Tapping into the talent of our women in the Middle East

Dispelling some of the myths and stereotypes that are held in both the East and in the West
Contents

Foreword .................................................. 03
Background to this report ......................... 04
The current landscape .............................. 07
So what are the challenges to progression that our women face in the workforce? ...... 11
Some of the solutions that we have developed at EY .................................................. 29
In summary .............................................. 35
Foreword

Abdulaziz Al-Sowailim
Regional Managing Partner
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The World Economic Forum estimates that it will take roughly another 170 years to achieve gender parity in the workplace. At EY, we aspire to play a differentiating role in addressing this global challenge.

In 2015, we launched our internal Pledge for Parity campaign to help make a difference in gender parity across our organization and beyond. The response of our people from across the globe was overwhelming, each committing specific actions toward making a difference – from accelerated leadership programs to progressive corporate policy to help create supportive environments for our female colleagues to achieve their career ambitions.

EY firms have been operating in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since 1923, so we truly understand the potential as well as the challenge. While women’s involvement in the economic and business world has increased significantly over the past 20 years, the road to gender parity remains long. Through the many programs we run within our organization, we will continue to play an active and progressive role in supporting women as dynamic, innovative and successful members of business and society. Additionally, we continue to contribute to external programs and organizations such as the Global Women’s Leadership Forum and the 30% Club – the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) chapter – where EY is a founding chair and actively involved in developing strategies aimed at the development of women in the region.

We are proud to release this report dedicated to women in the workplace. Tapping into the talent of our women in the Middle East aims to dispel some of the myths and stereotypes that are held about women in general, but also to share the experiences and solutions that we have developed at EY to help reduce the gap faster, both internally and externally within our communities.

The report identifies some common challenges that women face in the workplace: visible barriers, hidden barriers and external and societal pressure. Each of these challenges can be attributed to a lack of sponsorship or flexible working, or leaders’ commitment, which hinders women’s progress in the workplace. Other issues related to gender acceptance and how the media portrays the role of women in society and employment were also identified as major challenges.

The report also sheds light on internal programs and initiatives that can be part of the change. Our various initiatives, such as the Career Watch programme, female role models and women’s leadership development, are testament to our continued efforts in providing women in this region with as much support as they need.

We hope this report will leave you inspired to join us in making a real difference toward gender parity by overcoming the challenges to progression that our women face in the workplace every day.
02 Background to this report
Unfortunately, this can lead employers to overlook or underleverge a significant pool of people who are ready, willing and able to help them meet the shortage of talent in their particular geographies. EY firms employ more than 1,300 women in 15 countries in MENA. We decided to take a closer look at the topic of women in the workplace and ask some questions, with the aim of learning more from our women about their career aspirations and perhaps debunking some of the myths that are held by people, both men and women, in the West and in the East.

First, we took a look at some of the external research and thought leadership that was available. Then, closer to home, we interviewed 17 EY people, both men and women of all ranks, from five countries. We also looked at our MENA Advisory Women’s Forum survey that engaged with 103 EY Advisory women from 13 countries. Our first learning was that the Middle East is incredibly diverse. As Samar Obaid, Transaction Advisory Services (TAS), said, “People tend to think of MENA as a monolith but, in fact, it’s hugely diverse in terms of culture, from very westernized to very conservative.”

EY firms employ more than 1,300 women in the Middle East.

Much has been written and said about women in the Middle East; in particular, about what they can and can’t do, what they should and shouldn’t do and what they do and don’t want.
Background to this report

Our findings on the whole were as we expected. From our rich experience of meeting women from across our Europe, Middle East, India and Africa (EMEIA) Area at our women’s leadership programs over the last eight years, we know that many of the themes we hear about are consistent across most geographies, from the UK, through Russia and onto India. We did, however, identify a handful of challenges that were more specific to a Middle Eastern culture and way of life and we were delighted to identify easily the amazing qualities that this group of women bring to EY.

“It’s only by accelerating the development of that next generation of senior women that we will start to get the diverse cadre of role models we need.”

Samar Obaid
TAS, Jordan

“The Advisory women’s survey had some surprises – for example, in Saudi, the women are impatient for change. They don’t want special treatment – they want to get there on merit and there is no question that women have the ability to get to the top. We see that in their performance ratings across the board.”

Gerard Gallagher
Advisory Managing Partner, MENA

MENA Advisory Women’s Forum survey engaged with

103 Advisory women from
13 of our countries.
03 The current landscape
According to the World Economic Forum’s *Global Gender Gap Report 2016*, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Qatar, Oman and Kuwait all outpace the global gender distribution rankings in terms of enrolment in tertiary education.

Female graduates fill more university seats than males in Saudi Arabia and, according to the *Pearl Initiative 2015 progress report*, 52% of university students in the GCC are women. These numbers are reflected in the growing number of women entering the workforce, although, according to the International Labour Organization (ILO), the women’s labor force participation rate in the region is low at 27% versus men at 77%, having increased from 20% in 1990. The good news is that, over this period, we have seen changes to social attitudes and policies that support women in employment and in much of our internal research, it was clear that our women and their ambitions are well supported by their immediate family.
There clearly isn't a lack of female talent, but the ILO also tells us that working women in MENA often prefer to be employed in the public sectors. In Egypt, about 75% of employees in the public sector are women and in Saudi Arabia, almost 50% of public sector employees are women. Also, we are not yet seeing enough women in senior positions. This is a real challenge for the Middle East, as highlighted in Mercer's 2014 survey. It found that a quarter of regional organizations had female leaders in their 100 most senior roles and only in 4% of organizations did female leaders hold more than 30% of the senior positions.

That said, in a landmark decision in February 2016, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, announced the 12th Government of the UAE, which included eight new ministers, five of whom are women. This increased the percentage of female ministers in the UAE cabinet by 10.5% to 27.5%.

