



Understanding the perspectives of Emirati women of Sharjah on the emirate's private sector

A PwC Middle East report in partnership with NAMA Women Advancement, Sharjah





Based on a survey of 691 Emirati women who live, work or are seeking employment in Sharjah's private sector, this report examines what shapes the emirate's private-sector retention, progression and job satisfaction, and sets out practical actions employers can take to strengthen long-term career outcomes

1

Foreword from NAMA Women Advancement

At NAMA Women Advancement, we are guided by a clear foundational belief: women's empowerment is a cornerstone of sustainable development and a defining force in building resilient, thriving societies. This belief is embedded in everything we do, grounded in the understanding that when women are empowered, the impact extends well beyond the individual to strengthen families, communities, and the wider economy.

In the United Arab Emirates, we are witnessing continued progress in expanding Emirati participation across the private sector, with national talent contributing to an increasingly diverse and evolving range of industries. As this progress continues, it also presents a deeper opportunity – to move beyond access to employment towards workplaces that enable women to grow, lead, and build meaningful and sustained careers.

This commitment is further reflected in this report on "Understanding the perspectives of Emirati women of Sharjah on the emirate's private sector" developed in partnership with PwC. It builds on NAMA's work in advancing women's empowerment by bridging research with practice, ensuring that insights are translated into meaningful action. It amplifies the voices of Emirati women in the private sector in Sharjah, capturing their lived experiences, aspirations, and the factors shaping their career journeys.



Our approach looks at the full range of factors that shape women's participation and progression, from education and health to livelihoods and social status. Through this lens, we are focused on helping more women access, stay and grow in the private sector, including in emerging fields and traditionally underrepresented areas such as heavy industries. Initiatives such as Irtiqa bring this commitment to life by working with employers to strengthen workplace practices and create more inclusive environments where women can thrive.

Research and studies play a central role in our approach, enabling us to deepen understanding of evolving realities, generate evidence-based insights, and contribute to more responsive systems and informed decision-making, while also supporting policy development.

This study presents encouraging insights. Emirati women are entering the private sector in Sharjah with ambition, capability, and a strong desire to progress. At the same time, their experiences highlight the importance of clearer career pathways, greater workplace flexibility and environments that more consistently support development, recognition, and long-term growth.

At NAMA, we view this as a shared responsibility, one that calls for continued collaboration to ensure that systems and workplaces evolve in ways that allow women not only to participate, but to advance and thrive with confidence across all sectors.

Ultimately, when women are empowered to realise their full potential, the impact is felt across every layer of society. It strengthens families, enriches organisations, and contributes to a more balanced and sustainable future.

This remains at the heart of NAMA's mission and continues to guide our work across all areas of engagement.



H.E Mariam Al Hammadi
Director General,
NAMA Women Advancement



Foreword from PwC Middle East

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) continues to drive remarkable growth in homegrown talent across its private sector, with the number of Emiratis employed reaching 190,000 by July 2026.¹ Women are playing a leading role in this shift across sectors. For private-sector employers, it presents a clear opportunity to leverage the skills, perspectives and expertise of Emirati women as a driver of productivity, innovation and long-term national growth.

In Sharjah's private sector, the opportunity is matched by a distinct challenge. With the public sector continuing to hold strong appeal in the emirate, private-sector employers in Sharjah must ask whether they are creating workplaces where Emirati women can see a long-term future. What more can they do to strengthen engagement, develop national talent and improve job satisfaction? And how can they better retain and advance Emirati women in ways that support both individual ambition and business performance?

This is a subject close to the heart of NAMA Women Advancement Establishment, our partner in this report and an organisation committed to increasing women's participation in Sharjah's workforce and entrepreneurship ecosystem.² To better understand the lived experiences, expectations and ambitions of Emirati women, PwC Middle East and NAMA engaged with 691 women who live, work or are seeking employment in Sharjah's private sector to take a holistic, data-driven look at what truly supports them to build meaningful, enduring careers.

The timing of this conversation is significant. As the UAE marks 2026 as the Year of Family, there is a renewed focus on strengthening the conditions that enable Emirati women to thrive. For private-sector employers in Sharjah, this means looking more closely at how workplace policies can support Emirati women to build sustainable long-term careers. Flexibility, a balance between professional and caregiving responsibilities and clear return-to-work pathways are, therefore, critical levers for engagement and career continuity, contributing to the UAE's vision of family stability and social wellbeing.³



This is where private-sector employers in Sharjah can make a meaningful difference. To retain and advance Emirati talent, they need employee value propositions that reflect what Emirati women say they value most: flexibility, family support, clear progression pathways, purposeful development and workplaces where they can see a future.

