

Statement by

**Her Excellency
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Minister of State**

Submission of the Initial Report
of the United Arab Emirates
to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
Against Women
*In accordance with article 18 of the Convention
on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*

Geneva, 26 January 2010

Madam Chair, Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Government of United Arab Emirates and the members of its delegation, I have the honor to be with you today to consider the initial report of the United Arab Emirates in line with the terms of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women and to present the efforts and achievements of my country to implement the Convention and to identify our deficiencies in this respect. I sincerely hope that the report which we are presenting to the honorable members of the Committee along with our responses submitted in relation to the list of questions, will reflect the positive image of the empowerment of woman in the UAE in recent years. As it will be seen during our dialogue today, the UAE government has elaborated consistent strategic plans towards the development of a national legislation so as to ensure a full integration of women's rights and their positive participation in the process of the economic development of the country.

These plans come to fulfill our vision of women's equality and rights which meets our international obligations to implement the provisions of the Convention which is given by the UAE Constitution a binding legal force that is equal to national laws, as is the case to all other similar human rights conventions to which the UAE is a member such as the Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent and Punish Trafficking in Persons especially Women and Children, the ILO Conventions to combat all forms of discrimination against women such as Equal Remuneration Convention of 1957, the Convention on the Prevention of Discrimination in Employment and Occupation of 1958, and the Night Work Convention (Women) Revised of 1948.

In the field of regional cooperation on issues concerning women, the UAE hosts the office of the Arab Family Organization which was established in 1977 which includes in its membership almost all Arab countries. In addition, the UAE is an active member of the Arab Women Organization which was established in 2000, and which carries out its activities through the League of Arab States, as a body for the empowerment of Arab women and strengthening their capacities in all fields as a crucial component for social progress.

Madam Chair

From my position as a Minister in the Government and with all the members of my delegation which represent the main institutions concerned with women's issues we came here today to look forward to a constructive dialogue which I hope, will contribute to give a clear image of the great strides made by the UAE woman, and her growing role in the society. We hope that your observations and proposals as experts will contribute as well to the illumination of our road and to support our efforts towards the progress of women. We come to you in that spirit – and with

the desire to work in transparency and accept challenges and work diligently towards finding solutions to these challenges on the basis of the reality of our society and in consistence with our beliefs and our cultural heritage.

Madam Chair

We can say with pride, that what had been realized in the field of women empowerment in the UAE for a period as short as 38 years, which is also the time of the existence of the UAE, can be considered, by all standards, an important and remarkable progress. The UNDP reports on human development for 2007 and 2008 have classified the UAE in the 44th rank out of a list of 177 countries and on the 29th rank in terms of woman development worldwide, and in the first rank in the Arab World and GCC countries in the field of women empowerment.

Madam Chair

Since the time the UAE has ratified the CEDAW Convention and therewith the promulgation of the Federal Law number 34 of 2004, we have worked on the preparation of the initial report with collective efforts from the concerned institutions which composed a committee headed by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other government representatives, local institutions and public associations which participate actively in the field of women empowerment. Many of them are here with us today.

Even though we have been delayed to present our report, the period between 2004 and 2008 have carried with it considerable positive changes to the benefit of women in the UAE, with respect to national legislations and in relation to woman empowerment, since the accession of women to new fields of activity, such as membership in the Federal National Council and even the Ministerial Cabinet. The Committee which has prepared this report had to take in added burden to cope with the new successive events and draft all the information into the report in its final text which was presented to your honorable Committee.

Madam Chair

Since the founding of the UAE in 1971, the Founding Fathers have never overlooked the importance of women's rights in society, which have been enshrined in the National Constitution. Two months ago, we celebrated our 38th National Day which marked important achievements and milestones of the country. I am honored to say that the role of women has featured prominently in this journey. There are, honorable committee many misconceptions about the role of women in the UAE whereas in fact, we are at the forefront of both government and private sectors, and their prominent role in the society is seen as a normal almost expected developmental process and not as an exceptional event.

