



Article

Gender Roles, Gender Bias, and Cultural Influences: Perceptions of Male and Female UAE Public Relations Professionals

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Abstract: Research into gender dynamics in the Public Relations (PR) industry has suggested that the gendered perceptions of PR roles, gender bias, and cultural norms may contribute to gender-related issues in the field. The current study, framed as an exploratory investigation, examines how PR professionals in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) perceive gender equality issues within their industry. Drawing on survey responses from 152 PR practitioners in the UAE, this research investigates the extent to which these professionals perceive gender equality issues in the PR sector. The survey results reveal positive perceptions of gender equality issues, although some specific gender-related concerns emerge. One key finding is that there are minimal gender differences in perceiving gender equality issues between male and female professionals. Respondents also expressed confidence that their organizations are implementing practices in support of gender equality and recognizing the impact of such practices on employee performance. Given the lack of data on gender equality in the UAE, this exploratory study contributes to a better understanding of gender equality among professionals and provides insights into the strategies for advancing gender equality in the sector.

Keywords: gender equality; UAE; public relations; gender bias; gender sensitivity



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1. Introduction

Scholars have examined how workplaces reproduce inequalities across various dimensions, including gender, race, class, and other intersecting axes of identities and differences (Amis et al. 2020; Madden and Levenshus 2021; Van Laer et al. 2021). A fundamental aspect contributing to the perpetuation of these inequalities lies in the processes related to the perception of gender issues. Within the feminist literature, where gender is understood as both a construction and an interplay of relationships, some studies focused on the gendered power relations within male-dominated workplaces (Bridges et al. 2023; Pillay-Naidoo and Vermeulen 2023). A more limited body of research has adopted a feminist perspective to illuminate the role of gender and gender perceptions in shaping interactions, particularly within women-dominated professions (Tafvelin et al. 2020; Irvine and Vermilya 2010).

In the Public Relations (PR) industry, the phenomenon known as “feminization” refers to a shift in gender composition where a majority of professionals within the industry are female. Numerous studies have explored the repercussions of this shift in the field of public relations when the number of female practitioners is larger than the number of their male counterparts. (Heath 2006, p. 323). This body of research primarily focused on how gender can impact public relations texts and contexts (Aldoory 2009) and the experiences and perspectives of women in PR (Horsley 2009; Toth and Cline 1989; Toth and Grunig 1993). More recent research addressed women’s leadership challenges (Meng and Neill 2021; Topić 2021), showing that women may find themselves disproportionately concentrated in a cluster of junior roles or a “velvet ghetto” (Wright 2020). However, these studies primarily

centered on the United States, which is a common trend in the field, as much of the research on women in public relations is generated by U.S.-based scholars (Topić et al. 2020).

Conversely, the UAE presents a distinct context that has attracted research attention and also captured the interest of global public relations agencies. This is primarily attributed to the UAE's remarkable status as one of the rapidly growing countries and its notable shifts in gender dynamics, characterized by the significant participation of women as "partners and contributors" in the nation-building process (MNFCA 2007).

The UAE government has taken significant steps to promote gender equality, implementing a range of women empowerment policies, constitutional and legal protections, and organizational strategies. Notably, the creation of the Gender Balance Council and the publication of the Gender Balance Guide (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development 2017) serve as clear signals of the government's commitment to promoting gender equality across various industries (UAE Gender Balance Council 2023). In a further demonstration of commitment, the UAE Security and Commodities Authority issued a mandate that listed companies must have at least one woman on their board of directors (SCA 2021). In fact, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) is now the standout in the list of Arab countries that have adopted legislative gender quotas (Welborne and Buttorff 2022). These comprehensive efforts showcase the government's dedication to not only safeguard the rights of women through constitutional and legal means but also to actively promote gender balance within organizational structures.

These initiatives focused on creating inclusive organizational environments have led to transformative changes and progress in various sectors (Al Fardan and Marochi 2021). In recent years, women in the UAE have made remarkable strides towards empowerment, gaining access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities previously hindered by sociocultural factors. In the United Arab Emirates, the landscape of the public sector is notably dominated by women, constituting 66% of the public sector workers, with 30% in leadership roles and 15% in technical and academic positions (Dubai Women Establishment 2023). Notably, over 77% of Emirati women are now enrolled in higher education, constituting 70% of all university graduates (UAE Gender Balance Council 2023). This trend extends to the PR industry, as evidenced by the membership statistics of the Middle East Public Relations Association (MEPRA). Analyzing individual memberships becomes a key indicator, revealing the evident feminization of the field. MEPRA data showcase a noteworthy disparity between male and female representation, with 26 female members compared to 20 male members. These figures quantify the predominant presence of women in the public relations profession in the UAE. To date, few studies in the UAE have examined how gender issues are perceived, particularly within the PR profession, from the perspective of both male and female professionals. This study seeks to conduct a nuanced exploration of the attitudes and experiences of UAE PR professionals across both private and public sectors. With a specific focus on gender sensitivity in the workplace, the research aims to gauge the unique perspectives of individuals in the field and gain insights into their personal experiences with various gender equality issues within the workplace. Given the lack of data, this research holds significance, contributing valuable data on PR professionals' perceptions and experiences pertaining to gender roles and bias.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Gender Equality in Organizations and Workplaces