At PwC Middle East, we are on this journey. We are working to create environments where Emirati women can build rewarding careers. This includes “returnship” (return-to-work) programmes, targeted leadership development, partner-level accountability for gender diversity, and comprehensive flexible working policies. This commitment was recognised last year when Strategy& Middle East (part of the PwC network) was awarded the UAE’s ‘Parent-Friendly Label’.⁴

While government initiatives in the UAE continue to play an important enabling role in Emiratisation, the responsibility for creating appealing, sustainable workplaces ultimately lies with employers themselves. The large share of Emirati women in the private sector represents a powerful pipeline for future leadership. Realising this potential will require commitment and a willingness to rethink how workplaces are designed around the needs and ambitions of national talent.



Khaled Bin Braik
UAE Country Senior Partner,
PwC Middle East

2

Introduction:

From hiring success to retention leadership



In the UAE, rising national participation in the private sector reflects sustained practical government interventions, such as the NAFIS programme⁵ and a growing commitment among employers to recruit, develop and retain Emirati nationals as part of their long-term talent strategies.

But what happens after placements? The next measure of success will be retention, quality of experience and career progression. Government initiatives have helped build the pipeline; the next step is how leading employers can take ownership of creating workplace environments where this can happen.

Previous research from PwC Middle East, including our last Emiratisation study conducted with the UAE's Ministry of Human Resources & Emiratisation,⁶ has highlighted both the scale of ambition to develop and harness homegrown talent in the private sector in the UAE and the speed at which progress can be achieved when policy, incentives and employer engagement align.

Our latest survey explores Emirati women's perspectives on working in Sharjah's private sector. The emirate of Sharjah provides a distinctive context for this research: its public sector operates on a four-day working week and is often perceived as offering greater flexibility and workplace support.

For the emirate's private sector, this raises an important question: how can employers in this sector create roles that are not only competitive, but also genuinely attractive to Emirati women, reflecting their cultural and family priorities while supporting their sense of purpose and career progression?

Given the significant growth in the participation of Emirati women in the UAE's private sector, their experience will be central to the success of national private-sector workforce ambitions.⁷ For employers in Sharjah, this makes it important to look closely at the factors that shape Emirati women's workplace experience, including flexible working, family-conscious policies, manager support and clear pathways for progression.

Based on survey data, supported by focus groups with private-sector employees, public-sector employees and jobseekers, as well as discussions with policymakers, employers and NAMA Women Advancement leadership, this report explores how private-sector employers in Sharjah can create workplaces where Emirati women choose to build long-term careers.



I consider private sector work as training for me, a way to gain experience, because the government sector asks for experience.





Three overarching insights emerge from our findings:

- ▶ **Attraction now needs to be matched by progression.** Emirati women are entering Sharjah's private sector. However, 56% of Emirati women surveyed are currently in entry-level roles, compared with 33% who are in middle management positions. The pipeline is strong; the opportunity now lies in creating visible pathways for career progression.
- ▶ **Women evaluate the total value propositions, not isolated benefits.** Working hours in Sharjah's private sector, for instance, are deemed as important as compensation (key considerations for 76% and 73% of all survey respondents, respectively). Emirati women are looking for a holistic package of terms and benefits offered by Sharjah's private sector, with choice at the core.
- ▶ **Opportunities for change can be addressed.** 62% of Emirati women surveyed say they would prefer hybrid work arrangements and 29% already recognise that such flexibility exists in Sharjah's private sector. This finding points to an opportunity for employers in the emirate's private sector to differentiate themselves by improving the visibility of these options where they already exist or increasing systematic support for hybrid and flexible working.

NAFIS continues to play an important enabling role in connecting Emirati talent with private-sector opportunities in Sharjah. But the primary responsibility for creating sustainably appealing workplaces now lies with employers themselves. This report highlights the comprehensive value propositions that matter to most Emirati women, from clear pathways for career progression and learning opportunities to flexibility and family support, while recognising that every career journey is different. It also aims to provide practical recommendations that organisations can adapt and scale.

