Series: The Person in Five Circles

The Family at the Heart of Society: From Legal Text to Everyday Stability

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Introduction

On 6 November 2025, UAE President His Highness Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan directed that 2026 be the "Year of the Family", in support of the National Family Growth Agenda 2031. A federal Ministry of Family had already been created in December 2024. As the year draws to a close, a plain question is worth asking: what does "protecting the family" mean in legal terms, and how does that protection move from constitutions and treaties into the daily life of a household?

The family in international law

International instruments do not treat the family as a purely private matter. They treat it as an institution with a claim on society and the state. Article 16(3) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) states:

> "The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State."

The same principle appears in Article 23 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and in Article 10 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which calls for "the widest possible protection and assistance" to the family. Regionally, Article 33 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights describes the family as the natural and fundamental unit of society, and the preamble of the Convention on the Rights of the Child presents it as the natural environment for the growth of its members, particularly children. Taken together, these texts make protection a positive duty: the state must not only refrain from harming families but also help them become stronger.

The family in the UAE Constitution and legislation

The UAE Constitution places the family first among the country's social foundations. Article 15 provides that the family is the basis of society, founded on religion, morality and love of the homeland, and that the law shall secure its existence, safeguard it and protect it from deviation. Article 16 entrusts society with the care of childhood and motherhood and the protection of minors and others unable to look after themselves.

In legislation, Federal Decree-Law No. 41 of 2024 on Personal Status governs family relations from engagement and marriage to maintenance and custody, and in many disputes it puts family guidance and reconciliation ahead of litigation. The Child Rights Law (Wadeema), Federal Law No. 3 of 2016, affirms that the natural family is the first and best environment for raising a child. The approach is consistent: UAE law regulates rights and duties, but it prefers solutions that preserve family ties over those that sever them.

Between family privacy and the duty to protect

Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights protects privacy, family and home from arbitrary interference, a principle that preserves a family's lawful autonomy and guards it against unjustified intrusion. Privacy, however, is not absolute immunity for what happens behind closed doors: violence, serious neglect, or denying a family member a basic right such as education or physical and psychological safety. In such cases, intervention by the competent authorities protects the family and its most vulnerable members rather than violating it. This is why UAE law includes specific legislation on protection from domestic violence, alongside the Wadeema law on child protection.

One distinction follows. Family reconciliation is a genuine value, but it must never become pressure on a person who has been harmed to stay silent. Where harm has occurred, safety and accountability come before the wish to close the matter.

The Year of the Family: from slogan to policy

The Year of the Family was more than a symbolic occasion. A national task force of more than twenty federal and local entities was formed around three tracks: policies and programmes, behavioural interventions, and reproductive health. In October 2025 the Ministry of Family presented its 2025–2027 strategy, including initiatives to ease financial pressure on young people, encourage marriage and prepare individuals for family life.

These efforts should be judged by their effect on families, not by the number of initiatives. Has balancing work and home become easier? Do newly married couples find guidance before disagreements harden? Do services reach the families least able to ask for them?

Four pillars of everyday stability

The law protects the frame; what happens inside it is shaped by family members themselves. The following are social practices that recur in family-counselling literature, not legal obligations. Their value is that they turn protection from a text into a daily habit:

- **Protected time and listening:** a fixed weekly slot free of screens and work, in which every member is heard, especially children and older persons, and the reasons for decisions affecting them are explained.
- **Managing conflict rather than denying it:** disagreement is normal; the risk lies in how it is handled. Once it turns into humiliation or threats, it is no longer an ordinary disagreement. Seeking family counselling early is a sign of maturity, not weakness.
- **Shared responsibility:** a clear and fair division of household and care tasks between spouses, revisited as circumstances change.
- **Bridges between generations:** grandparents′ presence in grandchildren′s lives gives a family memory, values and emotional support.

Conclusion

International instruments, the Constitution and UAE legislation all place the family in a position that deserves protection, and the Year of the Family set out to turn that position into policy. Real protection, however, is complete only when what the state provides meets what family members build: time that is given, conflict that is managed and responsibility that is shared. A strong family is not created by law, but it needs the law to guard it.

Sources

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4. UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989, Preamble.
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