In defining gender equality, Roller (2013) characterizes it as a social condition where men and women enjoy equal rights, balanced rewards, opportunities, power, and status. This implies equal participation in political arenas, community, relationships, and the household, as well as having safety from violence and equal resource use and access (Heilman and Caleo 2018). In a community striving for gender equality, both genders are aware of available resources, including employment opportunities, health care services, bank loans, and education, and are equipped with the knowledge to access them. The significance of gender equality lies not only in the availability but also in the acceptance of

these resources by both genders. Additionally, both genders also need to have the time as well as ease of mobility, facilitating unhindered access to these resources (Parker and Funk 2017). Many countries have made substantial progress in this regard, including efforts to close the pay gap, equal opportunities for promotion, and implementing legal efforts to address gender equality in the workplace. These initiatives collectively contribute to creating environments where individuals of all genders can contribute meaningfully to various aspects of society. As The UN Foundation (2022) highlights, while challenges like the gender pay gap and access to mentorship opportunities still exist, the trajectory is moving toward a more equitable future. According to the surveys performed in 2021 by the PR council, women are found to earn 87 cents for every dollar that is earned by men. There exists a gap, but it has been reduced to a huge extent (European Institute for Gender Equality n.d.). Women's empowerment, defined as the process of providing women with the necessary opportunities and resources to exercise their rights, participate in decision-making processes, and exert greater control over their lives, plays a pivotal role in the pursuit of gender equality.

In this broader societal context, organizations worldwide are taking active steps to promote new social norms, implement measures to reduce biases, and initiate educational programs on gender equality. Mentorship opportunities have also evolved, benefitting women significantly, with various organizations that implement mentorship programs. Organizations are increasingly incorporating gender-sensitive practices into their frameworks. Gender sensitivity, defined as the ability to recognize and highlight existing gender differences, issues, and inequalities (Figuerola Vélez and Vélez Ochoa 2021), is essential not only to attract but also to retain female talent in the organization. This, in turn, contributes to the enhancement of workplace gender equality (Chang and Milkman 2020). As organizations embrace these initiatives, they move closer to creating inclusive environments that foster the professional growth and success of individuals, irrespective of gender.

However, despite these efforts, studies in gendered organizations (Stamarski and Hing 2015) have brought light to diverse forms of inequalities against women, including stereotypical behaviors and disparities in promotional opportunities. The term “glass ceiling” (Connell 2006) is frequently used in these studies to describe the persistent yet invisible organizational barriers that hinder women from reaching top leadership positions. Adding to this challenge is the glass cliff (Bechtoldt et al. 2019; Smith and Monaghan 2013), which suggests that women are frequently appointed to precarious leadership positions more often than men. This theory underscores the difficulties women face in ascending to top roles within organizations, emphasizing the need for gender sensitivity to break through these barriers and promote gender equality.

2.2. Gender Perceptions and Their Impact on Workplace Dynamics

The concept of gender and its association with stereotypes has been extensively discussed in the feminist literature. Gender is a social and cultural construct that assigns social and cultural roles and expectations to men and women. These roles and expectations are further reinforced through patterns of behavior, attitudes, and attributes culturally or socially linked to each gender, leading to the formation of gender stereotypes. Previous studies have shown, for example, that appropriate makeup is associated with health, heterosexuality, and credibility in the workplace (Dellinger and Williams 1997).

Fitch (2016) highlights that some specific public relations activities are marginalized due to an exclusive occupational identifier that relies on a limited conceptualization of public relations professions. This division in public relations roles has resulted in a segregation between managerial and strategic positions on one hand and technical roles on the other. Driven by the perception that women are viewed as “not good managers, were not tough enough for corporate life, were too emotional, would have children, and could not play the game” (Cline et al. 1986, pp. 6–8), these assumptions and stereotypes have become standardized representations of men and women in the PR industry.

They are often perpetuated by mass media and are based on various factors, including personality traits, occupations, physical appearance, or behaviors). This can lead to differential treatment of women in the workplace and double standards where women's behavior is judged compared to men. Research in PR scholarship highlights the need for gender equity in the industry (Lee et al. 2018). Studies have shown that social media expertise is linked to power in the PR industry, and women with social media expertise are often perceived to have lower power than men with the same expertise. This highlights the prevalence of gender biases in the PR industry and the impact they have on women in the workplace (Place and Vardeman-Winter 2018). Job performance can be affected by gender perceptions in the workplace. Job performance is important not only for the success of an employee but also for the success of the organization (Crites et al. 2015).

Hatfield et al. (2011) suggest that individuals have the motivation to maintain a sense of equity and fairness in their interactions and relationships with other individuals. Grounded in Equity Theory, this motivation extends to all facets of interactions, including the workplace. In the workplace, it pertains to the distribution of opportunities and rewards such as pay raises, promotions, and other benefits. These allocations are expected to be based on the performance of an individual and their contributions towards the organization rather than their gender. Furthermore, the theory suggests that individuals are driven to maintain a sense of fairness and balance in their relationships. Any perceived Inequity can lead to behaviors and feelings that are negative, ultimately hindering work performance (Inuwa 2017). For example, gender biases and stereotypes in the workplace can lead to prejudicial opportunities and biased treatment, disrupting the fairness that individuals seek.

2.3. Gender Issues at the Intersection of Societal Structures and Workplace Realities

Sociologists have revealed that the gendered division in the workplace is shaped and negotiated through everyday practice, extending beyond formal policy initiatives and transformative structural changes and progress. The theory of gendered organization posits that gender inequality is initiated by the organization itself through the active promotion of men and the creation of obstacles for women (Acker 1990). By emphasizing the enduring influence of patriarchal structures in society, as highlighted by Millett (2016), we can illuminate the power dynamics that influence decision-making processes. These dynamics often result in bias favoring men. This recognition contributes to a deeper understanding of gender disparities within professional settings. Recognizing and addressing these underlying power structures is essential for fostering gender equality and creating workplaces that are inclusive and equitable.

