

Article

## Achieving Gender Equality in Higher Education: An Empirical Study in the UAE

Page | 326

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**Abstract:** Gender equality in education has emerged as a core goal for sustainable development and social justice in the world as a whole, as it guarantees equal access to learning opportunities, it drives the values of social inclusion, structural inequalities and empowers people of all gender to fully contribute to economic, cultural and social development.. This study examined the role of universities in promoting gender equality in education in the United Arab Emirates, with a particular focus on institutional practices, challenges, and potential solutions. A quantitative descriptive research design was employed, and data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered to a random sample of 70 undergraduate students at Al Ain University. The findings indicated that the overall role of universities in promoting gender equality was moderate, reflecting ongoing progress alongside the need for further improvement. The results also revealed that the main challenges were related to awareness and attitudes among educational staff and parents, rather than structural barriers. In addition, the proposed solutions, particularly expanding educational initiatives and strengthening institutional commitment, were perceived as important for enhancing gender equality. Furthermore, the analysis showed that there were no statistically significant differences in students' perceptions attributable to gender, indicating a shared understanding of gender equality among male and female students. The study concluded that achieving gender equality in education requires an integrated approach that combines institutional practices, policy implementation, and societal awareness.

**Keywords:** *Gender equality, higher education, university role, educational challenges, policy implementation, students' perceptions, United Arab Emirates*

## **Introduction**

Gender equity in education has also emerged as a key focus of sustainable development, with international bodies like those promoted by UNESCO appreciating the need to focus on this. It is crucial not only that equal access to education be provided to all people no matter the gender but also provides a solution to social justice as well as economic development and social stability. Gender inequalities in education have been minimized in the last few decades; nevertheless, there are still certain gaps in the education systems in various regions and at various educational levels.

These differences do not just limit to access but also to participation, academic success and post-education opportunities. Studies have shown that gender inequality in education is a complicated combination of structural, cultural, and institutional determinants (Unterhalter et al., 2019). Traditional gender roles, socio-cultural norms and economic factors still influence educational experience, especially among female learners in some situations.

Colleges and universities are instrumental in combating gender inequality through creation of an inclusive atmosphere, equitable policy formulation and provision of equal opportunities to students. Colleges are not only knowledge production hubs but also social change agents that can rebrand the thinking towards gender equality (Morley, 2014). Universities can play an active role in eliminating gender disparity by designing the curriculum and setting up policies within the institutions and awareness interventions.

The situation in the United Arab Emirates is no exception, as the government has made significant steps in gender equality promotion in the sphere of education, policy changes, and more significant investments in this sector. Participation of females in higher education has tremendously grown which is an indicator of the countries effort to promote gender equality. Nevertheless, there are still difficulties especially with regards to the cultural perceptions, implementation of the policies and stakeholder awareness.

Although there is a growing literature on gender equality in education, the current literature has tended to focus on structural policies, cultural barriers or institutional roles individually. There is only a little focus on incorporating these dimensions in one analytical framework especially in the UAE context. Thus, the purpose of the research is to investigate the role of universities in gender equality in education by evaluating the role of university institutions, determining the main challenges, and offering effective solutions to the problem within the context of the UAE.

### **Literature Review**

Gender equality in education has been studied as a multidimensional issue by a growing body of literature, which has been affected by structural policies, institutional practices, and socio-cultural factors. Gender equality is not just a purely educational problem but it is a broader societal process that determines who accesses, participates, and achieves in educational systems.

On the international scale, studies have emphasized existing disparities even with the improvement of policies. As noted by UNESCO (2020), although the situation has become more egalitarian in primary education, the differences are still observed in higher education and in the areas of study. Equally, Unterhalter et al. (2019) contended that the problem of educational inequalities is so ingrained into the societal framework that it cannot be resolved without addressing the underlying cultural and economic issues.

