CASE STUDY

MARCH 2026

Women in business across the Middle East: a regional study of women leaders

THE CONSULTANTS MEA

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A nine-market study of around 400 women leaders across North Africa, the Levant and the GCC: where women are represented, how they lead, what holds them back, and what organizations are doing about it.

At a glance

- **~400** women in business leadership roles surveyed
- **9** markets: Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain
- **87%** of women leaders have made changes to be more inclusive of women in managerial positions
- **UAE** ranked as the most supportive country in the region for women in business
- **75%** of discretionary spend is projected to be controlled by women by 2028, while only **35%** of creative advertising directors in the US are women

The objective

The study set out to build a regional picture of how women in leadership experience the workplace: where they are represented, how they lead, what holds back their progress, and what organizations are already doing about it. The aim was to provide research-based recommendations that support women's career growth, and a credible, data-led position from which to speak publicly on the subject.

The approach

The study interviewed approximately 400 women occupying leadership positions in business across nine markets in North Africa, the Levant and the GCC. Coverage across this range of markets allowed the findings to be read both regionally and by country, including a comparison of how supportive each

country is of women in business.

The survey covered four areas:

> Representation of women leaders across industries

> Leadership styles and the priorities women leaders bring to their teams

> The challenges women face in advancing their careers

> The changes organizations have made to become more inclusive of women in management

Key findings

The UAE leads the region in supporting women in business

Respondents identified the UAE as the most supportive country in the region for women in business. The findings point to a combination of factors behind this position: the representation of women in government, empowerment policies, educational initiatives, leadership objectives and anti-discrimination legislation.

Representation varies widely by industry

Women CEOs are distributed unevenly across sectors. They are present in greater numbers in manufacturing and technology, and markedly underrepresented in banking, consumer goods, retail and government.

The gap carries commercial weight. Women are projected to account for 75% of discretionary spend by 2028, making them among the most influential consumers in the world, yet only 35% of creative advertising directors in the US are women ([Nielsen, Wise up to women](https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2020/wise-up-to-women/)).

Women leaders prioritize recognition and balance

Women leaders were less inclined to prioritize leadership styles built on emotional support and personal attention. Their focus was on creating an environment where professional success is recognized and rewarded, and where employees are supported in maintaining a healthy work-life balance.

> "Women need to be resilient. They are put down a lot and criticized in different ways, differently than

men. We are also sensitive; it's part of the feminine quality and we should use that as our power, not as a weakness."

Layla El Wafi, Senior Legal Counsel, Standard Chartered Bank

Gender bias and the return to work after childbirth are the leading challenges

Gender bias ranked as a top challenge, reflecting persistent stereotypes and unequal treatment that can affect career advancement, pay and representation in leadership roles. Published research shows that firms with more women in senior leadership tend to perform better, while women in those roles often earn less than their male counterparts ([Journal of Business Research](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148296315002143)).

The return of mothers to the workforce emerged as a distinct challenge, shaped by family responsibilities related to childbearing and childcare.

> "Workplaces need to adapt, there are two competing needs for women: the career and the biological clock. The successful workplace can navigate both, so that there isn't one that sacrifices the other."

Najla Al Jamali, CEO of Alternative Energy, OQ

Organizations are already acting on inclusion

87% of the women leaders surveyed have made changes to be more inclusive of women in managerial positions. This indicates that many organizations recognize the value of more women in management and are taking deliberate steps to support their advancement. The findings also point to further room for progress, and to the value of follow-up research on the factors that slow the adoption of inclusive practices.

The outcome

The study provided a regional evidence base on women in business leadership, drawn from approximately 400 women leaders across nine markets. The findings were used to take a public position in March 2024, identifying the most supportive market in the region, and as the foundation for research-based recommendations to support women's career growth.

> "Despite the challenges, the study showcases the resilience and determination of women in business, reflecting the need for continued efforts to foster a fair and inclusive work environment."

Rana El Naggar, Co-Founder, Kūdi

About the client

> **Client:** Kūdi, an association of women leaders in the Middle East, working to accelerate women's learning and professional development

> **Markets:** Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar and Bahrain

> **Method:** Quantitative survey of approximately 400 women in business leadership roles

> **Study published:** March 2024

Sources

> [Wise up to women, Nielsen, 2020](https://www.nielsen.com/insights/2020/wise-up-to-women/)

> [Women in senior leadership and firm performance, Journal of Business Research](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0148296315002143)