In the unique context of the Arab Middle Eastern region, certain contextual factors play a significant role in shaping how gender issues are perceived and experienced (Abuhussein and Koburtay 2021; Abalkhail 2019). Among these factors are the discussions related to the concept of *qiwamah*, which roughly translates to men's responsibility as custodians over women (Mir-Hosseini 2022). Furthermore, it is worth noting that certain professions and industries remain male-dominated, offering limited equal opportunities for females (Al Khayyal et al. 2020).

In this context, women often find themselves in a delicate balancing act. On the one hand, they harbor professional aspirations that align with the government priorities and initiatives aimed at gender empowerment. On the other hand, they need to navigate the conservative social expectations ingrained in the culture. Prager (2020) highlighted how Emirati women leaders could be compelled to navigate between state feminist discourses and the still prevalent conservative gender roles and value expectations. This social pressure can be challenging for women who aim to effectively balance their family and work responsibilities together.

In the UAE, there have been growing trends where the responsibilities are shared by both wives and husbands, and a lot of families also have domestic help in their houses to assist them with various tasks (Ellemers 2018). Even though there have been important moves made related to the redefinition of the roles of women in society, at home,

and in the workplace in the UAE, there is still continuous progress that can be made (Al Khayyal et al. 2020).

The strides made by the government suggest a positive trajectory for women's empowerment and increased opportunities for leadership and influence. There is a noticeable increase in the number of women in positions of leadership, indicating a promising future for women in this nation. This commitment to gender equality, coupled with the rising representation of women in leadership roles, reflects the ongoing efforts to create an inclusive and equitable society in the UAE.

Public Relations Industry in the UAE

The UAE is a Middle Eastern country consisting of seven emirates, including Dubai, Ras Al Khaimah, Abu Dhabi, Sharjah, Fujairah, Ajman, and Umm Al Quwain. The country is known greatly for its vibrant cities, luxurious amenities, and modern infrastructures. The economy of the nation is driven by the gas and oil reserves, which have helped the country in funding its rapid growth and development. The UAE has made diversifications in its economy through investments in industries like technology, finance, and tourism. The country's population mostly has a lot of expats, where less than 20% of the population are citizens of the country. Arabic is the official language in the country, but the widely spoken language is English due to tourism and business. It is a country with the majority being Muslims, and the official religion is Islam. It possesses a cultural heritage that is very rich and has many museums and historic sites as well.

The public relations industry in the UAE has experienced significant growth in recent years, mirroring the rapid economic development and the country's high global influence. According to Kirat (2006), the UAE recognizes the importance of public relations as a critical component in its marketing communications and business strategies. The competitive landscape of business and the diverse economy in the country necessitates effective communication strategies. These strategies are essential for differentiating the country from competitors and building and maintaining the nation's branding and reputation.

The UAE hosts a diverse array of international and local PR agencies. The local agencies provide vast knowledge about the culture and market of the region, whereas the international agencies are able to bring about global best practices and expertise in the country. These agencies offer a lot of different services that include crisis communication, social media marketing, content creation, media relations, event management, and influencer outreach. There are other agencies that also have specializations in different sectors like technology, hospitality, and finance (Kirat 2006). This dynamic mix of international and local PR agencies reflects the need for comprehensive and culturally sensitive communication strategies to navigate the complexities of the UAE's diverse market.

The UAE PR industry also recognizes the importance of digital media, where the rise in digital platforms and social media has transformed the industry where agencies mostly now focus on online reputation management and digital marketing. These agencies are leading innovative digital technologies and strategies (Kirat 2006). The UAE PR industry, overall, is a sector that is rapidly evolving and very dynamic, being driven by the global ambitions and economic growth of the country. The coexistence of global and local players in the PR industry in the UAE not only provides a range of services and approaches focusing on digital innovation, suggesting significant growth potential (Kirat 2006), but it also highlights the importance of gender sensitivity in the workplace. As the field of public relations evolves, recognizing and incorporating gender-sensitive practices becomes crucial for fostering an inclusive work environment. The field of public relations in the UAE is enriched by professionals hailing from various countries, including those in the Middle East or Gulf region, North America, Europe, and Asia. This diversity in the workforce brings a wealth of cultural perspectives, fostering a dynamic and inclusive environment. By acknowledging and addressing gender issues, the PR industry in the UAE can develop communication strategies that resonate with diverse audiences and reflect the values of equality and inclusivity.

While prior studies addressing workplace gender issues have predominately used qualitative approaches, often associated with feminist research (Hozic and True 2017), this paper takes a quantitative perspective to examine the issue. This quantitative approach aligns with the research questions posed, which aim to explore:

RQ1: To what extent do PR professionals in the UAE perceive gender equality issues?

RQ2: Do male and female PR practitioners perceive gender equality issues differently?

RQ3: To what extent do PR professionals in the UAE experience gender bias in the workplace?

3. Methodology

Research and Questionnaire Design

The research design was developed to gain comprehensive insights into the perceptions and experiences of gender equality among PR practitioners. Following IRB approval, an online survey was conducted with the help of a major UAE PR association to facilitate broad participation from PR professionals across diverse regions and industry sectors in the UAE. This study exclusively focused on professionals both residing and working within the UAE, guaranteeing first-hand knowledge of the local PR industry context. The Qualtrics survey platform was employed for efficient data collection, and the research spanned approximately three weeks during March and April 2023. This research design aimed to provide a holistic understanding of gender equality perceptions within the UAE's PR industry.

