

WOMEN AT WORK Advancing gender equity in the UAE private sector

“If the moral imperative worked,
it would have worked by now.”

C-Level Female Hospitality Professional

FOREWORD

In today's rapidly evolving business landscape, diversity and inclusion have become crucial factors for success. Gender equity is no longer just a social responsibility, but a strategic imperative that helps organizations thrive. Diverse teams drive innovation, foster creativity, and deliver superior business performance.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has made significant progress in advancing gender balance, particularly in the public sector. However, efforts to promote gender diversity in the private sector have been hindered by a data gap. Existing research is based on global or regional perspectives, failing to capture the unique dynamics of the UAE private sector. Recognizing this, Oliver Wyman conducted groundbreaking research to provide an intersectional understanding of the experiences of both men and women in the UAE private sector.

Through a rigorous methodology involving comprehensive surveys, individual interviews, and extensive research, this report uncovers the realities faced by those working in the UAE private sector. It goes beyond statistics, delving into the nuances and complexities of their experiences. The findings are enlightening and thought-provoking, revealing some similarities to global trends but also interesting differences, shaped by the demographics and circumstances of the UAE's multinational population.

Gender diversity brings benefits such as revenue growth and higher retention. This report calls on organizations, individuals, and policymakers to promote inclusivity in the UAE private sector, offering actionable steps and recommendations for short-term and long-term gains.

We extend our gratitude to the participants who generously shared their experiences and insights and made this first-of-its-kind research possible. The data is clear, so let us use these findings to take tangible actions that foster a more equitable and prosperous future for employees in the UAE private sector.



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gender diversity in the workplace should be a priority for many reasons, including the fact that it is good for business — multiple studies have demonstrated this fact. For example, IBM¹ found that companies with greater gender diversity reported 19% higher revenue growth and stronger organizational cultures, including 16% higher employee retention. Along these lines, in an International Labor Organization survey² of almost **13,000 enterprises across 70 countries**, **57% said that initiatives to promote gender equality had helped to improve their business outcomes.**

So, what can be done to support a balanced, gender-diverse, and inclusive workforce in the UAE? What can women — and men — do on an individual level to help foster this? And what can companies and policymakers do to promote gender parity? That's what this report asks — and answers — with a specific focus on the UAE private sector.

The UAE public sector has been advancing efforts towards gender parity and inclusivity, and it is critical that the private sector maintains pace. By incorporating the results of a comprehensive survey and individual interviews, this report by Oliver Wyman delves into the experiences of women within the UAE private sector, highlighting their unique perspectives and providing actionable steps that can be taken to address experience gaps and promote overall workplace inclusivity. In addition to our data-driven research, we drew upon extensive global literature to inform these recommendations that aim to be of use to numerous stakeholders, including companies operating in the UAE, individuals within and outside the private sector, and policymakers. Some of these recommendations could be implemented immediately, whilst others would be longer term improvements on the way to a North Star of gender equity.

As further detailed in the methodology section, the findings and recommendations were informed by an in-depth survey, interviews, and a literature review, all completed in Q2 and Q3 of 2023. This research hears from a cross-section of women and men within the UAE's private sector to yield insights into the intricacies of their workplace experiences.

The findings underscore that there are shared experiences between women in the UAE and those around the globe, but also that there are distinctive narratives. The **Cultural Contrasts** chapter illuminates the unique insights that set the UAE private sector apart, such as women advocating for themselves privately; the prevalence of financial incentives as a motivation; shared perspectives on gender targets; and a common understanding of the key attributes that are vital for leadership progression.

The **Shared Ambitions** chapter examines global similarities, such as female leaders driving gender-diverse teams and the need for sponsorship and networking to ensure career advancement; the evolving landscape of flexible and remote work practices; and the pervasive experience of cultural exclusion across gender and ethnic lines.

Ultimately, this research aims to be a starting point to propel action — and following each finding, we have outlined the key strategies companies, individuals, and policymakers can employ to address current workplace inequity and create a more inclusive private sector where gender (and other) balance becomes the norm. An index of all key recommendations is also included in Chapter 3 at the end of the report.

WHY THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

This study is unique in that it focuses solely on women in the UAE private sector. Most global studies do not consider the nuances of different countries. While some studies include working women in the UAE, they often group multiple countries in the Middle East or the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) together, or do not differentiate between the public and private sector.

As a result, UAE companies have relied on global data points to identify problems and solutions. However, this approach is not ideal, since the laws, policies, and practices that shape the public and private sectors differ significantly between countries and regions. This report aims to address this data gap.

The report surveyed men and women from various nationalities and industries to study the experiences of women in the UAE private sector. It explores how these compare to those of men, and how they vary across demographics such as ethnicity and industry.

These insights will be used to provide companies in the UAE private sector with more clarity on areas for improvement, as well as tools and strategies to bridge the experience gap, promote gender diversity, and enhance inclusion in the workplace.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

There is an increasing perception that women have equal opportunities to reach leadership positions, but the evidence does not back this up. Globally, women remain underrepresented at all levels of business, and hold only 25% of C-suite positions³ (there has been 10% progress⁴ on this front the past 10 years). Meanwhile, women hold only 35% of managerial roles⁵ (there has been 8% progress⁶ in the past 10 years). Women are also leaving their jobs and the workplace faster than men, exacerbating future representation gaps. A 2023 study from IBM⁷ found that in just the following 12 months after the survey was taken, as many as 30% of women reported that they plan to actively seek a new job and 24% said they plan to leave the workforce permanently. The 2023 Global Gender Gap Index⁸ shows that despite all the conversations, reports, and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives happening now globally, at our current rate of progress, it will take 131 years to reach full parity. Significant changes are needed at societal and company levels to see gender parity in our lifetime.



THE UAE CONTEXT

The Middle East is slightly ahead of the global curve, at 115 years to close the gender gap. The UAE is leading as the best-performing country in the region at 71% on the gender gap index.⁹ While there are many parallels to the global situation, there are important region-specific factors to consider:

- Gender equality is an integral part of the UAE's vision. To achieve its goal, the government has developed a range of policies and initiatives. These include the establishment of a Gender Balance Council (GBC) in 2015; HH Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed Bin Rashid Al Maktoum's Women on Boards 2011 initiative to increase the number of women on boards of directors to a minimum of 20%; and the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority's (ECA) Parent-friendly Label, established in 2022, which awards companies for implementing parent-friendly policies.
- The UAE has a unique socio-economic structure comprising 90% expatriates from more than 200 countries, while offering strong economic opportunities and being a hub of Middle East, India, and Africa headquarters.
- There has been some progress, particularly for those in entry-level and public sector positions. In 2021, women constituted almost 37% of all new hires and are making slow gains in most industries.¹⁰ Within the public sector, women make up 66% of the workforce, with 30% in leadership roles.¹¹ However, we have not yet seen this type of growth at the top of the private sector pyramid. As of 2022,¹² women held only 13% of C-suite positions and 22% of managerial roles, illustrating a significant lag behind global figures.
- In 2019-2020, the UAE introduced a package of legal reforms aimed at strengthening women's economic participation – this included being the first country in the Middle East and North Africa region to offer paid parental leave that is applicable to fathers too (of five working days) – this is on top of the existing maternity leave of 60 working days. Other reforms included mandating that financial institutions provide equal treatment to men and women, and requiring “equal remuneration for work of equal value”.
- The future looks bright — 56% of the UAE's STEM graduates are women, and the majority of the national space program workforce is female.
- In 2012, a UAE Cabinet Decree mandated the inclusion of at least one woman on the board of all UAE federal entities, authorities, and government-related enterprises. This requirement was extended to all publicly listed companies in 2021.

CASE STUDY: THE UAE GENDER BALANCE COUNCIL'S PRIVATE SECTOR PLEDGE

In early 2022, both local and multinational private sector companies in the United Arab Emirates publicly committed to taking tangible steps to increase the number of women in leadership positions within their organizations to 30% by 2025. To date, 56 companies have voluntarily joined the pledge.

This pledge — informed by the Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality — is a strong example of the value of public-private partnerships in advancing strategic priorities, shared interests, and important goals.

The pledge is overseen by the UAE Gender Balance Council, a federal government entity responsible for steering the advancement of the gender balance agenda in the UAE through legislative and policy reform and partnerships. Co-designed by government and key partners in the private sector, the pledge has four key commitments:

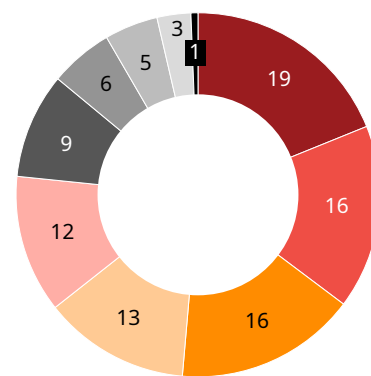
1. Ensure equal pay and fair compensation practices
2. Promote gender equitable recruitment and promotion
3. Reflect our ambitions through policies and programs
4. Be transparent with our progress through annual reporting to the UAE Gender Balance Council

The companies involved are working closely both with one another and with the government to share their internal best practices, challenges, and creative policy solutions to reach the 30% target by 2025. There is also ongoing engagement through whole-group workshops and one-on-one meetings between signatories and the UAE Gender Balance Council to foster candid dialogue and knowledge exchange.

HOW THIS RESEARCH WAS CONDUCTED

In mid-2023, we surveyed 800 people working in the UAE private sector: 500 women and 300 men. The survey was available in both English and Arabic and probed several topics deemed relevant to the UAE corporate workplace. These questions were determined through the report team’s decades of local and international corporate experience, in addition to a comprehensive global literature review of similar research papers. Given that approximately 87% of the private sector workforce is male,¹³ the inclusion of a tailored survey for men was crucial to gaining a comprehensive understanding of the gender dynamics within the workplace. This sample size ensures the findings of the survey are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level, with a 3.5% margin of error. We targeted the top 10 sectors driving the UAE economy and the top-tier companies therein, and 88% of the participants in the survey are from these companies.

Exhibit 1: A breakdown of survey respondents by industry (%)



Breakdown of sectors covered by survey respondents

- Professional, Scientific & Technical
- Wholesale & Retail
- Manufacturing
- Construction
- Others¹
- Financial & Insurance
- Transport & Storage
- Oil & Gas
- Real Estate
- Utilities & Waste

Sample of companies where survey respondents work

| | | | |
|-------------------|------------------|---------|----------------|
| SAIPEM | PWC | EMAAR | Emirates NBD |
| Dubai Duty Free | Etihad Airlines | HSBC | GEMS Education |
| Emirates Airlines | Cleveland Clinic | L’Oreal | Spinneys |

1. Information and communication; Education; Agriculture and forestry; Accommodation and food; Arts and recreation
Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

We ensured ethnic diversity and surveyed people hailing from all parts of the world, accurately representing the demographic makeup of the UAE. We targeted all job levels, with about 25% at entry-level, 25% in early career, 25% in middle management, and 25% at senior levels. We surveyed (and interviewed) people at local companies as well as multinationals. The survey methodology ensured the robustness of the data: participants were selected at random from across target companies; with no more than three participants per company in order to ensure the picture painted represented a wide swathe of the private sector. Each participant was screened by phone, and if they were found to be eligible and willing, they were emailed the link to the online survey. Every completed form was vetted to ensure the quality of the participant’s engagement.

63%

of respondents are female, with an average age of 34

37%

of respondents are male, with an average age of 40

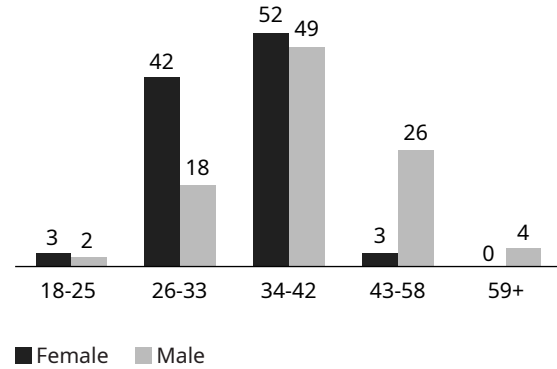
50%

of respondents are millennials, with the rest divided between Gen Z and Gen X,¹⁴ which accurately reflects the workforce generation split in the market

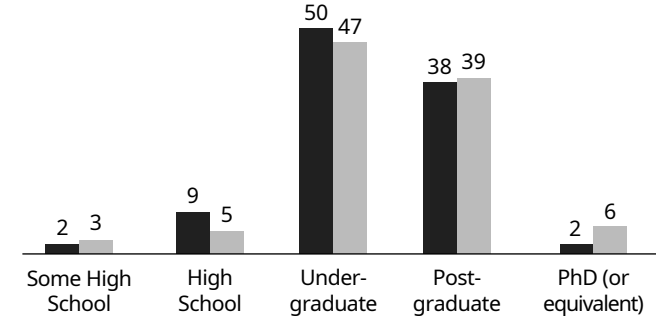
WHO WAS SURVEYED

Exhibit 2: Men and women of different ages and educational levels were surveyed

What is your age range? (%)



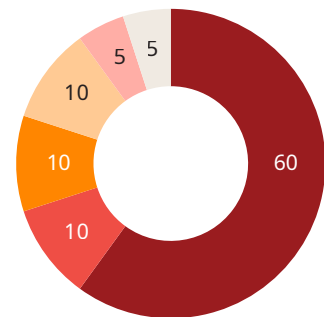
What level of education have you achieved? (%)



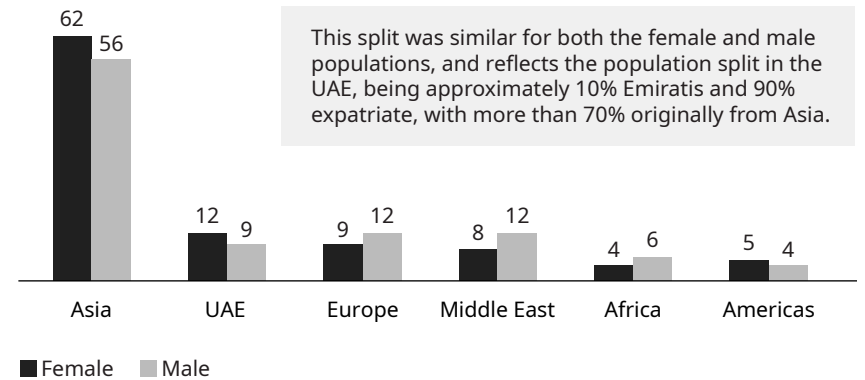
Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Exhibit 3: A breakdown of survey respondents by nationality

Where do you consider yourself to be from originally? (%)



■ Asia ■ UAE ■ Middle East
■ Europe ■ America ■ Africa



This split was similar for both the female and male populations, and reflects the population split in the UAE, being approximately 10% Emiratis and 90% expatriate, with more than 70% originally from Asia.

Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

55%

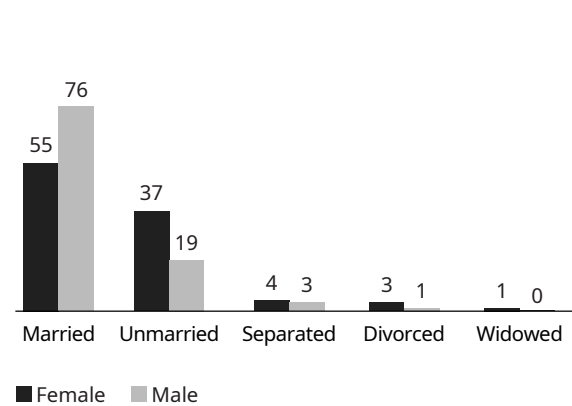
of female survey participants were married versus 76% of men

99%

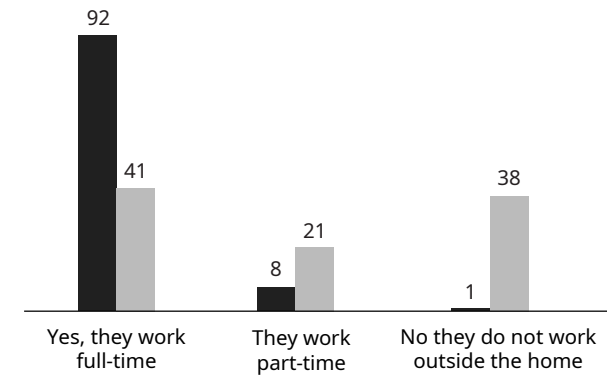
had a working partner compared to 62% of men

Exhibit 4: Survey respondents by relationship status – and the gender difference in regard to having a working partner

What is your marital status? (%)



If you have a partner¹, do they work full-time outside of the home? (%)



1. Excludes N/A responses; all applicable respondents were also "Married"
Note: Numbers have been rounded up to nearest integer.
Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

WHO WAS INTERVIEWED

After the survey results were analyzed, qualitative high-profile interviews were conducted with 20 women and men from 17 companies, which included companies that are both local and international, and all of which have a large employee base and a strong standing within their respective sectors. The interviewees covered a representative mix across demographic groups, job levels, departments, and industries to dive deeper into some of our insights. We heard first-hand accounts of women's personal experiences in the UAE private sector, and they highlighted company policies and practices impacting gender equity. These individuals are anonymized in the report: individual names, company names, and any other identifying information have been kept confidential.

WHAT THIS RESEARCH REVEALED

KEY DEFINITIONS

PRIVATE SECTOR

Non-governmental, profit-driven businesses, and organizations operating within the UAE

WOMEN IN THE UAE

All women working within the UAE, irrespective of their nationality or origin

SPONSOR

An individual, usually senior, who actively promotes someone on their behalf, provides access to opportunities at work, and/or advocates for career advancement

MENTOR

A person who, in a professional context, shares knowledge and provides guidance

Surveying hundreds of women and men in the UAE private sector has provided much-needed data on how people are experiencing their workplace: what work feels like day to day, what the career roadblocks are, what the perception and significance of compensation is, whether people advocate for themselves, and what local and international companies are doing to balance gender representation, particularly towards the top of the pyramid.

While women in the UAE share many experiences, challenges, and needs with their global sisters, they are also carving their own path. Throughout this exploration, we will present a multifaceted view of the current professional landscape, challenging our understanding of the experiences that shape the journeys of women at work. As we navigate these insights, we leverage our research findings and build upon global best practices to practically outline what companies, individuals, and policymakers can do to usher in a new era of inclusivity and gender parity.

In the following two chapters, Cultural Contrasts and Shared Ambitions, we will illuminate both the differences and similarities between women's experiences in the UAE and the rest of the world. In the final chapter, we present an action plan with company, personal, and policy recommendations.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

The market nuances

- Most women in the UAE have advocated for themselves — in private
- Financial reward is the top motivator for women in the UAE
- Over 90% of both men and women believe that gender targets are helpful or necessary
- Men and women agree on the attributes that are essential for leadership in their organization

SHARED AMBITIONS

The global similarities

- Female leaders cultivate gender-diverse teams
- Women both globally and in the UAE need sponsorship, networking, and affordable childcare to advance their careers
- Despite their importance to Gen Z, both flexible and remote work are not yet practiced widely in the UAE private sector
- Tackling exclusion, bias, and microaggressions are key to motivating a diverse workforce



CHAPTER 1

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

The market nuances

The first set of insights illuminates disparities and surprises that distinguish the UAE from the rest of the world. The four key findings are discussed below.

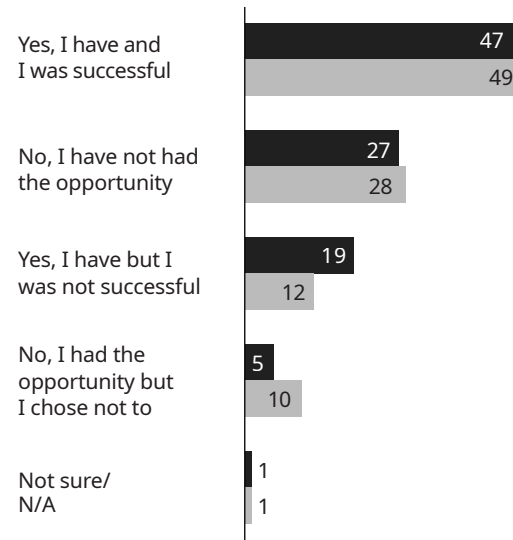
CULTURAL CONTRASTS

MOST WOMEN IN THE UAE HAVE ADVOCATED FOR THEMSELVES IN PRIVATE

Two-thirds of women in the UAE have advocated for themselves for promotion and 80% have been successful. However, despite the relative success of self-advocacy in one-on-one settings, only 57% of women feel comfortable speaking up in meetings, versus 69% of men.

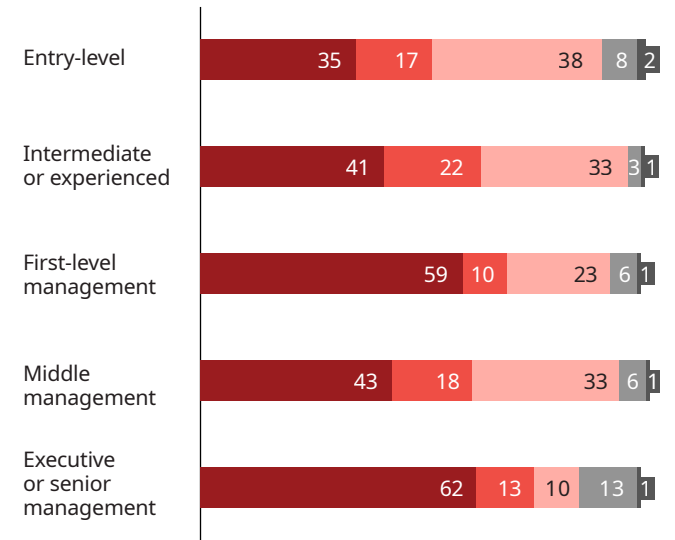
Exhibit 5: Experience of self-advocating for a promotion — broken down by gender and work experience

Have you ever advocated for yourself for a promotion? (%)



■ Female
■ Male

Self-advocating experiences by job level (%)



■ Yes and successfully ■ Yes but unsuccessfully
■ No opportunity ■ No chose not to ■ N/A

Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

These statistics are significantly higher than numbers seen in other parts of the world. Research on 4,600 working professionals in Western countries found that only 15% of women who requested a raise were successful.¹⁵ In another global study conducted by Indeed, 73% of the women surveyed expressed fear over how women are perceived when self-promoting.¹⁶

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

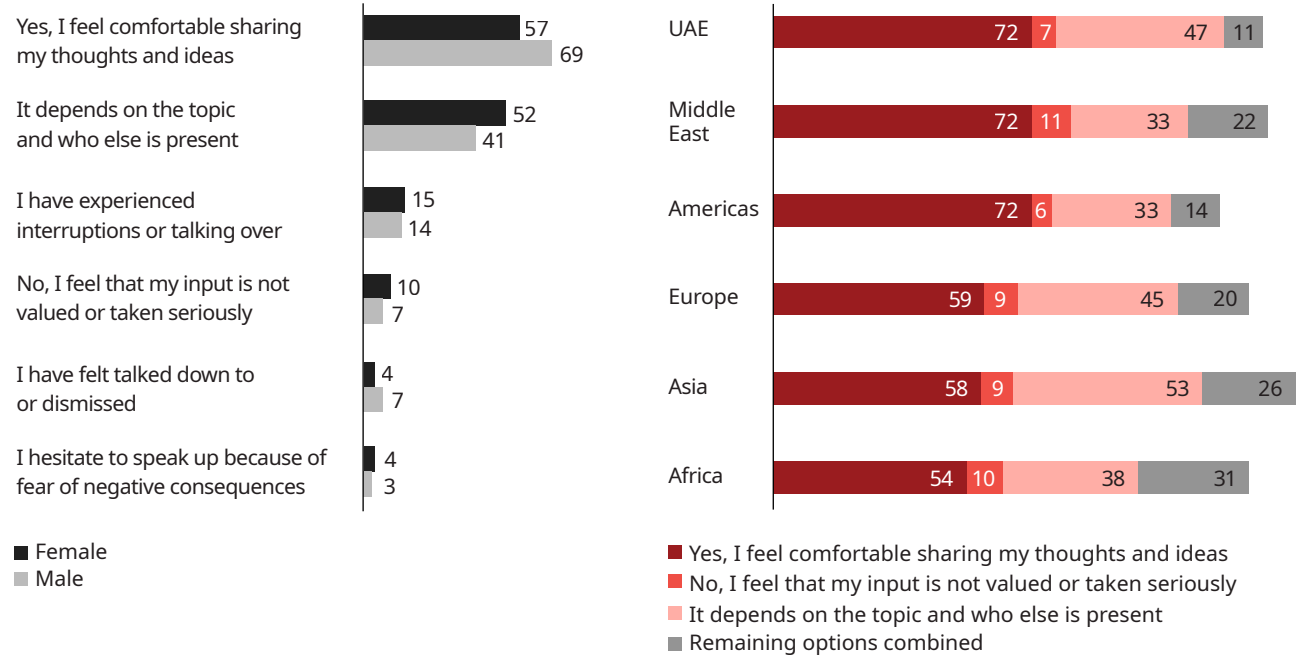
Most women in the UAE have advocated for themselves in private

“I feel like I always have to advocate for the promotion rather than it coming in an organic way, which I find frustrating. Because in theory, if you’re continually showcasing that you are performing beyond your objectives, why should the promotion not come organically?”

