiciary to address gender bias, increase the representation of women in the judiciary and security forces, and expand campaigns to eliminate the social stigma associated with reporting violence against women and children;

(f) Expand eligibility for social and economic programmes to include all women, particularly those at risk of economic vulnerability and gender-based violence, to strengthen financial independence and resilience across all communities;

(g) Strengthen complaint mechanisms and ensure strict enforcement of anti-harassment laws; and increase awareness of workers' rights, in order to build a more inclusive and equitable workforce;

(h) Establish community-based women-only centres providing outreach activities, legal aid, psychological support, economic empowerment and health advice; recruit and train social workers from within these communities to staff the centres, ensuring they are run by individuals from the communities they serve, in collaboration with authorities and other stakeholders;

96. Regarding women migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government:

(a) End discrimination against domestic workers by bringing them under the purview of the United Arab Emirates labour law, ensuring that regulations meet the minimum standards set out in Convention No. 189 of the International Labour Organization;

(b) Abolish absconding laws and delink residence permits from work permits, as both provisions grant excessive power to sponsors under the *kafala* system; ensure that women who file complaints against their employers can decide independently whether to work for another employer or leave the country, with full payment of owed wages and benefits;

(c) Allow domestic workers to unilaterally end contracts and change employers without needing to resort to lengthy dispute resolution mechanisms; and publish data on inspections of private homes and Tadbeer centres to ensure compliance with labour laws;

(d) Hold employers accountable through administrative, civil and criminal actions; ensure that judgments against employers are enforced without additional costs or burdens on migrant workers; and strictly implement penalties so that victims of wage theft receive not only their due wages but also compensation for hardships faced;

(e) Require mandatory orientation sessions for all new holders of domestic worker visas, informing them of their rights, available support services and complaint procedures; and publish data on the number, nature and outcomes of complaints received from migrant workers;

(f) Increase support and legal assistance for migrant women, ensuring the provision of interpretation services when they seek justice; enable domestic workers to form associations and support groups and involve them in developing complaint mechanisms; and allow domestic workers to live independently in their own spaces and ensure the availability of affordable housing to make this a practical reality;

(g) Strengthen outreach to migrant children and adolescents with tailored interventions to address risks linked to their specific vulnerabilities;

97. Regarding women and girls' victims of trafficking and those exploited in prostitution, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government:

(a) Ensure the proper identification of victims of trafficking, particularly those subjected to labour exploitation; expand support and shelter services throughout the United Arab Emirates for victims of trafficking and refrain from subjecting them to criminal proceedings; and consider providing options for victims to remain in the country and enforce penalties against recruiters, intermediaries and employers who violate labour protections;

(b) Adopt the abolitionist model on prostitution, recognizing the violence and exploitation inherent in commercial sexual exploitation and prostitution, even when cases do not meet the threshold for trafficking; treat women in prostitution as victims and provide them with assistance, protection and access to exit strategies; and adopt a policy that expressly discourages demand for the purchase of sexual acts.

98. Regarding personal status and birth registration, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government:

(a) Further reform the Personal Status Law and other relevant laws to allow women to enter into marriage without a guardian and to annul forced marriages;

(b) Restrict the practice of polygamy, including by making it mandatory for a man to inform his existing wife of the intention to conclude a second marriage and seek her consent;

(c) Amend the nationality law to permit Emirati women to pass on their nationality to their children from a foreign spouse under the same conditions as Emirati men, ensuring that the provision is applied retroactively and automatically;

(d) Require hospitals to provide birth certificates regardless of a parent's ability to pay or marital status; ensure that health insurance covers maternity care for women without a marriage licence, and provide public, cost-free maternity care; and extend maternity protections to domestic workers;

(e) Ensure that federal laws are consistently interpreted and applied across all emirates to avoid disparities, including in the registration of children born outside of marriage.

99. Regarding women in detention, the Special Rapporteur recommends that the Government conduct detailed risk assessments to explore alternative solutions for detainees facing deportation, including resettlement or the right to remain in the United Arab Emirates in cases involving risks of refoulement.