At institutional level, universities are identified to be among the key players in ensuring gender equality. Louise Morley (2014) emphasized that universities can serve as the transformative space, which questions gender norms and practices that may enable inclusion. Nonetheless, the success of universities is determined by the degree of policies being put into practice. Leathwood and Read (2009) discovered that despite the policy on gender equality being adopted by many universities, there are always gaps that exist between policy frameworks and real institutional practices.

The design of curriculum and the methods of teaching are also significant in determining the results of gender equality. Stromquist (2007) established that gender-sensitive educative curricula and teacher training programme helps in minimizing gender bias and enhancing equality in learning institutions. Conversely, standard curricula might be perpetuating stereotypes and restricting opportunities among the female students.

Another important dimension that affects the equality between genders in education is the social-cultural aspects. King and Winthrop (2015) demonstrated that family expectations, cultural norms, and societal beliefs have a strong influence on educational attendance and career ambitions and especially in women. These can be useful or be counterproductive to the quest to attain equality based on the degree of societal awareness and acceptance.

Studies have reported both improvements and the current predicaments within the Arab region. Ridge (2014) studied education systems in the Gulf countries and discovered that even though the number of female people in higher education has risen, the disparities in labour market outcomes and in study area remained. On the same note, Gallant and Pounder (2008) found that institutional and cultural factors influence the participation of women in higher education leadership in the UAE.

Moreover, literature has highlighted the significance of effectiveness of policies in creating gender equality. Unterhalter (2017) stated that legal frameworks couldn't work without powerful implementation mechanisms and social support. This shows that concerted strategies that involve policy, institutional behavior, and cultural change are necessary.

Although these efforts have been made, literature has mostly discussed the issue of gender equality in education in isolated views. There is little research that combines the institutional roles, socio-cultural challenges, and practical solutions all in one framework, especially in the setting of the UAE. This gap explains the need to carry out empirical research that gives a holistic picture of ways in which universities can succeed in fostering gender equality in education.

### **Problem**

Although the world has become more committed to ensuring gender equality in education, there are still huge gaps in accessing as well as experiences in education systems. Although most nations such as the United Arab Emirates have put policies in place to support equality, there has been a problem in the implementation of the policies into practical use in institutions of higher learning.

The issue of gender inequality in education is a multi-factorial problem that is determined by the interplay of institutional, cultural, and social factors. Universities should also be at the Center of ensuring equality, yet, it is not clear how successfully they introduce inclusive practices and how they solve gender-related issues. More specifically, the lack of awareness, policy gaps, and cultural perceptions can be hindering the success of gender equality efforts.

Furthermore, the research on gender equality in education in the past has tended to look at the issue in lone ways either in the policy structures, cultural obstacles or institutional functions. The empirical studies that investigate the interaction of these factors in the university setting, especially in the United Arab Emirates are lacking.

Hence, the gap identified in the present research is the poor knowledge of the role of universities in the process of gender equality in education and the obstacles they encounter and how the suggested solutions can be applied in the UAE setting.

### **Objectives**

The study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To examine the role of universities in promoting gender equality in education in the UAE
2. To identify the main challenges that hinder the achievement of gender equality in education
3. To explore potential solutions for enhancing gender equality within higher education institutions
4. To investigate whether perceptions of gender equality differ according to gender (male vs. female)

### **Research Questions**

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the role of universities in achieving gender equality in education in the UAE?
2. What are the main challenges facing gender equality in education?
3. What solutions can be proposed to enhance gender equality in education?
4. Are there statistically significant differences in perceptions of gender equality attributable to gender?

### **Hypotheses**

**H1:** There are no statistically significant differences in perceptions of gender equality in education attributable to gender (male vs. female).

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The research design used in this study was a quantitative descriptive design in order to test gender equality in education in the context of higher education in the United Arab Emirates. This design has been chosen because it allows describing and analysing the perceptions of the students towards the role of the university, the existing challenges, and the possible ways of improving gender equality in education.

## Sample and Sampling

The population of the study was all undergraduate students in the Al Ain University in the academic year 2023/2024. Simple random sampling method was used to make the study population representative.

