

**ORIGINAL ARTICLE**

# Implementation of child protection in the UAE under Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan: A policy analysis of the children's safety framework

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## Funding Information

This research was conducted without external funding from public, commercial, or non-profit organizations.

## Abstract

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), despite operating under a royal system of government, has pursued significant advancements in children's rights. This paper employs a qualitative descriptive design to examine child protection implementation in the UAE during the leadership of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, analyzing key legal instruments, particularly Federal Law No. 3 of 2016 (Wadeema's Law), and institutional programs under the Children's Safety framework, including the Child Protection Unit, Child Protection Committee and Centre, and Child Safety Department. Using Rosenau's political behavior framework, the study analyzes how leadership personality and executive authority have shaped child protection policy. Findings indicate measurable progress in specific domains, particularly health and protection, as reflected in successive KidsRights Index editions, while persistent gaps remain in the structural conditions necessary for comprehensive realization of children's rights, most notably in the enabling environment domain. This study offers comparative insights for countries, particularly those in the Middle East, seeking to strengthen child protection policies while navigating the intersection of international human rights standards and domestic legal traditions.

## Keywords

United Arab Emirates (UAE), Child Protection, Policy Formulations, Children's Rights, Zayed Al-Nahyan.

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## 1 | INTRODUCTION

The Middle East is a region with a variety of characteristics, including a strong religious tradition that is often controversial among human rights activists, especially regarding children's rights and protection (Baihaki, 2023; Snoubar & Duman, 2017). Moreover, the region, with its vibrant dynamics and ongoing military and social conflicts, is a strong factor in the high vulnerability of children in this region to being deprived of their rights (Cerellia & Saputri, 2020; Tembo, 2024). Based on existing data, this region is an area with a high number of children forced into marriage, namely around 40 million children, which is equivalent to around 700 thousand girls each year forced into marriage in this region, with the highest rates being in Sudan and Yemen (UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2017, 2019, 2022). Furthermore, 25 million children in the region still live in conflict situations, four out of five children in every country in the region have experienced physical or psychological violence at home and/or at school, three-quarters of all children in need of humanitarian assistance are in the region and tens of thousands of children from conflict areas are controlled by armed groups (Sachdeva, 2019). However, the region has also experienced changes following the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which marked a global movement for the protection and fulfillment of children's rights, and this region is no exception (Nurjannah Abdullah & Hastira, 2023; Hastira, Abdullah, Asy'ari, & Hastira, 2024). Data released by UNICEF Middle East and North Africa (2019) also show a positive trend: more children in the region are in school than before; the child mortality rate, from 65/1,000 births in 1990, decreased to 21/1,000 births in 2019.

One of the countries in the Middle East, the UAE, is also not free from cases that violate children's rights, even though it is one of the most developed and safe countries in the region (Emirates News Agency-WAM, 2021; Faraz, Mounsef, Raza, & Willis, 2022). For example, reported cases of physical and sexual violence against children rose in 2021, with 243 cases compared to 103 in 2020. However, as Amir (2022) notes, Dubai police has attributed this increase to stronger child protection laws that have encouraged more victims and witnesses to come forward, suggesting that the rise in reported cases reflects improved detection and reporting mechanisms rather than a straightforward increase in the incidence of violence itself. Maltreatment also occurred at 33.9 percent and neglect at 12.1 percent (Shah et al., 2021). The child issues facing the UAE can be said to be related to corporal punishment laws, camel jockeys, immigrant children's rights, and girls' rights. To address these issues, the UAE has laws in place. Some of its policies include setting the legal working age, establishing schools and institutions for migrant children, and promoting human rights in its society.

However, the rate of violence against children is comparatively lower in the UAE than in several other countries in the Middle East Region, which has contributed to relatively stronger enforcement of child protection laws, though significant challenges remain (UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, 2022). One study that supports this is Aisha Al Midfa et al. article's (2019) evaluating the level of readiness for child maltreatment prevention (CMP) in the UAE. Based on the results, the UAE received high scores in terms of a positive attitude towards the importance of prevention, program implementation, stakeholders' willingness to tackle the issue, institutional support, and strong legislative and policy frameworks to support child maltreatment prevention. However, the authors also evaluated that the UAE still needs improvement in providing comprehensive scientific data of CMP efforts, adequate material resources, and improved human and technical skills. In addition, they also mentioned how invested and committed the national figures and political leaders of the UAE are to addressing the problem of child maltreatment. This commitment can be seen in the approval of the Child Protection Law, investment in education, and the building of knowledge capacity. From this research, we can see that national figures and UAE leaders have, to varying degrees, influenced the enforcement of child protection. However, the extent and consistency of this influence across different areas of children's rights remain subjects warranting closer examination.