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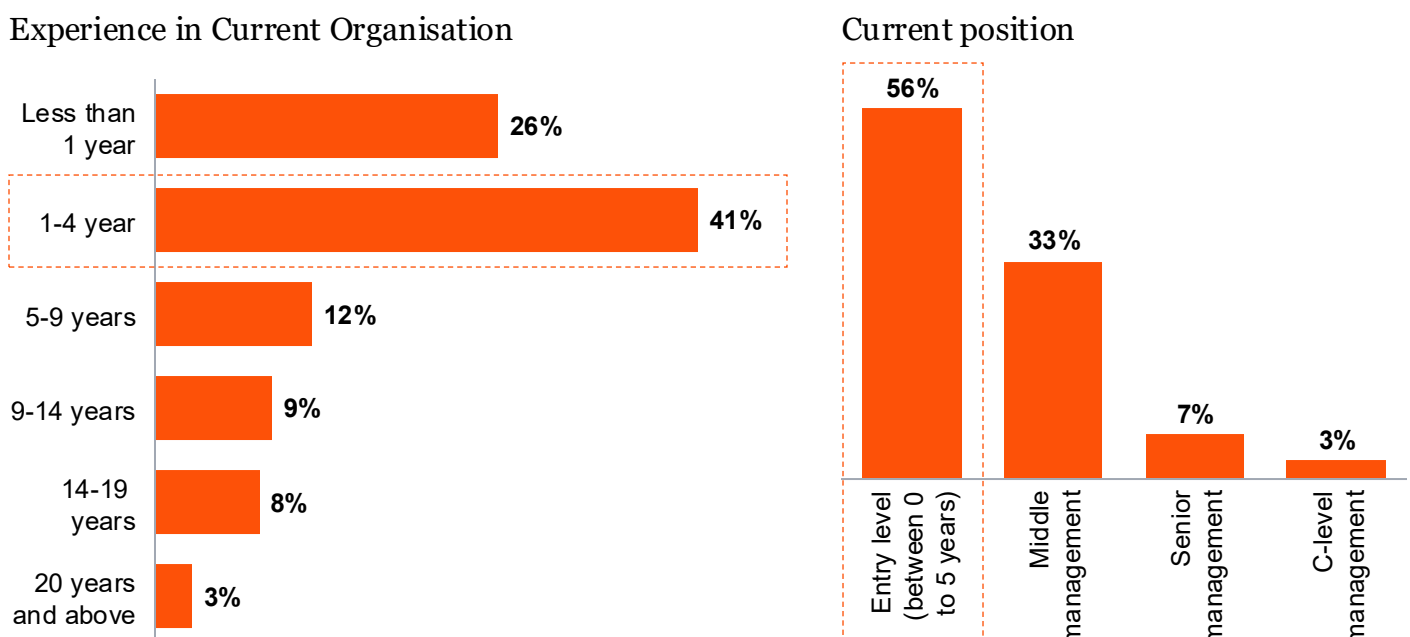
What Emirati women want from Sharjah's private sector

The survey shows that jobseekers are more optimistic about career progression in the private sector (47%) than those already employed there (32%). This may indicate that perceptions of jobseekers prior to the point of entry can differ from employees' subsequent experience, highlighting an opportunity for employers to strengthen alignment between expectations and employee experience.

Retention is visible, but progression needs greater clarity

Survey findings also indicate that 41% of respondents have been with their current organisation for one to four years, while a third have stayed for more than five years. At the same time, more than half of the survey respondents (56%) are currently in entry-level roles, while 33% are in middle management. This suggests that while retention is present, career progression needs to be more visible to employees. Respondents reported uncertainty about future career opportunities within their respective organisations, highlighting the need for clearer pathways, stronger leadership development and more guidance on the steps required to advance. Focus group participants reinforced this point, calling for greater clarity on "what comes next" and how to move forward.

Figure 1: Years of experience and role seniority



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Younger women should consider the private sector... it's an opportunity to explore different fields... the career growth is very different.



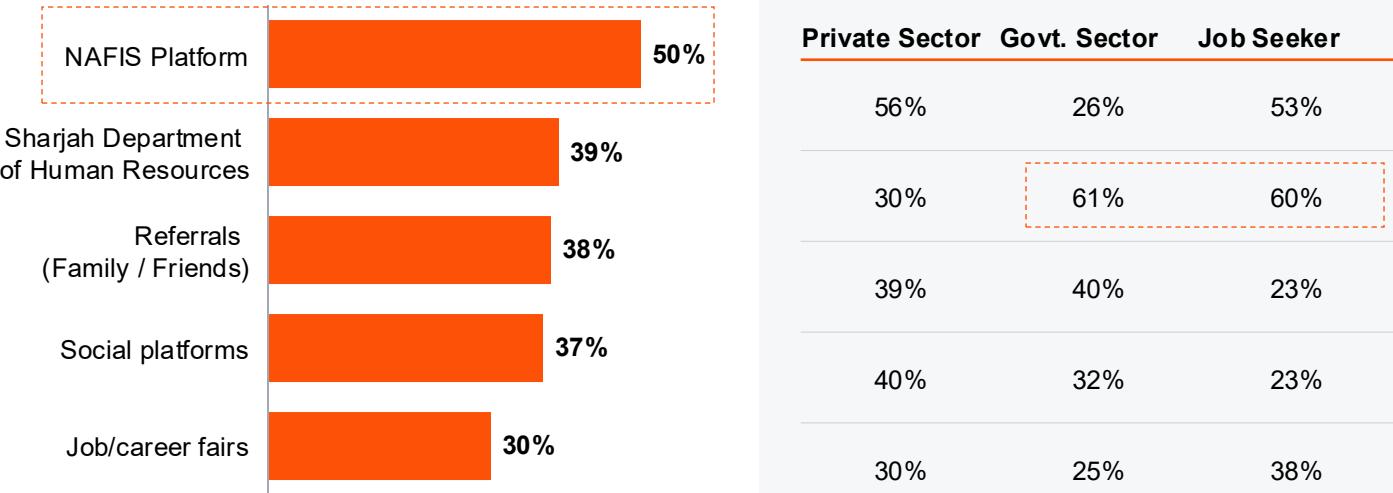
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Sharjah’s private sector employers have an opportunity to build on NAFIS support

Half of the women surveyed cited the UAE’s NAFIS programme⁸ as their primary job-search channel, validating the platform’s effectiveness for initial placements in the private sector (see Figure 2).

