

How to encourage more women into MENA's workforce



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Manal Abu Grain is from Shouneh, a conservative area of Jordan, 30 minutes outside of Amman. She married at 15, and for five years spent the majority of her days sitting in the small home that she and her husband shared with her in-laws, who barred her from getting a job.

Today, Manal is thriving as a seamstress in a garment factory that offers a comfortable work environment, and – surprisingly – her relationship with her in-laws has improved. “I am planning my own sewing workshop in Shouneh,” she said recently. If that doesn’t work out? “Five years from now, I will be a sewing trainer for other women. If you want something badly enough, you can get it.”

In the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA), around 17.5% of the adult female population – less than one in five women – is employed. Manal is an outlier, and we need more and better data to understand how to replicate her transition.

The low level of female economic engagement reflects and profoundly influences the personal choices and family dynamics of many women in the MENA region. The broader economic impact is likewise noteworthy: [raising the female labour force participation rates to country-specific male levels would, for example, boost GDP the United Arab Emirates by 12%, and in Egypt by a stunning 34%.](#)

While troublingly low female labour market participation rates are the norm in much (but not all) of the region, overall, women are well-qualified and well-positioned to enter the workforce in large numbers, and in fields critical to the region's economic growth. In nearly two-thirds of Middle Eastern countries, for example, there are more female than male students in university. [More Arab women than men are now enrolling in the sciences](#), and they're outperforming their male counterparts in these courses of study.

Bayt.com and YouGov's annual [Status of Working Women in the Middle East Survey](#) points to positive changes that are beginning to take hold for working women. Just over half (51%) of those women surveyed across the region believe that recruitment and selections are made regardless of gender, and 56% feel that job offers are made based on experience and qualifications, with gender playing no role.

Although women in the region have made tremendous advances in the workplace, significant barriers persist. Availability of job opportunities underpins all other challenges: according to Bayt.com and YouGov, 62% of women in the Middle East find it hard to find good job opportunities. Nadia Alnoudah, a Yemeni Education For Employment (EFE) alumna who is now a professional employment trainer, vividly [described in the Huffington Post](#) the challenges she experienced and now trains young women like Manal to overcome: structural corporate obstacles and workplace bias, conservative families and a lack of self-confidence. [Poor or unsafe transport services](#) can also constrain women's access to job training and work opportunities.

But Manal's case demonstrates that there are ways to address these barriers. First, there was a job opportunity: a local factory willing to hire young women with no previous work experience. Thanks to funding from a multilateral donor, in this case UNDP, Manal was able to access job skills training from Jordan EFE that responded to the textile market demand, and also provided the communication and negotiation skills that helped her engage more effectively with her family. Safe transportation and a work environment deemed appropriate by community standards was provided for the training and at the garment factory, and follow-up support from EFE provided

periodic check-ins and a safety net to support challenges faced during the full transition into employment.

For Manal's experience to be replicated at scale, we need to address an additional barrier to women's employment: a data divide. The paucity of robust, timely data on the factors that facilitate and constrain the entry of women into the workforce for the first time makes it difficult for governments, businesses and civil society to act strategically and collectively to support larger numbers of women in entering the workforce.

For example, we know little about the expectations of young women in the region when they enter the job search, and the factors that they or other relevant decision-makers in their lives take into account when determining whether or not to accept a job opportunity. Likewise, clearer insight is needed on the employer side: what expectations do they hold, and what policies are in place, or could be, to attract female employees and create hospitable work environments for women? Where do the perceptions and priorities of potential female employees and their potential employers diverge?

To begin to unpack these questions, in the coming months, EFE will be working with Bayt.com and YouGov to understand these perspectives and to examine the gap between the two.

It is only a start. We need more forensic understanding of incentives that would help every party involved in women's entry into the workforce – including women themselves, family members and hiring managers – to support greater economic participation of women. Likewise, additional research, specific to the countries in the MENA region, is needed to build a strong business case for hiring more women employees – especially in entry-level positions.

As the nature of work evolves, it is transforming the options available to potential employees and employers. Millions of women like Manal stand to benefit tremendously from these shifts. The right data – informing the right systems of support – can help this to occur at scale.

[The World Economic Forum on the Middle East and North Africa 2015](#) takes place at the Dead Sea, Jordan, from 21-23 May.

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Image: A woman walks near The Gate building at the financial and business district Dubai International Financial Center in Dubai February 5, 2012. REUTERS/Nikhil Monteiro

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