The questionnaire consisted of three sections: the first section asked demographic questions; the second section asked perceptions of gender equality, gender roles, and cultural influence on gender equality; the third section addressed gender bias-related questions. The survey was anonymous, and respondents could stop answering the questions if they felt uncomfortable to answer any questions.

Data analysis was performed using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) to perform descriptive and inferential statistics. The descriptive statistical analysis involved summarizing the data through measures such as means, standard deviations, and frequency distributions. For inferential statistics, our focus was on the t-test to compare means as well as the correlation analyses to examine the relationships between variables.

4. Results

4.1. Sample Demographic Characteristics

Initially, a total of 152 responses were collected. However, 14 responses were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete data. Consequently, the final valid dataset consisted of 138 responses. The sample comprised 70 males (50.7%), with an average age of 33.88 ($SD = 9.34$) and an average work experience of 10.39 years ($SD = 9.42$). The UAE is a multicultural country, attracting professionals from various nations. In our sample, 95 respondents (68.8%) were UAE nationals, while 22 (16%) hailed from Arab countries, and the remaining 21 (15.2%) represented other nationalities. Regarding work positions, the most common jobs were executive ($N = 27$; 19.6%) and manager ($N = 25$; 18.1%). Other roles included assistant/associate ($N = 24$; 17.4%), assistant manager ($N = 18$; 13.0%), senior manager ($N = 11$; 8.0%), director ($N = 9$; 6.5%), and other ($N = 27$; 19.6%). Regarding employment, more than half of the respondents worked in the private sector ($N = 72$; 52.2%), while 31.2% ($N = 43$) worked in the government sector, and 9.4% ($N = 13$) worked in nonprofit/NGO organizations. The remaining 7.2% ($N = 10$) worked in other organizations. In terms of education, the majority of the participants held a bachelor's degree ($N = 63$; 45.7%), while 26.8% ($N = 37$) held a master's degree or higher. A small percentage of participants reported having some high school education or less ($N = 9$; 6.5%), a high school diploma or GED ($N = 11$; 8.0%), some college but no degree ($N = 5$; 3.6%), or an associate's or technical degree ($N = 8$; 5.8%). Five participants (3.6%) preferred not to disclose their education level (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

Table 1. Demographics of Survey Participants (*N* = 138).

| | | Mean (SD) |
|-------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------|
| Age | | 33.88 (9.34) |
| Work Experience (Years) | | 10.39 (9.42) |
| | | Frequency (%) |
| Sex | Male | 70 (50.7) |
| | Female | 68 (49.3) |
| Nationality | UAE | 95 (68.8) |
| | Arab country | 22 (16) |
| | Other | 21 (15.2) |
| Work Position | Assistant/Associate | 24 (17.4) |
| | Assistant Manager | 18 (13.0) |
| | Manger | 25 (18.1) |
| | Senior Manager | 11 (8.0) |
| | Director | 9 (6.5) |
| | Executive | 27 (17.4) |
| | Other | 27 (19.6) |
| Employment | Private sector | 72 (52.2) |
| | Government sector | 43 (31.2) |
| | Nonprofit/NGO | 13 (9.4) |
| | Other | 10 (7.2) |
| Education | Some high school or less | 9 (6.5) |
| | High school diploma or GED | 11 (8.0) |
| | Some college, but no degree | 5 (3.6) |
| | Associates or technical degree | 8 (5.8) |
| | Bachelor's degree | 63 (45.7) |
| | Master's or higher | 37 (26.8) |
| | Prefer not to say | 5 (3.6) |

4.2. RQ1: To What Extent Do PR Professionals in the UAE Perceive Gender Equality Issues?

RQ1 examined the general perceptions of gender equality among UAE professionals. Table 2 shows the suitability of PR jobs according to the perceptions of the respondents, broken down by sex. The question was, “Which gender is better suited for PR jobs?” Out of the total 138 respondents, 60 respondents (43.5%) believed that men are better suited for PR jobs, while 78 respondents (56.5%) believed that women are better suited. However, when looking at the responses broken down by sex, it is interesting to note that male professionals think men are better suited for PR jobs, while female professionals think women are better suited for PR jobs. Although not hypothesized, a chi-square test was conducted to examine the relationship between gender and perceptions of suitability for PR jobs. The results indicated a significant association between the respondents' gender and their perceptions, $\chi^2(1, N = 138) = 21.71, p < 0.001$, Cramer's $V = 0.40$. These findings suggest a statistically significant gender-based difference in perceptions regarding the suitability for PR jobs. (see Figure 1 for illustration).

