



# Unleashing the Potential of Women in Asia and the Gulf

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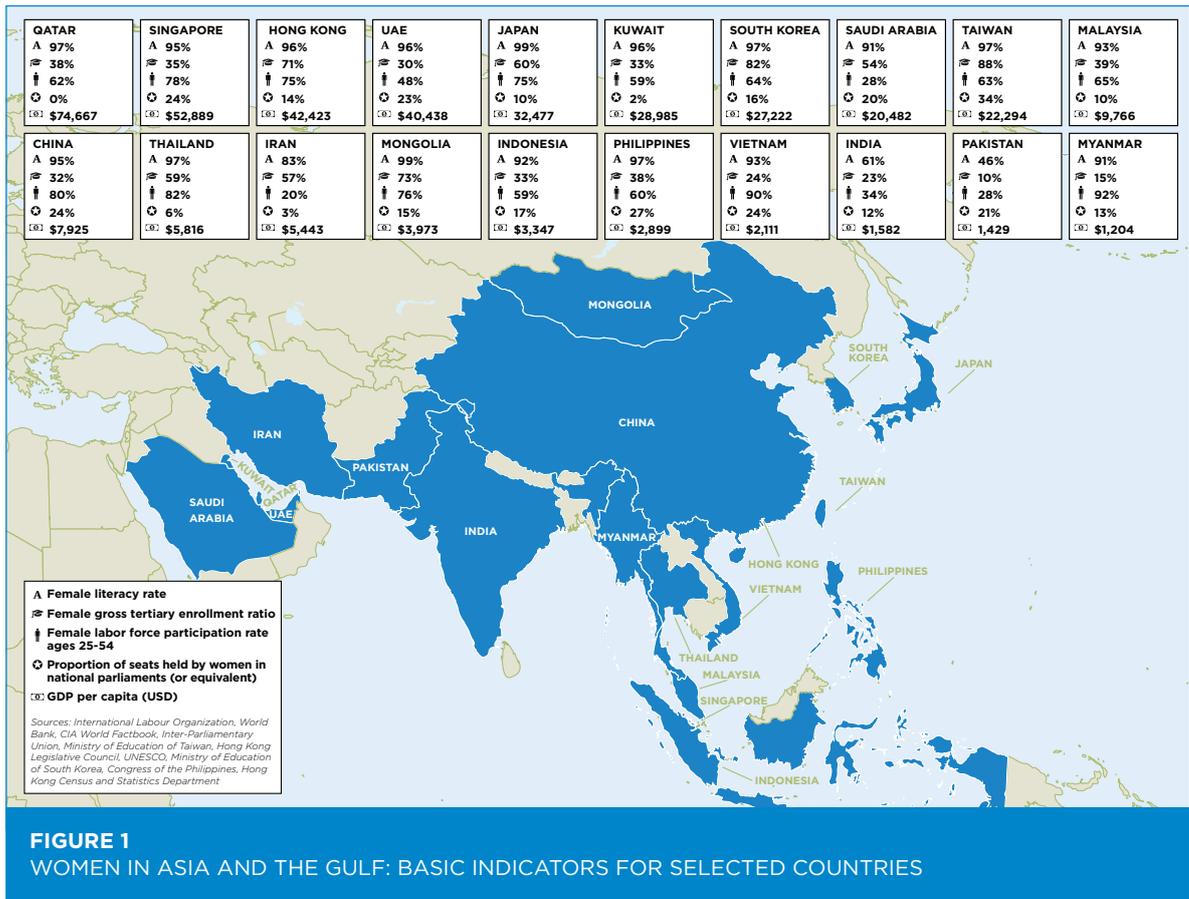
**Improving the education and workforce participation of women in Asia and the Gulf is good for society and for productivity.**

**A**sian and Gulf economies remain diverse in terms of their female participation in education and the workforce. For large developing economies, such as in South Asia, educational access for girls remains an issue, beyond basic education. In other emerging economies, such as many in Southeast Asia, education is broad-based, but enrollment in higher education remains low for both genders. In some countries with a history of valuing higher education, including Japan, South Korea, and Gulf economies such as Saudi Arabia, women are highly educated, but workforce participation remains low, largely due to social and cultural norms. In other mature economies such as Hong Kong, female workforce participation is relatively high, but female representation in leadership positions continues to be unequal and actual or perceived wage gaps for similar work remain.

