



The case for diversity series

Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

Perspectives



Hani Ashkar

Middle East Senior Partner

As business leaders with a longstanding commitment to the Middle East region, we play a key role in ensuring that inclusion and diversity are core to our workplace culture. We've made continual progress in increasing the representation of women across our firm, and while we have more work to do, we're proud of the progress we've made in addressing biases and structural inequalities that contribute to gender disparities - especially for experienced professionals who have taken career breaks.

Recognising the value of reintegrating professionals after a career break is important - their reintegration to the workforce could contribute up to US\$385 billion to the GDP of the nine MENA countries we studied. It's our responsibility to promote inclusion and diversity, lead by example to eliminate barriers that prevent women from realising their full potential, and develop strategies that support their reintegration into the workforce.

I hope this study will help business leaders understand what returning women value in employers, and the steps they can take to meet these needs effectively. A special thanks to the Middle East Inclusion and Diversity Council and everyone who shared their valuable insights and contributions to our research.



Norma Taki

Middle East Inclusion & Diversity Leader, Transaction Services Partner and Consumer Markets Leader

Businesses around the world have made significant progress in promoting gender diversity. Conversations on women in the workforce and in leadership positions have gained momentum. However, the reintegration of women into the workforce after a career break is often overlooked, especially in the MENA region.

Women returning to work face obstacles to career advancement as employers view career breaks negatively, which results in negative tangible impacts on earnings and career progression. However, career breaks can offer profound personal growth opportunities.

This report is the first in our 'The case for diversity' series, which aims to explore the different dimensions of diversity in our societies. I hope it encourages businesses to critically evaluate and transform policies, practices, and cultures to leverage the unique contributions of these women and create an environment where they can thrive.

I would like to extend my thanks to the founders and network of Crunchmoms for contributing their insights to this research.

Executive summary

Women in MENA have achieved remarkable progress in the last few decades, driven by a highly educated and enterprising female demographic. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) shows a substantial increase in the female labour force participation rate, from 19% to 32%, in the countries surveyed in this report (except Egypt) between 1990 and 2021.¹

This progress results from the rapid economic and social transformation in the region, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, where national development strategies and policies have been instrumental in integrating women into the workforce.

Having to navigate their professional and domestic roles, women often take career breaks over the course of their lives. However, many women face challenges when returning to work. Some may end up in positions that do not match their skills and experience, while others are discouraged from returning to work altogether.

By leveraging the talent pool of experienced and competent women who are eager to return to work, companies can not only enhance the quality and diversity of skills and perspectives in the workplace, but also effectively address the scarcity of women in senior leadership roles.

Our report highlights the experiences of women who have taken career breaks and the challenges they faced. It draws on insights collected from focus groups and a survey of around 1,200 women across the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman, as well as interviews with CEOs leading the workforce in the MENA region. More importantly, it sheds light on the practical steps businesses must take to address these challenges.

A snapshot of our findings:

US\$385bn

the total GDP contribution of returning women across the nine MENA countries we surveyed.²

68%

of women take career breaks at grades beyond entry-level.

82%

of women who have returned to work believe that they can progress to the top levels of their organisation.

46%

of women indicated the importance of the support of their partner and wider family when returning to work.

US\$4.3bn

of total GDP gains could be generated across the nine surveyed countries by activating flexible working arrangements.

