



The rise of the untapped national talent pool:

Inspirational women take the lead



Breaking the glass ceiling has been a challenge for women around the globe, for societal standards and legislative frameworks have hindered a woman's ability to thrive and prosper in decision-making and leadership spaces. The once alien notion of gender balance is being prioritized in the political and social agendas of the Arab world, with the UAE being among the first countries to take major legislative decisions towards integrating national women in leadership and non-conforming gender roles across the private and public sectors.

This article will focus on the UAE and KSA, as both are high growth markets and have had significant impacts on gender balance and reformative action in the region. The success stories of multiple Emirati and Saudi women are contributing to the change and growth of various sectors and industries, in return influencing other women to step forward and thrive with confidence within their careers. National women are breaking stereotypes and are now acknowledged to positively impact nations' economic growth.¹ The scope of this article will encompass the legislative impact in societal reforms when making equality an integral part of the national agenda and transition into discussing its effect on inspirational leadership in different sectors. To ensure the continuity of women empowerment and inclusion, organizations across industries must take the necessary steps to empower and enhance the attraction of talented national women and help facilitate their career growth and personal development. Organizations are to adopt a transformative approach that taps into the needs of national females, while most importantly adopting and integrating societal values within the values of the organization.

Legislative impact

To begin, the legislative impact has been colossal; first in the UAE, and recently in the KSA. The influence of governmental reform has been favorable to social change in the GCC region, where the public sector

regulations influence the private sector. Laws in the UAE have been enforced to ensure women have equal rights to economic resources, access to ownership and control over property, inheritance, and financial rights.²

As per the late H. H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, a law was passed to enforce a 50% seat occupation by women in the Federal National Council's (FNC).³ Similarly, regulatory requirements have been set to ensure the presence of at least one female board member on each listed company.⁴ That is a great step for the UAE considering that the progress at a global level is still considered slow with 19.7% of board seats held by women.⁵ To ensure and continue enhancing the leading role of Emirati women in the development of the country, the UAE established the Gender Balance Council, which guarantees the implementation of best practices by federal institutions to meet their gender equality goals. The laws enforced by the UAE ensure protection of women rights, decent living, and equal job opportunities in sustainable domains, which makes gender equality on the UAE's priority list.⁶ The KSA has also been gradually loosening laws that previously restricted women's mobility and employment. It has lifted the ban on female drivers and is allowing women to travel without a male guardian. This is with the intention of increasing the employment of national women.⁷ Hence, with the reforms occurring at a governmental level, social change is becoming more favorable.

Societal impact

Major shifts in legislation are used as an instrument of change in shaping social institutions. The launching of the National Strategy for Empowerment of Emirati Women in the UAE for 2015-2021 by Sheikha Fatima bint Mubarak positioned the UAE amongst the countries most advanced in women empowerment. The creation and implementation of the strategy establishes a framework for the government, private sector, and civil society organizations to practice women

empowerment in their daily activities.⁸ In return, the UAE became the first Arab country to increase maternity leave to 3 months and launch a workforce gender balance index.⁹

Similarly, the KSA has recently implemented various measures to expand the economic inclusion of women, including changes in family law. This aligns with the KSA's goal of Vision 2030: to empower Saudi women and expand participation in the workplace after recognizing the magnitude of the untapped talent pool.¹⁰ Hadeel Biyari, a Saudi national women leader in Indirect Tax at Deloitte Middle East, confirms that: "The Saudi government has implemented several initiatives to support women's employment, including providing access to new industries and taking on leadership positions." Additionally, with the rise of the nationalization agenda, the question of whether specific quotas should be set for national women on top of the overall nationalization target is raised.

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Education and shifts in academic interests

While legislative and social impact are crucial, fostering the younger generations to lead is also vital. Education builds the leaders of tomorrow, and so ensuring gender balance is integrated in educational systems is necessary. In 2016-2017, the percentage of Emirati females enrolling in public and private secondary schools was 46.1% to 53.9% respectively. Additionally, 56% of STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) course graduates at government universities in the UAE were women.¹¹ Also, the KSA documented 38% of their STEM graduates to be women. As per UNESCO, women occupy 59% of all students studying computer science in the KSA, compared to 16% in the US and 14% in the UK.¹² This highlights the parallels drawn between both the education and civil transformations towards gender balance in the region and further demonstrates women's capability to thrive, drive change, and greatly contribute in economic, societal, and political growth.

Rise of women in the public and private sectors

With laws and regulations necessitating the appointment of women amongst the ministries of governments and education equipping them with the tools to challenge gender norms, women are empowered to climb up the ladder within the public sector sphere. Jazala Hamad, one of Deloitte Middle East's Audit & Assurance UAE female partners, states that she has "a personal passion for being a role model and developing the Emirati talent of the future – who can go on to lead in their respective fields, making a wider impact." Accordingly, a contributing factor to the rise of national women is the group of inspirational female leaders at the forefront of this change. As per a study carried out in 132 countries, the UAE ranks as the first-place region for females in leadership positions.¹³ Research has shown that women participation in the UAE cabinet is amongst the highest in the world, with women making up two thirds