On the question about which dominates the PR industry, male respondents perceive that both genders dominate the PR industry: 34 male respondents perceived that males dominate the industry, while 36 respondents answered females dominate the industry. Among female respondents, 24 respondents answered males dominate the industry, while 44 respondents expressed that females dominate the industry. Overall, a higher number of respondents said the UAE PR industry is dominated by females ($N = 80$) than males ($N = 58$). A chi-square test was conducted to explore the relationship between gender and perceptions of industry dominance. The analysis, however, did not reveal a statistically significant association between gender and perceptions of industry dominance, $\chi^2(1, N = 138) = 2.50, p = 0.114$, Cramer's $V = 0.13$. These findings suggest that there is no significant difference

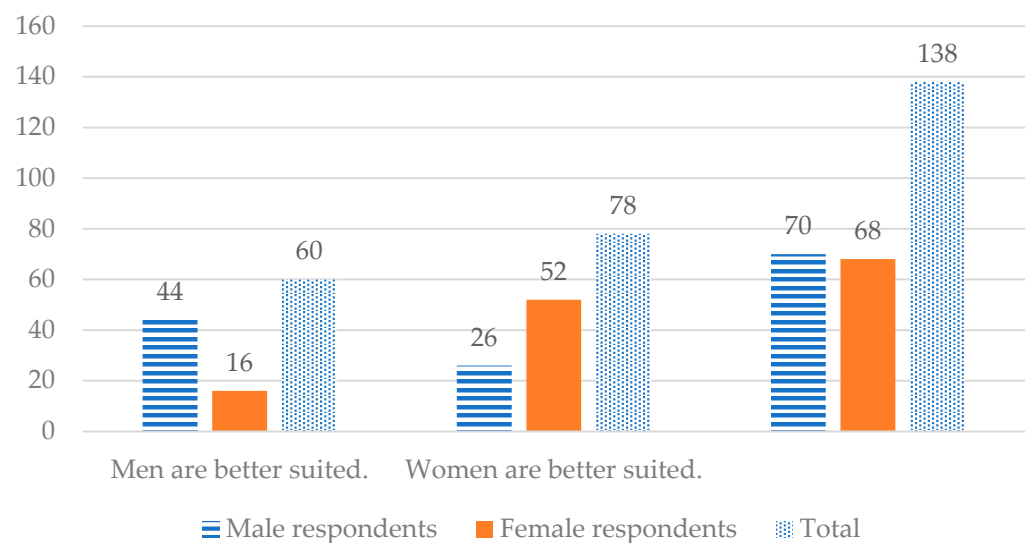
between male and female perceptions regarding whether the industry is male-dominated or female-dominated (see Figure 2 for illustration).

Table 2. Gender Equality, Gender Roles, and the Influence of Culture on Gender Equality.

| | Mean (SD) | | | t-Value |
|---|-------------|-------------|-------------|----------|
| | Combined * | Male | Female | |
| Gender Equality | | | | |
| Gender stereotyping exists in the workplaces. | 4.56 (1.78) | 4.37 (1.89) | 4.76 (1.65) | −1.31 |
| Gender equality is important in the workplaces. | 5.19 (1.79) | 4.96 (1.79) | 5.44 (1.77) | −1.70 ** |
| PR industry promotes towards gender equality. | 4.78 (1.73) | 4.64 (1.90) | 4.92 (1.52) | −1.07 |
| Government’s equality efforts have seen progress. | 4.83 (1.51) | 4.76 (1.87) | 4.91 (1.51) | −0.69 |
| Gender Roles | | | | |
| Men are under-represented. | 4.13 (1.89) | 4.29 (1.96) | 3.97 (1.81) | 1.02 |
| Men are paid more salary than women. | 4.51 (1.88) | 4.30 (1.88) | 4.74 (1.86) | −1.26 |
| Men are offered more opportunities for promotion. | 4.59 (1.69) | 4.40 (1.74) | 4.79 (1.62) | −1.31 |
| Men are assigned for more important tasks. | 4.71 (1.62) | 4.69 (1.78) | 4.74 (1.49) | −0.28 |
| Influence of Culture on Gender Equality | | | | |
| Influence gender equality in my workplace. | 4.70 (1.70) | 4.71 (1.81) | 4.68 (1.58) | 0.13 |
| Influence gender equality in the PR industry. | 4.83 (1.52) | 4.80 (1.54) | 4.86 (1.51) | −0.20 |
| Policies and practices support gender equality. | 5.01 (1.52) | 5.01 (1.62) | 5.02 (1.42) | −0.12 |
| Gender equality impacts work performance. | 4.86 (1.68) | 4.71 (1.72) | 5.02 (1.63) | −0.94 |
| Gender equality will improve in the future. | 5.10 (1.70) | 4.84 (1.85) | 5.36 (1.51) | −1.84 ** |

All items were measured by a seven-point Likert scale from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree”.

* $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.05$.



| | Male respondents | Female respondents | Total |
|--------------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|
| Men are better suited. | 44 (32%) | 16 (12%) | 60 (43%) |
| Women are better suited. | 26 (19%) | 52 (38%) | 78 (57%) |
| Total | 70 (51%) | 68 (49%) | 138 (100%) |

Figure 1. Which gender is better suited for PR jobs ($N = 138$)?