Mid-level female construction professional

Exhibit 6: On speaking up in meetings

Do you feel that you can speak up and be heard in company meetings? (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

According to the survey, Arabs and Americans are much more comfortable speaking up in meetings than other ethnicities

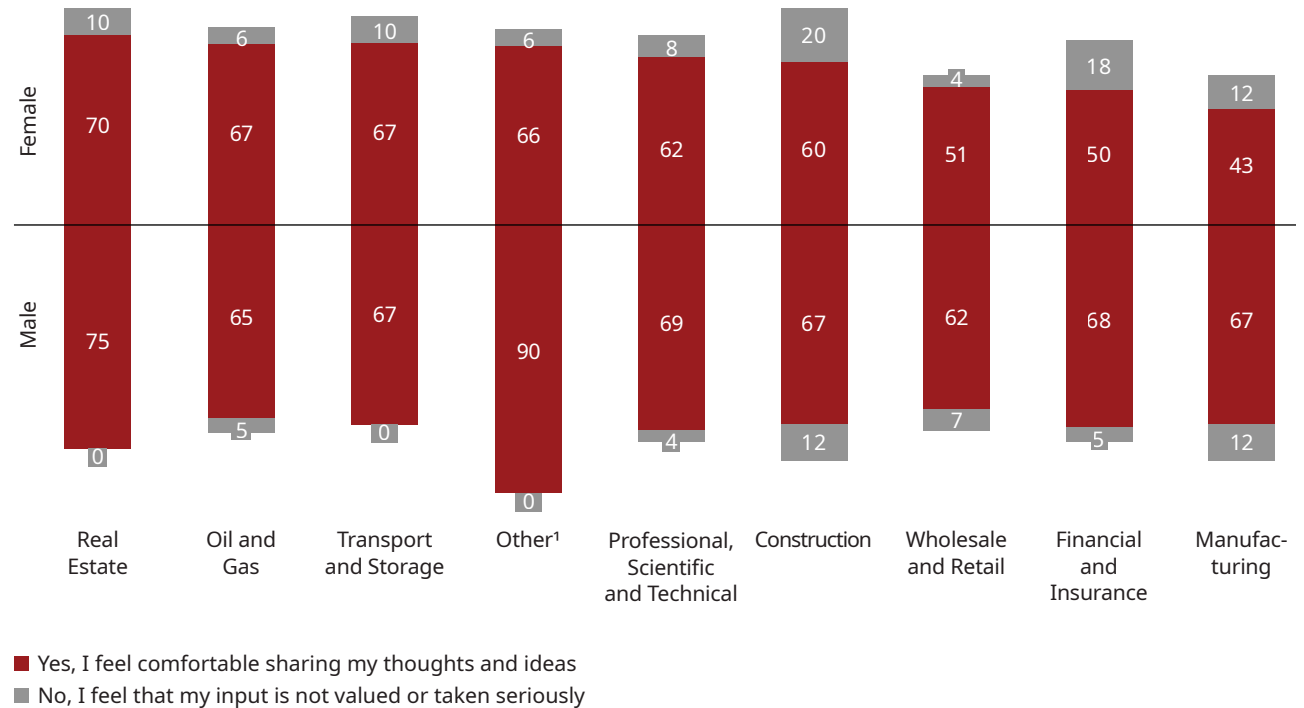
CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Most women in the UAE have advocated for themselves in private

“I made 55% of the department revenue and I was only a director; three men combined made 45% of the revenue and they were MDs. I believed passionately that I deserved a promotion — even though the MDs were 10 to 15 years older than me — but I didn’t get it. And so, I advocated for it. You do not just cross your arms, take your toys, and go home. I said to them, ‘I think you’re being unfair, but you have given me this feedback and I’m going to work on it. And next year, we’re going to have another conversation, and you won’t have excuses.’ I listened to the feedback, and I did something about it: I hired a coach and worked on it. And the next year, I got the promotion.”

C-level female financial services professional

Exhibit 7: Levels of confidence to speak up in meetings — broken down by industry (%)



1. Information and communication; Education; Agriculture and forestry; Accommodation and food; Arts and recreation
 Note: These are two of the possible responses to the question, multiple options could be selected in response. The remaining 4 responses are as follows: “It depends on the topic and who else is present”, “I have experienced interruptions or talking over”, “I have felt talked down to or dismissed”, and “I hesitate to speak up because of fear of negative consequences”
 Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Of all industries, women in technology, financial services and manufacturing are much less likely than their male colleagues to speak up in meetings

Despite the UAE performing better than the global average when it comes to women’s confidence to self-advocate, women in the country are still 45% more likely than men to feel that their input is not valued and 20% less likely to feel comfortable speaking up at all. This clearly demonstrates that while women in the UAE feel comfortable advocating for themselves, there are lingering challenges in fostering an inclusive environment where all voices are equally valued.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Most women in the UAE have advocated for themselves in private

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

Train your team leaders to foster an environment of psychological safety¹⁷ and be intentional about creating a meeting and working culture that is inclusive to all employees. For example, call out incorrect behavior such as interruptions or immediate dismissal of input, invite input from less outspoken female meeting attendees, and ask for feedback after meetings.

Provide women with more opportunities to showcase their expertise. For example, women should be panelists, not just moderators. Encourage women to lead discussions on technical topics, not just diversity topics.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Ask for that promotion or pay raise by seeking guidance from a female (or male) colleague who has done this successfully. There are also many podcasts and articles on how to navigate salary negotiations. In a podcast episode of *When Women Win* hosted by Rana Nawas, Professor Deborah Kolb, a recognized expert on negotiation and leadership, delves into the strategies and tactics for effective negotiation.¹⁸

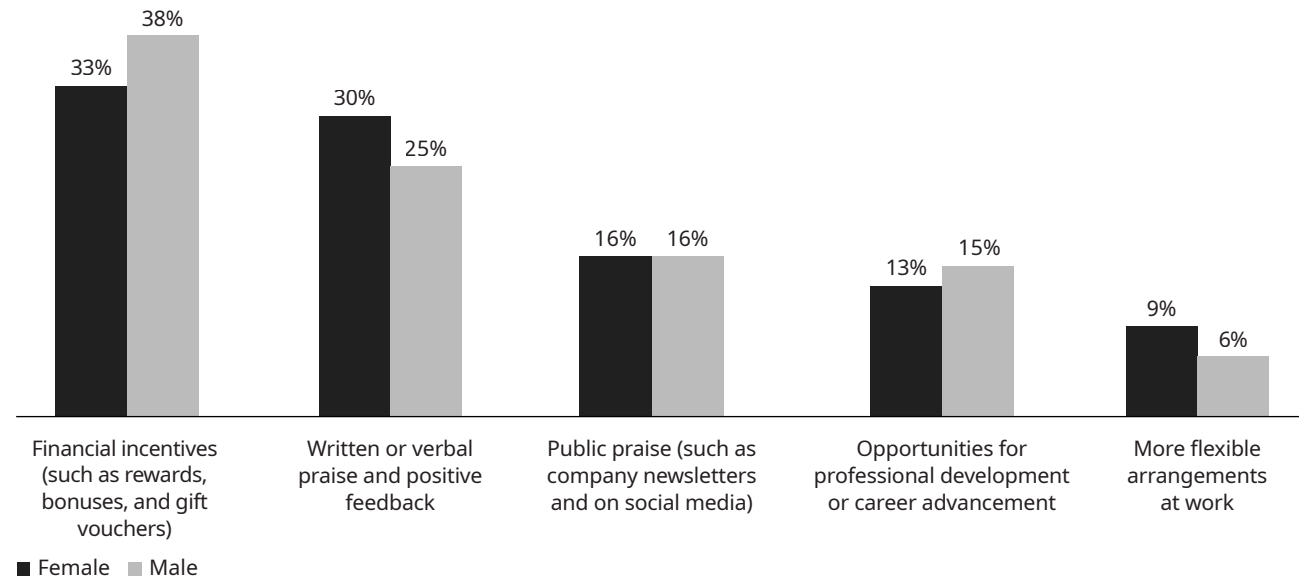
Speaking up in meetings is essential to being perceived as a valuable member of the team. If you have trouble with this, practice beforehand or line up an ally who can involve you in the conversation and amplify your contributions in the room.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

FINANCIAL REWARD IS THE TOP MOTIVATOR FOR WOMEN IN THE UAE

The number-one motivator for women in the UAE is financial reward. This is followed by praise and recognition. This focus on financial stability speaks to the UAE's thriving economic landscape and underscores the economic aspirations of its women.

Exhibit 8: The recognition or reward respondents find the most motivating



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

While this finding demonstrates a shared priority among women in the UAE, motivations vary on a global scale. For example, women in the US seem to have slightly different priorities. Gallup — an American analytics and advisory company — ran a survey of 13,000 US employees to understand what women and men value most from their jobs.¹⁹ On top of the list for what women considered most important was greater work-life balance, followed by compensation and benefits.

A lack of prioritizing financial reward is even more evident within Europe. In an analysis of 48,000 employees across 28 EU member states, researchers found that job security was the top motivator for women, followed by liking the work, work-life balance, skill suitability, and gaining experience.²⁰ Pay and benefits were ranked the lowest.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Financial reward is the top motivator for women in the UAE

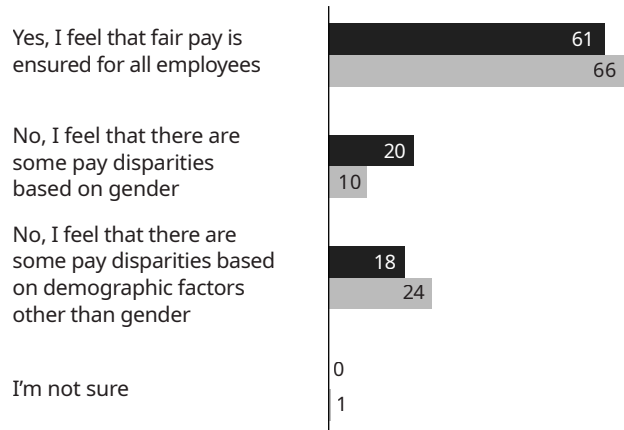
“We do a pay review every year and HR does a gap analysis for each job band — they look at comparable jobs and calculate the average of men’s pay and compare it with the average of women’s pay. We rarely find gaps over 5%, and when we do, we make adjustments. We also look at the percentages of women being promoted across every band, versus men. These practices are institutionalised across all departments and geographies.”

C-level female financial services professional

These differences make it clear that an intersection of culture, geography, and individual preferences shapes the motivators that drive women within their careers. Perhaps this focus on financial reward in the UAE is driven by the fact that 61% of women believe that their company ensures fair pay. Interestingly, this perception increases as women become more senior.

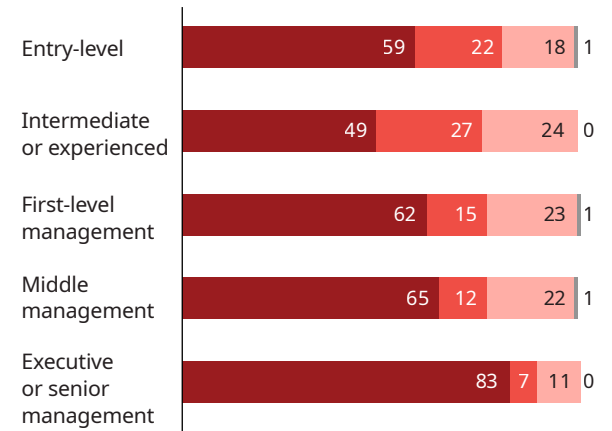
Exhibit 9: Perceptions of fair pay — including by seniority level

Do you feel that your company ensures fair pay for all employees? (%)



■ Female
■ Male

Perception of fair pay by job level (%)



■ Yes, ensured ■ No, gender based disparities
■ No, non-gender based disparities ■ I'm not sure

Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Men are only slightly more likely to report fair pay than women (66%). They are far more likely to believe disparities are based on demographics beyond gender (such as ethnicity), while women are twice as likely to believe it is related to gender — and do experience reinforced discrimination based on the intersectional dynamics of both ethnicity and gender

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Financial reward is the top motivator for women in the UAE

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

- To increase both the perception and the reality of pay parity, pay scales must be tightly defined and clearly communicated for each job role – for example, median +/-10%. Placement along the pay scale must be determined by objective metrics articulated before the interviewing process and should be based on base pay (as opposed to benefits).
- Companies should communicate to employees their position in range regarding the pay bracket for their salary grade.
- Annual pay equity reviews based on variables such as gender, nationality, and seniority should be conducted by companies.
- Enable peer-to-peer financial rewards for great work.
- Train team leaders on the importance of recognition and the various ways they can give it, and how important it is to be done in a timely manner.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Gain insight into your own value and potential income by utilizing external benchmarks and available resources. This can provide you with a clearer picture of how the compensation for roles and experience similar to yours in comparable organizations is structured.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Prevent companies from asking interview candidates what their current salary is — compensation should be determined by the role advertised and the candidate's experience.
- Require companies to publish their gender pay data, specifying the average male versus female salary for each job level and department. This policy has driven significant improvements in several countries across the Americas, Europe, and Australia.²¹ More than half of OECD countries (21 of 38) require private sector employers to report gender-disaggregated pay information publicly.

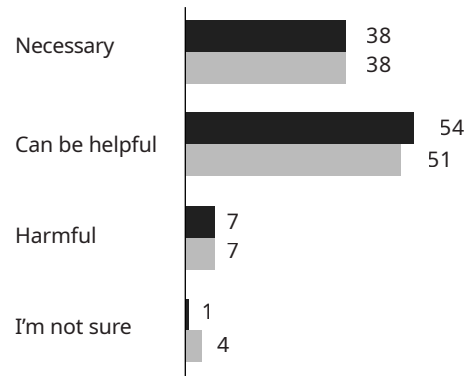
CULTURAL CONTRASTS

OVER 90% OF BOTH MEN AND WOMEN BELIEVE THAT GENDER TARGETS ARE HELPFUL OR NECESSARY

90% of men and women in the UAE believe that gender quotas or targets are at least “helpful”. This perception of targets increases with seniority, with 92% of executives or those in senior management reporting that targets are necessary (53%) or helpful (39%).