“The shortage of qualified women is changing because so many more women are able to study in higher education.”

“There has also been a major shift in attitudes to working in the public and private sector. Traditionally, public sector jobs were for local people and only expatriates worked in the private sector. Then it became acceptable for Middle Eastern men to work in the private sector, but it was still seen as unsuitable for women because of the hours, the travel and the places they might have to go. That is now changing.”

Mohamed Al-Qurashi
Assurance, Oman
Things are changing fast in Saudi Arabia, but it’s still not easy being a woman in the corporate world. The environment is very male dominated and it can be difficult to interact freely. In most meetings and conferences, for example, men and women will sit in separate areas, or have a partition between them.

You need to be cautious about approaching men, particularly as a young female. The response will depend on how educated and open-minded that individual is, but there is a definite risk that it will be taken the wrong way.

I’m always aware when dealing with clients that some will be from a background that means they are not comfortable dealing with females. They might not be prepared to shake your hand, for example. These are sensitive issues and you have to be careful to avoid awkward situations. It’s also the case that some male colleagues are not comfortable with a woman being in a position of authority.

Those are some of the most visible barriers; then there are the hidden challenges. There is still a lot of societal pressure on women to prioritize being a wife and mother over their careers. Women entered the workforce here relatively recently and there are many families that find it hard to adjust to their daughters going out to work. Fortunately, I’m blessed with a supportive family, but that isn’t the case for everyone. As a result, the turnover of women is quite high, especially in professional services. When women get married, they will often look for a job that offers a less pressured working environment, or opt to stay at home instead.

Of course, there are many, many positives too. I’ve had so many opportunities to learn and develop. The regional model means we are exposed to many different communication and leadership styles and we’re often invited to join teams that need our specialist input and knowledge of the Saudi market. EY is very keen to demonstrate its commitment to empowering women and that has created some great opportunities for me, including representing the company at careers fairs and talking to college students about jobs in professional services. Some of the partners and clients have asked me to talk to their children, too, about their future careers.
So what are the challenges to progression that our women face in the workforce?
So what are the challenges to progression that our women face in the workforce?

In 2010, The Center for Work-Life Policy completed a significant piece of research on female talent in emerging markets, which included the Middle East. Its findings suggested that, despite western media focusing on “stereotypical images of deprived and oppressed women in less developed countries,” the talented women in emerging markets were ahead of the curve in education, ambition and commitment. However, they were challenged with “work-related pushes” and “family-related pulls.” The work-related pushes included travel demands, safety concerns and gender bias in decision-making. Family-related pulls included elder care and the lure of the public sector with more family-friendly policies. In this research, women working full time at multinational companies in the UAE said that they had to work an average of 53 hours a week.

Taking into account all of the external research we looked at and the feedback from our internal research, we decided to present the top challenges in three clusters to allow us to explore them in a little more depth. The key themes fall under visible barriers, hidden barriers and external and societal pressures.

“One of my clients told me that, of all his employees across the region, Saudi females are the most effective. They are the most driven and the most productive.”

Rana Sanyoura
TAS, Beirut
1. Visible barriers

**Lack of mentoring and, in particular, sponsorship**

Both mentoring and sponsorship have a strong role to play in the development of women, but recent research suggests that women can be over-mentored and under-sponsored. At EY, we would tend to agree with this. Mentoring is what happens when you are in the room; sponsorship is what happens when you are not there with a voice.

The role of sponsor is to:

- Remove the roadblocks, intervene and influence on behalf of the protégé to ensure that the firm delivers on its promise of realizing their unique potential
- Leverage their personal and organizational authority to hold line management accountable for retaining, guiding and supporting the protégé to partnership or a senior leadership position
- Provide anonymous feedback to the Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) network on how the wider organizational system (the hidden barriers) needs to shift to create a more diverse leadership cadre

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2. Hidden barriers

**Lack of flexible working in the first place and the potential impact on your career if you do work flexibly**

As in all of our geographies, the availability of flexible working can be inconsistent, particularly in client-facing roles, which can prove challenging. In the early days, the Middle East tended to see formal flexible working (reduced hours) as just a benefit for working mothers but, over the last five years, there has been a considerable push to influence mindset to move away from traditional beliefs about presenteeism (people being seen in the office) and long hours and think more about informal flexibility and new ways of working.

There is also concern among some of our people that their firms will see them as less committed to their role if they aren’t always in the office. Gerard Gallagher agrees that, “In some cases, there is some stigma attached to it – that colleagues who take that option are somehow less committed.” He went on to say that, “We need to build even greater trust with our clients so they are encouraged to focus on outcomes, rather than inputs.”

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3. External and societal pressures

**The impact of unconscious bias**

- Leaders’ commitment to creating change versus maintaining the status quo
- Male colleagues needing a greater awareness of the barriers women face

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“*It’s not enough to leave it to time to address the balance of men and women in senior positions. You need a structured plan for identifying those people with high potential and then giving them the support they need to develop so that you don’t lose valuable talent.*”

*Bishr Baker*
Markets and Business Development, Jordan

“*I’ve heard female colleagues say that they are shifting to flexible working and that they expect to stagnate at their current grade as a result.*”

*Jennifer O’Sullivan*
Tax, Qatar
I was actually the first female ever to work for the Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), an organization that has been established for more than 60 years. I would say it took about six months to convince my colleagues that I wasn't there just as a token woman — that I was as well qualified and capable as any man.

At EY, I feel I have every opportunity to succeed and that my contribution is really valued. People tend to assume there are lots of restrictions in Saudi controlling how women interact with colleagues and clients, but I have never encountered any difficulties. Nevertheless, it's not easy being a woman in the corporate world. I still feel like we have to work harder to prove ourselves than the men. There are these stereotypes about women — for example, that we're very emotional and less objective in our decision-making. We have to show that these assumptions are wrong.