The UAE has also ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child on January 3, 1997, as well as the optional protocol on child trafficking, prostitution, and child pornography in 2016 (Manjoo, 2022; UNHRC, 2023). It has shown that it is serious about implementing the convention, even though the UAE has requested adjustments to some

articles during its ratification. The UAE also has laws at the national level as a form of the country's responsibility to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child, namely Federal Act No. 51 of 2006 which contains the protection of children from human trafficking, Federal Act No. 3 of 2016 or known as Wadeema's Law which contains the protection of children from various kinds of neglect, exploitation, physical and psychological abuse. The UAE also launched The National Strategy for Motherhood and Childhood 2017-2021, which aims to promote and protect the rights of mothers and children, and The Strategic Plan for the Rights of Children with Disabilities 2017-2021, which aims to improve the quality of medical care and social services for children with disabilities (End Violence Against Children, 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021). We can see that the UAE's ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is one of the first steps it is taking to improve its child protection efforts across various fields, including by better investigating invisible cases that may occur.

Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan's ascension to the presidency can also be said to have encouraged increased efforts to implement children's rights. As mentioned earlier, UAE leaders play an essential role in protecting children. Zayed Al-Nahyan, who served as president from 1971 to 2004, can indeed be said to be the central figure shaping the UAE's commitment to child protection. Moreover, Ahmed and Al Amiri (2022) found that Zayed Al-Nahyan is a transformational leader. This can be seen in his charisma, inspirational qualities, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration towards his people. Under his leadership, the UAE became an economically developed country. His leadership also played an essential role in the UAE's massive development plan across various sectors, including the construction of schools, universities, hospitals, airports, and roads. Therefore, Zayed al Nahyan's leadership is one of the main factors behind the UAE's success.

The development built by Zayed Al-Nahyan's leadership certainly also extends to child protection, as the UAE recognizes that its future depends on its young generation, especially children. Therefore, it is essential to protect them. In the early days of his administration, Zayed Al-Nahyan's commitment to children's rights was evident in the new laws and institutions he established to protect children from various forms of exploitation, including the minimum age law for camel racing. Under Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, the UAE established the Child Safety Department in 2011 as one of the initiatives of the Supreme Council of Family Affairs and the continuation of the child safety campaign, which has the aim of conducting campaigns, spreading awareness about the importance of child safety and protection, and working towards achieving a society where children enjoy mental and physical health (Child Safety Department & Supreme Council for Family Affairs, 2018). The establishment of this department is also one of his serious steps in protecting children.

The Children's Safety Department includes programs from various related ministries, for example. This 'Child Protection Unit' initiative is an initiative of the Ministry of Education (MoE) that aims to protect children from all forms of harm, negligence, and abuse that they may experience at school or at home and maintain their safety concerning their physical, psychological, and educational aspects to prohibit corporal punishment in schools (UAE Ministry of Education, 2019). Furthermore, the Higher Committee for Child Protection in 2009 and the MoI's Child Protection Centre in 2011 which came to be known as the Child Protection Committee and Centre aim to play a role in developing, implementing, and adjusting initiatives and processes that aim to provide safety, security, and protection for all children living in the UAE or even those coming as visitors by playing a key role in maintaining child safety as a shared responsibility. Programs by the Ministry of Interior (MoI) include the Nedaa service to find missing children, an awareness campaign called 'Together to Prevent Child Abuse', a child protection hotline at 80051115, and the provision of child-safe transportation (U A E Ministry of Interior, 2023). In addition, the Children Safety program also includes cooperation between The UAE's Supreme Council for Motherhood & Childhood UAE, UNICEF, the Ministry of Education and the Department of Education and Knowledge in Abu Dhabi launched a guide for parents on anti-bullying which aims to help parents identify whether their child is a victim or perpetrator of bullying and what can be done to prevent it. The partnership even provides a dedicated hotline 80085 (Child Protection Unit, Ministry of Education) to report bullying incidents (End Violence Against Children, 2018; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2021).

The UAE government has taken several measures to ensure that children's rights are fulfilled and protected. One of them is the Children's Safety program, which has had a significant impact on child protection policies in the UAE. Therefore, the author is interested in providing further insight into the implementation of child protection in the United Arab Emirates during the leadership of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, especially following the issuance of the Children's Safety program and Khalifa Zayed Al Nahyan's leadership in addressing child protection. Based on the previous studies and initiatives discussed above, there remains a need for a more comprehensive examination of child protection implementation in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), particularly concerning the Children's Safety framework. Existing studies have predominantly focused on child protection policies and legal frameworks in general, while limited scholarly attention has been devoted to evaluating the effectiveness and outcomes of Children's Safety initiatives and examining the role of national leadership in shaping their implementation.