Among women already employed in the private sector, NAFIS usage rises to 56%, while women in government roles and jobseekers are more likely to rely on the Sharjah Department of Human Resources as their primary channel.

Figure 2: Top five methods of job search, by sector



So, while NAFIS helps open the door to private-sector employment, the opportunity for employers in Sharjah’s private sector is to continue to build on that momentum by creating workplace experiences that encourage Emirati women to stay, progress and thrive.



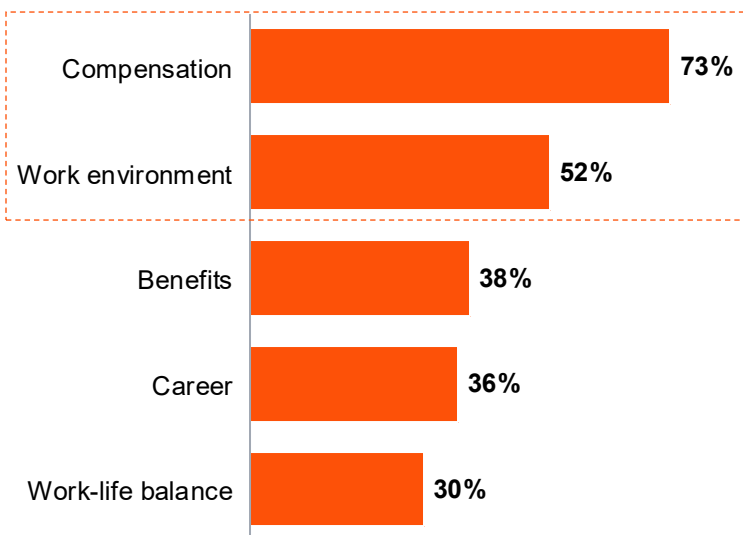
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Pay matters, but flexibility shapes Sharjah's private sector choices

For Emirati women, compensation is the strongest driver of employment decisions, with 73% of respondents identifying it as a top priority. However, pay is not the only factor shaping career choices: 52% also pointed to the work environment, underscoring the importance of a broader employee value proposition (see Figure 3).

This suggests that private-sector employers need to compete not only on salary, but also on the quality of the workplace experience, including culture, flexibility, manager support, development opportunities and a clear sense of belonging.

Figure 3: Top five drivers to pursue specific employment



However, when considering a transition from the public to the private sector, working hours were widely cited as a key consideration by 76% of all respondents, including 77% of current private-sector employees and 73% of jobseekers (Figure 4). This suggests that Emirati women assess the full employment proposition while considering employment in Sharjah's private sector, weighing pay alongside work environment and working hours and long-term career fit.



Work-life balance has become very important. If the private sector could provide that, it might encourage more people to join.



For women in Sharjah, where a four-day working week is standard in the government sector⁹, private-sector employers may need to consider how they can offer alternative options that are perceived as being similarly valuable or respond in ways that work for their business or workforce. This could help strengthen their appeal to female Emirati talent and support longer-term retention.

Notably for employers, individuals' preferences may vary when it comes to their workplaces and working conditions. Survey findings indicate that 62% stated a preference for hybrid working (rising to 64% among those already employed in the private sector, compared with 59% of jobseekers) and 64% expressed a desire for flexible hours (see Figure 5).