A strong economic case can be made for narrowing the gender gap. McKinsey Global Institute estimates that a scenario of female workforce participation equivalent to that of males can increase global economic output by more than 25%.<sup>1</sup> For Asia, future demographic challenges with aging, especially in developed economies including Japan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan, and also in China, will pose risks to workforce availability in these countries. Women need to participate in the workforce in order for countries to replenish the labor market shortfall and maintain growth. In the Gulf, where economies are gradually diversifying beyond the oil and gas industry, labor markets need to be replenished with both male and female talent. At the same time, for many countries in Asia and the Gulf that have invested in higher education in recent decades, working-age women are better educated than ever and are assets to the economy. Underutilizing female talent, or not actively removing barriers for women who desire to work, would be a missed opportunity.

Furthermore, the employment landscape globally is changing. Many countries are shifting from labor-intensive manufacturing to knowledge-intensive industries. The emergence of the digital economy will increase efficiency and automate processes, and dampen employment growth in conventional areas requiring manpower. Giving both men and women who are able to conduct higher value-added jobs the opportunities to do so will help expand income sources for families and lower the burden for government and societies.

More broadly, most Asian and Gulf economies and major companies are realizing that engaging more diverse groups in the labor force, including women, older workers, migrants, and young talent, will enable more people to contribute to and benefit from Asia's economic growth and social progress. This



**FIGURE 1**  
WOMEN IN ASIA AND THE GULF: BASIC INDICATORS FOR SELECTED COUNTRIES

briefing focuses on the opportunities and levers to unleash the potential of women, who present an immediate and sizable opportunity, and provides case illustrations from selected countries.

## KEY OPPORTUNITY 1: BOOST BASIC EDUCATION FOR WOMEN TO BUILD FUNDAMENTAL SKILLS FOR MEANINGFUL WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION

Worldwide, 63 million girls are not in school.<sup>2</sup> Poverty, gendered cultural expectations, child marriage, and prioritization of male over female education when faced with limited resources contribute to the lack of educational opportunities for women. At a basic level, providing women and girls with equal access to education will not only benefit families, but also communities and societies as a whole. When he was Chief Economist at the World Bank, Larry Summers remarked that “investment in girls’ education may well be the highest return investment available in the developing world.”<sup>3</sup> Simply adding one year to a woman’s schooling can increase her earnings 10% to 20%, justifying Summers’ claim.<sup>4</sup>

### INDIA

India’s lack of basic education for women impedes their participation in the workforce years later and stunts their ability to advance in the workplace. Only 34% of women aged 25 to 54 participate in the Indian workforce, compared with 97% of men.<sup>5</sup> According to the McKinsey Global Institute, if women in India participated in the workforce at the same rate as men, an additional \$2.9 trillion could be added to annual GDP in 2025, assuming the economy could absorb that many new employees.<sup>6</sup> However, with a female literacy rate at just 61% and secondary education enrollment at 62%, women lack the opportunity to become equal participants in the Indian economy.<sup>7</sup> Women are consigned to work low-level unskilled jobs without opportunities for upward mobility because they lack a basic education, which prevents them from working in jobs that require fundamental skills such as reading, writing, or math.

India has 23% of women with secondary education in professional or semi-professional roles, compared with only 1% of primary-educated women.<sup>8</sup>

An increase in funding for women's basic education and vocational training, with a focus on literacy, would provide women with the skills necessary to participate more fully in the workforce. First Lady of the United States Michelle Obama's Let Girls Learn campaign has begun tackling literacy and education issues in over 35 countries around the world by providing funding for community-based projects. Some firms are also taking action; Unilever's Shakti program in India has educated over 70,000 women in micro-entrepreneurial skills to sell their products in rural parts of the country.<sup>9</sup> This benefits women who can learn necessary skills for working professionally as well as enables the company to tap into an otherwise unreachable market.