The novelty of this study lies in its integrated analysis of the implementation of Children's Safety initiatives and the leadership role of Khalifah bin Zayed Al Nahyan in advancing child protection in the UAE. Unlike previous studies that have tended to examine child protection from legal or policy perspectives, this study combines an assessment of program effectiveness and implementation outcomes with an analysis of leadership dynamics, thereby providing a more comprehensive understanding of child protection governance in the UAE. Accordingly, this study seeks to analyze the implementation of child protection through Children's Safety in the UAE by assessing the efficiency and outcomes of existing initiatives. Furthermore, it aims to investigate the role of Khalifah bin Zayed Al Nahyan's leadership in advancing and strengthening child protection efforts within the country.

In light of these objectives, this article addresses the following research questions: (1) How has child protection been implemented through Children's Safety under the leadership of Khalifah bin Zayed Al Nahyan? and (2) In what ways has Khalifah bin Zayed Al Nahyan's leadership contributed to the implementation of child protection in the UAE?

## 2 | METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design to provide a comprehensive overview of the implementation of child protection in the UAE under the leadership of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Data were gathered through a library research approach, drawing on academic journals, government publications, international organization reports, legal documents, and credible online sources. Source selection followed purposive criteria, with materials included if they were directly relevant to child protection policy in the UAE and published between 2004 and 2023. This timeframe corresponds to Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's tenure as president of the UAE, from his assumption of office in 2004 to 2023, to capture the most recent assessments of policies enacted under his administration. Sources were retrieved through academic databases and repositories selected for their breadth of coverage of political science, international relations, and human rights literature, as well as for their accessibility to verified government and institutional publications. Materials that were unverifiable, outside the thematic scope, or irrelevant to the research questions were excluded.

Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through thematic synthesis, organizing findings around three analytical threads: (1) the state of child protection before and after the Children's Safety program; (2) the fulfillment of the four CRC principles; and (3) the role of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's leadership as analyzed through Rosenau's policy formulation framework. This approach ensures that data drawn from diverse sources is not merely catalogued but interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework, addressing both the descriptive and explanatory dimensions of the research questions. Data analysis was conducted qualitatively through thematic synthesis, organizing findings around three analytical threads: (1) the state of child protection before and after the Children's Safety program; (2) the fulfillment of the four CRC principles; and (3) the role of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's leadership as analyzed through Rosenau's policy formulation framework. This approach ensures that empirical data

drawn from diverse sources are not merely catalogued but are interpreted in relation to the study's conceptual framework, addressing both the descriptive and explanatory dimensions of the research questions.

In assessing the success of the UAE as a country that continues to apply the royal system in its government which is far from a democratic system, but has a relatively high progressive on the issue of human rights, especially children's rights, the UAE is a much better country than other Arab countries, so using the concept of child protection to see what rights have been fulfilled by the UAE government. Child protection involves various activities to ensure children's safety and to enable them to exercise their rights in accordance with their dignity as human beings (Cerellia & Saputri, 2020). At the international level, the concept of child protection is closely associated with the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, which entered into force on September 2, 1990. It stipulates that all individuals under 18 years of age are entitled to the protection of their rights (Kilkelly & Pleysier, 2023). This right includes children's protection from discrimination, physical, mental, sexual violence, and neglect in the family, school, community, and other environments. This right also protects children in conflict with the law, in particular, including the right to be treated in a manner that promotes a sense of self-worth and re-acceptance in society, as well as respect for the human rights and fundamental freedoms of others. In addition, children also have the right to be protected from stigmatization, child victims of drugs, and pornography. In ensuring the ongoing protection and fulfillment of children's rights, the Convention on the Right of the Child (CRC) has also stipulated that there are 4 basic principles for each country to be able to organize child protection, namely the Principle of non-discrimination, the Principle of Best Interests of the Child, the Principle of the Right to Life, Survival and Development, and the Principle of Respect for the views of the Child.

The UAE's success in fulfilling children's rights can be seen using the concept of policy formulation. In policy formulation itself, many actors are involved, recognizing that policies, especially those enacted by the state, will affect every individual in society. James N. Rosenau, in *Comparing Foreign Policy: Theories, Findings, and Methods*, distinguishes two types of actors involved in policy formulation: Internal Actors, which are directly involved. Internal actors can be both state and non-state. State actors certainly have the right to formulate official policies within their authority. Meanwhile, non-state internal actors play a role in providing information, applying pressure, and influencing the policies that are formed. Examples of non-state actors include political parties, the mass media, influential figures in society, experts, and other important groups. Also, External Actors are actors outside the country, such as other countries, international organizations, and conditions or phenomena that occur in the international world. In addition to the actors who influence a policy, Rosenau also sees five factors of political behavior that influence policy formulation, especially foreign policy, which can be used in the analysis, namely the personality variables of decision makers, the role and extent of decision-making power, government bureaucratic variables, community variables, and international system variables (Dehnavi, Rahbar, Bakhshi, & Mohammadzadeh, 2021).