EY really supports us in that. We are always presented to clients as equals; as qualified, capable consultants. It helps to know that the organization has that faith in me and that is backed up by training and by the opportunities I've had to travel to different countries and to shadow senior colleagues working in different specialist areas.

I've also found it really helpful to be able to work flexibly. We're encouraged to work remotely, from the client's premises or from home if we need to. There's no stigma attached to it. Our performance is measured on what we deliver, not how many hours we spend in the office. I feel like I have the ability to manage my own time, which is very helpful when you also have family responsibilities. I think it makes me more productive too.

There are still relatively few women in senior positions in Saudi Arabia, so it's not easy to find female role models. Women have only really been active in the corporate world for the past 15 years or so. Things are changing fast, but we still only account for around 22% of the workforce, so there is still some way to go. Organizations need to make sure they are not putting obstacles in women's way. For example, I think it's still true to some extent that men are promoted on the strength of their future potential while women are judged on their past record. That needs to change.

But really, I think change should start with women. It's our responsibility to make sure we are not underestimating our capabilities and the contribution we can make. We must stop being afraid to fail: we need to move out of our comfort zone, embrace challenges, take risks and start making our own rules. We are responsible for our own success — we shouldn't wait for organizations to do it for us.
“As you progress, it becomes more important to be in the office, as the job involves increasing amounts of coaching and mentoring.”

Lack of role models

Research regularly tells us that women believe that the absence of a good role model is the reason that they are not inspired to progress or, at times, even to stay in an organization. “If I can't see one, how can I be one?”

However, even more interesting is the way that women think about role models compared with men. Men tend to look at a lot of people and cherry-pick the elements of an individual that they admire. Women tend to look for one person that will meet all of their criteria and this is rare to find.

Strengthening the leadership pipeline in the Middle East is still work in progress, but there are some fantastic women in leadership positions – and there are also some great men.

“I have to look to male role models when I’m planning my own future. I feel I have a lot to learn from my male colleagues about how business is done.”

Negotiating to work flexible hours wasn't difficult, but the implementation was challenging. It can be hard to make sure that you are being judged on your outputs, not on the hours you put in. There is still that assumption among some colleagues that if you’re not there, you are not working. I still worry that I might be missing out on opportunities by not being in the office, so I try very hard to create them for myself.”

Salam Shouman
Advisory, Jordan

“There is also a need for individuals to take responsibility for negotiating for what they want and then partnering with the team to make it work. Shahzeen Baloch, an Advisory director, agreed with this when she told us that, “Last year, I was working in Qatar. I had to fly there every Sunday, but I made it clear that I wanted to come back on Wednesday to be able to spend time with my son.”

“In the office, as the job involves increasing amounts of coaching and mentoring.”
“Role models are vitally important. I work a lot with one of our female partners and I see how the women flock to her when we go to events together.”

Phil Gandier
TAS Managing Partner, MENA

“Sometimes, clients will specifically request to have women on the team. They see them as role models, as a way of showing their own employees the way forward.”

Fahad Altoaimi
Markets and Business Development, Saudi Arabia

“Women need to do more networking – talking to other women helps you to be aware of challenges and encourages you to go beyond your comfort zone. It makes you better able to maneuver in what is still a very male environment.”

“I’m always conscious that people are looking at me. I guess that applies to senior male colleagues as well, but I think it’s more acute for women. We probably have more to prove.”

“Both of our female partners in Jordan came up through the ranks here in the Middle East, which is definitely something that motivates more junior women. Such role models are vital in creating an environment where everyone feels they have an equal opportunity to progress.”
I was surprised at how similar the working cultures are in the UK and Saudi. In both places, there’s a lot of respect for women and there are no distinctions made in terms of the kind of work we are given, or what’s expected of us. Of course, there is one big difference and that is in the number of women in senior roles, but to me, it feels like a huge opportunity. I see it as a positive advantage and I’m very optimistic about the future.

The media seems to perpetuate the idea that Saudi women don’t have any opportunities and that the country is completely male dominated. It’s not true. One of the Saudi major investment banks has a female CEO, there are women sitting on the Shura Council and a Saudi woman is in the Forbes list of the world’s 100 most powerful women. I believe the media don’t put enough emphasis on the positives. Yes, it’s slow and the numbers are still relatively small, but it’s definitely happening.

I hope that I’ve made my mark by challenging ideas and changing attitudes within EY. Since I joined, the number of women working in Tax in MENA has grown significantly. Everyone can see how intelligent and hardworking we are. EY grants us the opportunity to benefit from the wealth of expertise here through mentoring from partners to managers and, in my personal life, my father is my mentor because he’s a certified public accountant as well. Also, he’s a huge supporter of me enhancing my personal skills to become a self-dependent women. I hope one day I will be like him.

In summary, I believe that it gets easier for women to progress as more of us reach senior positions and as blockers get removed within the workplace and elsewhere. One of my future goals is to change the overall barriers women face in the workplace. That will open the door not just for EY women, but for all women in society in Saudi Arabia.

Esraa Albuti is a member of the Tax service line in Saudi Arabia. She was the first Saudi woman to be promoted to manager. She joined EY in 2010 after graduating from King Saud University with a degree in Accounting and has also spent time in the London office of the UK member firm.
2. Hidden barriers

The impact of unconscious bias

Many of the decisions that we make on a day-to-day basis are based on our past experiences and our basic instincts and any bias that is present is unconscious. We all want to think that we are open-minded; however, our personal history heavily influences how we evaluate others. Of course, for survival, our natural instincts often keep us safe — for example, we don’t just step onto a busy road to cross over and we don’t put our hand on an open, hot grill. However, when we let bias influence our decisions at work, we can end up missing real talent and great opportunities.