The last sample was 70 undergraduate students both male and female. The respondents were all in the normal age bracket (18 to 25 years), which is in line with the study population and validity of the findings.

The sample was diverse in terms of gender, marital status, employment status, and level of income. This heterogeneity made the perceptions of the students concerning gender equality in education more comprehensive and enhanced the possibility of generalising the results of the study to the context of the UAE.

**Table 1**  
*Demographic Characteristics of the Study Sample*

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>	Male	45	64.3%
	Female	25	35.7%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Age</b>	18–20 years	18	25.7%
	21–23 years	30	42.9%
	24–25 years	22	31.4%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Marital Status</b>	Single	58	82.9%
	Married	12	17.1%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Employment Status</b>	Not employed	46	65.7%
	Employed	24	34.3%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>
<b>Monthly Income</b>	Less than AED 6,000	9	12.9%
	AED 7,000–13,000	41	58.6%
	More than AED 14,000	20	28.6%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 indicates that most of the participants were male (64.3%) and females made up 35.7% of the sample. The biggest age group was 21-23 years (42.9%) followed by 24-25 years (31.4%). Most respondents were single (82.9%) which is consistent with the nature of the undergraduate study

population. In terms of the employment status, most of them were not employed (65.7%). As for the monthly income, most of the participants reported a family income ranging from AED 7,000 to 13,000 (58.6%).

**Research Instrument**

The structured questionnaire that was used to gather the data was created on the basis of the literature on gender equality in education. The tool was aimed at measuring how students perceived the role of universities in gender equality promotion, the issues which prevent its realization, and the possible ways to improve it in the context of the UAE.

The questionnaire had two major sections. The demographic data, such as gender, age, marital status, employment status, and income level were gathered in the first section. The second part consisted of 14 questions allocated to three dimensions and those were as follows: role of universities in enhancing gender equality (5 items), obstacles to gender equality in education (4 items), and suggested strategies to improve gender equality (5 items). The measurements of responses were carried out on the five-point Likert scale (very low to very high).

In order to improve the quality of the instrument, the questionnaire was checked by the experts in the field of sociology and education in order to analyse the clarity, relevance, and correspondence of the items with the study objectives. According to their suggestions, few changes were done to enhance the wording and general coherence of the tool. In addition, Cronbach alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the questionnaire and it was established to be 0.90, which is demonstrating high internal consistency. This proves that the instrument was both content valid and reliable in measuring the study variables.

**Table 2**

*Internal Consistency Reliability of the Study Instrument*

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Number of Items</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>
Role of universities in promoting gender equality	5	0.87
Challenges facing gender equality in education	4	0.84
Proposed solutions to enhance gender equality	5	0.88
<b>Overall instrument</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>0.90</b>

Table 2 shows that the instrument was found to have a high degree of internal consistency reliability. Cronbach's alpha scores for the 3 dimensions were 0.84 to 0.88 and the overall reliability coefficient was 0.90. These values mean that the questionnaire was reliable and suitable for measuring the study variables.

## Data Analysis

The SPSS software was used to analyse the data. The analysis included:

Demographic characteristics of the sample will be described using frequencies and percentages.

Standard deviations and means to discuss the answers to the research questions.

Independent samples t-test to test the difference on the perceptions according to gender.

The level of statistical significance was set at  $\alpha$  0.05.

## Results

This section presents the findings of the study as per the research questions and hypothesis. The analysis has been done using descriptive statistics and inferential tests to give a comprehensive understanding of the perception of students regarding gender equality in education. Descriptive statistics (means and standard deviations) was used to answer the research questions and an independent samples t-test was used to investigate the differences based on gender.

### Descriptive Results

To address the research questions, means and standard deviations were calculated for each dimension of the study, as presented in Tables (3), (4), and (5).