Figure 4: Top concerns for transitioning from public to private sector

Top 5 Concerns for transitioning from public to private sector

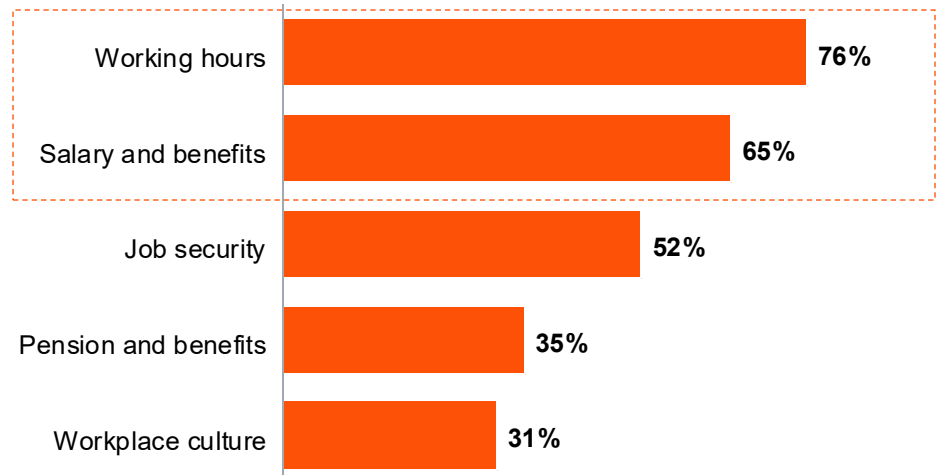
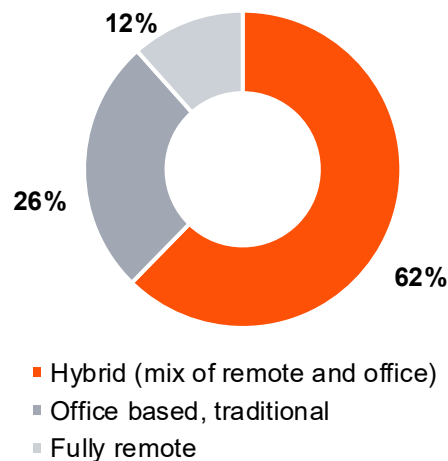
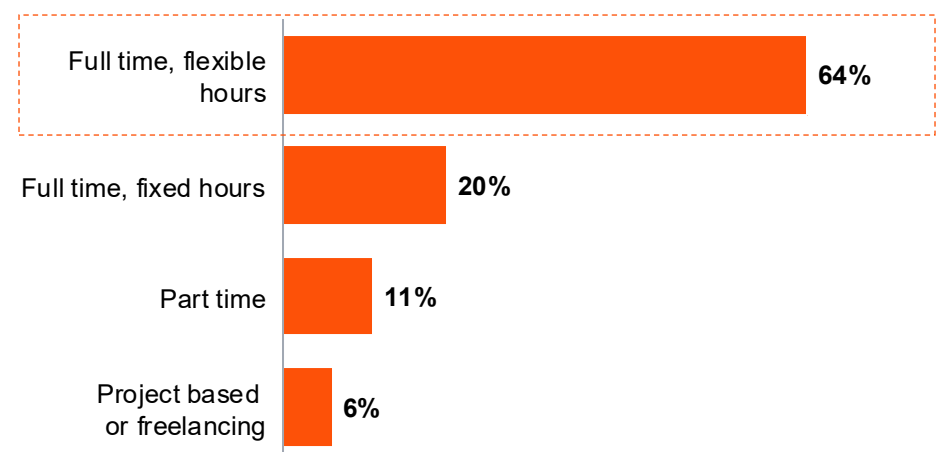


Figure 5: Preferences for employment type and schedule

Preferred Work Environment



Preferred Work Schedule



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Remote work is important in both government and private sectors. Having this option adds flexibility and makes people feel more comfortable working.



When it comes to shaping the total value proposition, private-sector employers have room to differentiate beyond pay. They can offer a range of benefits and career experiences that matter to Emirati women, from a supportive work environment, accelerated career progression and comprehensive learning pathways to “returnship” (return-to-work) programmes and leadership exposure. These positive factors came through strongly in the focus groups.