Most often, you hear people referring to unconscious bias (rather than bias), and “curing” unconscious bias is sometimes perceived as the silver bullet (perfect solution) for progressing D&I, which it clearly isn’t. The reason people use the term “unconscious” is to try and ensure that an individual doesn’t become defensive if you suggest that they are not as open-minded as they like to think they are. EY MENA has done a lot of work to raise awareness about the impact of bias, most recently delivering training for more than 400 people, but there is always more to do.

“We need to be honest with ourselves in identifying and tackling any unconscious bias that might be skewing ratings, promotion and development.”

Seshni Samuel
EMEIA Talent

“There are no barriers, beyond the kind of unconscious bias you will find everywhere. I think the glass ceiling is a global phenomenon.”

“There is still that assumption among some colleagues that, if you are not there, you are not working. That’s an example of the kind of unconscious bias I’d like to see us working to eradicate. It’s hard, because its implicit – but you know it and you feel it.”

“There are these stereotypes about women – for example, that we are very emotional and less objective in our decision-making.”
I didn't know what to expect from working in the Middle East. Had it been Dubai, I would have felt pretty confident that it would be a fairly international working environment. But Qatar was an unknown quantity. I didn't know how I'd be expected to dress, whether the language would be a barrier and, generally, what attitudes to women would be like.

Five years on and I wouldn't say I live my life any differently here from how I would in Europe or the US. It's been very easy to adapt. When I first came, I did encounter a certain amount of shyness and hesitation among male colleagues and clients, but that's changed over time as we have developed a greater understanding of each other. Their backgrounds are very different from mine, so I've had to learn to understand certain reactions and attitudes. For the most part though, men and women interact very freely. EY has worked really hard to make sure that's the case in the office too. There's been a real focus on recruiting women and encouraging them to go for promotion. The workforce here is pretty much 50/50.

The cultural norm is still for women to stop working once they have children and the proportion of women definitely drops off once you get to the more senior levels. This is a very competitive, fast-paced environment and I guess, in the past, women have found it difficult to get back in once they've taken a break. It's the same on the client side. You don't generally find many women in senior positions in industry here.

In my view, the Qatar firm has gone a lot further in terms of supporting women to get into senior positions than many other organizations here in Qatar, but the lack of female role models is still an issue. Personally, I have to look to male role models when I'm planning my own future. That wasn't the case when I was working in Europe. However, here in the Middle East, the environment is different. It is still male dominated, so I feel I have a lot to learn from my male colleagues about how business is done. The male partners here are very supportive and encouraging. If we were to have this conversation again in 10 years' time, I think the situation would be very different. I'm not sure we will have achieved complete equality — I think the nature of professional services means there's always going to be a falling away of females to some extent. But I think we're heading in the right direction.
Leaders' commitment to creating change versus maintaining the status quo

Too often, the gender agenda is focused only on women and events convened to discuss the challenges don’t involve men. The gender agenda is about men and women and, in many geographies, such as MENA, where the leadership is dominated by men, we need our men to lead the charge and drive the change. EY MENA is blessed to have a strong cadre of committed male leaders who have a vision that includes both men and women and, in our interviews, many of our more junior women talked about the impact they have seen these leaders have, both in what they say and what they do.

Inclusive leaders leverage the diversity of views around the table rather than converging too quickly on quick wins. They value difference. Among the many things they do, inclusive leaders:

- Plan for change over the long term and work with individuals to plan their careers over the short and mid term
- Prepare females for their next role – experiences, flexibility and potential
- Provide sponsorship, including offering stretch assignments to females and detailed feedback
- Commit to targets and hold their teams accountable
- Challenge narrow mindsets to ensure bias is surfaced
- Ensure equality in promotions through transparency

“When I took over managing the office in 2010, one of my priorities was to explore what women could bring to EY. We never had any doubts about their capabilities; the question was, could we work around the restrictions? Of course, it was a huge success and now, we are at the stage where more than 10% of our colleagues are female, a number that is growing all of the time.”

“Are we ready for a female partner in Riyadh? I don’t see why not. I can’t see any barriers or restrictions at all, beyond the simple steps we have to take to make sure that they are in a safe, comfortable working environment.”

“There is still a lingering perception that women are less ambitious or less career minded than men. In the countries I manage, there are a lot of very ambitious women who have already reached very senior positions in the company. I have noticed that our female colleagues in the Jordan office are often very keen to travel to the more difficult locations. They want to be involved in everything and to learn as much as they can.”
Maya Whiteley is a member of EY’s Transaction Advisory service line in Dubai and worked as a real estate developer in Vietnam before joining EY in 2012.

From the point of view of lifestyle and flexibility, joining EY has been a very positive adjustment. I didn’t really have any preconceptions about coming to work in the Middle East, beyond there being fewer women in professional services than there are in the West. But I was already used to that, having worked in real estate in Vietnam. What was surprising was the sheer diversity — I work with people from so many different cultures and backgrounds — and how welcoming the environment is to women.

I’ve just had my second baby. We won a couple of very big projects just before I was due to give birth, so I’ve pretty much been working throughout my maternity leave. I’ve done it flexibly, working from home and fitting around the baby. Of course, the team would have managed if I’d chosen to disconnect completely, but I felt a big responsibility to stay on board and offer guidance and advice. I don’t know if that’s to do with being a woman, or just to do with my personality.

For me, it’s always been a given that I would want to advance my career and find a way to make that work for my family.

Fortunately, this is a very family-centric culture. If something happens at home, the expectation is that you will drop everything to deal with it. That extends to my clients too. They absolutely accept that, as a woman, you’re going to be dealing with family commitments as well as work and I’ve found that there’s a huge amount of respect for anyone who’s balancing the two. For me, I would say being a woman in this environment is an advantage, not a barrier.