This article will put more emphasis on the internal actors of the state, namely the UAE in formulating child protection policies, especially on the leadership factors of the President and Prime Minister of the UAE and also external actors, namely international agreements and cooperation that the UAE participates in relating to the fulfillment of children's rights and protection as well as international organizations that play a role in influencing the emergence of UAE national policies on child protection. In addition, using Rosenau's five factors of political behavior, we will focus on how Khalifah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, as a policy actor in the UAE, is shaped by the first and second variables.

### 3 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### 3.1 | Child Protection before Children's Safety

Table 1 shows the timeline of key child protection laws and programs in the UAE. The issue of child protection and the fulfillment of children's rights in the United Arab Emirates is an issue that has only recently received significant attention after the Wadeema incident, an eight-year-old girl who was tortured to death by her father and his

girlfriend and found buried in the Sharjah desert in 2012 (The National, 2016). Although Children's Safety existed in 2011, it was only strengthened administratively in the year following the Wadeema incident, which also triggered the issuance of Federal Act No. 3 of 2016, known as Wadeema's Law, which provides for the protection of children from neglect, exploitation, and physical and psychological abuse (End Violence Against Children, 2018). Previously, in the UAE, a country with a legal system closely aligned with Islamic law, child protection issues were very rigid before the establishment of Children's Safety (Issa, 2013; Sachdeva, 2019). The rights of children belonged entirely to parents, and parents were allowed to do anything to discipline their children. On the other hand, the UAE also became the first country in the Middle East to sign the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which was then effectively implemented (Khodeir & Al Safar, 2017; Rakhimova, Khamzina, Kalkayeva, Buribayev, & Sailibayeva, 2024; Saarnik, Sindi, & Toros, 2024). Even before the existence of Children's Safety, cases related to violence against children became a disgrace, and children did not have access to report it (Murshed, 2020). Hence, it seemed that violations of children's rights were taboo to be reported in legal channels. Furthermore, before the Children's Safety program, the UAE placed greater emphasis on the family's right to provide guidance. This is evident in The Personal Status Law No. 28 of 2005, which regulates all matters related to the management of minors' funds, marriage, and divorce (Rakhimova et al., 2024).

Subsequently, despite the UAE's lack of attention to child protection during the issuance of the Wadeema Law and the Children's Safety Program. The UAE, which was established on December 2, 1971, with its seven federated emirates, still makes children's and non-citizens' rights a sensitive issue, especially regarding harassment and access to education for girls (Ahmad, Fildes, Logan, & Koppel, 2022). The absence of the Children's Safety Program gave less attention to child protection than it does today, although the problems of children in the UAE remain. These issues include the UAE's stringent citizenship eligibility requirements, which require paternity testing and allow only children born to UAE fathers to acquire citizenship at birth. Emirati women married to foreigners are not entitled to pass on their citizenship. When such children are barred from acquiring their father's nationality, they find themselves stateless and therefore vulnerable to many rights violations. This is not in line with the principles of child protection explained above, namely non-discrimination, survival, and development.

**Table 1.** Timeline of key child protection laws and programs in the UAE.

Year	Law/Program	Key Provision
1997	Ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child	Formal commitment to international child rights standards
2005	Federal Act No. 51 of 2006	Protection of children from human trafficking
2009	Higher Committee for Child Protection	Oversight body for child protection initiatives
2011	Child Safety Department / Child Protection Center	Implementation of child safety campaigns and programs
2016	Federal Act No. 3 of 2016 (Wadeema's Law)	Protection from neglect, exploitation, and abuse
2017	National Strategy for Motherhood and Childhood 2017-2021	Comprehensive framework for maternal and child rights
2019	Child Protection Unit (Ministry of Education)	School-based child protection and anti-corporal punishment

Sources: Compiled by the Authors, 2026.

Furthermore, at the legal level, corporal punishment remained permissible both in schools and within the family before the strengthening of the Children's Safety framework. This practice clearly conflicts with the principle of the best interests of the child, as research consistently shows that corporal punishment does not produce the disciplinary outcomes adults intend and instead tends to generate defiance and psychological harm in children. Moreover, issues related to child trafficking and child labor continued to pose challenges in this period. However, in 2005, the UAE provided support to assist and repatriate child victims of human trafficking with the support of

UNICEF. The UAE legal system also recognizes flogging for children over the age of 16 for offenses including murder, assault, and battery, as well as violations related to alcohol, theft, or illicit sexual relations outside of marriage. Sharia principles further permit corporal punishment of young children, with the age of criminal responsibility set at 7 years old, below the threshold recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child. Of particular concern, the UAE continues to apply the death penalty, including for children (Humanium, 2019). These issues represent clear violations of the fundamental principles of child protection, particularly the right to life and the right to respect for children's views.