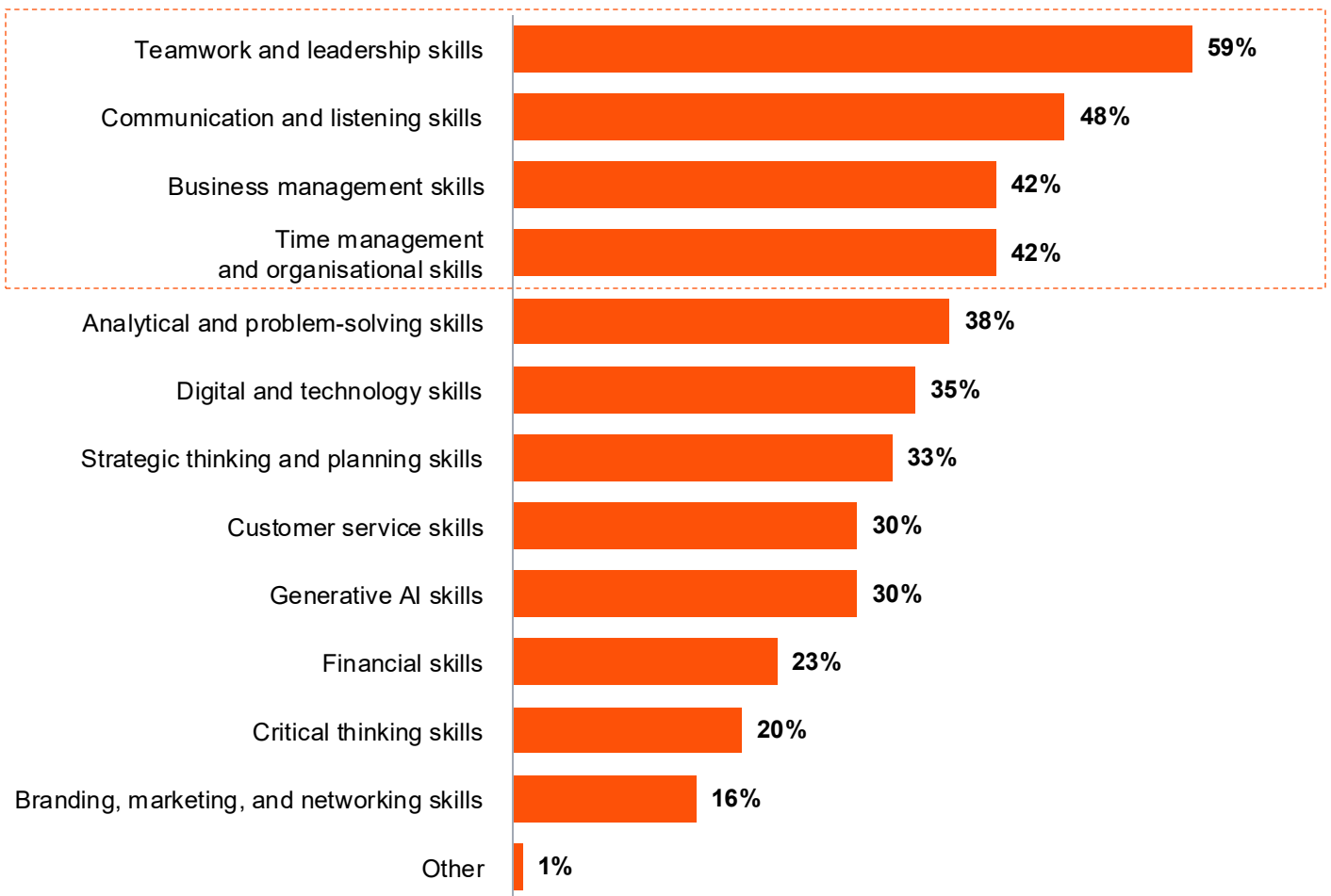


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Clearer pathways to development and progression

Skills development is a priority

Emirati women surveyed exhibited a strong drive to pursue career advancement in the private sector and continue building on their skills. Top three priority development areas highlighted in the findings included leadership and teamwork (cited by 59%), communication (48%), and business management skills (42%) (see Figure 6). Additionally, 55% expressed interest in developing or improving their entrepreneurial skills.

Figure 6: Top skills needed for achieving career goals

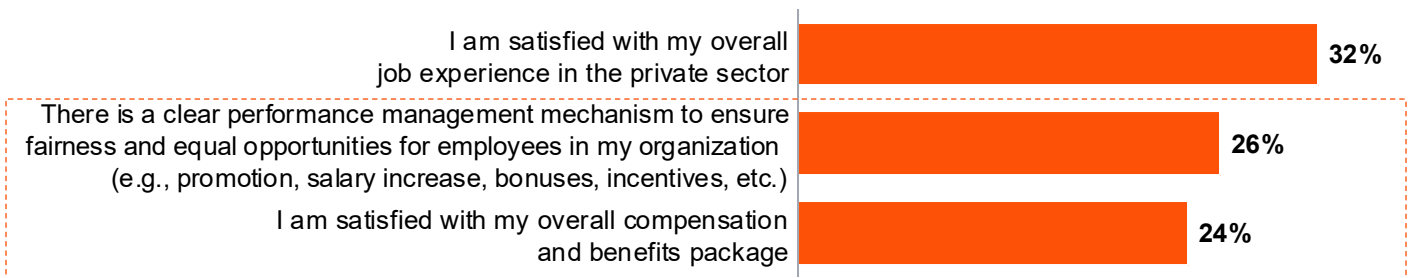
Expanding learning pathways

However, access to development opportunities may need to be more visible and consistent within their organisations. Fewer than half of respondents (46%) believe they currently have access to the training they need (see Figure 7), suggesting an opportunity for employers to better promote and expand learning pathways that support career progression.