## PAKISTAN

Pakistan is one of the worst-off countries in terms of women's education and literacy, with a female literacy rate at 46% as of 2015.<sup>10</sup> Girls are not attending schools for a variety of reasons; some parents are unwilling or cannot send their daughters to school because of the distance to school, poverty, and a culture that does not deem education necessary for a girl who will become a wife and stay-at-home mother.<sup>11</sup> Because of this lack of education, over 75% of women over the age of 15 who work end up in the labor-intensive agricultural sector.<sup>12</sup>

Malala Yousafzai, a Nobel Prize Laureate from Pakistan, was shot in the head at age 15 by a Taliban militant because of her vocal support for access to female education in her country after Taliban radicals banned girls' education and destroyed many schools.<sup>13</sup> Malala's attack brought the plight of girls' education in Pakistan under an international spotlight and the Pakistani government had to act. In 2015, the country pledged to double spending on education from 2% to 4% of GDP by 2018.<sup>14</sup> In addition, Michelle Obama's Let Girls Learn campaign pledged \$70 million to specifically target girls' education in the country. For the first time in Pakistan's history, the Academy of Education Planning and Management released official government data on out-of-school children, concluding that 24 million children between ages 5 and 16 are out of school.<sup>15</sup> While steps have been taken, the country remains in an education crisis. Girls are more affected by the crisis than boys, proven by various statistics—31% of males versus 55% of females over the age of 15 have never attended school; males spend an average of 7 years in school versus 5 years for females; and 43% of school-age boys are out of school versus 52% of school-age girls.<sup>16</sup> The numbers are staggering for both males and females, but it is clear that females are experiencing the brunt of the problem. Without education, these girls and women cannot hope to enter the economy and contribute more than just their manual labor. As a result, Pakistan suffers economically.

It is also important to ensure women have equal opportunities beyond primary education. Countries including many in Southeast Asia and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) have gender parity in secondary education and do not experience a drop-off in female tertiary enrollment. In fact, in these countries, women either enroll in tertiary education at or above the rates of their male counterparts. Investing in educational opportunities for girls is a smart economic decision for governments to make. Worldwide, girls are outperforming their male counterparts in school, and women who enroll in university are more likely to graduate than their male peers, making women's education a safe investment.<sup>17</sup> While basic education is the bare minimum governments should provide for all their people, more education correlates with better economic prospects, as average wages increase with the level of education.<sup>18</sup>

## KEY OPPORTUNITY 2: ENCOURAGE WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION OF HIGHLY-EDUCATED WOMEN

Higher education is a prerequisite for many higher-paid jobs, but it alone does not necessarily lead to high workforce participation. Other factors, such as workplace culture and policies, family values, and

female leadership in society contribute to female workforce participation. While women in many countries are equally if not better-educated than men, conservative cultures and social expectations undermine employment opportunities and are key factors that have discouraged women from entering or remaining in the workforce. Asia misses out on roughly \$45 billion annually as a result of limited access to employment opportunities for women; the Gulf region incurs economic losses for similar reasons.<sup>19</sup> Businesses can better attract and retain women by reiterating the importance of employee diversity and creating programs that embrace a work-life balance for all employees.

## JAPAN

While various Asian economies face problems of highly-educated women being out of the workforce, Japan is one of the most prominent cases demonstrating this discrepancy. Stereotypes regarding gender are difficult to shake, as is evident by the high education rates of women in Japan paired with low rates of female leadership in politics and business. Though the female employment participation rate appears high, it does not capture the nuances of the type of work women do. One key deep-seated issue is the negative social attitude toward working mothers.<sup>20</sup> For years, Japan has been experiencing falling birth rates and an aging population, which have contributed to subpar economic performance and a sharp decline in the working population.<sup>21</sup> Women feel pressured to choose whether to have children or a career, and to decide whether they can afford to have children without the career. Government leaders in Japan confirm that cultural stereotypes are a deterrent for women to be hired into high-level positions, and also for women to pursue senior positions.<sup>22</sup> Japanese culture emphasizes the concept of being an ideal mother, which is exceptionally difficult to balance with a corporate culture that values long work hours. Indeed, 70% of Japanese women stop working for a decade or longer after having their first child, and many of those women do not return to the workforce.<sup>23</sup> Even if they return to work, it is often part-time and in positions that are no longer part of a career path. By addressing the hurdles to female workforce participation and advancement, Japan can not only better utilize its educated female capital, but also fix the country's problem of a declining workforce and thus help increase its economic growth.

Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has been pursuing a “three arrows” economic policy to fend off deflation and promote growth since his election in December 2012. The “third arrow” in the quiver focuses on structural reforms and takes aim at raising labor productivity. One of the target areas for increasing productivity is reducing the gender gap, since Japan's female workforce participation rate is 20 percentage points below that of men, making it one of the biggest gender disparities in the OECD.<sup>24</sup>

Kathy Matsui and her colleagues at Goldman Sachs coined the term “womenomics” in 1999. It advocates catalyzing economic and demographic growth in Japan by increasing the hiring and promoting of women. Matsui argues that “contrary to popular opinion, higher female employment could actually raise, not lower, fertility rates.”<sup>25</sup> The International Monetary Fund's Yuko Kinoshita and Fang Guo support this conjecture in a paper addressing ways Asia can boost female workforce participation. They argue that higher female labor force participation increases fertility rates due to the income effect, where higher household incomes allow families to have more children.<sup>26</sup> A positively changing view of working mothers as well as public policies that extend parental leave, provide more accessible child-care services, and promote flexible hours at work may also contribute to the positive correlation.<sup>27</sup> Finally, full-time working mothers experience the benefits of paid and longer maternity leave compared to part-time or non-working mothers, further supporting the idea that working raises fertility rates. As this study suggests, Matsui's proposals include expanding daycare services, implementing flexible work arrangements, and using more objective evaluation and compensation models.<sup>28</sup> To that effect, Prime Minister Abe has set the goal of boosting women's workforce participation from 68% in 2013 to 73% by 2020 for all women of working age, in conjunction with an increase in daycare facilities.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the shortage of daycare makes the decision to stay at home an inevitable one. More than 23,000 children were not able to secure a spot in daycare in 2015 alone, forcing mothers to stay at home.<sup>30</sup> That same year, 950,000 women cited childcare and birth as the reasons why they were not pursuing a job.<sup>31</sup> The government is responding by allotting more money to create more childcare facilities in Prime Minister Abe's new \$280 billion stimulus package.<sup>32</sup> Already, Abe's administration has created 200,000 more spots in daycare, proving that the government is actively trying to support women in the workforce.<sup>33</sup>

Although public policy is crucial in increasing gender parity, governments are realizing that increasing the presence of female executives in the workplace remains a challenge. For instance, the Japanese government's "womenomics" agenda set an initial goal of filling 30% of senior positions in both public and private sectors with women by 2020. However, the government cut that ambitious number to 7% for senior government positions and 15% for senior private sector roles, highlighting the challenges of boosting female work participation in a male-dominated work culture persistently characterized by long work hours and a rigid hierarchy.<sup>34</sup> Work culture has been resistant and slow to change, making it difficult to increase female leadership in the short term.

Nonetheless, some companies have taken the new policy actions to heart. A number of large Japanese companies have been named as Nadeshiko Brands, a designation for brands that promote female advancement and success.<sup>35</sup> Asia Business Council members who run designated Nadeshiko Brand companies include Hiroaki Nakanishi, Chairman of Hitachi, Ltd. (awarded 2013, 2014, 2015); Yasuhiro Sato, President and Group CEO of Mizuho Financial Group (awarded 2014 and 2015); and Shuzo Sumi, Chairman of the Board of Tokio Marine Holdings, Inc. (awarded 2013 and 2015). Notably, Mizuho Financial Group aims to change the work culture by not only introducing flexible work arrangements for those who need them, but also by encouraging male employees to participate in their family's childcare so as to incentivize all employees to create a work-life balance culture.<sup>36</sup> Hitachi issued a diversity and inclusion manifesto in its 2015 Sustainability Report, outlining different methods to create a better work-life balance, how the company can measure its progress, and its goals for diversity promotion.<sup>37</sup> Tokio Marine Holdings also stresses flexible working hours.<sup>38</sup> These arrangements have benefited working mothers who are motivated to both work and take care of their children.<sup>39</sup> All these companies emphasize that a work-life balance applies to all employees, not just women. With such an approach, these companies change their cultures to promote family-friendly environments that not only allow women to participate in the workplace but also encourage men to engage in childcare and in so doing, promote a cultural shift to more reasonable working hours. These examples illustrate that top management commitment is crucial in supporting women and men at work and accommodating their dual roles as parents and employees.

Both government and business leaders recognize that without women, the Japanese economy suffers. To support the aging population and uneven population structure, more women must participate in the workforce and the economy. Many women are also qualified and may desire to work, but require the right culture, policies, and infrastructure to work and care for their families.