I think there’s a confidence that comes with a certain level of seniority too. A few years ago, I would definitely have said that I felt I had to work harder than male colleagues in order to compete. I was driving myself very hard and really over-delivering. Now I’m at the stage where, as my career has progressed, I’ve become more comfortable in my own skin and confident in my abilities — I don’t constantly need to prove a point — I can simply be me. I haven’t asked for flexible working in a formal way; it’s just kind of evolved. My partner knows that I’m committed and that I get things done. I don’t need to clock in and clock out.

I think EY is doing what it needs to do to support and encourage women in this region. The lack of women in senior roles is a global trend, not something that’s specific to the Middle East. Personally, I think the biggest barrier is ourselves. We need to be better at calling attention to our achievements, rather than waiting for someone to recognize us. Generally, that’s something men are much better at doing. I’ve seen female colleagues getting frustrated about their lack of advancement, or not getting the pay rise they wanted. When I said, “Well, did you ask for what you wanted?” the answer was no! That’s something we really need to address.
Male colleagues needing a greater awareness of the barriers women face

It would be difficult to find a man or woman at EY who denied that both men and women should be given the same opportunities to excel in the workplace. The challenge, however, is that, often, men genuinely don’t understand some of the challenges that women face.

There are, of course, the more obvious, stereotypical challenges, such as the need for flexibility to meet childcare needs, but there are a lot of less obvious challenges. For example, many women are ambitious, but don’t want to be labeled as ambitious because, for them, it has some negative connotations. In a Harvard Business Review article by Anna Fels, she refers to some of the words associated with ambitious women (versus men) – words implying that women are selfish, keen for self-agrandizement or the manipulative use of others for their own ends. On the other hand, when she interviewed men, it was considered to be a necessary and desirable part of their life. So, just because our women are not being strident or pushing for development and stretch assignments, they may still be very ambitious.

There is also the impact of micro-inequities that would happen less if men were more conscious of their day-to-day behaviors. Micro-inequities are subtle, often unconscious, messages that we send out through our facial expressions, gestures, tone of voice or choice of words. For example, folding your arms when someone starts presenting, looking at your emails, not making eye contact and dismissing someone’s idea.

“When you are only making use of half of the resources available, it’s like trying to clap with one hand. We need to raise awareness among male colleagues of some of the challenges that our women face.”

“We don’t have enough senior females to sponsor all the junior women, so we have to raise awareness among male colleagues of the kind of support that women might need.”

“Women are less likely to put themselves forward, I think. Not because of any lack of ambition, but because we have a tendency to focus on our weaknesses rather than our strengths. We tend to be less good at marketing ourselves than men.”

“I think the biggest barrier is ourselves. We need to be better at calling attention to our achievements, rather than waiting for someone to recognize us.”
Thinking about challenges in my own career, the main one is that it has been hard to build a business case for promotion based on Lebanon alone, as it’s such a small market. To build a case for myself and to continue to develop and grow, I’ve had to be very flexible and be willing to take some risks. When the opportunity came up to go to work with a client in Karachi, I was the only one, male or female, that volunteered to go. Sure, it’s a risky place, but I like adventure – and I saw it as a way of strengthening my credentials within the company.

I guess some women might find it more difficult to be quite that mobile. But there is scope for a lot of flexibility. Our senior leaders are very supportive in that way and I try to be the same. One of my team members has a small baby and I’ve told her to work from home when she needs to; for example, if she has problems getting childcare. She’s competent and I trust her.

For myself, having that flexibility means I can be based here in Lebanon and I can spend time with my family, but I can also serve clients across the region. That’s not to say it’s easy. I have a very supportive husband but, if I want to sit with my daughter at certain hours, I will compensate for that by working after midnight. You have to be prepared to be flexible too. But it does feel very much like we are truly geared to looking at deliverables, rather than at when people are checking in and checking out.

There are some myths about the Middle East, definitely – in particular, about the more conservative countries such as Saudi Arabia. Some people still think that women can’t and don’t work there. But I found it very easy to do business there as a woman. I wore the abaya – which I wouldn’t usually do in Lebanon – because I knew it would help me to fit in and make the client feel more comfortable. I don’t think that’s hypocritical, it’s about showing respect. One of my clients there told me that, of all his employees across the region, Saudi females are the most effective. They are the most driven, the most productive. If there ever has been an issue there with lack of ambition, it’s not the case any more.
“We need the support of men to help us tackle the challenges and remove any remaining obstacles.”

“I think it’s still true to some extent that men are promoted on the strength of their future potential while women are judged on their past record. That needs to change.”

“Men and women tend to have different communication styles. That’s true everywhere, but it is exacerbated in a male-dominated environment. There is a risk that, unless men are aware of the need to give women space to have their say, their voices might not be heard at all.”

“I think that it is about awareness. It’s a case of understanding our colleagues as individuals. Thinking about the skills, experience and perspectives that they bring to a project. This is how you can make the most of their knowledge and expertise.”

“Accommodation can be an issue and our priority must always be to make sure our colleagues feel safe and secure. There is still some work to be done in raising awareness among male colleagues of how they can better support their female colleagues.”

“My own personal view is that women are very often more productive than men and more focused on the job in hand. They have great attention to detail and are very good at listening too. They see things from a different angle. It’s always an advantage in any situation to have different perspectives and new ways of looking at a question.”
I’m so used to working in a male-dominated environment that I sometimes forget I’m the only woman in the room. Mostly, I don’t think about it and I try to see it from a positive perspective. However, there are challenges and you have to find a way around them. For example, male colleagues can easily build stronger relations with clients, which is harder for women. So I have to make a big effort to make that individual connection with clients during working hours. It’s a fact of life that people like people who are like them. I think, as a woman in this environment, you have to work a little bit harder to compensate for that.