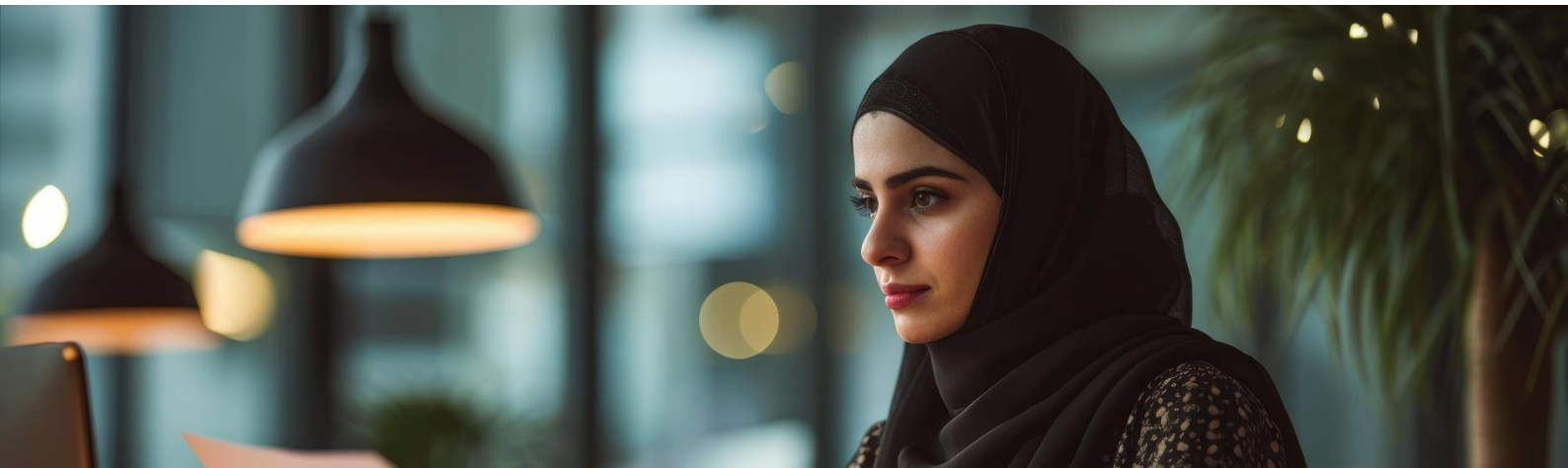
Figure 7: Perspectives on private sector



Perspective about Private Sector (T2B %)



Transparency is essential to building trust between employees and employers. The survey findings also suggest there is room to strengthen how performance and progression are communicated in Sharjah's private sector. Only 26% of Emirati women surveyed reported clear performance management mechanisms, while 38% felt they had the same advancement opportunities as their male counterparts. This points to an important perception among respondents about career progression and highlights the value of greater clarity around how performance is assessed, how advancement decisions are made and what development opportunities are available in the private sector.



7

Awareness gaps are weakening Sharjah's private sector appeal

Awareness of opportunities in Sharjah's private sector may be a bigger barrier than employers realise. Stakeholder discussions with the Sharjah Directorate of Human Resources (SDHR) highlighted that many job applicants have "limited visibility" of the private sector benefits available to them, including career growth, bonuses, allowances and workplace flexibility.

This suggests that even where good practices exist, women may not always be aware of them, creating perception gaps that could lead to attrition. Stakeholders therefore emphasised the need to raise awareness of the employee value proposition and to launch campaigns to change public perception of private sector careers.

8

Family transitions need stronger workplace support

Family transitions are another important consideration. Focus group participants that PwC Middle East engaged with during the fielding of this research highlighted that greater enhancements in this area could make a difference.

Re-entry pathways are equally important: only 45% of respondents believed suitable opportunities exist in the private sector for women returning after career breaks (see Figure 8). Qualitative discussions also pointed to the “difficulty in balancing work with caregiving responsibilities.”

Figure 8: Do you believe private sector companies offer suitable job opportunities and policies that support women who have taken career breaks to smoothly re-enter the workforce?



The survey identified other specific opportunities for private-sector employers relating to Emirati women's culturally specific needs. These include the provision of dedicated prayer spaces, appropriate ablution and “culturally fluent” management.



9

Recommended employer interventions to improve retention of Emirati women in Sharjah

Although government bodies provide the enabling framework for realising Emiratisation goals, the onus of creating appealing and sustainable workplaces falls on private-sector leaders.

The following seven recommendations are designed as practical interventions for private-sector employers. They are drawn from this research and informed by PwC Middle East's own frameworks and experience, recognising that what is feasible will vary by sector, organisation size and operating model. These are followed by some general suggestions for the wider ecosystem.





1. Ensure Emirati talent is fully utilised in meaningful roles

Seven priority actions for private-sector employers in Sharjah

Employers in Sharjah's private sector should look beyond hiring targets and assess whether Emirati women are placed in roles that make full use of their skills, qualifications and potential. This includes reviewing roles to ensure they are substantive and connected to the core business. As part of an annual role quality review, employers could assess whether Emirati employees are matched to roles aligned with their qualifications, skills and career aspirations, given access to meaningful work, including client-facing, operational, commercial or business-critical responsibilities and equipped with the tools, exposure and trust needed to contribute fully and build long-term private-sector careers.

This is closely aligned with the broader ambition of NAFIS that aims not just to increase Emirati participation in the private sector, but to embed national talent in meaningful roles that build capability, confidence and long-term economic contribution, including future entrepreneurship.

2. Implement transparent career architectures and compensation structures

- ▶ **Consider total employee value propositions**, such as accelerated career progression and leadership opportunities early in the employee's career. Where possible, demonstrate real examples of employee progression to make the pathway more credible and specific.
- ▶ **Strengthen transparency in compensation by** linking compensation decisions to clear role requirements, market benchmarks and defined performance criteria to support fairness and consistency. Where appropriate, they could also conduct periodic pay equity reviews to identify and address any unexplained disparities. This can help build greater transparency, trust and confidence in compensation practices.