## **GULF REGION**

GCC countries exhibit a range in both women's higher education levels and their participation in the workforce.<sup>40</sup> Overall, 6% more women than men in the GCC enroll in tertiary degrees but, including expatriates, women experience a 15% unemployment rate in the region, in contrast to the 3% rate for men.<sup>41</sup> Women also outperform men at universities across the GCC.<sup>42</sup> In the United Arab Emirates (UAE), 95% of female versus 80% of male high school graduates pursue a tertiary degree; 46% of all STEM graduates are women, though the field is known to be dominated by men.<sup>43</sup> While Qatar and Kuwait have rates of female labor force participation similar to Europe, Saudi Arabia has one of the lowest of any country, which can be attributed to cultural expectations, with women expected to stay at home and not interact

with men outside the family.<sup>44</sup> Gulf countries must address the issue of men completing the school-to-work transition at greater rates than women, despite more women completing tertiary education.

Economic growth and social prosperity in the Gulf region rely on the full utilization of talent, including women. Various governments in the region have improved female access to higher education, to the point where we see that female graduates now outnumber male graduates in every nation in the GCC: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.<sup>45</sup> This may be because while female education is supported, there is cultural and religious resistance to women working while married and raising children. Thus, the low participation rate is not due to a lack of educated and highly skilled women, but more likely due to a mix of cultural and religious sensitivities that keep women from fully participating in economic growth and progress.<sup>46</sup>

The phenomenon that women outperform men academically but are not working suggests that human capital in the region is underutilized. This is an untapped resource that would undoubtedly increase GDP and revenues of private companies. If cultural norms change to allow women to participate in the workforce more easily, businesses can hire the best qualified people for the job, without limiting themselves to only half the GCC population.

## **SAUDI ARABIA**

Saudi Arabia is both a country rapidly progressing in women's workforce participation and a country that has the furthest to go in gender parity in the workplace. While Saudi's Vision 2030, a blueprint for long-term goals and expectations for the country, declares that women are a "great asset" to the country's economy and that its economy "will provide opportunities for everyone – men and women, young and old," the country has not given women enough legal freedom to do so.<sup>47</sup> In the most general sense, women are treated as minors under the law, requiring guardian consent for many basic actions under the male guardianship system.<sup>48</sup> Women in Saudi Arabia cannot drive, go to university, or travel abroad without the approval of a male guardian.<sup>49</sup> In the workplace, women and men are required by law to have separate spaces, which makes hiring women more difficult because it requires investment in gender-segregated offices. Women entrepreneurs are also not allowed to start a business without a male agent.<sup>50</sup> Additionally, the government does not penalize employers who request a male guardian's permission for a woman to work, even though it is no longer required by law.<sup>51</sup> While Saudi Arabia's government recognizes the issue of low female workforce participation and has included a goal to increase the rate from 22% to 30% by 2030, it has not outlined clear strategies to achieve it.<sup>52</sup>

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia is progressing. From 2009 to 2013, the number of female employees rose from 50,000 to 450,000.<sup>53</sup> Last year (2015) marked the first year that women could not only vote in elections but could also run for office. With 21 out of 3,150 council positions filled by women, more change is coming.<sup>54</sup> The World Economic Forum found that when women are more equally represented in political bodies, female participation in the workforce increases.<sup>55</sup> Women in political leadership positions are more likely to care about women's issues and therefore implement policy measures that increase job availability for women. This would tap into the underutilized educated female demographic.

## **THE REST OF THE GCC**

In contrast to Saudi Arabia's conservative approach to the workplace and society, other GCC countries have made progress in terms of women's workforce participation, though barriers persist. The UAE is leading the charge as the first country in the Arab world to require female representation on the boards of state-owned companies and government agencies.<sup>56</sup> Expatriates dominate the UAE workforce, which may contribute to greater gender equality in the workplace. However, the country as a whole still culturally incorporates sexist ideals, such as recognizing only men as heads of households and as guardians.<sup>57</sup>

Kuwait also has a staggering 81% of expatriates in its labor force.<sup>58</sup> Of the 19% of the workforce that is Kuwaiti, 55% are women; yet, of the foreign labor force, 90% are men (though the large percentage of foreign men is due to many coming in as low-paid laborers in the service and construction sectors).<sup>59</sup> The numbers tell a mixed story as do the laws—women are generally independent and unrestricted, but there are contradictory laws, such as those permitting women to travel but not obtain a driver’s license without permission from their male guardian.<sup>60</sup> Part of the reason Kuwait is so unique in the GCC may be that the country has had a long-standing presence of women’s rights activists that have gained ground in various issues within a religiously conservative society, while leaving some issues yet to be fought.<sup>61</sup> Still, with Kuwaiti women outnumbering Kuwaiti men in the workforce, the stark contrast with Saudi Arabia is clear. Qatar, like Kuwait, is dominated by foreign workers and while it has the highest proportion of women employed in the GCC, the majority of them are expatriates.<sup>62</sup>