We acknowledge that there are several challenges which the Convention confronts us with, but we have worked during the last period at more than one level to meet these challenges. Therefore, let me review our efforts in all areas, in our quest to create a positive record in the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

Madam Chair

With regard to political rights, the whole Chapter Four of the UAE Constitution deals with the Federal National Council (the equivalent UAE's Parliament) which represents all the people of the UAE as stated in article 77 of the Constitution. The Federal Supreme Council decision number 4 of 2006 and the Presidential Decision number 3 of 2006 relating to modalities of election of the Federal National Council (FNC) members states that half of the members of the FNC be directly elected by an Electoral College and that a National Committee be created to supervise the elections.

For the first time the UAE has witnessed a new and unique experience which is the election of the Federal National Council which took place from the 16th to the 20th of December 2006 and which opened a wider space for citizens to express their views and opinions on several development issues. The Electoral College consisted of 6688 members of which 1198 members were women. As a result, the first Parliamentary Council came to being with half of its members chosen through election.

The Federal National Council also witnessed a strong representation of women, as it included 9 women members of which 8 were appointed and one was elected, thus accounting for 22.5% of the whole Council. The representation of women in the Council for the first time reflects a political wisdom of the leadership of the UAE and the importance it gives to the political participation of women. I seize this opportunity to point out that there is one female Member of the Federal National Council among our delegation

The culmination of the growing role of women was the appointment of 4 women Ministers in the current Government namely: Minister of Foreign Trade, Minister of Social Affairs, and 2 Ministers of State, of which I have the honor to be one of them and to represent my country here in front of your esteemed Committee. The entry of women into the political arena is a qualitative turning point in the process of democratic action which the UAE is experiencing, since UAE women have been able to take a prominent status in the society and to assume leadership positions which enabled them to make valuable input and give their thoughts and perspective, and advice in decision making.

The UAE women also joined the diplomatic corps within the Ministry of foreign Affairs, as two of them were nominated Ambassadors in the Kingdom of Sweden

and the Kingdom of Spain, and a third as a General Consul in Shanghai. In the justice system, a number of women have been appointed at different levels of the judiciary such as Attorney General and judges. The first female judge and the first Public Prosecutor nominated in the UAE are also present here as members of our delegation. There are also women who joined the military and the police and assumed the rank of Brigadier in the armed forces. Women have also been appointed as Secretary General of the Council of Ministers, and 12 of them are presently in the governing bodies of chambers of commerce and industry.

Madam Chair

The United Arab Emirates is keen to promote women's economic participation and their involvement in the labor market, as there is no more restrictions on the jobs that can be filled by women. In this context, may I refer to the latest statistics published by the Ministry of the economy which show an increase in the number of female citizens (15 years and over) in the workforce, from 15,729 in 1995 to 49,000 in 2006 thus representing an increase of more than 22% of the total labor force of the citizens in 2006.

The percentage of the contribution of the female population in the total labor force increased from 5.4% in 1995 to 11.8% in 2006. The statistics indicate the predominance of women in some institutions such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs.

The Government has launched a set of initiatives aimed at strengthening the role of women in business and in all economic areas through the development and promotion of women's capacity in order to enhance their contribution in the economic development through the establishment of boards of businesswomen, as well as the launching of a Business Women Award in the UAE.

Madam chair

The educational policy in the United Arab Emirates aims at building an integrated human personality in its belief, behavior, skill and performance, by providing equal and diversified educational opportunities for all citizens. The United Arab Emirates regard education as the most important way for the development of women capable to enhance their role in the society as women receive the same education as men. There is no doubt that the increase in the level of education and awareness among women has had a positive impact on the Government's success in improving the health and social conditions of its population.

Statistics of the Ministry of Education indicate an increase in the number of women enrolled in general education and technical teaching. Their number raised from

15,696 students in 1972/1973 to 145,956 students in 2004/2005 and the number of government female schools has reached 318 schools in the different Emirates.

In the field of participation of women in higher education, the United Arab Emirates is considered as one of the highest in the world with 95% of female students and 80% of male students graduated from high school, with the possibility of choosing to attend national institutions of higher education in the or apply for scholarship abroad. The number of female students enrolled in public higher education institutions has reached 24,880 during the academic year 2005/2006.

In respect to literacy programs and adult education, the results of population census of 2005 indicate that the proportion of illiteracy among citizens amounted to 8.8% overall, and 11.7% of women. On the other hand, the Government gives citizens, males and females alike, full opportunities to join university education and graduate programs abroad. During the 2005/2006 academic year, 43 females students have enrolled for the bachelor's degree, 24 for the master's degree and 18 for the doctorate at various universities abroad.

