





Rana Ghandour Salhab on gender equality in the Middle East

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There is little doubt that gender parity and pay gap are headline-making news today. Where does the Arab world stand?

Women in the Arab world are making great strides in commerce and industry and are advancing as entrepreneurs, due to rising access to education—where women now outnumber men in universities in many Arab countries—and opportunities provided by the knowledge economy and digital platforms. Female entrepreneurs in the region are also growing in number and influence thanks to an encouraging startup environment. Many business incubators and accelerators have started up in major cities across the region in the last three years as well as across organizations and recognition and award programs specifically targeting women.

I want to stress that empowering women is a game changer for our region, and it is governments and organizations that need to take heed of that. At 26 percent, the figure for female labor participation in the Middle East North Africa region is one of the lowest in the world. Even when women are hired, there is high attrition so that very few women reach senior level positions. In fact, men occupy an overwhelming 98.5 percent of boardroom seats in the region.

This is beginning to change as more Arab women, even in what is perceived to be more traditional societies, are increasingly assuming ministerial, board and chief executive positions, and a woman leads the capital market in one of the GCC countries. However, the pace of change can, and should be, faster.

There are many talented and qualified women in the region and we need to help this talent rise up to the challenge and grasp the opportunities offered by businesses. There is a need to create a cultural shift, so that recognizing women for their potential is not hindered by subconscious biases, or driven only by the desire to show an increase in figures. Organizations need to recognize the added value of female talent in the Arab world to the economy as a whole and to their business, and invest in their attraction, recruitment, development, and retention. The role of men and of leadership commitment and inclusive leadership, in particular, are crucial to this process.

It seems wherever we look, the situation is not rosier. With so few women in key leadership positions in the West, who should we learn from? What should we emulate?

Yes that's true. When asked whether they believe women are treated unfairly in the workplace because of their gender, both women and men across the world had similar perceptions of stereotyping and bias.

The biggest barriers to women's access to leadership positions—and this is as true in the West as in the Middle East, the East, the South and everywhere—are tied to a masculine corporate culture that is not sufficiently inclusive. Practices emanating from conscious and unconscious biases result in failure to develop and promote women leaders, inadequate leadership accountability, lack of women role models and lack of adequate support, mentoring and benefits related to retaining women.

What we need to emulate from the West are changing perceptions, tackling stereotyping through awareness, learning and role modeling, in addition to the adoption of gender-blind laws, some of which we lack in our part of the world and that continues to hinder gender equality. We can also benefit from the tried and tested policies and practices in the West that succeeded in allowing women to participate in the economy and advance their careers while managing their demanding family roles.

What is Deloitte doing?

The most impactful thing Deloitte is doing to create an inclusive environment is making leaders accountable: at Deloitte Middle East we introduced gender targets that are set by the Business leaders themselves. That is because the business case must be articulated and leadership commitment should be made clear. Then it turns to the task of building and cascading accountability.

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Another step Deloitte is taking is trying to limit the leakage on the corporate highway. While the male/female ratio at the new hire level is increasingly close to 50/50 in a number of our practices in the Arab region, the female leadership pipeline leaks significantly. The practices we are adopting to advance women into leadership positions are the introduction of high potential development plans, mentoring programs, workplace flexibility

policies, women networks and diversity and inclusive leadership awareness workshops for current leaders.

Deloitte is also active as a champion of women in our communities. We believe in an integrated, holistic diversity and inclusion strategy that expands beyond our internal practices. We advocate that diversity in the boardroom and in senior roles is a competitive business tool. We offer external collaboration for mentoring and support and our partners sit on governmental, business and NGO advisory councils for women empowerment across the region. We offer advice, support and thought

In March 2018 we launched the Deloitte Accelerator for Social Innovation in the Middle East (DASI), a program that is tailored to Arab entrepreneurs and social businesses with full or partial female ownership and management. It covers 14 Middle Eastern countries and is designed to combat the region's social challenges by aiding small to medium-sized social enterprises grow through customized Deloitte support packs, mentorship and skills development valued at over US\$100,000. This is just one of our programs under WorldClass, our global social impact initiative to empower 50 million people to succeed in the rapidly changing global economy.

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leadership studies. In collaboration with the 30% Club—GCC chapter—we published a research study on the perceptions of both, national and expat leaders in the Arab world towards the progress of women to senior management and board-level positions, in order to drive the dialogue and creation of solutions.

You have always been an advocate of women helping themselves and each other. Where should they start? What advice you would offer these women looking to step up the corporate ladder?

I think the one place they should start is not stepping off the corporate ladder. Women who step off the corporate

ladder because of obstacles in advancing their careers risk being trapped in a vicious cycle: they are lauded for sticking to their beliefs, but by going “off-balance sheet,” they make it harder to achieve gender parity in the executive ranks.

Also, by stepping off the corporate ladder women create an absence of female role models in the workplace, which itself stands in the way of gender diversity.

Women who face this decision should demand a more inclusive environment that offers both flexibility and a level playing field. However, flexibility does not mean one size fits all, and who best to tell corporations what flexibility is? The women themselves. They should speak out and participate in offering creative solutions.

Therefore, my advice to women looking to make headway in their organization’s hierarchical structure is, first, to make the right choices at critical junctions in their careers. Have a long-term view: that is, do not allow short-term considerations to affect your career in the long run. Look for a career not a job, a culture not a company, a future not a role.

Watch out for, and change, what I call Career Limiting Behaviors (CLBs) to Career Boosting Behaviors (CBBs). Promote your expertise and your accomplishments, as invisible work is not recognized. Men network and women cluster especially in business settings, so network smartly. Ask for what you want, be it a raise, a promotion, or a challenging assignment. Take risks and make sure your personal presence is

noted: there is no return for blending in the background. Differentiate yourself and get noted.

And lastly, assess social and business situations in flexing your style and actions between good female attributes of team work and empathy and what is traditionally known as “masculine traits” — defined as aggressiveness, assertiveness, and confidence. Research suggests that for women to be successful they must simultaneously present themselves as self-confident and dominant while tempering these qualities with displays of communal characteristics. The combination of these learned behavior patterns may be the greatest determinant of workplace success.

by **Rana Ghandour Salhab**, Deloitte Middle East Managing Partner for Talent and Communications (*recognized in the Top 10 Financial Times HERoes Global Champions of Women in Business list*)

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