83%

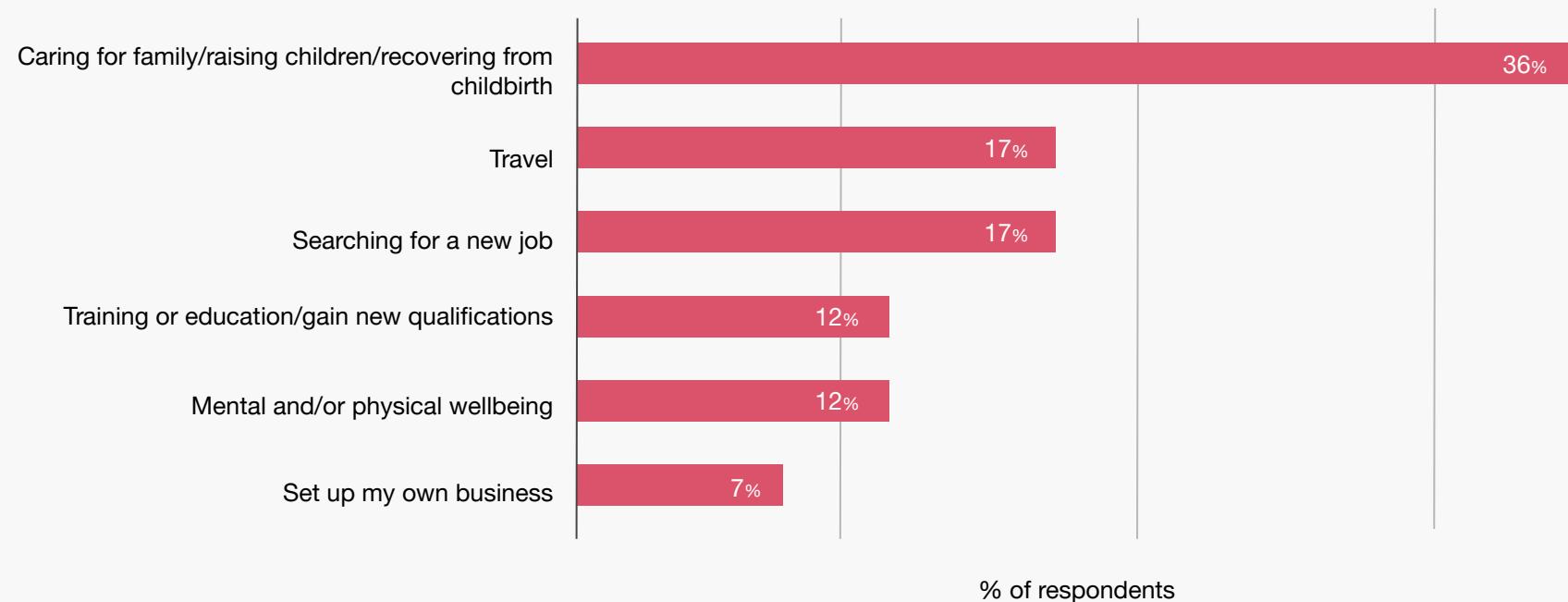
of women agreed that returnship programmes are important in influencing their decision to rejoin the workforce.

Women in MENA go on career breaks just as their careers peak, driven by family and caregiving responsibilities

Our survey results indicate that nearly half of working women in the MENA region have taken a career break over the course of their careers. Of the 44% of those who have taken a career break, the top motivator has been caring for a family, raising children or recovering from childbirth (see Figure 1).

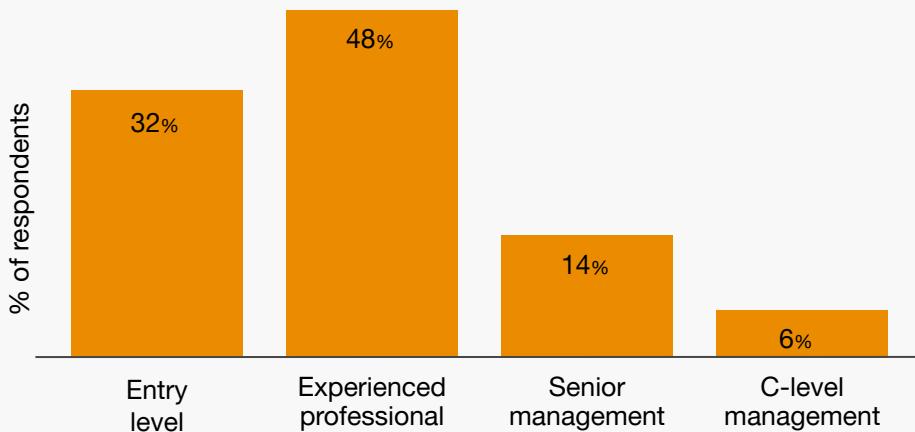
There are significant business, economic, and social costs associated with women leaving the workforce. Businesses miss out on a vast reservoir of talent, exacerbating the issue of the 'leaky pipeline' in senior leadership positions.

Figure 1: Top reasons for taking a career break (% of women who have taken career breaks)



Among women who have taken career breaks, a significant 68% possess relevant experience beyond entry-level roles. Within this, 20% of the women surveyed took their break at the senior management and C-suite level (see Figure 2).