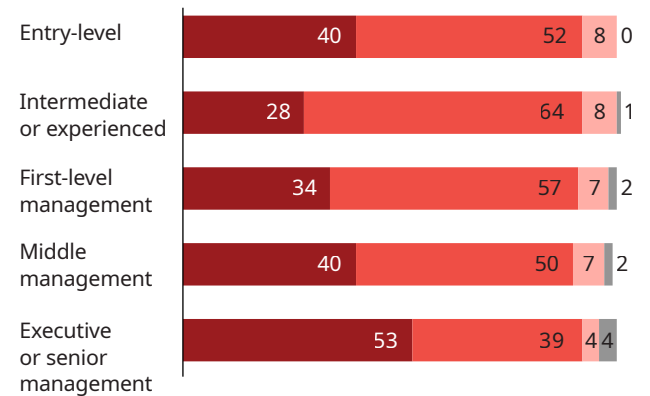
Exhibit 10: Opinions on the use of quotas — including by job level

How would you describe the use of quotas or targets in improving diversity in leadership positions? (%)



■ Female ■ Male

Opinion on use of quotas by job level (%)



■ Necessary ■ Can be helpful ■ Harmful ■ I'm not sure

Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Respondents who felt that there are pay disparities are twice as likely to feel that quotas are helpful as opposed to necessary. In contrast, our interviews revealed another side to the story, with some respondents noting concerns around tokenism and not hiring the most qualified candidates in regard to quotas.

When placed in a global context, the UAE stands out as a leader in terms of support for gender targets. Most recently, the UAE Gender Balance Council led a coalition of local and multinational companies from diverse sectors in signing a pledge to raise the percentage of women in leadership positions to 30% by 2025.²² In contrast, in many other countries, citizen support, particularly among men, is notably lower than what was highlighted in our UAE survey findings. A cross-national study covering 27 European countries found that in some nations as few as 40-60% of men supported the idea of gender targets.²³

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Over 90% of both men and women believe that gender targets are helpful or necessary

“Quotas serve as valuable guiding objectives, but their implementation shouldn’t create unnecessary pressure, potentially leading to compromises in quality and perpetuating tokenism. This approach can also inadvertently place additional scrutiny on women, implying that they were selected only due to gender rather than competence.”

C-level female telecoms professional

“Having a target taps into human nature’s drive to achieve goals, so I’m in favor of quotas. This commitment extends to our shareholders and investors, because promoting diversity and women in the workplace leads to business benefits like better lending rates. However, in some sectors, the bottleneck is the pipeline — we might have a few strong women candidates, but not enough numbers to fill the desired targets.”

C-level female retail professional

While much of the research on the effectiveness of targets is still ongoing, a 2021 report from the European Institute for Gender Equality²⁴ found that across six quota-based European countries — Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, and Portugal — the average share of women on boards was 37.6%. For European countries without quotas, the share of women on boards was 24.3%. Company-determined targets seem to be gaining ground in the UAE. For example, Google has a target of 35% female representation at senior levels, Emirates Airlines has committed to having 25% women in leadership positions, and Marriott aims to have 45% women in such positions globally.

CASE STUDY ON TARGETS

A mid-level female tech professional told us that the division she works in had an objective of achieving a certain percentage of female representation at senior levels. They have already reached their goal thanks to several promotions over the past two years — which were achieved after intentional action. Overall, the approach was defined by three pillars: career progression, fostering inclusive culture, and enhancing external outreach to enrich the talent pool. In this case, as she notes, “quotas, guided by a thoughtful agenda, have been effective”. She pointed out that initiatives spotlighting women have been essential to meeting their target — “we ensure female voices are heard internally, for instance through activities where female directors share their journeys”. They also allocated budget to host empowering events.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Over 90% of both men and women believe that gender targets are helpful or necessary

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

Set targets on inputs that will deliver the desired outputs: for example, ensure that the final selection pool for each job opening is balanced between qualified male and female candidates. This will dramatically improve the rate of hiring qualified women. Interview panels should strive for a 50/50 balance of male and female panelists to limit gender bias.

Set targets on outputs at a global and departmental, functional, and job level: clearly communicate goals top-down, along with their rationale, action plan, and timeline, as well as the people who will be held accountable for achieving them. Be explicit that competency standards will be upheld 100% of the time because diverse talent with the required skills does exist. Track progress continually: diversity is like any other strategic initiative — constant vigilance is required.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Find out if your company has set specific diversity goals and understand how it tracks and reports on these targets.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Implement and enforce legislation that mandates both publicly listed and private companies to publish their gender statistics at every level of the pyramid and for every department.

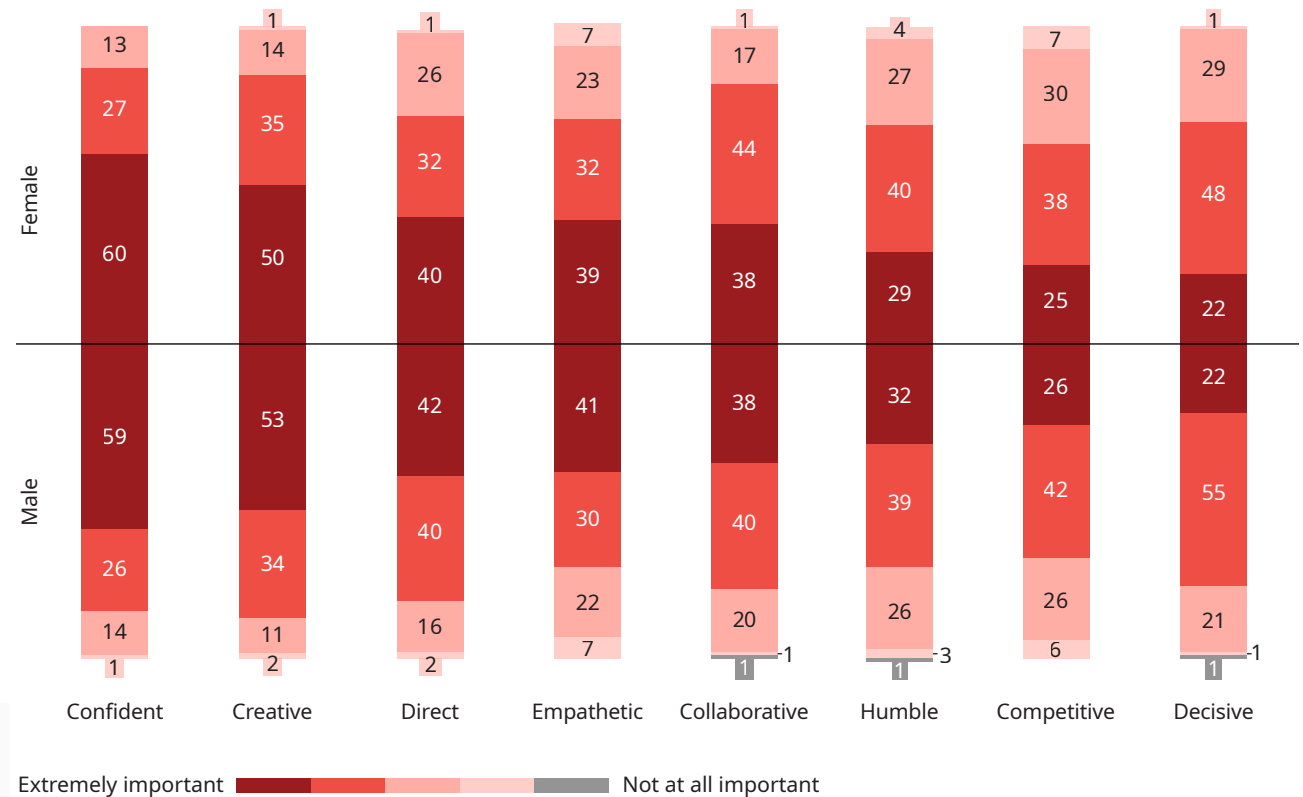
Conduct government audits of diversity data and reporting regularly. Do not just rely on self-reported numbers from companies.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

MEN AND WOMEN AGREE ON THE ATTRIBUTES THAT ARE ESSENTIAL FOR LEADERSHIP IN THEIR ORGANIZATION

The survey required participants to rank the top eight “traits for becoming a leader in their organization”. Surprisingly, men and women provided identical rankings, from 1 to 8. This alignment underscores a common understanding of the key attributes essential for success in the UAE’s private sector. These traits are, in order of noted importance, confidence, creativity, directness, empathy, collaboration, humility, competitiveness, and decisiveness. This consensus may reflect a pattern of those embodying these traits rising as corporate leaders throughout the country.

Exhibit 11: On which traits are most important to becoming a leader at their organization (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

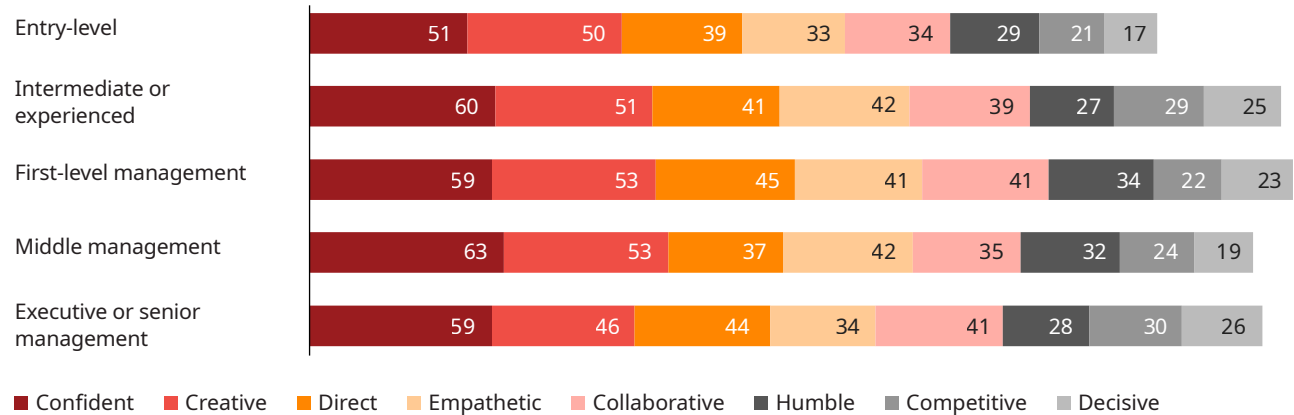
CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Men and women agree on the attributes that are essential for leadership in their organization

“Women get stuck in HR, marketing, PR, accounting (not finance) — the “pink ghetto”. Women do not have enough profit and loss roles, and there is this perception or bias that women do not have financial acumen. I was told I do not have enough financial acumen to be a COO. There are no senior women in finance.”

C-level female hospitality professional

Exhibit 12: On which traits are most important at each job level (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

The ranking of traits was consistent across all job levels.

Those in managerial roles perceive confidence as particularly important. This emphasizes the significance of self-assurance when it comes to career advancement.

Comparing these findings to global reports enhances their significance. A Pew Research Center survey on gender and leadership attitudes worldwide reveals a noteworthy distinction. In the global context, women tend to prioritize intelligence and honesty more than men when ranking top leadership traits. So, it is particularly noteworthy that men and women in the UAE share the same perspectives on leadership.

Women and men in the UAE also share a common perspective on the top three factors deemed essential for improving one’s career prospects: leadership training, networking, and confidence-building.

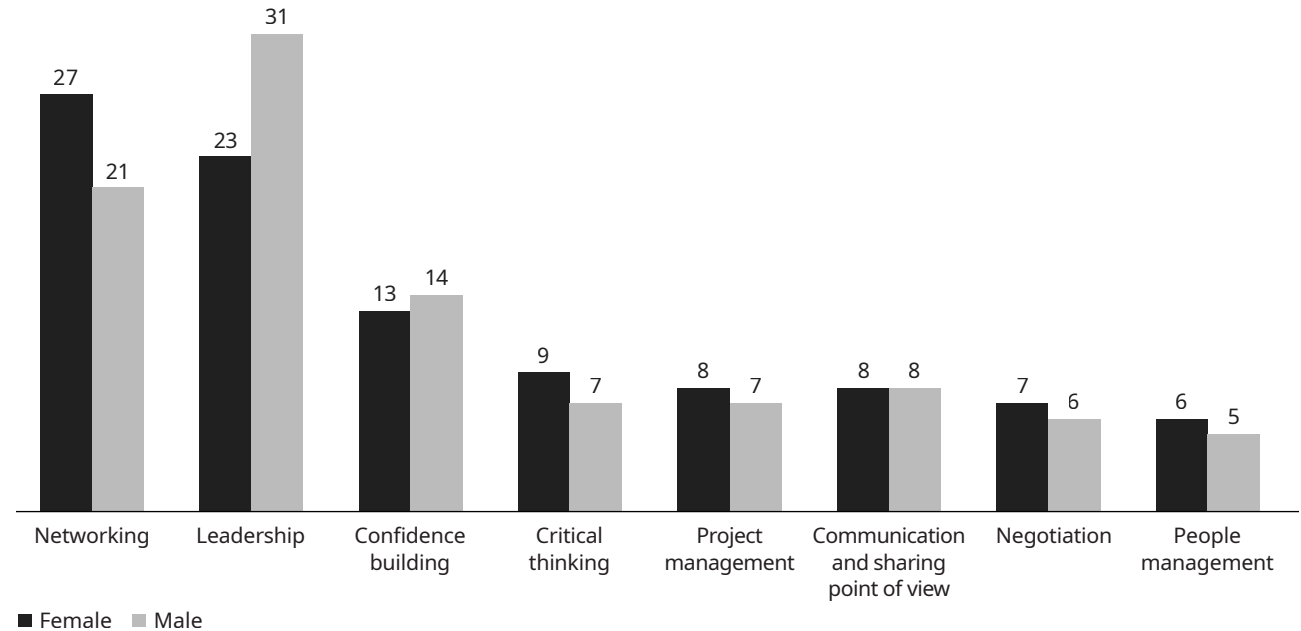
CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Men and women agree on the attributes that are essential for leadership in their organization

“It drives me crazy when we talk about all these development programs for women. I keep telling people, women do not need to be fixed. Women tend to work twice as hard to get to any position because they have to, they have more grit, and therefore they do not need fixing. What we need is to change the toxic environment that has developed over decades and is not conducive to the way women are socialized to behave.”