Madam Chair

In matters of health services, we consider that the economic and social developments witnessed by the United Arab Emirates is sufficient enough to improve the health of individuals, including women. Health services, therapeutic and preventive programmes carried out by the Ministry of Health have reinforced the health status of the UAE women, and there is no doubt that the increase of the level of education and awareness among individuals has helped the Government's efforts to improve the health care of all its citizens.

We can measure this situation through a number of indicators such as: decrease in morbidity which led to a low mortality rate, especially among infants, and an increase in the number of birth rate, life expectancy and health awareness among individuals in general, and mothers in particular in most segments of the society.

The latest statistics released by the Ministry of Health in 2007 indicate that there are 85 hospitals in the UAE, in addition to the 468 centers for primary health care, and 12 centers and 122 units for mother and child for primary health care.. The statistics of the Ministry of Health show also the decrease of infant mortality at birth, at 5.15 children per 1000 live births, which corresponds to less than 10 deaths of children per year. The 99% of births are supervised by skilled professionals, as there are no maternal mortality due to pregnancy, childbirth and postpartum.

Regarding the health care for mothers and children, the UAE provides all the services needed through primary health care centers belonging to the Ministry of Health in addition to the women's associations which are engaged in the promotion of health awareness. In the near future, a Supreme Council for motherhood and

childhood already approved by the Council of Ministers will be established and preparations are presently underway to set up the organizational and managerial structure of this new entity. A Decision has been issued recently from the President of the Supreme Council for Motherhood and Childhood to set up a High Committee which will be responsible for laying down a National Strategy for Childhood and Motherhood.

As an example of this health awareness building, there is a robust breast cancer awareness program in the UAE that is systemic with extensive literature to support and educate women on their health and potential risks to it. This has broken many taboos and has been an important pillar in breast cancer prevention.

Madam Chair

The issue of social welfare is at the heart of the Government's strategy since the foundation of the UAE. It aims primarily at providing adequate housing, as well as granting a monthly financial aid to 16 social categories of people such the elderly, the disabled, the orphans, the widows and divorcee women. More than 37,848 families benefit from this program as the Government pursues a policy that provides social services by using mobile units for home care which provide health care and medical follow-up for the elderly, as well as giving guidance, counseling and psychological support at home through a medical team which includes doctors, nurses and social workers. More than 11171 of elderly receive social assistance in addition to some specialized institutions which provide daytime shelter services for the elderly without requiring residency with the aim of keeping the elderly within their family environment.

Among the social services enjoyed by women under national laws, we can mention the opening of nurseries inside ministry buildings and public institutions, the allocation of housing for widows, divorced women and women married to foreigners, as the Government grants them adequate housing free of charge or provide them with a free piece of land equipped with the basic infrastructure including roads, water, electricity and also provide them with the necessary funds to build their own houses.

Madam Chair

Due to the Government's commitment to the empowerment of women in the United Arab Emirates, a large number of institutions and associations dealing with women's issues have been created in order to increase women's capacity in various areas. At present, there are more than 20 institutions in the UAE all over the country, amongst which the most important women's are participating with us today in this session such as General Women's Union, the Family Development Foundation, Women's Development Foundation, the Dubai Foundation for women and children.

Madam Chair

The United Arab Emirates society is basically a conservative society which strongly rejects trafficking and exploitation of persons, especially women and children and prohibits all acts which affect women, as the religious and cultural beliefs prevailing in the UAE society deplores such practices.

This led the UAE to issue the Federal Law No. (51) of 2006 on combating trafficking in human beings, especially women and children which put the country well ahead of several States by providing deterrent penalties for the perpetrators of trafficking crimes. In the light of this new law, the Council of Ministers issued Resolution No. (15) of 2007 leading to the set up of the National Committee to combat human trafficking under the chairmanship of His Excellency the Minister of State for the Federal National Council and representatives from a number of relevant government institutions. The Government also enacted a number of laws condemning all crimes of rape, indecent assault and incitement to debauchery and prostitution.