Since having my second child, I’ve worked flexible hours. I work from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Negotiating wasn’t difficult – we have a female partner, who is very supportive – but the implementation was challenging. For the first three months, I really struggled: I was trying to manage the same workload as before and people were regularly asking for meetings outside my working hours. I actually came close to giving up on my career but, instead, I went back to the partner and informed her about the situation. She really helped me to realize that it was fine to say “no” and to ask people to respect my hours and fit in with me. Having female role models who understand the challenges is the key to maintaining gender diversification in EY.

Before, I was worried that people would think I was no longer capable of doing my job. Basically, I was trying to be a superhero – something I think a lot of women do! However, I couldn’t keep doing everything and maintain the standards I set for myself. I still worry that I might be missing out on opportunities by not being in the office, so I try very hard to create them for myself. It can be hard, too, to make sure that you’re being judged on your outputs, not on the hours you put in. There’s still that assumption among some colleagues that if you are not there, you are not working.

That’s an example of the kind of unconscious bias I’d like to see us working to eradicate. It’s hard, because it’s implicit – but you know it and you feel it. You can’t change the fact that there are differences between men and women, but you can try to make changes to the working environment – and perhaps to manage client expectations – so that there are fewer barriers.

Women need more role models and we need our male colleagues to be more aware of the challenges we face. I think having more women in senior positions would bring huge benefits to the organization. Women tend to be more organized and focused on detail; men can be better at the big picture of things. That’s a powerful combination. As an organization, we should be looking to make use of all the different strengths and capabilities that are available to us to build a better working world.
3. External societal pressures

**Interacting with clients (e.g., entertaining)**

These challenges vary across the Middle East but, in our research, we didn’t find anyone that had not been able to overcome them. For example, Samar Obaid said that her “male partners will help by inviting the client out, so that she can be accompanied and the situation becomes socially acceptable.”

Phil Gandier agreed that there were some restrictions: “Women can only travel with a family member or licensed driver so, if a team is going out to see a client by car, any female members will have to travel separately.” We laughed though when one of our women in Saudi said that she was delighted that someone else had to deal with her travel arrangements. She didn’t have to navigate the route or worry about parking and she could read her emails on the way.

In some cases, it is just early days. Azza Jamjoom is the first Saudi female to become a TAS manager so, to a great extent, her work and presence is pioneering. She said that, “It can be difficult to interact freely. In most meetings and conferences, men and women will sit in separate areas or have a partition between them. I’m always aware when dealing with clients that some will be from a more conservative background that means they are not so comfortable dealing with females. For example, they might not want to shake your hand. It’s also the case that some male colleagues are not comfortable with a woman being in a position of authority.”

Salam Shouman confirmed that, “There are challenges and you have to find a way around them. For example, male colleagues can easily build stronger relations with clients, which is harder for women. So I have to make a big effort to make that individual connection with clients during working hours.”

“I found it easy to do business in Saudi Arabia. I wore the abaya – which I wouldn’t usually do in Lebanon – because I knew it would help me to fit in and make the client feel more comfortable.”

“Coming to a global organization such as EY was a complete contrast to working for a national bank. People tend to assume there are lots of restrictions in Saudi controlling how women interact with colleagues and clients, but I have never encountered any difficulties. We are always presented to clients as equals; as qualified, capable consultants.”
“There are still some restrictions on who women can work with. In the past, I have withdrawn a female colleague from a particular project because she didn’t feel comfortable with the working environment. It would have meant working with a lot of expat men who didn’t understand her culture or how to behave around her.”

“One of my colleagues resigned because her husband’s job meant he was at home from 4:00 p.m. each day, while she didn’t get back from the office until 7:00 p.m. Had it been the other way round, it would have been fine – she would have spent the time cooking dinner, taking care of the house or with the children. It wasn’t OK for him to do the same thing.”

“Having women in the team enhances our clients’ perceptions of EY. Many of them have female staff too, so it is good to show that we can offer the same broad mix of talent.”

“The cultural norm is still for women to stop working once they have children and the proportion of women definitely drops off once you get to the more senior levels.”

“The need to balance family and work hours

Research by the Pearl Initiative 2015 found that one of the key challenges for women is that they face the double burden of work and family care responsibilities. The study in GCC countries indicated that women considered balancing work and family life as the single most important obstacle to their career aspirations.

It is definitely a big challenge at EY but, arguably, a nice one to have. People we spoke to agreed that there was a lot of societal pressure for women to prioritize being a wife and mother over their careers. Azza Jamjoom told us that, “When women get married, they will often look for a job that offers a less pressured working environment, or opt to stay at home instead.”

That said, we also spoke to many men and women who felt that, with the right support in place, both at work and at home, this was becoming less challenging. Bedor Al Rashode felt that, “Our performance is measured on what we deliver, not how many hours we spend in the office. I feel like I have the ability to manage my own time, which is very helpful when you also have family responsibilities.”
Role of the media

When doing our research, we found that there were many different ways that the press wanted to portray the Middle East and, in particular, the role of women in society and employment. As Esraa Albuti confirmed, “The media seems to perpetuate the idea that Saudi women don’t have any opportunities. It’s not true. One of the Saudi major investment banks has a female CEO, there are women sitting on the Shura Council and a Saudi woman is in the Forbes list of the world’s 100 most powerful women.”

Certainly in the West, we are led to believe that there are few women working in Saudi Arabia, and we were delighted to hear from Dania Naguli, in Tax, that, when she joined the team in Riyadh in 2013, she was one of three females. Now there are nearly 30 women in her service line.

“This is a very family-centric culture. My clients accept that, as a woman, I’m going to be dealing with family commitments as well as work and I’ve found that there is a huge amount of respect for anyone who’s balancing the two.”

Maya Whiteley
TAS, Dubai

“We tend to be more organized and focused on detail; men can be better at the big picture of things. That is a powerful combination.”

“There is definitely still a perception across many of the countries in the region that women can’t balance the demands of work and home but, just as in the rest of the world, the idea of a working couple is becoming more and more common.”