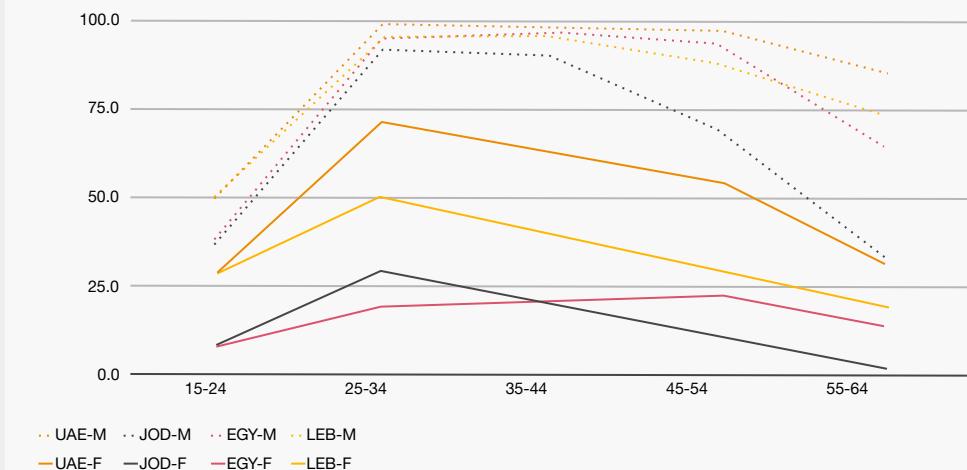
Figure 2: Career stages at which women have taken a break



Source: PwC Middle East: Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

This is consistent with patterns in labour force participation rates (see Figure 3), which shows that female labour force participation decreases after the ages of 25-34 years, while for men, it tends to stay relatively steady throughout their lives.

Figure 3: Male and female labour force participation by age group



Source: ILO



Women are highly-motivated to return to work following their career breaks, but face challenges doing so

Our survey has revealed that 43% of women that have taken career breaks have returned to work in MENA. This is primarily motivated by the desire to become financially independent, with 38% of women reporting this as their top reason for returning, while 30% had the desire to achieve personal development and growth. These were followed by reasons such as wanting to earn enough to afford basic necessities, with children growing up or moving out, as well as some wanting to boost their self-esteem and gain a sense of achievement.

However, many women feel apprehensive about the prospects of successfully returning to work after a career break. Our survey reveals that 60% of women believe that taking a career break will negatively impact their career, with this figure being even higher (66%) for working mothers.

43%

of women that have taken career breaks have returned to work in MENA.



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Returning women bring with them a deep sense of responsibility and an appreciation of the opportunities given to them, rather than entitlement.

Elda Choucair
CEO, Omnicom Media Group

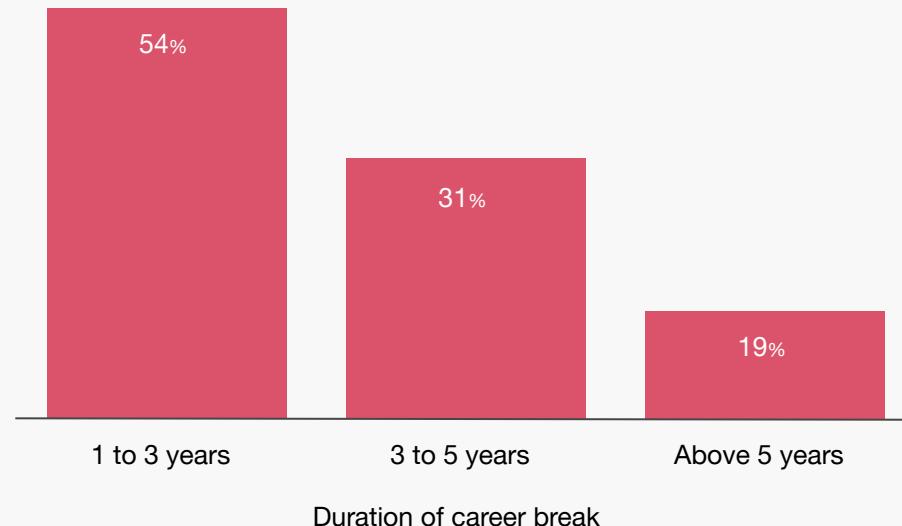
Our survey and focus groups identified three typical challenges women face when returning to work

01 Employer stigma around career breaks

Feedback from focus groups suggests that employers sometimes assume that returning women lack experience or have diminished skills. As a result, their applications are rejected before even being considered.