### Research Question 1: What is the role of the UAE in promoting gender equality in education?

To answer the first research question, means and standard deviations were calculated to examine students' perceptions of the UAE's role in promoting gender equality in education, as presented in Table (3).

**Table 3**

*Students' Perceptions of the UAE's Role in Promoting Gender Equality in Education*

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
The UAE provides schools that accept diversity in cultures and gender	3.82	0.73	High
The UAE designs curricula that promote gender equality in education	3.70	0.98	High
The UAE trains educational staff who believe in equal educational rights	3.42	1.51	Moderate
The UAE provides education to all nationalities	3.38	1.43	Moderate
The UAE enacts laws promoting gender equality in education	2.90	1.65	Moderate
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.37</b>	—	<b>Moderate</b>

Table 3 shows that the students' perceptions of the role of UAE in the promotion of gender equality in education was moderate ( $M = 3.37$ ). The highest rated items are those pertaining to inclusive school

environments and curriculum design, whereas aspects related to legislation were rated comparatively lower. This implies that institutional practices are more visible to students than policy effectiveness.

**Research Question 2:** What are the challenges facing gender equality in education?

To answer the second research question, means and standard deviations were calculated to identify the main challenges facing gender equality in education, as shown in Table (4).

**Table 4**

*Challenges Facing Gender Equality in Education*

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Some educational staff do not fully support gender equality	3.74	0.79	High
Lack of parental awareness regarding girls' education	3.69	0.92	High
Diversity of nationalities as a challenge	3.47	1.41	Moderate
Cultural traditions limiting female education	2.54	1.65	Moderate
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.03</b>		<b>— Moderate</b>

As it can be seen in Table 4, the overall level of challenges was moderate (M = 3.03). The most prominent challenges were associated with the attitude of educational staff and parental awareness, while cultural traditions were seen as having less impact. This shows the importance of awareness and attitude factors in the development of gender equality outcomes.

**Research Question 3:** What solutions can enhance gender equality in education?

To answer the third research question, means and standard deviations were calculated to explore the proposed solutions for enhancing gender equality in education, as presented in Table (5).

**Table 5**

*Proposed Solutions for Enhancing Gender Equality in Education*

Item	Mean	Std. Deviation	Level
Educational initiatives in remote areas	4.13	0.73	High
Strengthening commitment to gender equality	4.00	0.98	High
Raising awareness among stakeholders	3.53	1.54	Moderate
Media campaigns promoting equality	3.45	1.60	Moderate
Enforcing gender equality laws	3.00	1.21	Moderate
<b>Overall Mean</b>	<b>3.61</b>		<b>— Moderate</b>

Table 5 indicates that the solutions proposed were rated as moderately important (M = 3.61). The top solutions rated were those with a focus on improving access to education and strengthening institutional commitment, suggesting that access to education and policy support are both critical to advancing gender equality.

## Hypothesis Testing

**H1:** There are no statistically significant differences in perceptions of gender equality in education attributable to gender (male vs. female).

To test the study hypothesis, an independent samples t-test was conducted to test whether there were statistically significant differences in student's perceptions of gender equality in education based on gender (male vs. females).

**Table 6**

*Independent Samples t-Test for Gender Differences*

Gender	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-value	Sig.
Male	3.73	0.59	0.153	0.879
Female	3.72	0.62	—	—

The results show that there are no statistically significant differences among male and female students regarding their perceptions about the gender equality in education ( $p = 0.879 > 0.05$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis is accepted and it indicates that gender has no significant effect on the students' views about the role of the UAE in promoting gender equality in education.

## Discussions

The current research investigated the role of universities in the promotion of gender equality in education in the United Arab Emirates, in particular the institutional practices, perceived problems, and possible solutions. The findings offer important insights into the understanding and experience of gender equality in the context of higher education.