“I think there is sometimes a perception that women in the Middle East are meek and subservient, but that is far from the truth. The women I meet are as dynamic, energetic and outspoken as anywhere in the world and they want to make a difference.”
Some of the solutions that we have developed at EY
Some of the solutions that we have developed at EY

MENA rolled out Career Watch in early 2016, with more than 60 high-potential female senior managers and directors participating from all four service lines.

This is a sponsorship program for both high-potential women and GCC nationals. With only 4% female partners and 10% GCC nationals, the EY MENA leadership agreed to support Career Watch to focus on strengthening our leadership pipeline.

One of our first Career Watchers was Gerard Gallagher (prior to there being a formal program), who sees great value in sponsorship: “For me, one of the most important things we can do to support the development of female colleagues is to make a visible, personal commitment to lead by example as a sponsor. We are now rolling out Career Watch, and all of our 52 Advisory partners will be paired with high-potential females and nationals. I’ve also stated that, from next year, I want half of the new partners coming through to be from these two groups. At the graduate intake level, we already have a target of 55% of our recruits being female.”

Following the briefings to partner sponsors and participants, early feedback suggests that the program was well received by the protégés, and many women and GCC nationals are keen to use this opportunity to achieve their potential and realize their career ambitions. Going forward, the D&I Team will be reviewing progress on a quarterly basis with a view to supporting both the protégés and the sponsors.

The potential impact of a Career Watcher is summarized below:

Believes in me and speaks up on my behalf
Adovates for my next promotion
Promotes my visibility
Puts their own political capital on the line
Gives honest, critical feedback
Provides stretch opportunities

Connects me to senior leaders
Raises my profile
Gives advice on presentation of self
Gives advice on presentation of self

Some of the solutions that we have developed at EY rolled out Career Watch in early 2016, with more than 60 high-potential female senior managers and directors participating from all four service lines.
New ways of working

Internal research shows a direct link between our people’s engagement and their ability to work flexibly – not necessarily on a formal contract, but informally, allowing them to choose where and when they work. At EY, we talk about six behaviors that we believe, if they are fully adopted, will lead to more effective collaboration and teaming.

EY MENA’s flexible working journey started in 2012 with the publication of its booklet called Working Flexibly. In 2014, the region ran a campaign that focused on the Six Behaviors Model as leading practice to successfully work flexibly. To date, there are about 20 people working on formal flexible working arrangements. In 2016, the Region started to focus more on informal flexibility. With a campaign aimed at every level in the organization and at both men and women, this started to drive a deeper conversation within teams to understand better the value and benefits to our people and our business.

They are now seeing more male leaders than ever before opting for informal flexibility in MENA, although there are still some challenges. There is still a relatively high percentage of managers and leaders who are reluctant to allow their teams to work flexibly. A change management approach is needed to build trust and confidence within teams so that they can enjoy the advantages of working flexibly while still exceeding the expectations of our clients by delivering quality work effectively and efficiently.

The Six Behaviors Model

1. Communicate effectively
2. Focus on outputs
3. Set boundaries
4. Embrace diversity
5. Work intelligently
6. Trust your team
Tackling the lack of role models

Since 2011, EY MENA has run a high-profile and very engaging role model program, which was initiated to recognize and honor exceptional EY women across the Region. Being selected as a female role model is seen as a personal achievement for all of our women across MENA. At the same time, this program is a tribute to our women’s dedication and perseverance at work and outside of work. Last year, they had 69 nominees and 143 nominations.

The selection criteria was to nominate a colleague who:

- Exhibits the right attitude, behavior and EY values
- Helps create an exceptional learning environment for colleagues and supports the development of a high-performing culture
- Builds exceptional team knowledge, including commerciality and organizational growth and focuses on delivering results
- Is proactive and collaborative and shares responsibility with the team
- Displays a leadership style that is flexible, inspirational and inclusive

EY MENA 2016 role models

Ranim Amin
CBS
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

Dima Shatara
Advisory
Amman, Jordan

Bedor AlRashode
Advisory
Riyadh, Saudi Arabia

The three winners were presented with a personalized EY trophy by their firm’s market sector leaders or the service line leader during a local celebration.
Tackling the impact of unconscious bias

In EY MENA, unconscious bias training is mandatory for all managers and above, as well as staff below manager level. This two-hour virtual session focuses on identifying the unconscious bias we all have and on mitigating it in our people processes. EY MENA has started to see some positive changes in counseling relationships and in more effective teaming. The aim is to influence review committee discussions about ratings and promotions using D&I champions to facilitate the committees. This year, there were training sessions conducted for eight talent team facilitators, with six virtual sessions conducted across MENA and more than 400 people attending in total.

Jalal Bibi, Advisory Services and Strategy Competency Leader, says, “It was a pleasant experience to attend this interesting and insightful training, during which colleagues shared their own perceptions, observations and experiences in a safe environment. There were many lightbulb moments for the participants and I recommend more of such sessions, especially during year-end reviews to embed this learning into our people processes.”

Women’s leadership development

In EMEIA, we sponsor three flagship programs targeting women at different stages in their career journey. Navigator is the newest addition to this trio and EY MENA launched it in 2014 for more than 70 managers and first-year senior managers from Amman, Doha, Dubai and Manama. The key objectives are to help participants think about building their personal brand, become more aware of the beliefs that are self-limiting and create better networks to support each other and share experiences. An additional added value was getting partner sponsors to be mentors and coaches for some of our high-potential women. Following feedback, they redesigned the program to be two full-day sessions instead of three half-day sessions. Since the initial programs, hundreds of women have participated.

