




The case for diversity series

Navigating the path back: Women returners in KSA

Alternative work models critical to support the reintegration of women in the Saudi workforce

April 2024



Women are a transformational force in the Saudi labour market, but many face challenges when returning to work following career breaks

In the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the transformational shift in societal attitudes, as well as the introduction of legal reforms and Saudisation policies, have resulted in a significant increase in the number of women in the workforce.

Between 2017 and 2023, the female labour force participation rate more than doubled, rising from 17.4% to 36%, and is ahead of the target set for 2030. With recent labour law reforms in KSA, many of the impediments for women to work have now been removed. There are new protections in place, like the right to equal pay, and legal provisions that seek to prevent discrimination in employment, and protect against sexual harassment in the workplace.

As with the broader MENA region, many women in KSA tend to leave their jobs when they start a family. However, as women become increasingly integrated in the Saudi workforce, the presence of women returners will also become more common. Unfortunately, many women returners face challenges in their transition back to professional life, which can leave them feeling discouraged, with some leaving the workforce altogether.

The size of the prize from getting this right is huge. In our latest report, **Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA**, we examine the challenges that women in Saudi Arabia face in the workplace and offer possible solutions for employers to empower them, in line with the National Transformation agenda.

The combined economic potential of women that take career breaks could be as large as US\$385bn across the nine MENA countries we have studied. In fact, there are not just significant business, economic, and social benefits from encouraging the participation of women in the workforce; businesses also benefit from being able to access a skilled and experienced talent pool, thereby building strong and sustainable leadership pipelines.



Women in Saudi Arabia are more likely to take career breaks, but are slightly less likely to return to work than their MENA counterparts

In Saudi Arabia, more than half (55%) of the women surveyed have taken career breaks, higher than the 44% of their peers in the MENA region. However, women in the Kingdom are also less likely to return to work - only 40% of Saudi women who have taken career breaks have returned to work, slightly lower than the 43% of MENA women who have done so.

In line with MENA findings, the key reason for taking a career break in Saudi Arabia is due to caregiving responsibilities. But unlike the rest of MENA, women in KSA also consider caring for their own mental or physical wellbeing as one of the top three reasons for taking a career break.

“

I don't even think taking a career break is an option for me if I want to continue working and progress - KSA national

Key insight

The Saudi women in our focus groups are determined to challenge perceptions about the role that women should play in work. They feel a strong sense of obligation to take advantage of the hard-won gains women have made and the momentum from the reforms achieved in the Saudi labour market. As a result, some women are keen to remain in work and are reluctant to take career breaks so that they can ride the wave of progress.

Among the women surveyed who took career breaks, 67% were at the peak of their careers in experienced, senior management and C-level roles. This is similar to what we have seen in the wider MENA region, where 68% of women have taken career breaks beyond entry level.

As with the broader MENA region, women in Saudi Arabia are motivated to return to work primarily for financial independence and personal development. However, it is noteworthy that the drive for financial independence is stronger in KSA than in the MENA region (42% vs. 38%), while the motivation for growth and development is comparatively lower in KSA (27% vs. 30% in the MENA).

Feedback from focus groups suggest that by becoming financially independent, women are better equipped to support themselves and their families, giving them greater financial security and control.



Women in KSA value work-life balance and alternative work models

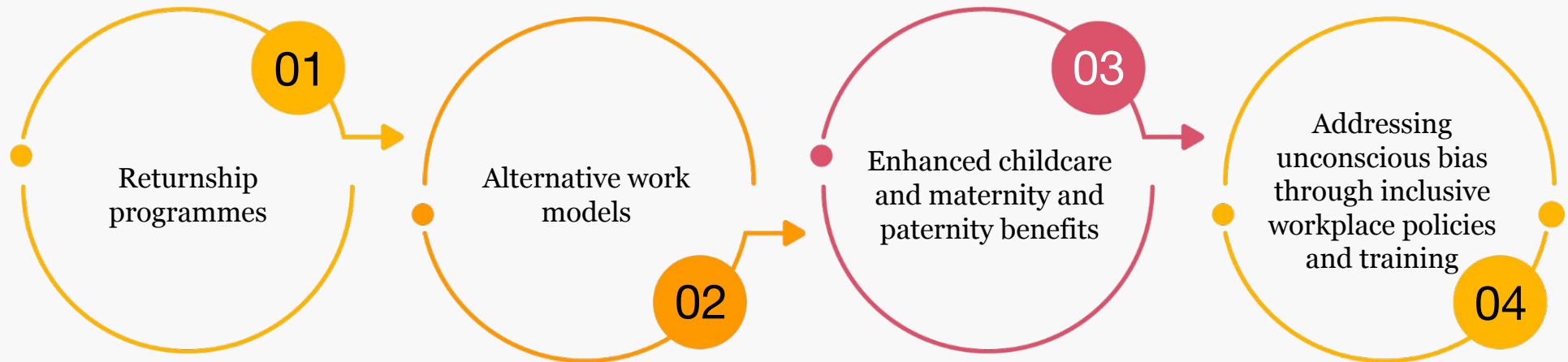
Our survey has highlighted that the top three factors enabling women's return to work in KSA, in line with the broader region, included partner and family support, societal support, and access to job opportunities that matched their skills and experience.

The top three employer characteristics that women returners look out for include employers that emphasise work-life balance, fulfilling work and flexible and remote working opportunities.

Our call to action: re-integrating women into the workforce

More than half of the women we surveyed (60%) in KSA indicated that taking career breaks will have a negative impact on their careers, similar to the sentiment shared by their peers in the wider MENA region. So, how can businesses in the region unlock this experienced but underutilised pool of talent?