C-level female financial services professional

Exhibit 13: The training respondents believe would best help them in advancing their career (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Notably, confidence-building is equally sought-after by both genders, indicating a lack of gender disparity in confidence levels within the UAE private sector. This is an encouraging finding as it suggests a more equitable landscape for professional growth, where men and women are equally motivated to explore opportunities for enhancing their professional capabilities.

CULTURAL CONTRASTS

Men and women agree on the attributes that are essential for leadership in their organization

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

Review the list of leadership traits in the section above. If these do not correlate to your company's leadership, you need a plan to rewire your culture. This could include a revision of the company's core values and an employee communication plan to ensure these effectively roll out to the entire organization.

To reduce the impact of bias in decision-making, ensure that key decisions (for instance promotions) are consistently made by diverse panels and based on pre-agreed objective criteria.

Criteria and objectives for promotion should be transparently communicated to all employees well in advance of any formal review process, removing subjectivity and ambiguity where bias can creep in.

Conduct audits on performance ratings data to identify patterns of bias. Look at ratings split by gender, race, and other variables and address unexplained gaps. As outlined in Iris Bohnet's book *What Works: Gender Equality by Design* (Harvard University Press, 2016), organizations should focus on fixing their processes and systems to remove conditions that lead to biased behaviors and decisions rather than trying to "fix the people."

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Embrace self-awareness and skill development. Regularly assess your strengths and areas for improvement. Do not be afraid to ask trusted colleagues, supervisors, or mentors for advice and feedback — it can be helpful to get an outside perspective.

Engage in continual learning and skill development to enhance your competencies in line with leadership traits. If your company offers 360-degree reviews, leverage these so you get feedback from multiple, diverse sources.

Participate in programs or trainings sponsored by your company. Embrace opportunities to gain additional training, skill-building, and a platform for connecting with peers. If your company doesn't currently offer any programs, consider making a request for sponsorship for external programs provided by universities, institutions, or industry associations.



CHAPTER 2

SHARED AMBITIONS

The global similarities

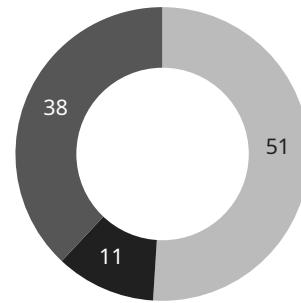
The second set of insights presents experiences, challenges, and aspirations that match with global findings and underscore the cross-border similarities between the UAE and the rest of the world. The four key findings are discussed in detail below.

FEMALE LEADERS CULTIVATE GENDER- DIVERSE TEAMS

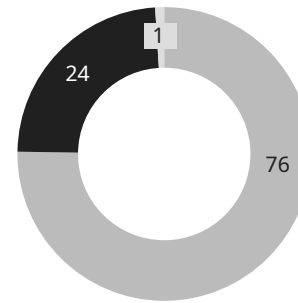
The importance of a proportional representation of women in leadership came through in the survey: 76% of participants have male managers, and only 40% work in gender-balanced teams. However — and this is key — teams led by women in the UAE are twice as likely to be gender-balanced than those led by men. The reason this finding aligns with global trends is that the share of male managers is similar worldwide – across OECD countries, an average of 65.9% of managers were male in 2022.²⁵

Exhibit 14: Diversity of teams – and how having a female manager affects this

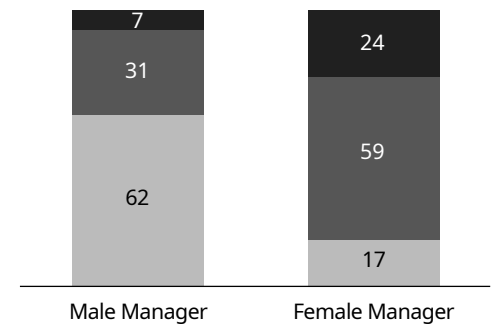
How diverse is your current team? (%)



How would you describe your direct manager? (%)



Deep dive: Team diversity by gender of direct manager (%)



■ Female ■ Male ■ Balance between both ■ Prefer not to respond

Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

This finding aligns with existing academic research. A study on Fortune 500 companies²⁶ established a strong connection between female leadership and the promotion of diverse teams. It revealed that organizations led by women tend to feature greater gender diversity, particularly in managerial and executive roles. Furthermore, it found that women leaders prioritize inclusivity across various backgrounds, cultures, and experiences.

In our UAE survey, respondents on gender-balanced teams are 26% more likely to view leadership actions for gender parity as highly effective. They also tend to perceive pay as fair. This all highlights that investing in gender balance can enhance trust in less visible areas. By recognising the impact of female leaders, the private sector can advance inclusive workplaces that embrace diversity in all dimensions.

SHARED AMBITIONS

Female leaders cultivate
gender-diverse teams

“The fact that there were women in senior and executive management clearly contributed to our division being the most diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, and in every other sense.”

Mid-level female former real
estate professional

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

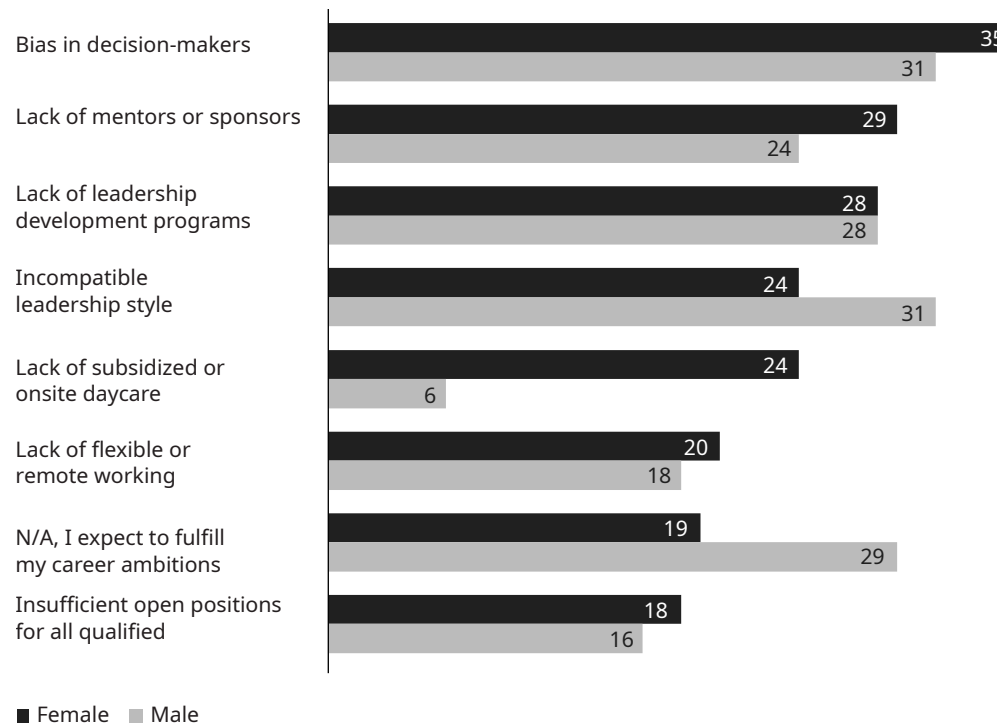
Analyze the gender balance within your teams led by men and women to understand whether there are practices that create better gender balance. Measure this regularly and encourage knowledge-transfer of best practices across teams.

SHARED AMBITIONS

WOMEN IN THE UAE NEED SPONSORSHIP, NETWORKING, AND AFFORDABLE CHILDCARE TO ADVANCE THEIR CAREERS

Almost a third of women in the UAE (29%) rated a lack of access to relevant mentors and sponsors as a barrier to career progression, making it the second leading reason after bias. This is also a priority globally – a study of 318 businesswomen from 19 countries conducted by Development Dimension International (DDI) found an overwhelming 63% of women reported they have never had a formal mentor despite 67% rating mentorship as highly important in helping to advance their career.²⁷ In the UAE, women rated networking as the top training they would find beneficial, particularly earlier in their careers when there are likely fewer opportunities to meet potential mentors and sponsors. Companies without intentional efforts to build mentorship and sponsorship relationships equitably will continue to see gaps throughout leadership ranks.

Exhibit 15: Factors that affect ability to achieve career ambitions (%)



Note: Respondents could select multiple options
Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

SHARED AMBITIONS

Women in the UAE need sponsorship, networking, and affordable childcare to advance their careers

“Empowering women for leadership starts early in their careers. Enabling programs, mentorship, and equal opportunities are necessary. Focusing on existing female staff is vital before seeking external senior candidates. Building an internal system for growth is essential.”

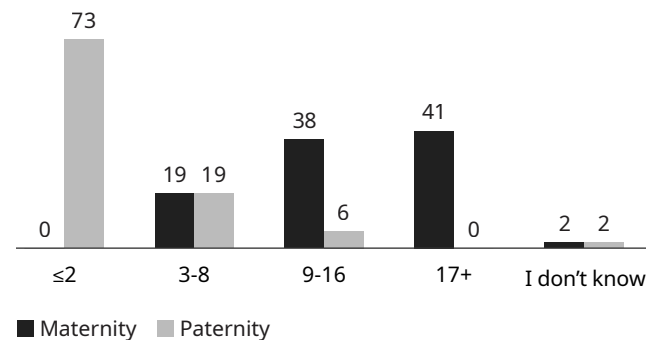
Mid-level female construction professional

Women are also four times as likely as men to identify the “lack of subsidized or onsite childcare” as a career roadblock. This is due to several reasons:

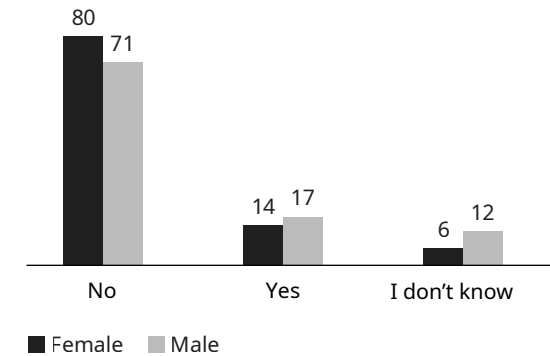
- 90% of the UAE population comprises immigrants, and many of them moved to the UAE specifically for a job or to advance their careers. This means they are less likely to have a family network of parents and other relatives to support them with child-rearing and other everyday tasks.
- 92% of married women surveyed have partners also working full-time, versus just 41% of their male counterparts. This means that men are more than twice as likely as women to have a partner who is not employed and is therefore likely providing more support at home.
- Maternity leave is offered much more widely than paternity leave, which is part of the reason men do not have the capability of participating more at home. 79% of participants surveyed work at companies that offer more than eight weeks of fully paid maternity leave, whereas 73% of participants work at companies that offer only one to two weeks of fully paid paternity leave.

Exhibit 16: On the career impact of parental leave

In weeks, how long are the parental leaves offered by the company? (%)



Do you feel taking advantage of parental leave would negatively impact your career? (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

On top of this, networking events are often held outside of working hours, on evenings or weekends, thus creating conflicts for those with family obligations. These insights emphasize how critical it is to address systemic barriers. By providing women with the tools, support, and opportunities they need, the private sector can create an environment that values both women’s professional growth and their roles as caregivers.