Bahrain and Oman have both achieved gender parity in primary and secondary education, but both have low levels of female workforce participation, at 48% and 36% respectively.<sup>63</sup> Therefore, while some of these countries are closer to workforce gender parity than Saudi Arabia, they have a long way to go, especially in achieving cultural gender equality.

In GCC countries, women did not gain the right to vote until the early 1990s or 2000s and are well underrepresented in politics. Many of the GCC countries employ large proportions of expatriates, which additionally skews workforce gender statistics, as is especially evident in Kuwait. Women are well-educated in all the GCC countries, but conservative cultures in one way or another still impact women’s decision to work. Formally, the male guardianship system still exists, even if women now are granted more rights. Certain laws in all these countries continue to discriminate against women, such as restrictions on the type of jobs women can hold, or the rights granted to a woman in marriage. Until these societies introduce policies to enable more equal opportunities and anti-gender discrimination laws are enforced, true parity will not be achieved and women will remain underutilized.

### **KEY OPPORTUNITY 3: BROADEN FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN BUSINESS AND GOVERNMENT**

Even in countries around Asia where women make up half the workforce, women are less frequently in leadership positions than men. In every Asian country examined by Deloitte’s “Women in the boardroom: A global perspective” report, women make up a small fraction of companies’ boards.<sup>64</sup> This means that even once workforce parity is reached, women tend to have lower-ranking jobs than men.<sup>65</sup> Firms that do not have women on corporate boards and in “C-level” positions tend to underperform relative to those who do.<sup>66</sup> But the results are neutral if firms only have a female CEO without fellow senior-level women, suggesting that the proportion of female executives and board members is more important than a token female leader.<sup>67</sup> Evidence points to an underutilization of women in the workforce and that firms suffer financially as a result.

Why are women not reaching higher levels of corporate leadership? One of the many causes may be that many women lack appropriate mentors to encourage professional development and entrepreneurship. According to a Gallup study, “Adults who have access to a mentor are three times as likely to say they are planning to start a business as those who do not have one.”<sup>68</sup> Mentorship programs for women that aid them in reaching senior-level positions, or even in starting their own businesses, are crucial. Company leaders must also visibly support women in management positions and make doing so a part of their core agenda. According to the World Economic Forum, visible support of women in leadership, especially by taking actions such as creating a department, regular reiterations of the mission, and relevant targets, reinforces the message that women leaders are wanted and supported and holds the company accountable to that message.<sup>69</sup> As in countries like Japan, where long work hours are rewarded, companies must create a better work environment that stresses a work-life balance, so that women do not have to choose between

raising their children and working. Finally, gender diversity must be promoted and implemented through the entire chain of the company, including suppliers, distributors, and partners. This radiates the message outward and influences other companies to also focus on supporting female leadership in the workplace.

## **CHINA AND HONG KONG**

Historically, China has a longstanding presence of women in its workforce, with an 80% female labor force participation rate for women aged 25 to 54.<sup>70</sup> While only 8.5% of company board members are women, that is amongst the best statistics in Asia for female leadership.<sup>71</sup> According to one report, 51% of management positions in China are held by women, more than any other country.<sup>72</sup> Some credit China's longstanding history of supporting women's rights for its success; it was one of the first countries to approve the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and has long encouraged women to work outside the home.<sup>73</sup> It is also possible that due to the longstanding One Child policy, as well as extended family support, women in China were better-able to rise among the hierarchical rungs. On the other hand, companies are known to lack flexibility when it comes to employees having children. China requires companies to provide 14 weeks of compensated maternity leave, which may contribute to companies' reluctance in hiring women into high-level positions, since companies expect the women that are qualified to be right around the age when they marry and have children.<sup>74</sup> This impedes women from advancing into leadership positions at the most opportune time in their careers.