The results of our survey show that returning to work becomes more difficult as the amount of time spent out of work increases. 54% of women who took a career break of up to three years have returned to work, while only 19% of those who spent more than five years out of work were able to do so (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of women that have returned to work, by length of career break



Source: PwC Middle East: Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

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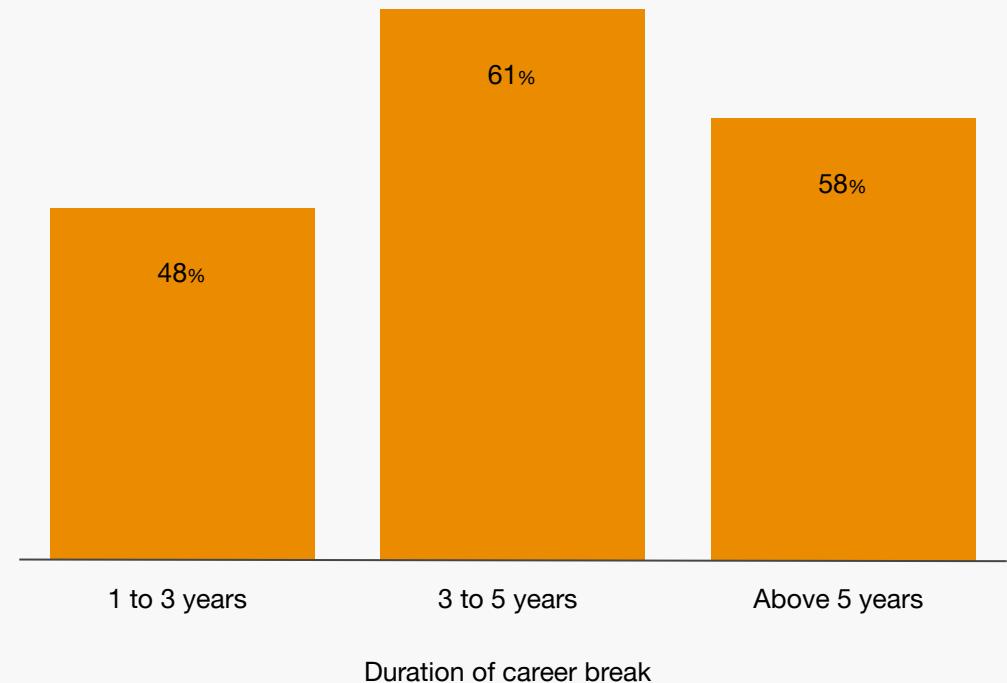
I wanted to get back to the level I was five years ago, but when I returned from my break, I felt like a fresh graduate looking for my first job.

Female professional

late 30s, financial sector

In addition, out of the women that have taken career breaks, 49% agreed that their applications have been rejected due to gaps in their resume, with this figure being higher for women that have taken longer career breaks (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Percentage of women who agree that their applications were rejected due to gaps in their resume



Source: PwC Middle East: Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

Several women from the focus groups also flagged their reliance on professional networks and connections with previous employers and managers that were necessary to personally endorse their skills and expertise, as it would be otherwise impossible to be considered by prospective employers.



02 Lack of flexible working arrangements

Our survey results indicate that women value flexible working arrangements that enable them to balance work alongside other responsibilities. However, the scarcity of flexible roles often forces women to choose between part-time roles or risk going into roles that are not commensurate with their skills and experience (known as “occupational downgrading”).

A sizable share of women (60%) currently working part-time would prefer to work more hours if flexible working or remote working options are available, indicating that there is a gap in the market for such opportunities in the region. This preference is even more significant (75%) for experienced women above the age of 45 years, who would work more hours if given the flexibility to do so.

It is also clear that flexible work has a broad appeal beyond married women and mothers, as 67% of single women also expressed willingness to work more hours under conditions of flexibility. Women in our focus groups also spoke of moving into roles that enable them to juggle work and family responsibilities, even if they entail limited professional growth.

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The key is flexibility, it is the culture that empowers the woman to handle her work and home responsibilities in the best way that she can.

Elda Choucair
CEO, Omnicom Media Group

03 The risk of being “mommy tracked”

Women from the focus groups that have returned to work shared their frustrations at being “mommy tracked”, as employers make assumptions about their willingness to take up challenging roles or assignments, or feel they are less committed to their jobs due to caregiving responsibilities.