SHARED AMBITIONS

Women in the UAE need sponsorship, networking, and affordable childcare to advance their careers

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

- Establish Employee Resources Groups (ERGs) across a range of employee interests, such as women's empowerment, ethnic diversity, wellbeing, sustainability, or fitness and health. Ensure there is adequate sponsorship to support initiatives and community-building events.
- Create more opportunities for employees to network with each other and senior executives. The calendar of events might include ERG events such as speed networking, department off-sites built around an activity, or reverse mentorship workshops where juniors can provide feedback to senior leaders. Consider scheduling some events during working hours.
- Provide online or in-person refresher courses on how to network effectively.
- Incentivize senior executives to build relationships with junior executives so they might identify talent to sponsor.
- Sponsor memberships for high-potential individuals to join relevant professional associations and business organizations.
- Establish a formal sponsorship program where leaders are matched with high-potential individuals from underrepresented groups:
 - Train sponsors on how to effectively advocate for their protégés.
 - Track metrics that measure program efficiency, effectiveness, and satisfaction of both sponsor and protégé.
- Explore onsite childcare. If this too is challenging, focus on parent-friendly flexible working models.
- Assess how parent-friendly your company is by using the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority's Parent-friendly Label handbook.²⁸ Consider adopting additional parent-friendly policies and practices to further support the wellbeing of your working parents. 90% of companies with experience implementing parent-friendly policies found them to be cost-effective.²⁹

SHARED AMBITIONS

Women in the UAE need sponsorship, networking, and affordable childcare to advance their careers

FOR INDIVIDUALS

- If you want to network with colleagues, walk the halls, eat in the company canteen, and attend company functions. Leverage the connections you make to identify a potential mentor or sponsor.
- Practice your networking skills outside the office — there are numerous networking events around the UAE, all with different topics, demographics, styles, and formats. Find the ones that suit you and make the time to attend them. For tips on networking, check out resources like “Networking for Professional Women Made Easy”³⁰ and “The Secrets of Successful Female Networkers”.³¹
- Insert a weekly slot in your calendar for network maintenance. Send notes to people via email or LinkedIn to keep your network warm. Always give value before you make requests.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

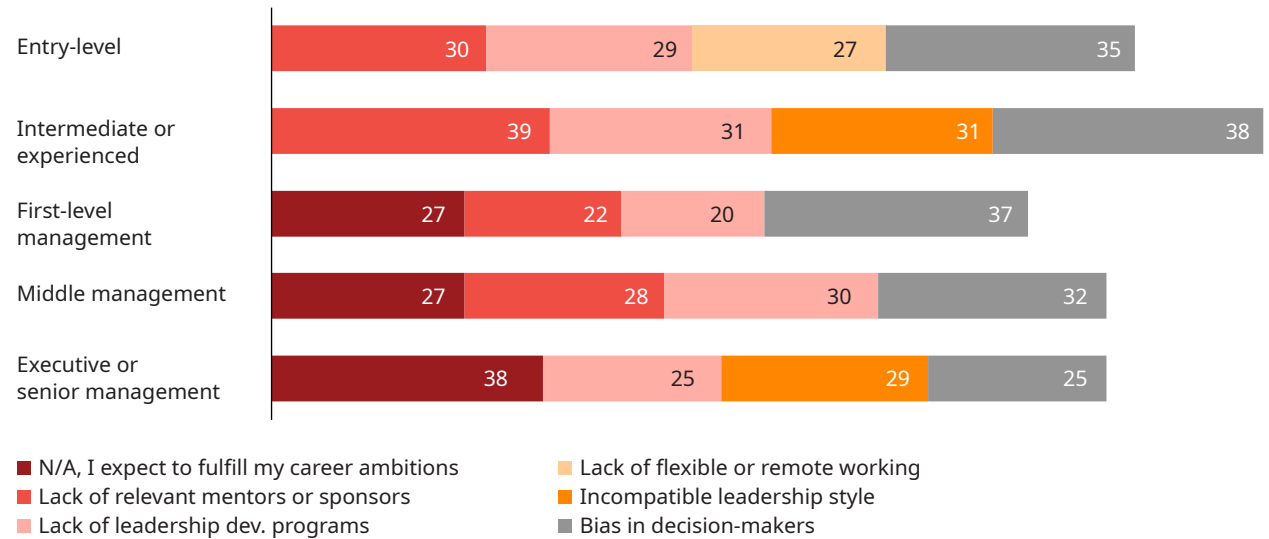
- Offer all parents or companies childcare subsidies for children under school age.
- Increase paid paternity leave from five days to become globally competitive. Based on global figures, the World Bank estimates fathers on average receive 13.7 paid reserved parental leave days.³² A survey conducted by the UAE Federal Authority for Government Human Resources on the needs of working women found that respondents favored more time for paternity leave than currently in place,³³ with 31% of respondents preferring 14 days’ allowance. Ensuring both parents can manage the burden of care is essential to empowering women to expand their network beyond the home.

SHARED AMBITIONS

DESPITE THEIR IMPORTANCE TO GEN Z, FLEXIBLE AND REMOTE WORK ARE NOT YET PRACTICED WIDELY IN THE UAE PRIVATE SECTOR

The growing prevalence in the global culture of flexible and remote work practices is evident, especially among Gen Z. A substantial 27% of entry-level professionals in the UAE cited the lack of flexible or remote work as a career limiter, demonstrating the changing expectations of the future workforce. None of the other job levels highlighted it as a top five issue. This is in line with extensive global research that shows that Gen Z in particular expect hybrid and remote work part of the week. This is the case globally as well. According to an international LinkedIn survey, 72% of Gen Z respondents have either left or considered leaving a job because their employer did not offer a feasible flexible work policy.³⁴

Exhibit 17: Factors that affect career ambitions — broken down by job level (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Nearly 30% of women from every nationality highlighted the lack of flexibility as a critical career barrier, while 65% feel comfortable taking advantage of flexible work arrangements. Some models include time off during work hours for personal appointments, start and end time flexibility (for instance staggered hours), working from home during regular workdays, part-time work, and work from anywhere (for instance, from your home country during the summer).

SHARED AMBITIONS

Despite their importance to Gen Z, flexible and remote work are not yet practiced widely in the UAE private sector

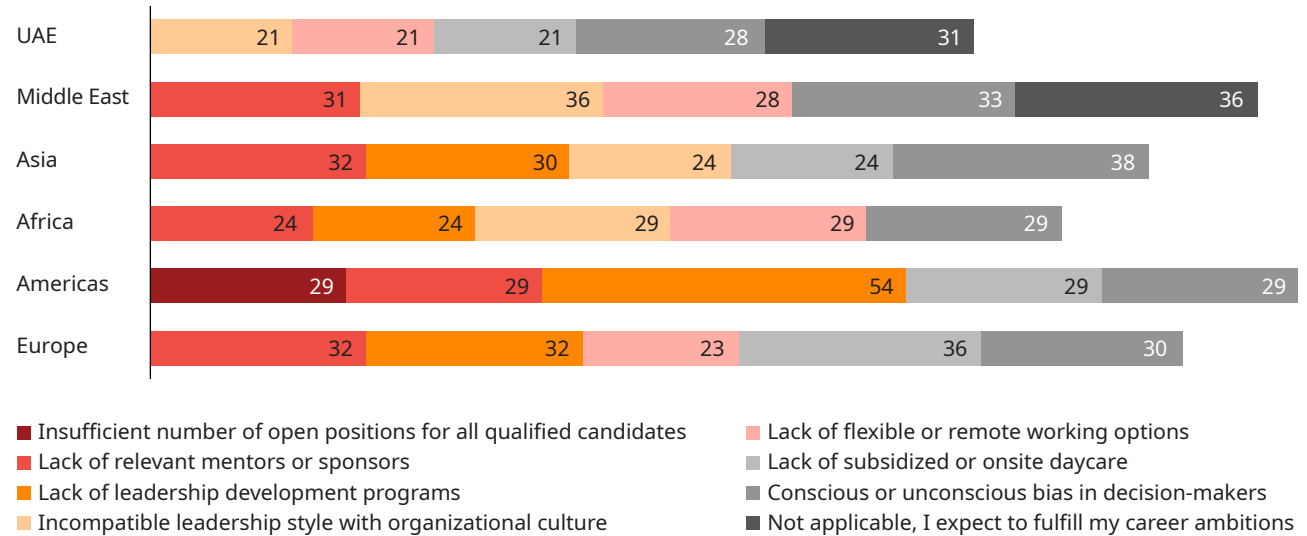
“It is about empowering individuals with the flexibility to manage their work hours. They might work longer one day and shorter the next or attend their child’s soccer game and compensate with weekend hours. Right now, we lack such a policy or defined benefit. If we had it and published it clearly, people would understand it. In the absence of formal communication, misconceptions arise when people leave the office or adjust their schedules.”

C-level female hospitality professional

“Our flexibility regarding remote work and work-from-home arrangements is quite limited, unlike many international organizations. I think there’s room for improvement in this aspect.”

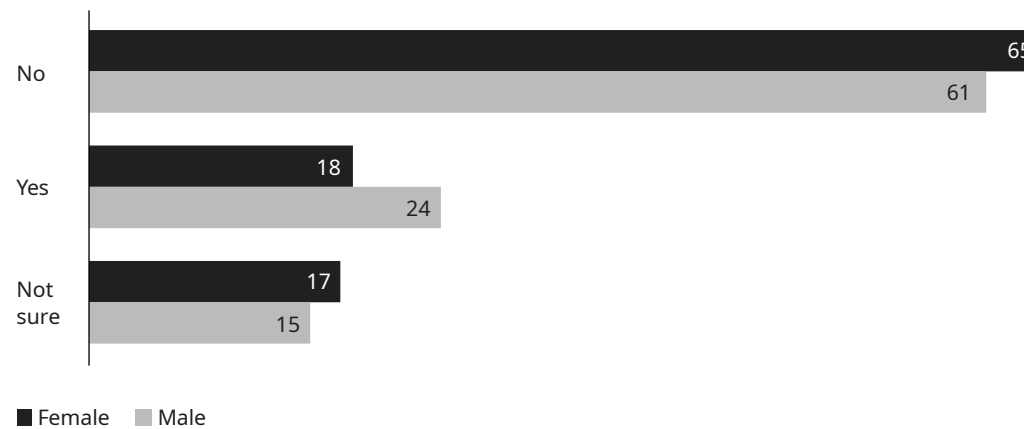
C-Level male aviation professional

Exhibit 18: Factors that female respondents believe affect career ambitions — broken down by nationality (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

Exhibit 19: On whether flexible work arrangements can harm one's career (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

SHARED AMBITIONS

Despite their importance to Gen Z, flexible and remote work are not yet practiced widely in the UAE private sector

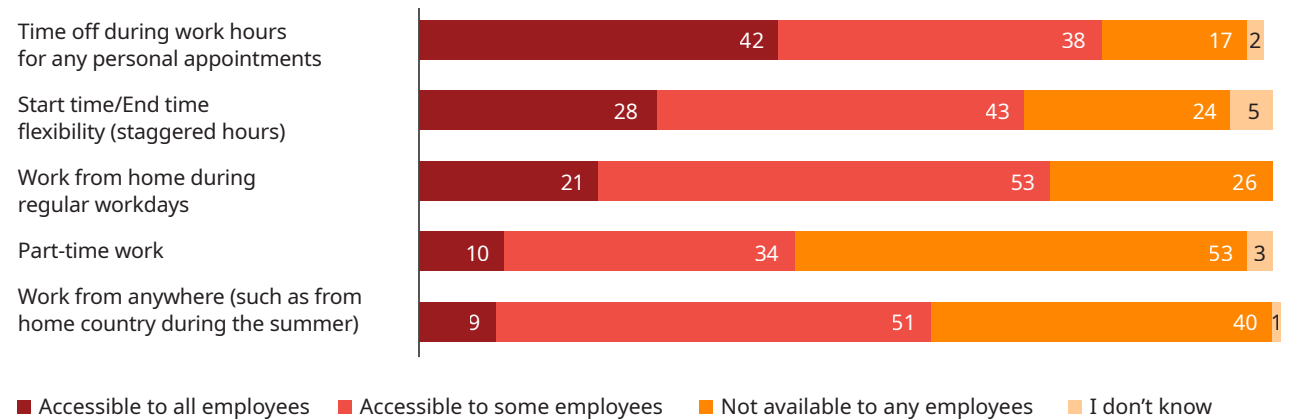
“This is important to me — I have a young deputy. The pandemic has changed us. For above property employees [those who do not need to be on site every day], we have a practice of two days in the office and three days’ work from home. I do not care if my team wants to work from home four days a week as long as they are in for critical meetings. We’ve functioned so well the past few years without seeing each other every day. Seeing each other is important, but we do not have to do it every day.”

C-level female hospitality professional

Interestingly, 24% of men versus 18% of women believe that taking advantage of flexible work policies is detrimental to their careers. To illustrate how this discrepancy could have a negative effect on women, it is necessary to turn to a study that was a global literature review on the power of feminist messages, which showed that men’s influence tended to be more persuasive than women’s. The researchers noted that this could be because men are seen as having higher status in society — which could also mean that men believing flexible work could harm their careers might unintentionally affect women negatively.³⁵ If men are avoiding flexible work because they think it is detrimental, this perspective could become a roadblock for women who want to embrace flexible work options.

Flexible work arrangements in the UAE generally appear to be limited to certain employees, such as more senior ones, or remote-enabled workers. For example, only 21% of participants said their companies had regular “work from home” days for all employees, whereas 53% of participants confirmed that work from home was available to “some employees.” Similarly, 51% of participants said that “work from anywhere” policies applied to “some employees,” and 9% to all employees.