### 3.2 | Child Protection after Children's Safety

Children's Safety is one part of the UAE's policies on justice, protection, and law. Through Children's Safety, the UAE implements laws to protect and empower children by providing education, health, and other facilities. Here are some of the programs, institutions, or policies that fall under the umbrella of Children's Safety, such as Child Protection Unit, Child Protection Committee and Center, Nedaa Service, and the Child Safety Department (Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2022).

The Child Protection Unit is an initiative of the UAE Ministry of Education intended to protect students from all forms of violence, negligence, and abuse that they may experience at school or home. It also aims to protect children physically, psychologically, and educationally. The duties of the Child Protection Unit are to assess reported cases of child rights violations and take preventive measures, create intervention plans, provide consultation and support for families and children affected by harm, violence, or abuse, and provide therapy, including rehabilitation, psychosocial, social and health with the competent authorities and conduct social research with a focus on children's environment. The Child Protection Unit categorizes four levels of child abuse that are used to assess before following up on reports (UAE Ministry of Education, 2019).

In addition to the Ministry of Education, the UAE Ministry of Interior established the Child Protection Committee in 2009, followed by the Child Protection Center in 2011. Both of these are intended to develop, implement, and adjust initiatives and measures to ensure the safety, security, and protection of all children in the UAE, including migrants and immigrants. The Ministry of Interior itself outlines fourteen dimensions of child protection, namely Investigation of child abuse; Prevention of neglect, physical, emotional and sexual abuse, and exploitation; Protection of children on the streets and transportation; Protection of children in buildings; Protection of children in crises and disasters; Protection of children in public places; Protection of children from technological risks and threats; Protection against known bad actors; Child protection in school and education; Child protection against bullying and peer harassment; Child protection in troubled families; Child protection in sports; Protection from human trafficking; and Prevention of exploitation of child labor (U A E Ministry of Interior, 2023).

Then, Children's Safety also offers the Nedaa Service, which is arguably the first breakthrough in the Middle East, using social media as its primary tool. Through Nedaa Services, missing children are expected to be found quickly via alerts shared on Facebook to people in certain areas. The area given a warning is, of course, the place where the child concerned is missing. In 2011, the Child Safety Department (CSD) was established under the auspices of the Supreme Council for Family Affairs (SCFA). The department aims to raise public awareness of the importance of child protection with the vision of 'A conscious society and a safe child'. This goal is achieved through the development of national policies, the establishment of initiatives and activities, and cooperation with competent partners. CSD addresses a wide range of child protection issues by creating and sharing educational videos and messages through social media, organizing charity and humanitarian events, conducting surveys and research, and participating in local and international agreements (Child Safety Department, 2017).

In addition to the above institutions, Children's Safety also holds programs that support child protection. For example, they held campaigns to raise awareness. One of the child protection campaigns is 'Together to Prevent Child Abuse'. This was a campaign initiated by the UAE Ministry of Interior as part of the Higher Committee for Child Protection's annual initiative (The National, 2015). The campaign is conducted through seminars, materials, and

media campaigns on various forms of child abuse and its prevention. This campaign is, of course, also conducted to raise public awareness, especially by educating parents and teachers.

Initiatives to ensure safe transportation for students are also being taken, such as the Roads and Transportation Authority (RTA) in Dubai banning schools from using mini buses (buses less than 6.7 m in length) as vehicles to transport students in 2016, and the Dubai Taxi Corporation (DTA) deploying bright buses for students, especially in cooperating schools (Gokulan, 2016). These bright buses feature advanced technology, such as surveillance cameras on board and a satellite-tracking system that informs parents when the bus is in use, and are environmentally friendly (Emirates News Agency-WAM, 2021; Emirates News Agency, 2016).

The UAE Ministry of Education also participated by holding several programs. For example, they decided to ban corporal punishment to foster mutual respect between teachers and students and promote modern educational methods aligned with UAE traditions and culture. Moreover, they issued a Guide for Parents on Anti-Bullying together with the Ministry of Education and Knowledge, UNICEF, and the High Council for Mothers and Children. This guide enables parents to monitor and identify possible victims of bullying, bullies, and how to stop it.

The UAE has also enacted Wadeema's Law or Federal Law No. 3 of 2016 to ensure the fulfillment of children's rights and protection. This law protects children's social rights and stipulates the provision of a good standard of living that ensures their proper physical, mental, and psychological growth. Promulgated by Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Wadeema's Law stipulates that children must have the right to be given a good name and birth certificate, regulations regarding child labor, requiring parents or guardians to provide protection and health, banning the sale of tobacco to minors and smoking in public spaces including transportation that is also used by children, access to education for all children without discrimination and the establishment of child protection shelters (Khodeir & Al Safar, 2017).