Madam Chair

The Government of the United Arab Emirates, attaches a great importance to the issue of labor, particularly the employment of domestic workers as it passed in April 2007 a mandatory standard formula for all employment contracts for domestic employees and their employers, at the federal level. At the same time, the common labor law regulates domestic labor within these categories as appropriate with the nature of their profession and the like business while covering other aspects such as health care, salaries and duration of contract as well as giving domestic workers adequate periods of rest in addition to providing health treatment in accordance with the health system in force in the country.

The State is currently preparing a draft law on service assistance which includes domestic workers and their employers, as well as all the contractual relationship of employment, including all the rights and duties incumbent upon all Contracting Parties, amongst which the designation of dispute settlement bodies capable of receiving complaints and dealing with litigation procedures in matter of working hours and types of leave and pay. The new law will be issued soon after completion through the adequate constitutional procedures.

We would also like to emphasize that the penal laws of the Government consider acts of abuse and physical assault as crimes punishable by penalties including imprisonment and imposing fines.

Madam Chair

The United Arab Emirates pays great attention to women in remote areas through its development programs run by the Ministry of Social Affairs which opened social development centers in a number of remote areas to ensure that services are provided to the largest possible segments of the population. These centers provide care and social security, in partnership with working women's associations and their branches which contribute to such activity through education, awareness-raising and care for women in those areas.

The Ministry of Education has also participated in the promotion of these areas by opening schools for males and females as well as encouraging adult education to combat illiteracy, with the help of women's associations.

With regard to access to credit and agricultural credit, the law gives women equal rights as men so long as agricultural land is registered in their names, as they have the right to benefit from agricultural marketing programs provided by the Government in support of the farmers.

We have also to point out that the latest UAE Government strategy comprises 21 subjects divided to 6 main sectors of development. One of these sectors is the development of remote areas, as an investment in human resources in these areas, with the aim of building their capacities and improving the standard of living, by providing them with all the basic services compatible in quality with similar services in the cities. A Ministerial Committee for the development of remote areas was established for this purpose. It is intended to take in charge the planning and the supervision of the implementation of development projects in all sectors in these remote areas. Local committees were also formed where necessary, for the identification of the local needs and the facilitation of implementation operations.

Madam Chair

The Personal Status Law in the UAE includes provisions regulating issues of engagement, marriage, child custody and inheritance. Islamic Sharia is the basic reference in the provisions of this law, since they are issues which have been identified by our religion in a clear way which does not allow controversy.

Although the consent of the custodian is a prerequisite for the validity of marriage for women, the law establishes control over this issue to ensure women's rights. With regard to the question of equal rights and responsibilities during marriage and its dissolution, the law mandated the man to maintain the wife and children and did not require from the wife to maintain herself or her family, even though she is wealthy, since all her possessions belong only to her and she is not responsible for the maintenance of the family. Article 55 of the law stipulates that the rights of the wife to her husband consists in ensuring her maintenance, not preventing her from completing her education or visiting her close family members

such as her parents or relatives, or interfering in her possessions and assets, and refraining from harming her physically or psychologically.

Although the woman is exempted from the maintenance of the children, which is considered as a privilege, she has obligations to her husband in terms of taking care of the children and raising them in a proper way as mentioned by article 54 of the Personal Status Law. Item (g) of the article 16 of this law states that the woman has the right to chose her family name on equal footing as the man. With regard to Item (h) of the same article on the financial liability of the wife, it states that the woman has an independent liability since she can make contracts, acquire, donate or legate property without the interference of the husband or any body else.

Madam Chair

Before I finish my statement, I would like to come to the reservations made by my country when it ratified the Convention. We are aware of the concerns of the Committee regarding this matter. But allow me to mention that the principle of reservations which the convention permits, serves to cope with the human diversities whether cultural, social or religious, which led to bearing its fruits in a global partnership to protect the rights of women with the accession of 186 countries to the convention.

While we value and appreciate the efforts of this esteemed Committee to enhance this global partnership, we would like to assure you that, despite our reservations on certain articles of the Convention, we are working on its application to an extent not contrary to our legislation and our cultural heritage.

Madam Chair

Finally, I would like to thank you for your attention and would also like to assure you of our determination to receive comments or suggestions with an open mind through this interactive dialogue. I am fully convinced that such a dialogue will help us to understand better many issues that are reflected in my government's plans, keeping in mind that our common objective is to strengthen together the role of women and their empowerment in the United Arab Emirates.

Thank you