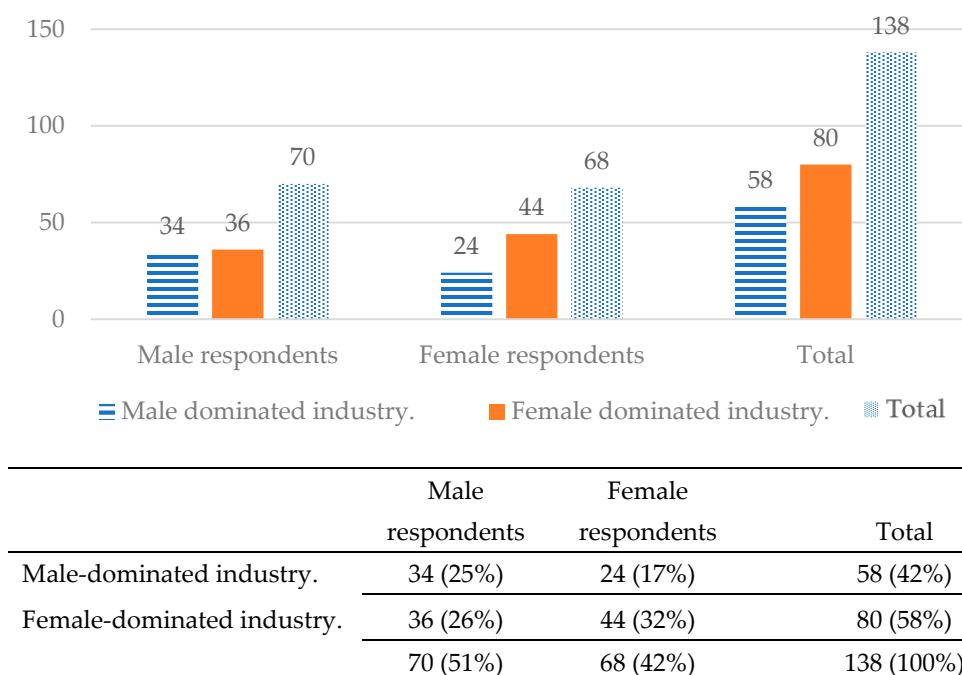


Figure 2. Which gender dominates the PR industry ($N = 138$)?

Table 2 presents the mean scores and standard deviations of responses to the survey questions related to gender equality, gender roles, and the influence of culture on gender equality in the workplace and the PR industry. All items were measured with a seven-point Likert scale from “1 = strongly disagree” to “7 = strongly agree”. The table also includes t -values, which indicate significant differences between male and female respondents. Because of the relatively small sample size, a bootstrap one-sample t -test with 3000 resample (95% confidence interval) was performed on all question items to improve the accuracy of estimates and p -values in the analysis. The results showed that all question items were significant ($p < 001$), suggesting robustness and confidence in the findings.

On gender equality perceptions, the respondents perceived that gender role stereotyping exists in the workplace ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 1.78$). Female respondents ($M = 4.76$, $SD = 1.65$) perceived gender role stereotyping to be more prevalent than male respondents ($M = 4.37$, $SD = 1.89$). On the other hand, female respondents ($M = 5.44$, $SD = 1.77$) perceive gender equality to be more essential than male respondents ($M = 4.96$, $SD = 1.79$). The respondents also believed that the PR industry promotes gender equality to some extent ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 1.73$). In contrast, the respondents were neutral about the progress of the government’s efforts towards gender equality ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.51$).

The survey results indicate that PR professionals in the UAE perceive gender equality issues to some extent. The respondents perceived that gender role stereotyping exists in the workplace, and men are offered more opportunities for promotion and higher salaries than women. However, the respondents also believed that gender equality is essential in the workplace and that the PR industry promotes gender equality to some extent.

On gender roles, the respondents perceived that men are paid more salaries than women ($M = 4.51$, $SD = 1.88$), and men are offered more opportunities for promotion ($M = 4.59$, $SD = 1.69$). The respondents were also somewhat neutral about whether men are under-represented ($M = 4.13$, $SD = 1.89$) and are assigned more critical tasks ($M = 4.71$, $SD = 1.62$).

Regarding the influence of culture on gender equality, the respondents perceived that cultural norms directly influence gender equality in the workplace ($M = 4.70$, $SD = 1.70$) and the PR industry ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.52$). The respondents believed that current PR policies and practices support gender equality ($M = 5.01$, $SD = 1.52$) and that gender equality directly

impacts work performance ($M = 4.86$, $SD = 1.68$). Finally, the respondents were optimistic that gender equality will improve in the future ($M = 5.10$, $SD = 1.70$).

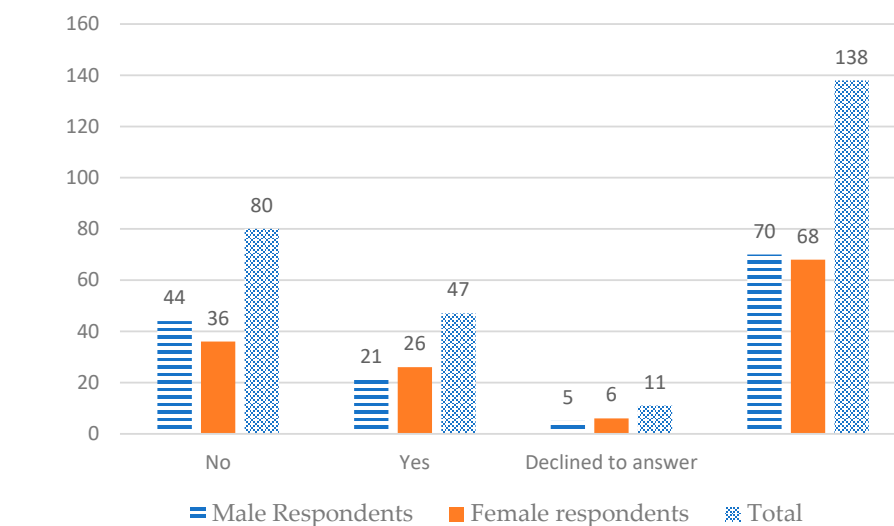
4.3. RQ2: Do Male and Female PR Practitioners Perceive Gender Equality Issues Differently?