In addressing the issue of child trafficking, the UAE has established several policies and programs to combat human trafficking through a comprehensive action plan, including prevention of human trafficking, prosecution and punishment of traffickers, protection of survivors, and international cooperation. The UAE's commitment to combating human trafficking at the local level and enhancing its international role is reflected in Federal Law No. 1 of 2015, an amendment to Federal Law No. 51 of 2006. One of the things regulated in this law is, of course, the imposition of sanctions on perpetrators of human trafficking; it also states that sanctions or fines apply to witnesses who are aware of such crimes but do not report them. In addition, several organizations help in dealing with this issue, such as Ewa'a Shelters for women and children who are victims of human trafficking and sexual exploitation and the Dubai Foundation for Women and Children (DFWAC) which was established in 2007 is a shelter for women and children who are victims of domestic violence, abuse, and human trafficking in the UAE by also providing protection and assistance services in accordance with international provisions on human rights (H Elhais, 2023; Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, 2022).

Based on some of the policies, initiatives, or programs above, we can see the UAE's commitment to upholding children's rights and protection, which can be analyzed through the fulfillment of the four basic principles of the implementation of child protection by the state in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). The first is the principle of non-discrimination. In this case, the UAE has been faced with the issue of discrimination against non-Muslim non-Communities, so that they are limited in obtaining fundamental rights, especially health and education. In addition, the issue of discrimination is also experienced by children of non-UAE descent in obtaining citizenship, and the issue of discrimination in education for women and children of migrants (foreigners) (Humanium, 2019). The existing policies in the UAE cover all children, including migrants and immigrants, in line with establishing the Child Protection Committee and Center.

Regarding education, Wadeema's Law emphasizes that every child has the right to education and that the state must provide equal opportunities for children without discrimination. Another is the principle of the best interests of the child. In implementing child protection measures, the UAE and its institutions establish programs and policies to advance children's welfare. However, the state and its institutions are expected to ensure that not only the goals but also the means of implementation do not harm children, with children's interests as the primary consideration.

The fulfillment of this principle by the UAE can be seen in the categorization of four levels of child abuse by the Child Protection Unit, which allows responses to reported cases to be appropriately calibrated. In addition, the prohibition of corporal punishment in schools represents a meaningful step toward fulfilling this principle, as corporal punishment is not conducive to healthy child development. However, it is important to note that this prohibition applies only within the school setting. Under UAE personal status law and Sharia-influenced family law, parental discretion in disciplining children at home retains a degree of legal protection, meaning that the ban on corporal punishment has not been extended comprehensively to the family context. This distinction limits the scope of the reform and represents an area where the principle of the best interests of the child remains incompletely realized. In line with the principles of the right to life, survival, and development, we can examine the policies and programs implemented by the UAE to uphold children's rights and protect them across various fields. Starting from health, education, transportation, to human trafficking, the UAE strives to ensure that children have a standard of living with access to health and education, feel safe wherever they are, including in transportation and public spaces, and are protected from human trafficking and exploitation.

In the context of respecting the opinion of the child. Article 12 of the Child Protection Law (Wadeema's Law) states that children also have the right to freely express their opinions within their age and maturity, in line with the rules, public morals, and laws of the country. The following article mentions the prohibition on harming children's honor or reputation (Hassan Elhais, 2023). From these two articles in the law enacted by the UAE, we can see how they aim to respect children's opinions and will within limits that do not violate prevailing norms, as one of the fundamental rights that must be realized.

Despite these achievements, the implementation of child protection in the UAE continues to face important structural limitations. While the state has established an extensive legal and institutional framework, several child rights concerns remain unresolved. One of the most significant challenges relates to citizenship and nationality rights, where children born to Emirati mothers and foreign fathers may face legal and administrative disadvantages compared to children of Emirati fathers. In addition, opportunities for meaningful child participation in public decision-making remain limited. Child protection policies in the UAE are largely designed and implemented through a state-centered approach, leaving relatively little space for independent civil society organizations to contribute to policy monitoring and evaluation. These conditions suggest that the success of child protection in the UAE has been driven primarily by government commitment rather than by a comprehensive rights-based governance structure.

The UAE's implementation of measures to uphold and protect children's rights can be considered relatively successful in specific domains, as evidenced by its performance in the KidsRights Index (Table 2). This initiative ranks countries based on how well children's rights are respected and how committed countries are to improving them. In its measurement, the KidsRights Index uses five domains, namely (1) Right to Life; (2) Right to Health; (3) Right to Education; (4) Right to Protection; and (5) Enabling Environment for Child Rights. Based on the 2022 edition, the UAE ranked 76th out of 185 countries overall, with domain scores of 0.915 in Life, 1.000 in Health, 0.775 in Education, 0.930 in Protection, and 0.357 in the Enabling Environment (KidsRights Foundation, 2022). In the 2023 edition, the UAE improved to 72nd out of 193 countries, before declining to 81st out of 194 countries in 2024 (KidsRights Foundation, 2023, 2024, 2025). These fluctuations reflect the multi-dimensional nature of children's rights performance. Domain-specific scores across editions reveal a more nuanced picture: the UAE consistently achieves near-perfect scores in Health, placing it among the top performers globally in that domain, and maintains

strong scores in Protection and Life. However, the Enabling Environment domain, which assesses structural conditions for realizing children's rights, including non-discrimination legislation, child participation mechanisms, and state-civil society cooperation, represents a persistent area of weakness, with the UAE scoring 0.357 consistently across 2022 and 2023, before declining further to 0.286 in 2024. This suggests that while the UAE has made substantial progress in delivering health and protection outcomes for children, the structural and institutional conditions necessary to sustain long-term children's rights commitments remain underdeveloped.

