

## REGIONAL PROGRAMME

## GULF STATES

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# Supporting Saudi Women in the Labour Market

A CAREER WORKSHOP TO STRENGTHEN THE ECONOMIC ROLE OF WOMEN IN SAUDI ARABIA

**The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is on a steep path of economic transformation. This development has also attributed Saudi women with a greater economic and social role. Flanked by fundamental economic reforms, Saudi Arabia has seen a remarkable increase in women in employment in recent years. Despite this success, however, there are cultural challenges for working women that still need to be addressed.**

The gradual integration of women into the Saudi labour market has its origins in the cautious reforms of H.R.H. former King Abdullah in Abdulaziz Al Saud, signalling the gradual emancipation of Saudi women towards the end of his term in office. With his ambitious economic reform package, "Vision 2030", H.R.H. Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud has accelerated this trend in recent years with an eagerness unprecedented in the recent history of the Kingdom. This transformation process is more necessary than ever: In times of low oil prices and high budget deficits, the commitment, self-determination and entrepreneurial spirit of working-age Saudis are increasingly required. Nevertheless, a third of Saudi women are still unemployed – a proportion that is nearly five times the rate of unemployment amongst men. Given the economic challenges, such indicators are concerning.

In order to tackle this deficit, the Saudi government has adopted a series of key structural reforms in recent years designed to improve women's economic position and employment prospects. Nowhere is their

success more evident in Saudi Arabia than in the retail sector. Since a landmark reform in 2011, about 200,000 women have found work in the sector. As Saudis became more and more accustomed to seeing women working in their country's shopping malls, it also created important societal spill-over effects that gradually created acceptance and awareness of a more significant role of women in Saudi Arabia. In addition, the development proved to serve as a pioneer for a similar increase in other sectors. In the spring of 2017, the Saudi Ministry of Labour and Social Development announced that the number of women in the Saudi private sector has increased by 130 percent over the past four years. The end of the driving ban, projected for mid-2018 and one of the biggest obstacles to women's economic integration for years, also signals the increasing convergence of the roles of women and men in the professional sphere.

## Deficits in reform implementation

Despite these noteworthy advancements, one of the major shortcomings remains the implementation of reforms in practice. For instance, the government no longer demands gender separation in the workplace – yet many employers have not changed this practice, also because such reforms are often not adequately communicated and HR leaders are therefore under-informed, according to Ghaida Al Mutairi, event manager at Glowork, an employment agency specialised on women. A better implementation would be elementary, as the separation of genders in the office is a barrier in the re-

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cruitment of women, which is why they, in turn, have opted for alternative models such as home office in the past. Even where women are already completely involved in work processes, persisting reservations by supervisors, colleagues, and customers can be observed. From clients who refuse to talk to female employees over the phone, to managers who are unsure how to appropriately communicate criticism towards their female colleagues, uncertainties and challenges remain in the professional sphere. In order to overcome these, time and an open social debate that renegotiates gender roles are required. Most notably, it demands the patience and resilience of Saudi women who are already an active part of the labour force.

**Individual support for women in professional life**

An informal career workshop, held on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2017 and jointly organised by Glowork and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS), addresses these challenges. The event provided an opportunity for 20 female participants to individually discuss in an informal atmosphere difficulties in interacting with supervisors, expectation management, and how to deal with criticism. Furthermore, it presented a chance for participants to jointly develop strategies to become more successful in the professional sphere in the long term. Not only did the workshop raise awareness about how the newly created open spaces and opportunities for women in professional life can be used more effectively. The participants, moreover, received practical suggestions on how to handle aforementioned cultural obstacles and reservations in practice with more confidence.

In addition, Mozah Al Otaibi, herself a successful business consultant and trainer in the field of personality and skills development, advised the group of working women and familiarised them with solutions for the business world. The workshop was preceded by a Twitter survey in which women were able to take a vote on the biggest job challenges for them. While 50 percent indicated that the search for their dream job is their biggest difficulty, 19 percent and 17 percent

respectively described communicating with superiors and dealing with criticism as their biggest challenges.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the almost three-hour discussion focused mainly on these questions. Al Otaibi enriched her recommendations on dealing with conflicts and colleagues with her own professional experience. In addition, she pled for realistic expectations and honest self-reflection when searching for the dream job.

**Strategies for professional success**

With the workshop, Glowork and the KAS Regional Programme Gulf States set an important impetus to convey soft skills and success strategies for the professional sphere to Saudi women. Over 80 requests for attendance received prior to the event from female young professionals highlighted the strong demand for training formats such as the workshop. Hence, the format shall be replicated in the future in partnership with Glowork. For the attending women the opportunity to share experiences with each other and the encounter with Al Otaibi as a successful female professional and a role model were particularly significant.

Thus, the Regional Programme Gulf States made an important contribution to put participating women in a better position in the labour market, thereby supporting the existing economic and social emancipation initiatives in the Kingdom. The workshop therefore enabled Saudi women to become independent and responsible agents of the transformation process in their country.



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<sup>1</sup> 14 percent stated another reason as the biggest difficulty.