



International
Labour
Organization

Gaining Momentum: Women in Business and Management in the Middle East and North Africa

*Conference
1 February 2016
Muscat - Oman*

“Women are running more businesses, and consumer-spending decisions are increasingly in their hands. These realities often seem to be overlooked, even though there is an intensive search for global talent and skills as economies are based increasingly on knowledge and technology.”

ILO General Director Guy Ryder, 2015

What we know

Women in the private sector represent a powerful source of economic growth and opportunity for enhanced business performance. There is ample evidence on positive business outcomes gained in hiring and retaining more women at the highest levels as part of more diverse management teams. Even though women are beginning to outnumber men in higher education, they continue to be under-represented at senior management levels in business. Today, women represent around 5 per cent of CEOs of the largest global corporations. The larger the company, the fewer women there are at the top¹.

Promoting gender equality at the workplace is not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do. A growing body of evidence shows that utilizing the skills and talent of both men and women is beneficial for enterprises and for society in general. The growing participation of women in the labour market has been a major engine of global growth and competitiveness.

The world of work has changed dramatically in the last generation due to falling fertility, aging of populations and migration, as well as increased access to education and technology. This is also happening in many countries in the Middle East and North Africa where women are slowly gaining momentum in the world of work. **More women than ever have entered the labour market in the past 10 years in this part of the world**, with a rapid increase in the female labour force participation reaching on average 18 per cent in the Middle East² and 26 per cent in North Africa³. Fast progress is

1 ILO 2015, *Women in Business and Management – Gaining Momentum*.

2 Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the occupied Palestinian territory (oPt), Syria, and Yemen.

also happening in the GCC⁴ countries where the female labour force participation is at 38 per cent and where there are clear signs that women are ready to take on senior roles driven by personal growth and recognition.⁵

Despite a growing recognition of women's contribution to the world of business, historical barriers remain a challenge that many companies are progressively more interested in overcoming. **Family responsibilities, gender stereotypes and masculine corporate cultures are top three barriers to women's leadership globally.**⁶ This is no different in the Middle East and North Africa where the majority of women feel that simply being a woman limits their opportunities at work. Working women struggle to achieve a decent work/life balance and combine a high-power career with family responsibilities. This results in women being unable to break the glass ceiling. Many companies in the region still show conscious or unconscious bias limiting women's career progression. Consequently, many Arab women are more prone to take career breaks, while others prefer to start their own businesses or become self-employed, thus being in a better position to control their work arrangements. Yet, numerous women have no choice but to leave the workforce permanently, contributing to the phenomenon of the 'leaking pipeline'.⁷

The business community and the national employers' organizations have a strategic and timely role to play in recognizing how women's contribution to economic participation and decision-making can make a positive difference to the "bottom line" and business performance. However, there is often a capacity challenge for employers' organizations to reach out to businesswomen and their associations as well as to effectively advocate to their member companies on the business case for gender equality and to provide advice, tools and good practices on why and how to promote women in management. Promoting gender equality and women in business and management go hand-in-hand as inequality at work and at home has been a primary reason for women's traditional lack of access to managerial jobs.

Why this conference?

Driven by the International Labour Organization's fundamental commitment to promote equal opportunities for both women and men in the world of work, **this regional conference will showcase practical solutions for businesses in the Middle East and North Africa to attract and retain qualified women in business and management.**

The event will build on insights and know-how of business leaders and employers' organizations who successfully overcame barriers and made the business case for working women a reality. Through the analysis of global and regional good practices, the conference will provide participants with the most effective trends on how gender equality means business.

3 ILO, KILM 2015.

4 Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) which includes Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia (KSA), and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.).

5 Pearl Initiative 2015, *Women's Careers in the GCC*. http://www.pearlinitiative.org/tl_files/pearl/reports/gcc-2015/gcc-2015-en.pdf

6 ILO 2015, *Women in Business and Management – Gaining Momentum*

7 Pearl Initiative 2015, *Women's Careers in the GCC*.