3. Address working hours through greater flexibility

- ▶ **Where feasible for the role and industry, offer flexible working options** or role-specific arrangements
- ▶ **Equip managers to lead flexible teams** effectively by training them in results-oriented evaluation, focused on deliverables and outcomes rather than hours or physical presence, shifting the culture away from “visibility equals productivity.”

4. Support women through key life stages

- ▶ **Strengthen family-conscious leave support:** Employers could consider clear and consistent options for additional leave or flexible support based on individual circumstances, including for mothers returning from maternity leave and employees caring for children with special needs. This could include unpaid leave with job protection or even phased return-to-work arrangements.
- ▶ **Ensure appropriate facilities,** including purpose-built nursing rooms with comfortable seating and other facilities.

5. Build structured “hire to retire” development supported by mentorship

- ▶ **Where possible, establish formal mentorship matching for Emirati women** within their first month, and engage senior leaders early in talent discussions to identify high-potential candidates and support their development. Employers in Sharjah's private sector could also introduce structured returnship programmes for women re-entering the workplace after one- to five-year career breaks. These should include skills refresh training, mentorship with senior women, phased reintegration and clear progression pathways.
- ▶ **Develop structured development pathways across career stages,** complementing NAFIS' investment in training and skills development. This could include foundational skills covering professional communication, digital fluency, generative AI; leadership pipelines for high potential candidates, anchored in focused learning projects; and executive development including external executive education and board readiness.

6. Establish accountability among leaders

- ▶ **Strengthen accountability in employee concern resolution:** Employers in Sharjah's private sector should identify systemic workplace barriers, address employee concerns early, and build greater trust in grievance and resolution processes.
- ▶ **Set measurable targets at leadership level:** There should be clear annual goals linked to Emirati women's representation, promotion, retention and engagement within their teams.
- ▶ **Track and report progress transparently:** Monitor representation by level and track year-on-year progress across hiring, promotion, retention and satisfaction. Internal reporting can help build accountability, highlight where interventions are working and identify where further support is needed

7. Implement innovative long-term retention incentives

Design retention-focused schemes, such as:

- ▶ Long-term incentive plans
- ▶ Retention bonuses at key milestones,
- ▶ Sabbatical opportunities for long-serving employees
- ▶ Leadership fast-track programmes for high performers



10

The opportunity ahead

When it comes to working in Sharjah's private sector, Emirati women are clear about the need for comprehensive value propositions combining career progress, skills development, flexibility, family support, cultural respect, transparent advancement and the right level of compensation.

To build on the progress made through Emiratisation, private sector leaders in Sharjah need to take a lifecycle view of retention. This means tracking what happens after Emiratis join the private sector, including retention and progression at one-, three- and five-year intervals. This requires, as one stakeholder noted, "developing a mechanism to continuously measure and monitor retention indicators."

The opportunity now is for adoption of these measures at scale across Sharjah's private sector, in ways that are feasible for the size and sector of each organisation. Retaining and advancing Emirati women in Sharjah's private sector will not only support national workforce objectives but also help build resilient leadership pipelines that strengthen long-term competitiveness.



Contact us



Khaled Bin Braik

UAE Country
Senior Partner



Basma Bushnak

Partner and Inclusion
& Diversity Leader

PwC Middle East Contributors

Randa Bahsoun

Zina Janabi

Fatma Maryam

NAMA Research Team

Eida Jassim Obaid

Aalia Alfalasi

Hamda Al Ali

Hanan AlGailani



Methodology:

Research approach

To understand the employment landscape and lived experiences of Emirati women in Sharjah's private sector, a 360-degree research approach was adopted. This comprehensive methodology included:

- ▶ A quantitative survey of 691 Emirati women across different employment status groups, conducted between 3 June 2025 – 1 September 2025. 86% work full time; 6% work part time; 9% are job-seeking. 74% work in the private sector; 18% are employed in local government; 2% are in federal government posts; and 8% are classified as other. The demographic profile of respondents reveals an educated, early-career population: 52% hold university degrees and 10% postgraduate qualifications, with 66% aged between 25 and 39.
- ▶ Strategic meetings throughout the month of August 2025 with the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MOHRE) and Sharjah Department of Human Resources (SDHR) to align the study with national priorities and policy frameworks.
- ▶ Focus group discussions conducted throughout the month of August 2025 across diverse personas including public and private sector employees and jobseekers, with a special emphasis on Emirati women in Sharjah, to explore sector-specific challenges and barriers to workforce participation.
- ▶ Roundtable interviews with decision-makers, policymakers, HR directors, and representatives from the government and private sector.

This mixed-methods approach supports a fuller understanding of the current employment context and helps bridge the gap between policy and practice.

The sentiments captured in the report reflect the views at the time of the research.

Note: Percentages in charts may not add up to 100%, a result of rounding percentages; multi-selection answer options; and the decision in certain cases to exclude the display of certain responses, including 'Other', 'Not applicable' and 'Don't know'.



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Thank you