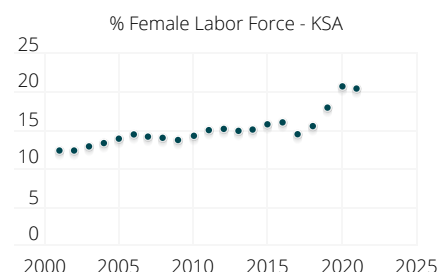
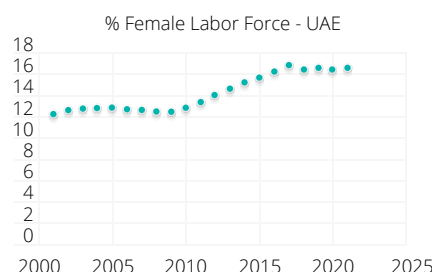
of the public sector workforce, 30% of leadership roles, and 27.3% of ministerial seats.¹⁴ Additionally, national women have been appointed diplomatic roles since 2009 and are currently occupying 30% of the diplomatic corps in 234 positions.¹⁵ Similarly, the KSA has recently appointed two women in the senior governmental positions of Deputy Secretary General of the Saudi Cabinet and the Deputy Minister of Tourism.¹⁶ The relatively large change in numbers portrays the output of heavily investing in national women leaders. This highlights the fruits of fostering political inclusion for national women in the public sector. With education, empowerment, and the right resources, more women can come forth to lead and be empowered to do so.

This political inclusion acts as a foundation to initiate an inevitable snowball effect, fostering the active participation of women in managerial and entrepreneurial positions. As per the Dubai Women Establishment, 23,000 women lead on AED50 billion projects in 2020, accounting for 10% of the total private sector.¹⁷ Similarly, in 2020, the KSA documented the joining of 51,000 Saudi women to the job market, as well as an increase of 50% in the number of female entrepreneurs in 2019, therefore highlighting the rise of women in the private sector as well.¹⁸ 

Rise of women across industries

Women in the UAE are growing across different industries, and “bring to the table an Emirati woman’s perspective and understanding of the UAE national culture,” which is essential to the success of the business, as stated by Jazala Hamad. Emirati women make up 15% of technical and academic roles,¹⁹ comprise at least 35% of employees in the health sector, 20% in social affairs, and above 40% in education.²⁰ In the companies listed under the Dubai Financial Market and Abu Dhabi Securities Exchange, the number of board seats held by women increased by approximately 2.6 times since 2020.²¹ Additionally, in February 2018, 15 Emirati women joined the UAE’s first Women’s Firefighting Unit at the Sharjah Civil Defense, which has been a regular occurrence since.²² In fact, women are playing an active role in key sectors like oil and gas, leading in large national companies like the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC). By the end of 2022, ADNOC was committed to having at least one woman on the board of each ADNOC group company. In June of 2022, ADNOC had 3 female chief executives and 16 women were already seated on its 18 boards, highlighting the impact women are leaving on the growth of these sectors and industries.²³ Similarly, the KSA is appointing women on the boards of Saudi Aramco, Saudi Arabia’s stock exchange, and the Public Investment Fund.²⁴ Hadeel Biyari highlights that as a national woman leader she can bring several edges to the table as she has “in-depth experience in multiple sectors, including FSI, oil and gas, retail, and EPC,” which makes her agile and able to develop innovative solutions. Hence, women are occupying industries that have been traditionally male-dominant in the past. In fact, between 2017 and 2022, there was an increase of 5.9% (14.5% to 20.4%)²⁵ in the percentage of females in the KSA labor force, and a mild decrease of 0.3% (16.9% to 16.6%)²⁶ in the percentage of females in the UAE labor force. An increase in the total female labor workforce aligns with the legislative and societal changes affecting the increase in national female workforce too.

Labor force, female (% of total labor force) - UAE²⁷ and KSA²⁸ respectively



Source: The World Bank

Evident improvements in the number of female board members and women occupying various industries and sectors have been observed, however, there will always be room for more equality and equity with the rise of new everyday challenges. Therefore, in parallel with the nation’s transformative steps taken to alleviate the gender gap, organizations must continue to play a role in women empowerment.

Key takeaways

In conclusion, it is vital to acknowledge that the shifts occurring in the Arab world regarding gender balance are not necessarily novel. Nonetheless, it is only until recently that these nations have been reaping the fruits of the major legislative and social changes that they have been working incessantly towards. Evident improvements in the number of female board members and women occupying various industries and sectors have been observed, however, there will always be room for more equality and equity with the rise of new everyday challenges. Therefore, in parallel with the nation’s transformative steps taken to alleviate the gender gap, organizations must continue to play a role in women empowerment. The key is for organizations to echo, leverage, and integrate societal values within their organizational values. This is through creating an inclusive work environment built on inclusion, equity, and equality. Women are capable and usually have the tools to succeed in becoming leaders. However, they are not always given the chance to, whether that be having seats at the boards of listed companies or being seen and heard in hybrid work environments in comparison to their male counterparts. Jazala Hamad states:

"I was fortunate, throughout my career at Deloitte, to have had both formal and informal mentorship opportunities, which have had a huge impact on my career development and growth." Similarly, Hadeel Biyari adds: "We have a strong network of female leaders who act as mentors and role models, and we encourage flexible working arrangements. This enables women to thrive in their careers while also balancing their family responsibilities." Policy changes are vital, but it is action over policy that makes the true impact.

Organizations have a big role to play in promoting the driving gender parity in the workplace by:

- Fostering a sense of purpose and impact;
- Nurturing a psychologically safe and inclusive environment;
- Helping women feel seen, heard, and equal to their male counterparts;
- Creating flexibility, equality, and equity in a hybrid workspace;
- Sponsoring and mentoring high potential women talent;
- Rewarding and recognizing performance equally to their male counterparts; and
- Adapting and personalizing policies to the lifestyles and working preferences of women.

It is not only organizations that have a role to play, but women leaders too... in creating a culture of fellowship and empowerment for other younger women to lead and leave an impact. ●

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Endnotes

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