Exhibit 20: Respondents on the types of flexible work arrangements available at their company (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

The mismatch between workforce expectations and current practices highlights the need for organizations to bridge this gap. As Gen Z becomes a dominant force in the workforce, the demand for flexible work options will likely only continue to grow. In fact, Oliver Wyman Forum’s research report on Gen Z found that 85% of those already in the workforce prefer hybrid or remote work environments — and if these are not offered, they will look elsewhere.³⁶

SHARED AMBITIONS

Despite their importance to Gen Z, flexible and remote work are not yet practiced widely in the UAE private sector

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

Companies should assess their flexible work arrangements and investigate the potential for introducing diverse solutions such as hybrid work models wherever feasible, based on the maturity of their workforce and their operational context. Research from the global professional body Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that a set-up of two days at home/three days in the office leads to more productivity, higher-quality work, and deeper employee relationships — meaning such set-ups are win-win for employees and employer.³⁷

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Require companies to publish their policy on flexible work.

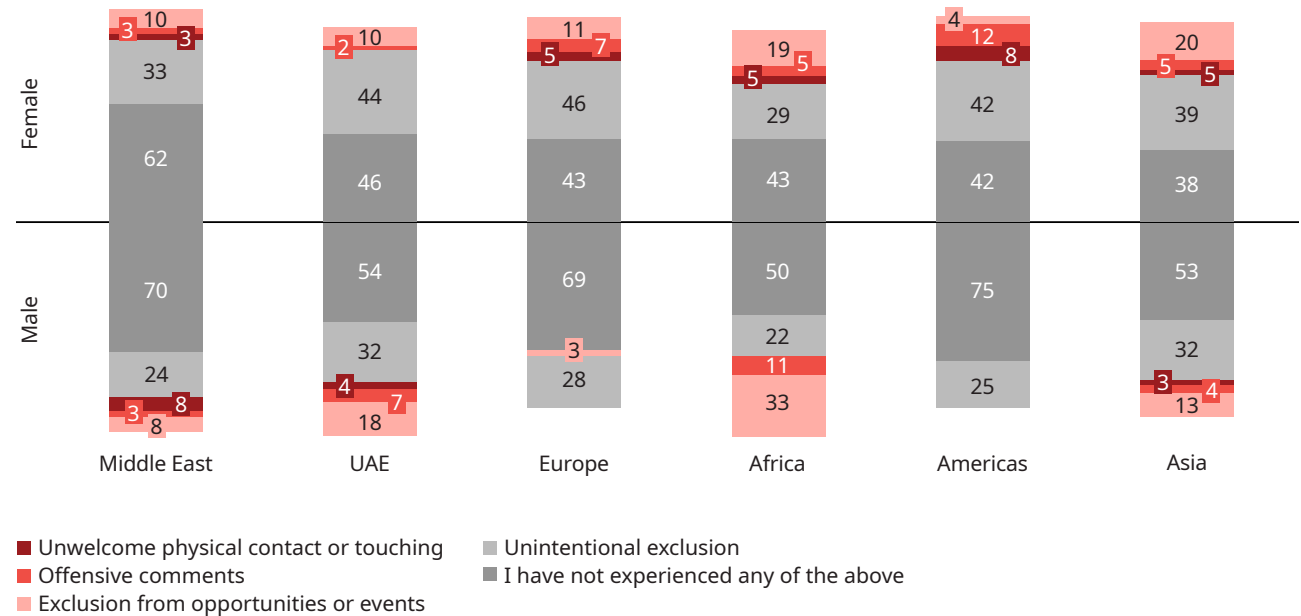
SHARED AMBITIONS

TACKLING EXCLUSION, BIAS, AND MICRO-AGGRESSIONS IS KEY TO MOTIVATING A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

A key driver for recruitment and retention of talent is company culture — people opt in or out of a workplace, or indeed the workforce altogether, based on their day-to-day experiences. Our survey shows that women too often face exclusion, biases, and microaggressions that lead them to lose motivation or leave the workplace altogether. Addressing company culture from the top down is critical to reaching gender parity goals.

63% of women have experienced exclusion or unwelcome and offensive targeting in the workplace, versus 50% of men. However, two-thirds of these events were labelled “unintentional exclusions.” Among the nationalities surveyed, these rates are lower for non-UAE-national Arabs and are highest for Asian women.

Exhibit 21: Experiences of exclusion or offence — broken down by nationality (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

This varies by ethnicity, with Asians and Africans more likely to experience exclusion

SHARED AMBITIONS

Tackling exclusion, bias, and microaggressions is key to motivating a diverse workforce

“Ageism and unspoken gender bias are especially noticeable in regions like the Middle East. On European projects, no one hesitates about my role leading the project. However, in the Middle East, there’s apprehension that counterparts might anticipate a different profile, possibly influenced by certain stereotypes. The company’s stance might be partially constructed, but external perceptions could play a role. Regardless, even if those expectations exist, it is disheartening and frustrating. We should challenge and reshape such stereotypes.”

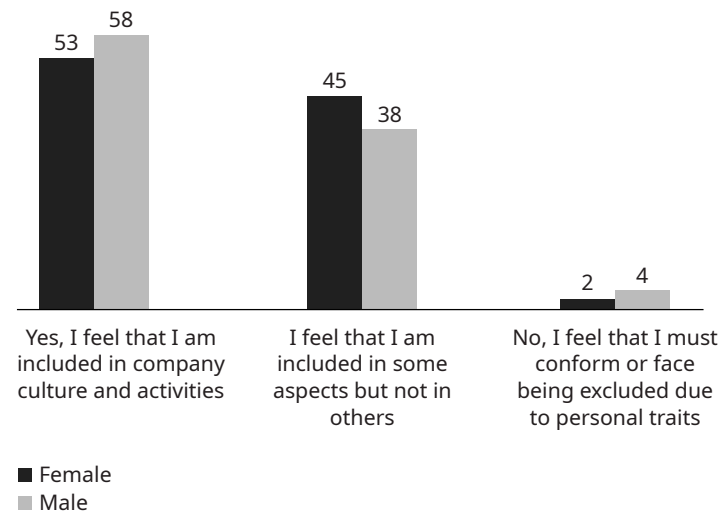
Mid-level female oil and gas professional

These feelings of exclusion or targeting are not limited to the UAE. A Glassdoor survey of more than 1,100 employees across the US, UK, France, and Germany found that about 61% of respondents have witnessed or experienced some form of discrimination in the workplace, with 42% having experienced or witnessed racial or gender discrimination.³⁸ This is not just bad for employees, it is also bad for business. In a Pew Research Center survey, 57% of workers who quit their job in 2021 cited feeling disrespected.³⁹

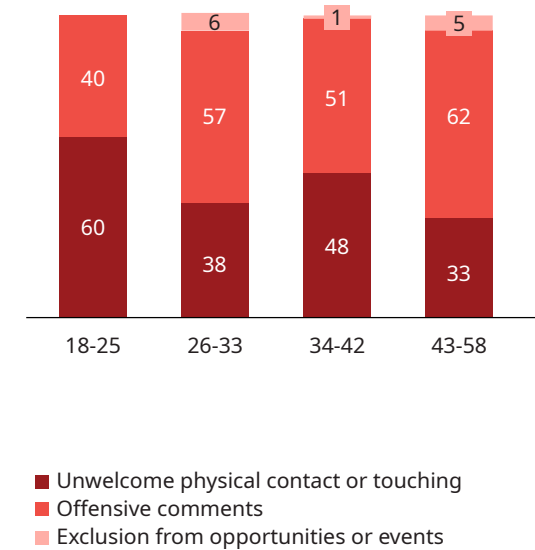
Overall, however, 53% of women in the UAE and 58% of men say they feel “included in company culture and activities”.

Exhibit 22: Sense of belonging at work — broken down by gender and age

Do you feel a sense of belonging in your company? (%)



Deep dive: Challenging experiences by age (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

The sense of belonging increases with seniority

SHARED AMBITIONS

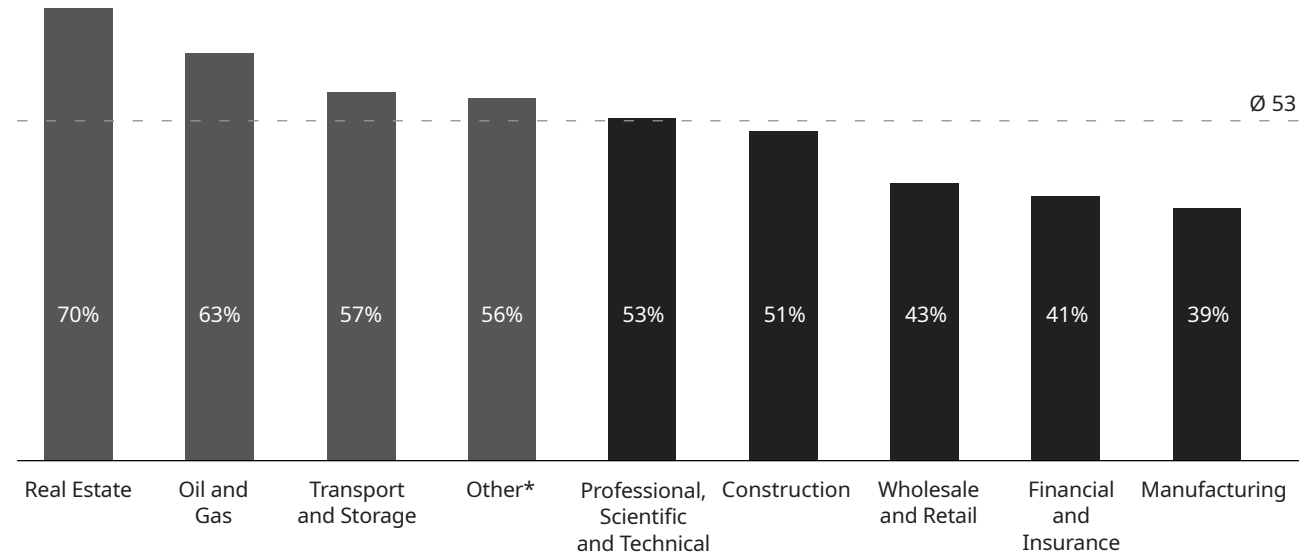
Tackling exclusion, bias, and microaggressions is key to motivating a diverse workforce

“When I joined the company, there was a willingness to connect, but the older men on the team struggled to relate to me as a younger woman. They often resorted to odd comparisons like ‘you remind me of my daughter or niece,’ which created an uncomfortable dynamic. On the other hand, they easily drew lines, not thinking twice about inviting male colleagues for drinks.

I recall addressing this, asserting that I’m not someone’s daughter or niece — we’re all adults, so why not ask me for a drink? That’s why balanced teams are so important: it reduces the discomfort of socialising, making it less unappealing than hanging out with an all-male group.”

Mid-level female oil and gas professional

Exhibit 23: Sense of belonging at work for women — broken down by industry



1. Information and communication; Education; Agriculture and forestry; Accommodation and food; Arts and recreation
Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

This varies by industry: real estate is the highest, while oil and gas and financial services are the lowest

It is crucial to build on the success of the majority of employees feeling included and to address areas of concern. Tailored strategies should be designed to address the unique challenges faced by different groups. Elevating the sense of belonging for all employees, regardless of gender or ethnicity, is integral to achieving not only gender parity but also to realising the full potential of a diverse organization’s workforce.

SHARED AMBITIONS

Tackling exclusion, bias, and microaggressions is key to motivating a diverse workforce

RECOMMENDATIONS

FOR COMPANIES

Implement inclusive hiring practices that focus on attracting and retaining talent from diverse backgrounds, diluting possibilities for marginal exclusion. During recruitment this could mean diverse candidate sourcing, during new hire onboarding this could mean inclusion and diversity training, and during performance reviews this could mean ensuring diverse panels assess employees. In the aforementioned Glassdoor survey,⁴⁰ 76% of employees and job seekers said diversity was important when considering job offers.

Ensure your company adopts mechanisms to promote psychological safety amongst middle managers, such as measuring a team's satisfaction with their manager or conducting regular Net Promoter Score surveys (that is measuring on a scale of 1-10 on how likely employees are to recommend working with a manager)⁴¹.

Consider mandating that team leaders do training on creating psychological safety. Courses such as Amy C. Edmondson's Psychological Safety: Clear Blocks to Innovation, Collaboration, and Risk-Taking⁴² offer practical strategies and methods that help foster healthy workplace environments and improve business outcomes.

FOR INDIVIDUALS

Join or co-lead at least one ERG focused on gender or ethnic diversity. These groups can provide a platform for open discussions, sharing experiences, and providing support when faced with challenging situations.

Act as an ally for colleagues facing gender or ethnic exclusion by offering support, advocating for their ideas, and amplifying their voices.

FOR POLICYMAKERS

Create and enforce regulations around discrimination in the workplace. Make it affordable, easy, and effective for people to use this course of action.

A woman with long dark hair, wearing a patterned dress, stands in profile looking at a tablet. She is positioned in front of a large window that offers a view of a city skyline with several tall buildings. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting daytime. The image is framed by a red border that is partially visible on the left and right sides.

