



**Maximizing Women's participation in
the GCC workforce
Executive Summary**



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Executive Summary

This report by Oxford Strategic Consultants¹ makes specific recommendations to increase the levels of participation by women in the GCC workforce. The major recommendation is that companies are set up in GCC countries to provide outsourced services (such as IT, call centre etc) to national and international customers whilst employing professionally qualified women working from home. In the West, home-working has gradually evolved from office and factory based working but the GCC has the opportunity to overtake these countries and enjoy the major benefits of home-working at a relatively early stage of development.

In order to investigate this question, a team of OSC consultants began extensive research by interviewing employers and employees of leading private and public sector companies across the GCC to identify the barriers and solutions for more women to work. The report presents the findings of the research and provides comprehensive and actionable proposals to enhance the participation of women in the GCC workforce.

The report first examines the benefits of increasing women's participation from the current GCC levels of around 20% to international levels of around 50%. Global research suggests that this could increase the effective GCC workforce by at least 12%, allow over 2 million additional highly qualified women to enter the workforce and potentially contribute up to 30% (c \$363 billion) to GCC GDP (given a total GDP of c \$1,210 billion). Many of the relevant services could be provided to non-GCC export markets, thus contributing to the GCC balance of trade and increasing non-oil/gas revenues. The recommendations would also reduce costs of commuting and transport whilst retaining the national identity and culture of the GCC countries and enhancing the self-worth and value of women who, thanks to the efforts of GCC governments, are increasingly well educated and qualified.

The report also reviews commonly held views on potential disadvantages of women working (disintegration of family life etc) and finds that there are no negative impacts that cannot be mitigated through flexible, and especially, home-based working. The many and varied initiatives being implemented across the region are reviewed in some detail. The conclusion is that, although huge advances have been made in women's education and emancipation, the interface between academia and work remains a major issue. In common with many young men, women are ill-prepared for the world of work and the world of work is ill-prepared for them. Investments in vocational and attitudinal training, in flexible working and

¹ Oxford Strategic Consulting (OSC) works with major private and government organizations in the Middle East and Europe in dealing with challenges of rapid growth and increasing competition for markets and human resources. OSC specializes in building human capabilities through strategy, change management, talent management and successful implementation of mergers and acquisitions and has carried out extensive work in the Gulf region, particularly the UAE and Saudi. OSC has carried out research, development and delivery of a number of strategic and policy initiatives throughout the Middle East and the UK. In 2008, OSC assigned an expert team of consultants to focus on a proposal for increasing the rate of female economic participation across the GCC through home working. The project was named 'Shurouq' which means 'sunrise' in Arabic and this initiative aims to help create a brighter and more prosperous future for the GCC States.

facilities for women are all required but the major opportunity is to increase the availability of home-based but professional roles.

The paper next examines the potential barriers to women working (based on the research interviews and survey). The most cited barrier was that women wish to care for their children and families. The next most cited barrier was the lack of facilities for women in places of work and the possibility of workplaces having inappropriate working conditions. Also, in most GCC countries, many women live far away from major cities and so find it difficult to commute to places of work. All of these issues could be resolved through home-based working, which, as has been shown in many countries, can offer a productive and efficient alternative to office-based working, as well as overcoming many of the barriers mentioned above. There are other societal benefits including reduced transportation costs through less commuting. This does not, of course, just apply to women. The same principles can be applied to men and other categories such as disabled workers.

Employer Benefits

Becoming an employer of choice by:

- Attracting and retaining staff, and thereby building the capabilities to achieve long-term organizational objectives
- Appealing to a wider pool of talent
- Reducing time and money spent on journeys to meetings and for commuting, increasing organizational efficiency
- Providing a better work/life balance for staff, boosting productivity through increasing employee satisfaction

Employee Benefits

- Work/life balance improved
- Stress reduced
- Long working hours reduced
- Avoid culturally inappropriate work conditions
- Travel time and costs reduced, increasing flexibility, productivity and efficiency

A recent survey by Bayt.com (Bayt 2009) of 9,923 job seekers across the Middle East, found that 72% of professionals think that working from home (described as telecommuting) would be a good idea for both employees and employers. The main benefits cited for employees were: increased time with family, reduced costs and time in commuting and flexibility in working hours. Benefits to the employer included better employee motivation, retention and staff loyalty and greater productivity.

All these benefits would collectively be transferred onto clients and consumers through offering them a more efficient and productive service, increasing their levels of satisfaction which in turn serves to promote future business growth.

The report then reviews potential obstacles to home-working and solutions, as well as a range of potential service offerings and guidance on the facilities required for home-workers. This

clearly suggests that the investment, not just in infrastructure, but mainly in management and staff training, to allow home-working, is perhaps too large for a small percentage of any particular organization's workforce. Thus, the report recommends that an intermediary company, specializing in home-workers, is created to provide professional services to international companies. 85% of the respondents said they would use such a service.

It is strongly recommended, therefore, that in-depth feasibility studies should be carried out in each GCC country to review the potential for such a company and produce comprehensive business and investment plans.