As a result, women with children find themselves being assigned to a career path with limited opportunities or end up progressing on a less steep career trajectory and fall behind their peers in terms of promotions and wage growth. This has real consequences in terms of lifetime earnings potential, with research showing that this “motherhood penalty” can be as high as 20-30%.⁴

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Countering the perception that skill sets have diminished or being perceived as less ambitious after a career break is a significant challenge many women face.

Patrick van der Loo

Regional President, Middle East, Russia and Africa (MERA), Pfizer



Partner and family support, work-life balance and access to the right opportunities are key enablers that encourage women to return to work

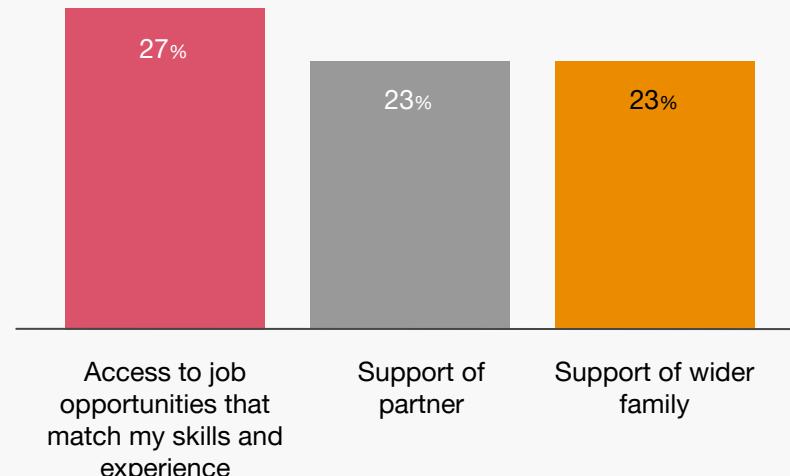
In the Middle East in particular, social and cultural norms place expectations on women to prioritise their domestic and caregiving roles, often above their career aspirations.⁵ According to our survey, nearly half (46%) of participants indicated the importance of the support of their partner and wider family when returning to work. However, this support is often conditional on women being able to prioritise family responsibilities alongside work.

This is consistent with survey responses which show that, when seeking return to work opportunities, women prioritise employers that provide work-life balance (the most important employer characteristic), as well as flexible and/or remote working arrangements (the third most important employer characteristic). Fulfilling work was also cited as a key characteristic.

In addition, 27% of women surveyed say that access to job opportunities that match their skills and experience is another key factor in enabling them to return to work (see Figure 6). This figure is more significant for women aged 45 years and above who are potentially more senior/experienced.

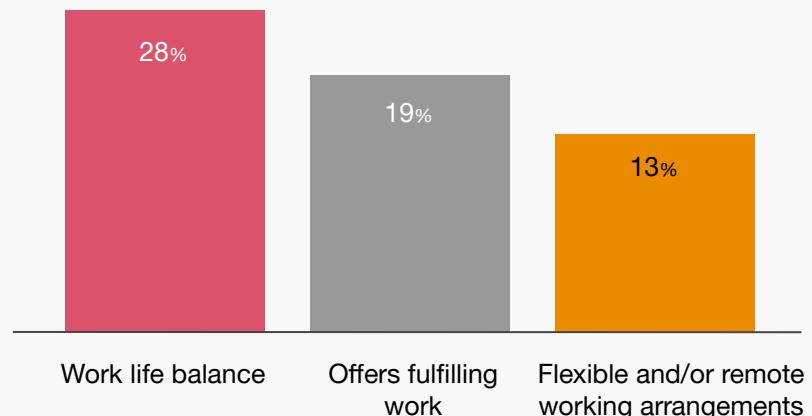
Figure 6: Percentage of respondents rating most important factors (general and employer-related) that enable women's return to work

Top three general factors enabling women's return to work



Source: PwC Middle East: Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

Top three employer characteristics enabling women's return to work



Source: PwC Middle East: Navigating the path back: Women returners in MENA

Dispelling three myths around career breaks

Women returning from career breaks often encounter biases and misconceptions that pose as significant obstacles to their professional advancement.