**Table 2.** UAE KidsRights index domain scores.

Domain	Score		
	2022	2023	2024
Life	0.915	0.914	0.912
Health	1.00	1.000	0.997
Education	0.775	0.793	0.793
Protection	0.930	0.930	0.930
Enabling Environment	0.357	0.357	0.286
<b>Overall Score</b>	<b>0.749</b>	<b>0.752</b>	<b>0.718</b>
<b>Overall Rank</b>	<b>76<sup>th</sup> / 185</b>	<b>72<sup>nd</sup> / 193</b>	<b>81<sup>st</sup> / 194</b>

Sources: KidsRights Foundation, 2022, 2023, 2024, 2025.

The relatively low performance of the UAE in the Enabling Environment domain deserves particular attention. Unlike the domains of health, education, and protection, which are largely dependent on state investment and service delivery, the Enabling Environment dimension evaluates broader institutional conditions such as non-discrimination guarantees, civic participation, accountability mechanisms, and the engagement of civil society organizations. The UAE's consistently low score in this domain indicates that improvements in child welfare outcomes have not been matched by equivalent progress in participatory governance structures. This finding suggests that child protection in the UAE remains predominantly state-driven and top-down in nature. While this model has produced tangible outcomes in several sectors, its long-term sustainability may depend on strengthening institutional accountability, public participation, and independent oversight mechanisms related to children's rights.

In addition to the KidsRights Index, a survey was also conducted by Which School Advisor (WSA) through the Happiness Survey. Through this survey, WSA concluded that, since 2014, the UAE has become an increasingly attractive destination for living and raising children. As evidenced by the 2021 survey, 26% of respondents cited their children's quality of life as their main reason for settling in the UAE. In fact, there was a decrease in parents' concerns about their children's success in living and growing up in the UAE, with the three most common reasons being that children can develop an openness to other cultures, are more able to follow their desires, and have better-quality education. To support these results, a survey comparing education standards in the UAE and other countries was also conducted with respondents from other countries. In 2021, 36.7% of respondents said the quality of education in the UAE is much better than in their home countries. This figure continues to rise from only 11.37% in 2014 (Westly, 2022).

### 3.3 | The Influence of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan's Leadership on the Implementation of Child Protection in the UAE

The United Arab Emirates is a federal system in which the Supreme Council of Rulers elects the president, who serves as the highest policy-making body. This body has legislative and executive powers, including the power to plan and ratify federal laws, and to approve the president's proposed prime minister. It is the prime minister who later forms

the cabinet to oversee the development and implementation of federal policies (The Official Portal of the UAE Government, 2024; UAE Ministry of Interior, 2015).

Based on that explanation, the UAE experienced significant improvements and developments under the rule of Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed bin Sultan Al-Nahyan, the UAE's second president, who served from 2004 to 2022. Sheikh Khalifa rose to the presidency after his father, Sheikh Zayed. As president, Sheikh Khalifa certainly influences policymaking. This influence can be analyzed through the theories in policy formulation by James N. Rosenau.

In his theory, Rosenau divides the actors involved in policy formulation into internal and external (Dehboneh & Parsa, 2021). Looking at Sheikh Khalifa, he is, of course, categorized as an internal state actor because he is the president, part of the government, and holds authority. This is clarified in the UAE's federal authority order, which comprises the Federal Supreme Council, the President and Vice President, the Cabinet, the Federal National Council, and the Federal Judicial Authority (Alshehhi & Rosman, 2022). From this order, we can see that, in the formulation of policies, the president will undoubtedly be involved; moreover, he is the one who proposes the prime minister and his cabinet, so that, indirectly, the competence of other policy makers is rooted in the election. Furthermore, we can analyze Sheikh Khalifah's role in the formation and implementation of child protection policies using two of the five variables that influence Rosenau's policy decisions. The first variable is the decision-maker's personality. In this case, Sheikh Khalifa's personality may influence his views when approving or proposing policies. Secondly, the role of Sheikh Khalifa will be clearer in how he acts as president and the breadth of power he has to make decisions.