Here are four key actions for employers to consider:



01 Returnship programmes

Our survey has revealed that 83% of women in KSA find returnship programmes to be significant in influencing their return to work, similar to the share of women surveyed in MENA. Women returners value returnships as it provides a clear and structured pathway with the necessary training and support to be re-integrated into the workforce. For many, such programmes can be a decisive factor in influencing their decision to rejoin the workforce.

02 Alternative work models

In addition to work-life balance and flexible working arrangements, Saudi employers should consider the possibility of making alternative work models (such as part-time or contract-based work) more widely available to facilitate the transition of women back to work. Findings from our survey indicate that other than being able to achieve work-life balance, the ability to find flexible and remote/online working jobs, as well as alternative work models, are key factors influencing women's decisions to return to work.

03 Enhanced childcare and maternity and paternity benefits

The Kingdom has achieved marked progress in ensuring legal protections for women in the workplace, including maternity leave policies. Going forward, the Kingdom has the opportunity to further enhance this, for example by improving and expanding the coverage of maternity and paternity benefits - fathers are currently entitled to five days of paid leave within six months of the birth of their child. Businesses can also play a role by moving towards more equitable parental leave benefits, which help shift the cultural narrative towards shared responsibility for caregiving.

04 Addressing unconscious bias through inclusive workplace policies and training

Women in Saudi Arabia are ambitious, with 85% believing they have the potential to reach the topmost levels of their organisations. However, just like their peers in the broader MENA region, women in KSA face employer stigma associated with career breaks. For example, 52% indicated that they have had their resumes rejected due to gaps in their careers. Feedback from focus groups also suggest that returning women risk being “mommy tracked”, due to perceptions about their willingness to take up challenging roles or assignments, or their commitment to work. Combating such perceptions through inclusive workplace policies and training for leaders and managers is critical to minimise the risk of unconscious bias and promote an inclusive culture.

85%

Of Saudi women believe they have the potential to reach the topmost levels of their organisations

In focus

In conversation with Maha Taibah Founder & CEO of Rumman and PwC Middle East Advisory Board Member



Maha Taibah describes herself as a lifelong learner. Having graduated from some of the top academic institutions in the world, she has worked closely with business leaders, governments, NGOs, and startups, and has made numerous appearances in the media. She is passionate about empowering individuals to achieve their full potential and is dedicated to creating healthy workplace cultures, attracting top talent and giving back to society.

Hawazen Al-Hassoun, COO at PwC Middle East speaks with Maha to discuss how women in the Kingdom can make the most of their career breaks and achieve a successful transition back to work.



What are your top tips when planning a career break?

Establish clear goals and invest in your development

Having clear objectives and what you want to achieve during your break (personal goals, training etc.) will be important to demonstrate to your employer how you have made the most of your leave. Stay informed about the latest trends in your field, and invest time to upskill yourself to prepare for a successful career comeback.

Build and maintain your network

Having a strong professional network and staying in touch with colleagues and networking actively can keep you connected and informed about developments in your field, and when the time comes, help connect you to job opportunities.

Explore a new dimension

As you shape a new identity beyond your work life, consider exploring various opportunities that might not directly align with your usual professional role. These experiences can offer valuable insights into different aspects of yourself and contribute to a deeper self-discovery journey. Try introducing yourself without referring to your previous profession and see where this takes you.



Advice to business leaders to help women return to work

Embracing flexible work arrangements, remote work and part-time working can support the reintegration of women, and enable them to balance caring responsibilities, exploring entrepreneurial ventures, or prioritising mental health and well-being.

Providing on-site childcare facilities and dedicated nursing rooms can help ease the transition back to work for mothers. Moreover, offering enhanced parental leave policies and initiatives centred on physical and mental wellbeing can help foster an inclusive environment that encourages women to resume their professional journey.

Additionally, creating mentorship circles, hosting family-friendly events, and establishing peer support groups alongside tailored career development support cultivates a culture of inclusivity.

Unconscious bias training is essential to address the stigma that returning professionals face and foster fairness and equality in the workplace.

Embracing these initiatives not only promotes gender equality but also contributes to the socio-economic progress of Saudi Arabia.

Contacts



Riyadh AlNajjar
PwC Middle East Chairman of the Board & KSA Country Senior Partner



Zina Janabi
Inclusion & Diversity Director, Middle East
zina.janabi@pwc.com



Norma Taki
Inclusion & Diversity Leader, Transaction Services Partner and Consumer Markets Leader, Middle East
norma.taki@pwc.com



Fatma Maryam
Senior Inclusion & Diversity Consultant, Middle East
fatma.maryam@pwc.com



Jing Teow
Economics & Sustainability Director, Middle East
jing.teow@pwc.com

About the survey

Conducted in October 2023, the MENA study covers insights collected from focus groups and a survey of around 1,200 women across the GCC (KSA, UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar), as well as Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. This report focuses on KSA-specific findings, where 73% of the survey respondents were nationals, while 27% were expatriates.

At PwC, our purpose is to build trust in society and solve important problems. We're a network of firms in 151 countries with nearly 364,000 people who are committed to delivering quality in assurance, advisory and tax services. Find out more and tell us what matters to you by visiting us at www.pwc.com.

Established in the Middle East for over 40 years, PwC Middle East has 30 offices across 12 countries in the region with around 11,000 people. (www.pwc.com/me).

PwC refers to the PwC network and/or one or more of its member firms, each of which is a separate legal entity. Please see www.pwc.com/structure for further details.

© 2024 PwC. All rights reserved