Out of all the economies examined, Hong Kong has a history of female representation in the workforce and in leadership. Similar to China, 8.4% of company board members in Hong Kong are women.<sup>75</sup> Part of what makes Hong Kong more successful is the affordability of hiring full-time foreign domestic helpers, which allows women to better balance work and family.<sup>76</sup> Domestic helpers not only look after homes, but also children, making them an indispensable component enabling Hong Kong women to achieve their career goals while still balancing family life. While this has been successful in Hong Kong, it is not a sustainable solution for every country or for those in Hong Kong who cannot afford full-time domestic help. It relies on the presence of cheap labor from other countries, which may not be a long-term solution.

## **THE GULF REGION**

Women in Saudi Arabia are pioneering as female executives in some companies, while also championing women's rights and counteracting workforce discrimination against women.

Lubna Olayan, Deputy Chairperson and CEO of Olayan Financing Company, as well as the Asia Business Council's Chairperson, has taken charge of bringing women to work at Olayan. She started out as the only woman at her company and had to convince her peers to hire her first fellow female colleague 18 years later.<sup>77</sup> The company has come a long way, now employing more than 400 women out of a workforce of 12,000. One of the tools that helped to facilitate the employment of women was an internal group called Olayan Women Network, which works to address and observe all issues pertaining to women working at the company and aiding them in growing their careers.<sup>78</sup> Because of companies like Olayan Financing, Saudi Arabia, one of the most conservative countries with respect to women, is beginning to open doors to women in the workforce.

Her Royal Highness Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud also successfully navigated the space between female empowerment and Saudi Arabia's conservative laws when she was chief executive of Alfa International, which operates the luxury department store Harvey Nichols in Riyadh. In June 2011, the Ministry of Labor in Saudi Arabia declared that stores specializing in women's products as well as women's sections of department stores, including Harvey Nichols, must hire female staff.<sup>79</sup> Princess Reema spearheaded the initiative by creating a training program designed for women. The program not only taught female staff how to interact with customers, but also empowered the stores' female employees by teaching them basic personal finance and their rights to their salaries.<sup>80</sup>

Princess Reema continues to advocate for women in her many leadership roles, including as the Vice President of Women's Affairs at Saudi Arabia's General Sports Authority and as CEO of Alf Khair.

Huda M. Al-Ghpson, Executive Director of Human Resources at Saudi Aramco, is the first woman to be named a permanent executive director at Saudi Aramco. In a *McKinsey Quarterly* article in 2015, Ms. Al-Ghpson chronicled her company's increased hiring of women and programs created to attract and retain women, an issue Saudi Aramco struggled with. With Ms. Al-Ghpson in charge, the company set up a Women in Business program that aims to interest young women starting out their careers, and Women in Leadership, a program that grooms women to rise as leaders within the company. In just a few years, the company went from three female leaders to 84.<sup>81</sup> Women like Ms. Al-Ghpson are not only leading by example through their own career success, but they are also bringing other women with them.

Her Excellency Noura bint Mohammed Al-Kaabi, Minister of State for Federal National Council Affairs of the UAE and CEO of twofour54, a leading media company in the Gulf, emphasizes gender equality as the way to achieve UAE's Sustainable Development Goals.<sup>82</sup> She herself has been a trailblazer, named one of *Foreign Policy* magazine's Top 100 Global Thinkers and one of *Forbes Middle East's* 30 Most Influential Women in Government. Media often reflect cultural gender stereotypes and propagate them, which is why it is so important that Her Excellency Ms. Al-Kaabi holds a position that has influence over media and the way it portrays women.

GCC female leaders who lead by example and speak on behalf of other women will enable moves toward gender equality to be achieved more quickly. Overall progress is unsteady and many hurdles remain, particularly in the domestic economy and culture beyond expatriate-oriented workplaces. However, the women in leadership discussed are spearheading change in their respective countries and raising the status of other women with them.

## CONCLUSION

Asia and the Gulf are poised to achieve continued economic progress. But while countries' economies are quickly growing, not all populations have had the same opportunity to contribute and benefit. The most immediate and largest opportunity lies with women, who make up half of these countries' populations, yet have varying levels of influence and participation in economically productive activities. Time and time again, women have proven that they perform as well as or outperform men in academics, contribute positively to businesses performance, and are capable of working in more advanced positions than most of them currently do. With encouragement and practical support, and if given equal opportunities, women will positively influence their respective countries' economies. Governments, businesses, and civil society must make a concerted effort on various fronts so that women can participate in the workforce on equal footing with men.

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