RQ2 asked whether there would be any differences in terms of gender equality perceptions between male and female professionals. Unlike our expectations based on the literature review, the survey results indicate that male and female PR practitioners perceive gender equality issues differently, as indicated by mean differences. However, a series of t -tests showed that out of the thirteen questions, only two question items showed statistically significant differences. Specifically, female professionals perceived gender equality as more important than males did ($t = -1.70$, $p < 0.05$). Likewise, females expressed a more optimistic view about gender equality compared to their male counterparts, $t(136) = -1.84$, $p < 0.05$). Overall, the results of data analyses show that there is not much difference in gender equality perceptions among UAE PR professionals.

4.4. RQ3: To What Extent Do PR Professionals in the UAE Experience Gender Bias in the Workplace?

RQ3 aims to investigate whether PR professionals have observed gender bias in their workplace. The questions focus on whether participants have “seen” gender bias rather than asking whether they personally experienced bias to minimize the reluctance to report gender-related bias and to allow participants to provide insights into their observations of gender bias in the workplace environment. Further, in answer options, the research gave one more option: “Decline to Answer” in addition to “yes” or “no”.

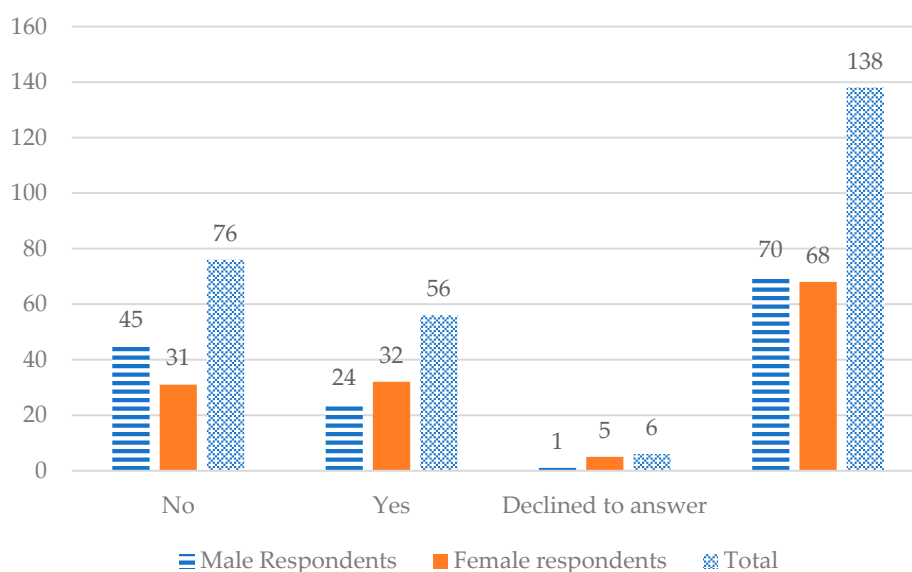
Figures 3 and 4, with tables, present the respondents’ experiences of gender bias and discrimination in their workplaces. The results show that a significant number of respondents reported having seen gender bias and discrimination in their careers.



| | | Male respondents | Female respondents | Total |
|--|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|------------|
| During your career, have you ever seen gender bias in the workplace? | No | 44 (32%) | 36 (26%) | 80 (58%) |
| | Yes | 21 (15%) | 26 (19%) | 47 (34%) |
| | Decline to answer | 5 (4%) | 6 (4%) | 11 (8%) |
| | Total | 70 (51%) | 68 (49%) | 138 (100%) |

Figure 3. During your career, have you ever seen gender bias in the workplace ($N = 138$)?

Specifically, when asked if they have ever seen gender bias in the workplace, 47 respondents answered “yes”, while 80 respondents answered “no”. Female respondents reported experiencing gender bias more than male respondents, with 26 answering “yes” compared to 21 males, and for gender discrimination, 32 answering “yes” compared to 24 males. These results suggest that gender bias and discrimination experiences may exist, as perceived by PR professionals. To further prove gender differences, chi-square tests were performed. Specifically, a chi-square test was performed to examine the relationship between gender and the observation of gender bias in the workplace. The test revealed no statistically significant association between gender and witnessing gender bias, $\chi^2(2, N = 138) = 1.40, p = 0.50$, Cramer’s $V = 0.10$. These results suggest that there is no significant difference between genders in terms of witnessing gender bias in the workplace. A chi-square test was also conducted to assess the relationship between gender and the observation of gender discrimination in the workplace. The results indicated a statistically significant association, $\chi^2(2, N = 138) = 6.36, p = 0.042$, Cramer’s $V = 0.22$. These findings suggest that there is a significant difference between genders in terms of witnessing gender discrimination in the workplace. Notably, unlike the perception questions, the two questions asked about PR professionals’ experiences. Furthermore, a relatively significant number of PR professionals (gender bias question, 11; gender stereotyping question, 6) declined to answer, suggesting that some professionals were reluctant to answer these questions, although the survey was anonymous.



| | | Male respondents | Female respondents | Total |
|--|-------------------|------------------|--------------------|-----------|
| During your career, have you ever seen gender discrimination in the workplace? | No | 45 (33%) | 31(22%) | 76(55%) |
| | Yes | 24(17%) | 32(23%) | 56(41%) |
| | Decline to answer | 1(1%) | 5(6%) | 6(4%) |
| | Total | 70(51%) | 68(49%) | 138(100%) |

Figure 4. During your career, have you ever seen gender discrimination in the workplace (N = 138)?

5. Conclusions

The results presented in this paper provided valuable data, which suggest that women in public relations face challenges related to gender sensitivity in the workplace, particularly

in the context of work–family balance. Focusing on the PR industry, the results of this study contribute to a better understanding of the status of gender sensitivity in the workplace.