From a young age, Sheikh Khalifah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan had acquired political knowledge and even entered government service, being appointed representative of the Abu Dhabi ruler in the Eastern Province in 1966 at only 18 years old. This career continued as Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi in 1969, Prime Minister of Abu Dhabi and Minister of Defense and Finance in 1971, then Deputy Prime Minister in the second UAE Federal cabinet in 1974, Deputy Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces in 1976, and finally President of the UAE and ruler of Abu Dhabi in 2004. From here, we can see that Sheikh Khalifah always accompanied his father when he became President and even sharpened his political skills while studying at the Public Majlis, the best school of political leadership in his time. Sheikh Khalifah was greatly influenced by his father, who was dedicated to bringing prosperity, maintaining security and unity, caring for the environment, and preserving his people's culture. Sheikh Khalifah thus views a leader as one who is concerned with his people's welfare (Hassan Elhais, 2023).

Since the beginning of his leadership, Sheikh Khalifa has pursued a strategic plan for the UAE to achieve balanced, sustainable development and ensure national welfare. It can be said that Sheikh Khalifa played an essential role in developing Abu Dhabi into the modern city it is today. His re-election in 2009 to the presidency demonstrated his effective leadership, so in his second term, he is also committed to continuing the implementation of his ambitious strategies in political, administrative, economic, social, and cultural development. On the issue of children, Sheikh Khalifah's dedication is evidenced by the Khalifah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan Foundation, which focuses on improving health and education at all levels, and the Khalifa Award for Education, which aims to promote education and encourage educators to improve more innovative educational practices (U A E Government, 2022). Sheikh Khalifah was also the one who issued the Child Rights Law, namely Federal Law No. 3 of 2016, also known as Wadeema's Law, mentioned earlier. Thus, it is not surprising that the enforcement of children's rights and protection in the UAE under the leadership of Sheikh Khalifah is among the concerns he has addressed, as we can see that he is dedicated to the welfare of his people, including children.

Meanwhile, in his role as president, of course, people have expectations of policies that prioritize the welfare of the people. Moreover, as president, Sheikh Khalifa has the power to determine policy. This is clearly seen in the powers of the President of the UAE, one of which is to sign and issue laws, decrees, and decisions passed by the Supreme Council. Therefore, for a policy to be implemented, it must be approved by the president. Within his powers, the UAE President also has the right to supervise the implementation of federal laws, decrees, and decisions through the cabinet and competent ministers. Thus, in the formulation of policies, including those on child rights

and protection, the president's role and power extend beyond approval to evaluation, which helps determine future policies.

#### 4 | CONCLUSION

The UAE has enacted significant legislative and institutional measures to strengthen children's rights, most notably through Wadeema's Law (Federal Law No. 3 of 2016) and the Children's Safety framework, which collectively address child protection across health, education, protection from trafficking, and access to justice. The country's efforts broadly align with the four core principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: non-discrimination, the best interests of the child, the right to life and development, and respect for the views of the child, though implementation has been uneven across these principles. Performance across successive KidsRights Index editions reflects this unevenness: the UAE demonstrates consistently strong outcomes in health and protection domains, while the enabling environment domain, which measures the structural and institutional conditions for children's rights, has shown a declining trend, scoring 0.357 in both 2022 and 2023 before falling to 0.286 in 2024. This pattern suggests that while the UAE has achieved meaningful progress in delivering child protection outcomes, the systemic conditions necessary to sustain and deepen those gains remain underdeveloped.

The leadership of Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan played a demonstrable role in this progress, particularly through the promulgation of key legislation and the establishment of child protection institutions, consistent with the first and second variables of Rosenau's political behavior framework. However, the persistence of structural gaps, particularly the limited enabling environment for children's rights and the continued ambiguity around corporal punishment in the family context, points to areas where policy commitment has not yet translated into comprehensive institutional reform. The findings further demonstrate that the UAE's child protection framework reflects a broader pattern of governance in which policy effectiveness is closely linked to executive leadership and state capacity. Although this approach has generated significant achievements in child welfare and protection, it also creates dependence on centralized political commitment. Consequently, future reforms should focus not only on expanding legal protections but also on strengthening institutional participation, transparency, and accountability mechanisms that can sustain child rights protection beyond individual leadership periods. Future research should move beyond descriptive assessment to evaluate the measurable impact of specific programs, examine implementation gaps at the subnational level, and assess the extent to which the UAE's child protection framework has been internalized beyond formal compliance with international obligations.

#### Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to all individuals and institutions that contributed to the completion of this research. Special appreciation is extended to academic colleagues in the International Relations Study Program, Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta.

#### Disclosure Statement

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this article. This research was conducted independently without any financial, commercial, or institutional influence that could affect the objectivity of the analysis, interpretation of findings, or conclusions presented in this study.

#### Data Availability Statement

The data supporting the findings of this study were obtained from publicly available secondary sources, including government publications, international organization reports, policy documents, and peer-reviewed academic literature. All materials used in this research are cited in the reference list and can be accessed through official

websites, institutional repositories, and academic databases. No primary data were collected for the purpose of this study.

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