Somaya AbdulJawad, ACR Leader, Bahrain – Accounting, Compliance & Reporting, says, “The Navigator program has broadened my horizons by giving me the exposure to interact with powerful women in EY. It gave me an opportunity to discover my mentor, who played a significant role in providing me with guidance and inspiration, which made me believe that the dream of success is a reality. The program has helped me to understand the obstacles I need to overcome to achieve my goal and work around them, create a positive mental attitude, embrace the challenges, stay on track and show the world that the goal is definitely achievable. Last, but not least, the Navigator program has lit up the spirit of the warrior in me.”
External solutions

The Women³. The Power of Three forum is part of our Women. Fast forward platform that aims to accelerate the collective power of women in business, government and entrepreneurship to accelerate the rate of change toward gender parity.

EY MENA hosted one of these forums to address the economic, geopolitical and social challenges that influence the management and success of global business and government, today and in the future. The forum also discussed approaches for plugging the skills gap through the Power of Three, with a particular emphasis on approaches to professional talent development.

With the premise that professional talent, particularly females, is developed neither fast enough nor effectively enough, there is a need to plug the widening skills gap between availability and requirement of skills in the workforce. We believe that doing this right will contribute to accelerating gender parity.

The recommendations that came from the Dubai forum include:

• Develop regional action plans to accelerate women in the workplace
• Focus on entrants and use of digital technology as an enabler
• Actions for entrants and digital technology to be reflected in our reports
• Develop a framework and a project plan for the Employer of Choice Award for the Region
• Propose a partnership arrangement with existing digital platform-serving entrepreneurs within MENA

MENA participants in the forum took the issues raised during the roundtable event to an international forum meeting in Istanbul, to ensure that local challenges in professional talent development are heard on a world stage.
In summary
It was clear, from everyone we spoke to, that the EY MENA region is on track to enjoy increased economic and social benefits from its greatest resource – its women.

"Diversity is one of our major strengths at EY. Being exposed to different perspectives sharpens everyone up and makes us more dynamic and creative."

"Women in the Middle East are talented, they are ambitious, they are focused and they are determined to prove themselves. Growing our female talent is a no-brainer for our business in the region."

“For me, it’s like sending your children to a mixed-gender school – they will be more used to dealing with different perspectives and points of view and be better prepared for the real world.”
In one way, the findings that we describe in this study are unremarkable. While the trends we have identified are similar to those across the world, what is different and what I have seen in my eight years in this region is that the intensity of the challenges are quite unique.

I have experienced an unprecedented change in the last couple of years in the way women across the MENA region have put themselves forward to take on opportunities that women from other regions could only imagine. As an expat, I have come to appreciate that the journeys of the women in MENA are different. It is not only important but essential for us to see the boundaries that women push and the successes that they achieve in fast-tracking their ability to compete with not only men and women, but also an expatriate workforce. Alongside the common traditional perceptions and unconscious biases that women often face globally, women in the MENA region have additional biases and perceptions to overcome. Over the years, I have seen a determination and energy to change the mindsets of people globally and within the region and prove through their courage that they can stretch the traditional limits. One of the distinct qualities that I feel is unique to this region’s women is their ability to create long-lasting and transformational relationships; the women are determined to influence key stakeholders and achieve remarkable results across some of the countries in MENA by having a seat at the decision-making table.

I am personally inspired and enthused by the story of the first-ever Saudi woman to climb Mount Everest and the female fighter pilots in the UAE air force. As the EY MENA Talent Leader, I have visited most of the countries in our Region and, as I reflect, I am utterly amazed by the diversity in career and life journeys of my female colleagues. I admire their resilience to impact change in a world that expects them to stretch and adapt quickly to the ever-changing landscape of business and the working world. I feel very privileged and proud to be in a position to support, both personally and as part of EY, so many MENA women to realize their potential and continue their unique journey.

Rachel Ellyard
MENA Talent Leader

The women of the MENA region are rich in diversity and full of ambition, vision, determination and a will to drive change. They want a seat at the table alongside their business partners, leaders and peers, collaborating on solving their countries’ issues and contributing to the evolvement of not only the region’s, but some of the world’s, biggest challenges. They want a role in shaping the future.
Sources referenced in this document

1. Women’s Careers in the GCC: the CEO agenda, 2015, Pearl Initiative


5. Anna Fels, Do Women lack ambition?, Harvard Business Review, April 2004
Pledging for parity

Many of our people in the Middle East signed up for our 2016 International Women’s Day Campaign. #pledgeforparity

I pledge to help a woman on my team identify and secure her next promotion.

Jorn Tihssling

I pledge to identify opportunities for women on my teams to lead.

Cassandra Harris

I pledge to challenge our leaders to ensure men and women are treated equally.

Anonymous

I pledge to become a sponsor for a woman to help her achieve her professional ambitions.

Jonathan Blackmore
I pledge to challenge our leaders to ensure men and women are treated equally.

-Lora M. Qutbah

I pledge to identify opportunities for women on my teams to lead.

-Matthew Zemmel

I pledge to become a sponsor for a woman to help her achieve her professional ambitions.

-Tim Peters

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-Liliane Hameh

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-Lilya Darwich
“Over the last two decades, a major shift in lifestyle, culture and education has taken place in the Middle East, fueling the transformation of women’s quality of life and the role they play in society. Nevertheless, many challenges still exist. Today, women in the Middle East are an active part of society, sharing responsibilities and challenges and reaping success alongside their male counterparts. A number of countries in MENA have passed legislation to bring better equality for women and to give them more rights in education, health and employment opportunities, as well as political and social representation of their communities. The stereotypical role of women in the region is beginning to fade away and the EY women across MENA are living proof of this transformation.”

Zaid Al-Hadhrami
Diversity & Inclusion Leader for MENA
About EY

EY is a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services. The insights and quality services we deliver help build trust and confidence in the capital markets and in economies the world over. We develop outstanding leaders who team to deliver on our promises to all of our stakeholders. In so doing, we play a critical role in building a better working world for our people, for our clients and for our communities.

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