The first research question of this study was aimed at understanding the perspectives of UAE PR practitioners regarding the perceived gender suitability for PR jobs. The results showed that respondents overall perceived that women are more suitable for PR jobs, although more women than men perceived so. This finding suggests a gendered perception observed in the industry. This phenomenon resonates with the existing literature, as demonstrated by [Aldoory and Toth \(2002\)](#). The prevalence of the belief that PR roles are well-suited for women underscores the potential influence of gender stereotypes and cultural norms within the field.

Results indicate that PR practitioners are aware of gender issues. Respondents conveyed a perception that the opportunities for women for promotions are far less than for men in the industry. Additionally, they expressed the belief that women are paid less than men in the field. Despite this perceived disparity, respondents expressed that gender equality is important and that the PR industry believes in the concept wholeheartedly.

The variables of gender roles, gender equality, and the influence of culture on gender equality were also studied, which showed that many of the respondents believe that stereotyping by gender may exist in the workplace in the PR industry. The female participants believed gender role stereotyping was more prominent than male participants, whereas both genders perceived that gender equality is crucial in the workplace. Respondents also expressed that they believed the PR industry promoted gender equality. The respondents seemed confident in confirming that the current PR practices and policies at their workplace are supportive of gender equality. These favorable perceptions align with the decreasing trend in gender discrimination ([Patterson et al. 2021](#)) and the prevalent inclusive atmosphere that characterizes the broader societal and professional landscape in the country. However, these results could be subject to social desirability, prompting respondents to express views that align with perceived societal norms or expectations. This recognition invites a nuanced consideration of the data, emphasizing the importance of further research to disentangle the complexities associated with social desirability in respondents' perceptions and responses on gender-related issues within the PR industry.

The respondents were neutral regarding the under-representation of men and the assignment of critical tasks to men. This neutrality may reflect a recognition that gender dynamics and biases can manifest in various ways, including instances where men may be under-represented or assigned critical tasks less frequently. The participants perceived that workplace gender equality is influenced by cultural norms, with no significant differences in the responses between male and female participants. This shared perception suggests a collective understanding among both genders that cultural norms play a substantial role in shaping the gender dynamics within the workplace. However, the male participants seemed more optimistic about the future of gender equality in the workplace than the female participants. This difference in optimism may reflect varying perspectives or experiences that individuals of different genders bring to their expectations for the future of workplace gender equality. Hence, to answer the second research question (RQ2), male and female PR practitioners do see issues of gender equality differently.

For RQ3, many of the female respondents expressed that they faced bias more than male participants, whether it was related to promotion opportunities or experiencing gender bias. UAE PR professionals do experience gender bias in the workplace to some degree, a phenomenon that has been thoroughly examined through literature reviews and the lens of equity theory. This is particularly because such stereotypical behavior exists in organizations and has also been explained through previous research ([Heilman 2012](#); [Wynn and Correll 2018](#)). In conclusion, all the research questions have been answered with empirical evidence and showcase that more attention needs to be paid to issues of gender quality in the workplace in the PR sector in the UAE.

Future studies should explore more in-depth experiences of gender bias in a qualitative study and study the gender bias in the PR industry in a different location than the UAE.

This study has some limitations. First, this study utilized a relatively small number of samples ($N = 138$) with a convenient sample method, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Further, the survey was conducted only among those who were registered with the Middle East Public Relations Association, which provided the list of their members. Thus, caution should be exercised to generalize the findings of this study. Future studies may benefit from increasing the generalizability with, for example, a larger number of samples with a probability sampling method. Second, this study did not ask participants' marital status. Married and unmarried women may develop different gender equality perceptions when gender equality issues arise in their workplace. Third, this study is limited in its scope. It examined gender equality-related perceptions with some additional experience questions. For example, this study does not address how female professionals cope with gender equality issues, especially when facing gender bias or gender discrimination issues. In fact, this study suggests that there might be some discrepancy between participants' perceptions and the actual challenges they encountered. Although there were some lower perception numbers, gender equality perceptions among the participants are not considered worrisome. Participants, in general, expected that gender equality would improve in the future. However, a relatively higher number of male and female professionals reported seeing gender bias and gender discrimination in their workplace during their careers. Future studies can incorporate additional behavioral questions, such as coping strategies, to gain a full picture of the multifaceted aspects of gender equality in the PR industry. Lastly, it is important to note that this study relied solely on self-reported responses, which may be subject to bias and may not fully capture the actual experiences of the participants. To address this limitation, future research may consider combining qualitative data collection methods, such as in-depth interviews or focus groups.

In conclusion, gender equality is a multifaceted issue intertwined with various aspects of modern society, including its economy, education, and workforce. However, it is evident that gender-related research and data remain sporadic in the UAE context. This study has sought to bridge this gap by examining how PR professionals in the UAE perceive gender equality issues within their industry. The findings from our survey offer valuable insights into the current state of gender equality perceptions among professionals. Overall, the results reflect relatively positive perceptions of gender equality within the PR industry, while some responses have raised concerns. Notably, our study reveals that there is no noticeable disparity in how male and female professionals perceive gender equality issues, showing a shared understanding of gender equality. Given the limited availability of data on gender sensitivity in the workplace in the UAE, this study represents a meaningful contribution to understanding gender sensitivity among professionals and the strategic implications for its advancement. Moving forward, the insights gained from this research can inform policies and initiatives to further promote gender sensitivity in the PR industry and beyond in the UAE.

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