The results indicated that the overall role of the UAE in promoting gender equality in education was perceived as a moderate. This suggests that, despite the fundamental progress achieved at the policy and institutional levels, there is still scope for improvement with regard to translating these efforts into practices that are fully effective. In particular, the relatively poor assessment of legal frameworks in contrast to institutional practices implies the potential existence of a divide between policy formulation and the perceived impact of the policy. This finding is consistent with previous research, which highlights how the effectiveness of gender equality initiatives is not only related to the existence of policies, but also the policy implementation and visibility.

With regard to challenges, the findings showed that the most prominent barriers were related to the attitude and awareness, especially from some educational staff and parents. This highlights the persistence of the role of socio-cultural factors in determining the equality of education. While the issue of structural barriers such as access to education has been addressed in the UAE context to a large

extent, attitudinal and cultural factors continue to serve as critical barriers. This adds to the existing literature that proposes that gender inequality in education is so entrenched in social norms that it requires broader cultural change that goes beyond institutional reform.

In contrast, the results revealed that traditional cultural barriers were seen as having lesser importance as contrasted to challenges of awareness. This may be reflecting the progress made in reducing overt forms of gender discrimination in the UAE, while more subtle forms of inequality continue at the level of perceptions and attitudes. Such a shift shows gender equality efforts have shifted away from issues of access to more complex socio-cultural dimensions.

Regarding proposed solutions, the study found that increasing educational efforts and increasing institutional commitment were seen as the most effective ways to improve gender equality. This points out the importance of better access to education in areas with need while at the same time reinforcing institutional responsibility. The moderate assessment of the enforcement of law indicates that individuals rate their perception of awareness and practical initiatives as more immediate and impactful than legislation alone.

The hypothesis testing further showed that there were no statistically significant differences between the male and female students on perceptions of gender equality in education. This finding implies a common understanding of gender equality across genders in the university context, which could be an image of the success of the national policies and educational practices in promoting inclusive values. It also indicates that gender equality is also becoming more of a collective society issue rather than an issue limited to a specific group of people.

Overall, the findings imply that the goal of gender equality in higher education can only be achieved with a multidimensional approach that includes institutional practices, understanding of the cultures, and policy implementation. While much progress has been made in the UAE in terms of gender equality promotion, the results indicate the necessity to focus more on awareness, attitudes, and the effective implementation of policies to ensure sustainable and meaningful change.

### **Conclusion**

This study has focused on the role of the universities in promoting gender equality in education in the United Arab Emirates, in terms of the institutional practices, challenges, and potential solutions. The results showed that generally the role of universities in achieving gender equality was seen to be

average, meaning that although some progress has been made, more work is needed to improve effectiveness.

The findings also indicated that the greatest barriers were to do with awareness and attitudes, especially among educational staff and parents, rather than structural barriers, such as access to education. This suggests that the achievement of gender equality in the UAE has progressed beyond the issues of access towards more complicated socio-cultural dimensions that need to be targeted for intervention. In addition, the results emphasized the importance of increasing educational efforts and institutional commitment in boosting gender equality in education.

Furthermore, the lack of statistically significant differences between male and female students shows a common understanding of gender equality in the university context, reflecting a positive effect of national policies and educational practices. Overall, the study shows that gender equality in education needs a wide-ranging approach that includes integration of institutional efforts, institutions to implement policies, and societal awareness.

From the more practical point of view, the results highlight the need for universities to adopt more inclusive and gender-sensitive practices, and policy makers should work on how to better implement and make visible gender equality policies. Increasing awareness by educators, students and families is still key to addressing attitudinal barriers that continue to affect educational outcomes.

However, this study has several limitations that should be considered. The use of self-reported information may create response bias, especially in relation to socially desirable topics, such as gender equality. In addition, the study was confined to a single university, which may impact on the generalisability of the results. The cross-sectional design also limits the ability to establish causal relationships between variables.

Future researches are recommended using of more than one universities and longitudinal designs to get a more comprehensive understanding of gender equality in education. Further studies should also probe the views of other actors, notably faculty members and policymakers, to obtain a deeper and more holistic picture with respect to the factors that affect gender equality in higher education.

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