

AStepAhead 2017

A CAREER FAIR FOR WOMEN AS AN ENTRY POINT INTO THE LABOUR MARKET

In addition to its commodity wealth, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has a resource for which it is far less well-known: highly qualified labour, especially women. Unlike its oil reserves, however, this vast human resource has been partially underutilised in recent years. This is illustrated by the following key figures: Although a notable proportion of 51.8% of graduates in Saudi Arabia today are female, still 32.8% of all Saudi women remain unemployed.

Despite these deficits, women have become increasingly important as drivers of economic change in Saudi Arabia. "Vision 2030", the economic reform programme designed and initiated by H.R.H. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud, aims to promote more commodity-independent growth and to increase the future resilience of the Saudi economy. To this end, the crown prince has also set an ambitious goal for the economic integration of women for the Kingdom: By 2030, 30% of the labour force is sought to be female - while their share is currently 22%. The portion of Saudi citizens in the Kingdom's private sector, currently below 20%, is also meant to rise to 30% until then to combat rampant unemployment, especially among the youth, and to absorb the millions of young Saudis who will embark on the labour market in the next years.

In order to achieve both targets, it is crucial that the placement of young female graduates in the labour market becomes more effective. According to figures from the Saudi Job Creation Commission (JCC) and despite the high rate of university graduates mentioned above, 64% of women leaving universities in the Kingdom still remain un-

employed. This is a clear indication of the need to improve the transition from the education sector to the labour market, especially by better matching job-seekers with open positions.

Better job placement for women in Saudi Arabia is not just a key factor in achieving commercial goals and securing the country's economic future. It further implies intertwined social spill-overs in addition to the mere economic effects: With a higher employment rate among women and their growing economic self-responsibility, the social role of women in shaping the future of Saudi Arabia is also gaining in importance.

Strategic challenges for the job placement of women

Shortcomings in job placement, especially of women and young Saudis, are manifold. Traditional gender images, which are sceptical of the gradual convergence of roles between women and men in professional life, endure. Another structural challenge is the low share of overall employment in the non-oil private sector of the Kingdom – even though the percentage of gross domestic product (GDP) the sector is generating has been gradually increasing in recent years. These shortcomings at the macro-level need to be addressed through tailor-made structural reforms under the umbrella of the "Vision 2030". In addition, they require a carefully balanced social dialogue and the willingness of the Saudi people to renegotiate gender roles.

However, there are also reasons on the micro-level for the slow job placement of

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women in Saudi Arabia. Two factors emerge: First, young female graduates often lack elementary knowledge about job opportunities and employers, according to Khalid Al Khudair, founder and CEO of Glowork, a women's employment agency and host of the annual career fair AStepAhead. In addition, "90% of the graduates are not properly prepared", noted Al Khudair. This is, for instance, because they do not compile their application documents adequately or have not been taught soft skills, such as confidently appearing in job interviews.

AStepAhead: Supporting job placement, expanding qualifications

The "AStepAhead" career fair, which has been held annually in Saudi Arabia since 2012 and is the largest career and recruitment event of its kind in the Kingdom, addresses both shortcomings. For this purpose, the fair brought together around 85 companies from 26 to 28 September 2017 to provide women with a chance to find out about employment opportunities and requirements. In addition, "AStepAhead" offered some 45 workshops with experts and female executives to job-seekers aiming to improve soft skills and offering support for preparing applications.

This year's edition of the career fair, "AStepAhead 2017", has been primarily gathering Saudi employers in addition to a small number of Kingdom-based foreign enterprises. In addition to blue chip companies in the consulting, finance, health, and information technology (IT) sectors, smaller niche-industry employers were also represented at the exhibition space at Faisaliyah Center in Riyadh.

In addition, the strong presence of Saudi government institutions illustrated the great interest from the official side in supporting pilot projects such as "AStepAhead". In this vein, the fair took place with the support of the JCC and the General Authority for Small and Medium-sized Enterprises (Mansha'at), both of them also being represented with a booth at the fair. Furthermore, H.R.H. Princess Reema bint Bandar Al Saud, vice-

president of the General Sports Authority, functioned as patron of the event. The branding of "Vision 2030" at the fair was omnipresent – the logo of the reform programme embellished the stands of the JCC, underlining the integration of the career fair in the wider context of economic reforms in Saudi Arabia as well as the government's focus on improving employment services for women.

Critical debate and encouraging words

The first day of the exhibition "AStepAhead 2017" opened with presentations by the sponsors and patrons. In addition to Al Khudair, Omar Al Batati, governor of the JCC, as well as its executive director, Munirah Al Ghamdi, gave keynote speeches. The Saudi Ministry of Finance also participated on the first day of the fair represented by its head of HR, Nawaf Dhubaib. Representatives of the business community included Adel Al Ghamdi, career and talent management director at STC, the largest Saudi telecommunications company, and Mohammad Al Hoti, general manager of HR at Tawuniya, one of the largest Saudi insurers, who contributed keynote lectures. Following the speakers, H.H. Princess Haifa Bint Mohammed Al Saud expressed her gratitude towards the partners of the event on behalf of Princess Reema. Amongst others, she honoured Dr Manuel Schubert, the Regional Representative to the Gulf States of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), in front of the present press. The Foundation participated as a partner of Glowork at this year's fair. Finally, government officials and business leaders debated the importance of soft skills, success factors for job search, and the future of the Saudi labour market during four panel discussions.

The speakers also addressed structural and cultural deficits ranging from disadvantages for women in job selection procedures to the incomplete link between higher education and the labour market. For example, Al Khudair estimated that "60-70% of women are studying for a degree that does not help them on the job market." In addition, prejudices in the professional realm were discussed, such as those regarding the marital

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status of female applicants. Ultimately, however, encouraging words to the present job-seekers predominated. Asma Said Khan, herself a successful entrepreneur, had a motivational message for the women in the audience: "Do not be afraid... You can achieve anything!"

Positive impulses for the economic role of women

Over the three days of this year's edition of "ASStepAhead", a total of 37,000 Saudi women seeking employment took the opportunity to meet employers in an open atmosphere as well as to conduct job interviews parallel to the fair. Thus, they were able to take first steps into the professional sphere. The visitor volume marks an increase of 25 percent compared to the career fair last year. The high interest in various workshops exceeded the expectations of the organisers by far, demonstrating the initiative and enthusiasm jobseekers brought to the event. In addition, the Twitter hashtag for the career fair ranked No. 9 of the most cited Twitter-hashtags in Saudi Arabia during the first day of the event – an

indication of the vibrant discussion in relevant social media accompanying the event. Another key theme was the lifting of the driving ban by royal decree, which took place on the first day of the event and was received enthusiastically.

Overall, "ASStepAhead 2017" made an important contribution to overcoming the described challenges in the labour market, by increasing graduates' visibility regarding the job supply and by better preparing them for upcoming assessment processes. In the context of "ASStepAhead 2017" 3600 young women found new employment, partially in intermediate levels and management positions. Thereby, "ASStepAhead" enabled female participants to determine their professional fate and future – in a self-responsible and self-determined manner. In the future, KAS will continue to work through its Regional Programme Gulf States in partnership with Glowork to contribute towards women and the youth becoming active agents of the economic transformation underway in their country. This will support existing efforts in the Kingdom to grant women a more significant economic and social role.



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