CHAPTER 3

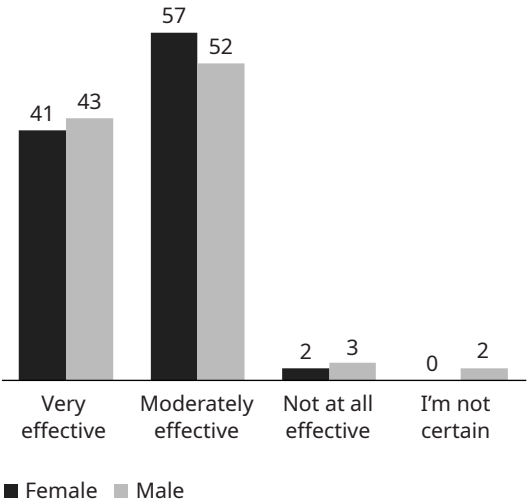
CONCLUSION AND ACTION PLAN

As we navigate the evolving landscape of gender equity in the UAE, the progress in the public sector stands as a hopeful example. The significant strides in empowering women within government serve as a precedent — and the private sector should pursue the issue with equal commitment.

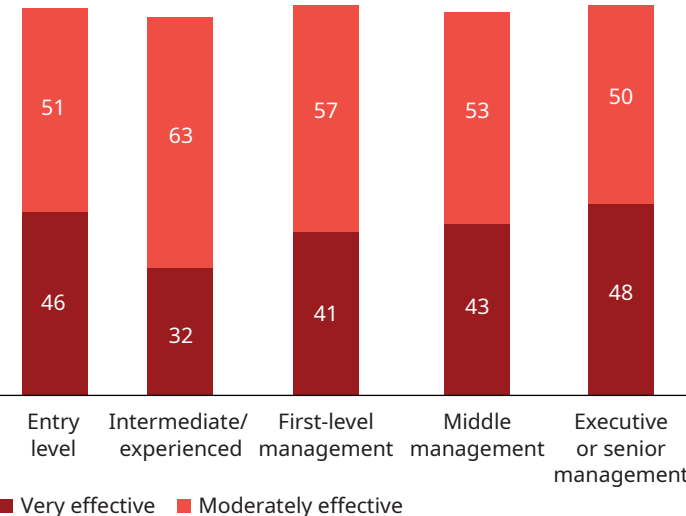
Current private sector interventions to improve the representation of women in leadership positions are already making an impact, and the sentiment is overwhelmingly positive. A remarkable 97% of participants view these efforts as at least “moderately effective”.

Exhibit 24: Assessing the impact and effectiveness of senior executives' actions

At your office, to what extent do you feel that senior executives take effective action to improve the representation of women in leadership positions? (%)



Deep dive: Perception of senior executive effectiveness by job level (%)



Source: Oliver Wyman UAE Private Sector Employee Survey (2023)

As companies embrace inclusivity and individuals drive their growth, the UAE has the potential to become a global champion for gender equity. The research-supported action points in this report are intended to drive positive change in this critical endeavor.

SUMMARY OF THE ACTIONS RECOMMENDED THROUGHOUT THIS REPORT

| Key Findings | Company Recommendations | Individual Recommendations | Policymaker Recommendations |
|--|--|---|--|
| <p>Most women in the UAE have advocated for themselves in private</p> | <p>Train your team leaders to foster an environment with psychological safety and be intentional about creating a meeting and working culture that is inclusive to all employees. For example, call out incorrect behaviour such as interruptions or immediate dismissal of input, invite input from female meeting attendees, and ask for feedback after meetings.</p> <p>Provide women with more opportunities to showcase their expertise. For example, women should be panelists, not just moderators. Encourage women to lead discussions on technical topics, not just diversity topics.</p> | <p>Ask for that promotion or pay raise by seeking guidance from a female (or male) colleague who has done this successfully. There are also many podcasts and articles on how to navigate salary negotiations.</p> <p>Speaking up in meetings is essential to being perceived as a valuable member of the team. If you have trouble with this, practice beforehand or line up an ally who can involve you in the conversation and amplify your contributions in the room.</p> | |
| <p>Financial reward is the top motivator for women in the UAE</p> | <p>To increase both the perception and the reality of pay parity, pay scales must be tightly defined and clearly communicated for each job role — for example, median +/-10%. Placement along the pay scale must be determined by objective metrics articulated before the interviewing process and should be based on base pay (as opposed to benefits).</p> <p>Communicate to employees their position in range regarding the pay bracket for their salary grade.</p> <p>Conduct annual pay equity reviews based on variables such as gender, nationality, and seniority.</p> <p>Enable peer-to-peer financial rewards for great work. One example is Oliver Wyman’s kudOWs program, where any employee in the company can send a colleague anywhere in the world a \$150 “thank you” voucher for going above and beyond their job requirements to deliver client impact. Another example is Shell’s Recognition Award, a cash reward (separate from bonus) provided to employees by a line manager for outstanding outcomes at any time during the year.</p> <p>Train team leaders on the importance of recognition and the various ways they can give it, and how important it is to be done in a timely manner.</p> | <p>Gain insight into your own value and potential income by utilizing external benchmarks and available resources. This can provide you with a clearer picture of how the compensation for roles and experience similar to yours in comparable organizations is structured.</p> | <p>Prevent companies from asking interview candidates what their current salary is — compensation should be determined by the role and the candidate’s experience.</p> <p>Require companies to publish their gender pay data, specifying the average male versus female salary for each job level and department. This policy has driven significant improvements in several countries across the Americas, Europe, and Australia. More than half of OECD countries (21 of 38) require private sector employers to report gender-disaggregated pay information publicly.</p> |

Key Findings

Over 90% of both men and women believe that gender targets are helpful or necessary

Company Recommendations

Set targets on inputs that will deliver the desired outputs: for example, ensure that the final selection pool for each job opening is balanced between qualified male and female candidates. This will dramatically improve the rate of hiring qualified women. Interview panels should strive for a 50/50 balance of male and female panelists to limit gender bias.

Set targets on outputs at a global and departmental, functional, and job level: clearly communicate goals top-down, along with their rationale, action plan, and timeline, as well as the people who will be held accountable for achieving them. Be explicit that competency standards will be upheld 100% of the time because diverse talent with the required skills does exist. Track progress continually: diversity is like any other strategic initiative — constant vigilance is required.

Individual Recommendations

Find out if your company has set specific diversity goals and understand how it tracks and reports on these targets.

Policymaker Recommendations

Implement and enforce legislation that mandates both publicly listed and private companies to publish their gender statistics at every level of the pyramid and for every department.

Conduct regular government audits of diversity data and reporting, to ensure self-reported numbers are accurate.

Men and women share the same perspective on the attributes essential for leadership advancement within their organizations

Review the list of leadership traits. If these do not correlate to your company's leadership, you need a plan to rewire your culture. This could include a revision of the company's core values and an employee communication plan to ensure these effectively roll out to the entire organization.

To reduce the impact of bias in decision-making, ensure that key decisions (for instance promotions) are consistently made by diverse panels and based on pre-agreed objective criteria.

Criteria and objectives for promotion should be transparently communicated to all employees well in advance of any formal review process, removing subjectivity and ambiguity where bias can creep in.

Conduct audits on performance ratings data to identify patterns of bias. Look at ratings split by gender, race, and other variables and address unexplained gaps.

Embrace self-awareness and skill development. Regularly assess your strengths and areas for improvement. Do not be afraid to ask trusted colleagues, supervisors, or mentors for advice and feedback — it can be helpful to get an outside perspective.

Engage in continual learning and skill development to enhance your competencies in line with leadership traits. If your company offers 360-degree reviews, leverage these so you get feedback from multiple, diverse sources.

Participate in programs or trainings sponsored by your company. Embrace opportunities to gain additional training, skill-building, and a platform for connecting with peers. If your company doesn't currently offer any programs, consider making a request for sponsorship for external programs provided by universities, institutions, or industry associations.

Female leaders cultivate gender-diverse teams

Analyze the gender balance within your teams led by men and women and why your women managers are more successful than your male managers at creating that balance. Share these best practices with male managers and track their implementation methodically.

Key Findings

Women in the UAE need sponsorship, networking, and affordable childcare to advance their careers

Company Recommendations

Establish Employee Resources Groups (ERGs) across a range of employee interests, such as women's empowerment, ethnic diversity, wellbeing, sustainability, or fitness and health. Ensure there is adequate sponsorship to support initiatives and community-building events.

Create more opportunities for employees to network with each other and senior executives. The calendar of events might include ERG events such as speed networking, department off-sites built around an activity, or reverse mentorship workshops where juniors can provide feedback to senior leaders. Consider scheduling some events during working hours.

Provide online or in-person refresher courses on how to network effectively.

Incentivize senior executives to build relationships with junior executives so they might identify talent to sponsor.

Sponsor memberships for high-potential individuals to join relevant professional associations and business organizations.

Establish a formal sponsorship program where leaders are matched with high-potential individuals from underrepresented groups:

- Train sponsors on how to effectively advocate for their protégés.
- Track metrics that measure program efficiency, effectiveness, and satisfaction of sponsor and protégé.

Explore onsite childcare. If this too is challenging, focus on parent-friendly flexible working models.

Assess how parent-friendly your company is using the Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority's Parent-friendly Label handbook. Consider adopting additional parent-friendly policies and practices to further support the wellbeing of your working parents. 90% of companies with experience implementing parent-friendly policies found them to be cost-effective.

Individual Recommendations

If you want to network with colleagues, walk the halls, eat in the company canteen, and attend company functions. Leverage the connections you make to identify a potential mentor or sponsor.

Practice your networking skills outside the office — there are numerous networking events around the UAE, all with different topics, demographics, styles, and formats. Find the ones that suit you and make the time to attend them.

Insert a weekly slot in your calendar for network maintenance. Send notes to people via email or LinkedIn to keep your network warm. Always give value before you make requests.

Policymaker Recommendations

Increase paid paternity leave from five days to become globally competitive. Based on global figures, the World Bank estimates fathers on average receive 13.7 paid reserved parental leave days. Ensuring both parents can manage the burden of care is essential to empowering women to expand their network beyond the home.

| Key Findings | Company Recommendations | Individual Recommendations | Policymaker Recommendations |
|---|---|--|--|
| <p>Flexible and remote work are not yet practiced widely in the UAE private sector</p> | <p>Companies should assess their flexible work arrangements and investigate the potential for introducing diverse solutions such as hybrid work models wherever feasible, based on the maturity of their workforce and their operational context. Research from the global professional body Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development shows that a two days at home/three days in the office set-up leads to more productivity, higher-quality work, and deeper employee relationships — meaning such set-ups are win-win for employees and employer.</p> | | <p>Require companies to publish their policy on flexible work.</p> |
| <p>Cultural exclusion is experienced at both the gender and ethnic levels</p> | <p>Implement inclusive hiring practices that focus on attracting and retaining talent from diverse backgrounds, diluting possibilities for marginal exclusion. During recruitment this could mean diverse candidate sourcing, during new hire onboarding this could mean inclusion and diversity training, and during performance reviews this could mean assessing metrics such as how well employees embrace inclusion</p> <p>Ensure your company adopts and implements mechanisms for psychological safety, such as having KPIs to measure a team’s satisfaction with their manager or conducting regular NPS assessments.</p> <p>Consider mandating training for team leaders on creating psychological safety. Courses such as Amy C. Edmondson’s Psychological Safety: Clear Blocks to Innovation, Collaboration, and Risk-Taking offer practical strategies and methods that help foster healthy workplace environments and improve business outcomes.</p> | <p>Join or co-lead at least one ERG focused on gender or ethnic diversity. These groups can provide a platform for open discussions, sharing experiences, and providing support when faced with challenging situations.</p> <p>Act as an ally for colleagues facing gender or ethnic exclusion by offering support, advocating for their ideas, and amplifying their voices.</p> | <p>Create and enforce regulations around discrimination in the workplace. Make it affordable, easy, and effective for people to use this course of action.</p> |

FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

These resources cover a range of topics related to gender equality, negotiation, leadership, and women’s empowerment, providing additional insights and perspectives for advancing women in the UAE’s private sector.

Publications and books

[Negotiating at Work: Turn Small Wins into Big Gains by Deborah Kolb and Jessica L. Porter](#)

[The Fearless Organization: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace for Learning, Innovation, and Growth by Amy C. Edmondson](#)

[What Works: Gender Equality by Design by Iris Bohnet](#)

[“The Gender Balance Guide: Actions for UAE Organisations” by UAE Gender Balance Council](#)

[“The Parent-friendly Label Handbook” by Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority](#)

[“Women in the United Arab Emirates: A Portrait of Progress” by Mohammed Khaled Alsuwaidi and Alawiya Abdulla Al-Maamari](#)

Digital media and articles

[Designing a Bias-Free Organization: An Interview with Iris Bohnet by Gardiner Morse \(Harvard Business Review\)](#)

[Make It Safe for Employees to Speak Up — Especially in Risky Times by Constance Noonan Hadley, Mark Mortensen, and Amy C. Edmondson](#)

[When Women Win podcast hosted by Rana Nawas](#)

[Women at Work podcast hosted by Harvard Business Review](#)

[Women Rising: The Unseen Barriers by Herminia Ibarra, Robin Ely, and Deborah Kolb \(Harvard Business Review\)](#)

[UAE A Role Model For Gender Balance, Says Mona Al Marri \(Gulf News\)](#)

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