



AmCham Saudi Arabia's Women in Business Event Summary

Diwaniya Series 2023: Urban Migration in KSA and Impact on Women in Workforce

Wednesday, March 29, 2023, 9-11PM

AlSultan Resort, Riyadh

Background: *Diwanias are a place to network where people from different facets of society gather to discuss topics of interest, form alliances, close business deals or introduce associates to their network. For the Women in Business Committee of AmCham, the Diwaniya series for 2023 invites senior leaders from the Kingdom's ecosystem to discuss topics that impact women in the workplace and along their career paths. The objective is to present the latest research on a relevant topic and facilitate reactions, new ideas and feedback that can lead to innovative solutions to support women in business.*

Summary of Introduction by Dr. Abeer Bar, Education Consultant

Since the launch of Vision 2030 in 2016, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has taken huge strides toward becoming one of the strongest economies in the world. Vision 2030 focuses on three themes: a diverse and thriving economy; an ambitious nation; and a vibrant society. "One clear goal is to **diversify the economy and reduce dependence on oil**, encourage the growth and development of human resources and a knowledge-based economy." Employment statistics in recent years reveal growth in various sectors, with a notable increase in female employment. According to Brookings, female labor force participation increased 64% from 2018 to 2022. The General Authority for Statistics (GSTAT, 2023) reported in Q4 2022 that female participation in the labor market was at 36%. Research has shown this growth is attributed to governmental reforms that facilitated women's entry into the workforce, such as changes in labor and guardianship laws and allowing women to obtain driving licenses.

Remarkably, female employment has grown across the different regions of the Kingdom. According to the Q4 2022 report by GSTAT (GSTAT, 2023), the female labor participation rate in Riyadh region jumped from approximately 380,000 in 2018 to 637,000 currently. The number makes up about 50% of the female labor force in Saudi, making Riyadh the leading region with the highest number of female employees.

Movement for work is a phenomenon called Employment Migration and is generally an indication of a healthy, growing economy. In Saudi, the movement to the capital is part of the national

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development plan. In an interview with Arab News in 2021, Prince Mohamed bin Salman talked about the strategy for the Saudi capital; he said, “We are aiming to make Riyadh one of the 10 largest city economies in the world...and...increase its residents from 7.5 million today to around 15-20 million in 2030”.

Research on Employment Migration or Employment Mobility seeks to understand the push and pull factors that influence migration (or vice versa). In very simple terms: Push Factors drive migrants away (national disasters or lack of health care) while Pull Factors attract them (residential benefits and cultural tolerance). The Hays Middle East Saudi Arabia Salary Guide 2023 reported that 69% of employers' recruitment efforts are currently concentrated in Riyadh, underscoring the importance of understanding these factors for policymakers to respond to potential employees' needs effectively. For example, create suitable job packages or install policies for more attractive work environments. Although there are existing studies on factors affecting employment migration, there is a lack of data on factors that affect female employment mobility in the GCC. This is because most theoretical models in the existing studies are built for European or Western contexts (Shahrani, 2022).

However, existing data on female employment in Saudi can help create initial evidence-based assumptions of possible factors, particularly data gathered after the issue of Vision 2030 and the implementation of gender-specific reforms guided by the Vision's goal to pursue a knowledge-based economy.

Example of helpful studies are those that look at understanding the challenges women in Saudi face in their work environment. Jamjoom and Mills (2022) looked at tools that women in leadership positions utilize to resist power struggles such as physical tools, including assertive body language, ensuring attendance, and maintaining visibility in meetings. They also utilized nationalism by referring to national decrees during discussions related to organizational decision-making. In a separate study, B. Alareeni and A. Hamdan (2023) explored self-reported reasons behind unemployment with women citing job mismatches due to over-education and difficulty in locating work environments with childcare facilities. AlGhamdi studied challenges for women in non-traditional jobs (2022) and found that they faced cultural and societal restrictions due to customs and traditions and a lack of family support.

Despite these studies, more specific data is needed to better understand factors affecting female employment mobility in Saudi Arabia. The AmCham Policy and Research committee is planning a mixed-method inquiry utilizing a critical ethnography lens and a localized version of the Swedish “motivation to migration survey” to gather and analyze data. The goal is to present findings to raise awareness among the public, recruitment organizations, and recruiting institutions. The findings will ideally aid policy and decision-makers in implementing effective governmental reform policies,

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help recruitment professionals develop comprehensive onboarding and training programs, and enable organizations to attract and retain talent.

Common themes and observations from participants regarding Urban Migration of Women in Business in KSA:

Process of Acculturation – Women moving from other areas of Saudi Arabia often face additional challenges as they need to spend time assimilating into a different culture, way of working and living situation. Single women especially may find it difficult as there are few comfortable options for living and it is often their first time being away from family. The “pull” factor is strong however, with women feeling the need to move to bigger cities (mainly Riyadh) in order to find fulfilling, well-paid jobs that provide space to progress their careers.

The Saudi Experience of Urban Migration and Impact on Women is Unique – It was acknowledged that, even though most other countries have or are experiencing rapid urban migration, the Saudi experience is a unique one in that it is happening much faster and there are more public resources available to address challenges. The Kingdom also has an excellent track record, through Vision 2030, of successfully working through transformations, especially regarding the experiences of women and the workforce. It was also noted that many participants at the Diwaniya come from similar socio-economic backgrounds and it’s important that diverse views are integrated and that any policy responses are inclusive.

Lack of Professional Networks – Even when women move across KSA and are able to link up with extended family or make personal connections, they reported that establishing a professional network can prove quite difficult and takes a lot of time. Perhaps the creation of more formal, established, women-only networking organizations would allow women to address this challenge and build effective networks more quickly.

Other Themes and Key Observations

Women in Leadership – Undoubtedly, women are entering the workforce quickly, but some participants expressed concern that their advancement into leadership positions is not keeping pace. Several noted that management and leadership positions for women sometimes appear to come without additional responsibility or opportunities for decision-making and therefore do not allow women to develop these much-needed skills like their male colleagues.

Adaptability as a Key to Success for Women – There was also discussion around how to ensure women are able to learn and acquire the soft skills needed to succeed in professional life. These are skills such as negotiation, agility and adaptability that are important for delivering in the workplace

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but are often missed in formal education and university settings. Programs for women that focus on building these types of skills as they progress through their careers could help to address this barrier.

Next Steps & Key Items for Consideration

The AmCham Women in Business Committee aims to hold additional Diwanias that focus on the topic of women in leadership. These gatherings will delve into the significance of soft skills and adaptability, among others, and discuss ways in which women can receive greater support in their career journeys. These diwanias will feature recent research and include policy-makers and attendees with diverse experiences.

The participants at the March Diwaniya felt it was important for research to continue into the issue of urban migration, the uniqueness of Saudi Arabia's experience and what lessons can be learned from the experiences of others.

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