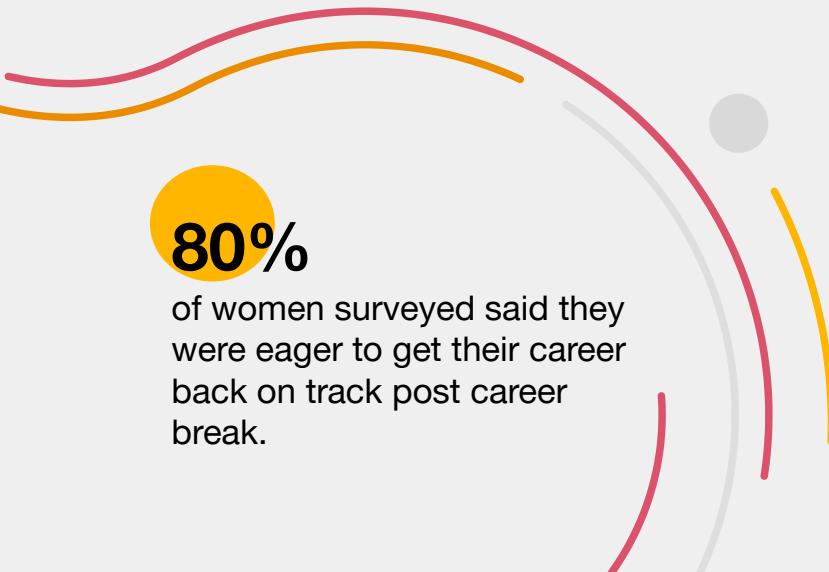
Our findings challenge and dispel some of these widespread myths.

Myth 1

Women who return from career breaks lack ambition

Reality:

There is a misconception that women returning from career breaks are less ambitious than their peers and do not aspire to personal and professional development. Contrary to that belief, the women we surveyed are driven and determined to grow and succeed. 80% of women surveyed said that they were eager to get their career back on track post career break. These women are clear about what they want, in terms of culture, working arrangements, and access to training and development opportunities. They also take a proactive approach towards their personal development and career progression. 82% of respondents who have returned to work say that they envision themselves thriving in their roles and advancing towards the highest levels within their organisations.



80%

of women surveyed said they were eager to get their career back on track post career break.

Myth 2

It is impossible to stage a successful return to work

Reality:

While the prospect of returning to work may feel daunting at first, our survey shows that it is possible for women to re-enter the workforce into roles that are commensurate with their skills and experience. 59% of women we surveyed agreed that the jobs they found matched their salary expectations. 81% of them returned to a higher salary than when they left; 50% returned to the same grade they left, and 35% returned to a higher grade. These observations should provide comfort to others that, with the right steps and support from employers, a successful return to work is within reach.

Myth 3

The onus is on women to stage a successful return to work

Reality:

There is the perception that women should be solely responsible for navigating a successful return to work, while managing the expectations of their partners, wider family and employers. On the contrary, a concerted effort and shared responsibility among employers, governments and societies at large are imperative to effectively move the needle in bringing women back into the workforce. The survey results show that having the right support – preserving work-life balance, as well as making flexible and remote working opportunities more widely available – can ease the transition for returners back into work (see Figure 6). Additionally, an empathetic approach to leadership and management, as well as inclusive workplace policies can make a real difference.

Crunchmoms: How a community-led approach is helping UAE women make a successful return to work

UAE-based Crunchmoms is a private network in the Middle East for women, focused on confidently helping moms re-enter, restart, or change their careers at all stages of their professional life, empowering them to achieve their full potential in work, business and life.

Members become part of the Crunchmoms network to join a community of accomplished and influential women who provide confidence and comfort in returning back to the workforce. Members can participate in events and workshops to expand and maintain their professional network, obtain helpful advice and support from industry experts, senior executives and entrepreneurs, and keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date.

Crunchmoms also leads and advocates for change in businesses by:



Helping businesses understand the importance of flexible or part-time job opportunities, and address negative perceptions associated with such roles and tailor them to the dynamic lives of mothers and parents.



Advocating for robust support from organisational leaders and line managers to enable a seamless return from maternity leave through personalised career plans, updated policies, mentorship, and conducive workplace environments.



Highlighting high-value positions to its member network, especially middle-management to senior executive roles that align with the diverse skills and expertise of the women within the network.

US\$385bn

the total GDP contribution of returning women across the surveyed MENA countries.



Supporting women returners: Our call to action

Career breaks are nothing new, and yet our research shows that women still face obstacles when returning to work. These returning women represent an economic force to be reckoned with – they contribute around US\$385bn of GDP across the nine MENA countries we surveyed.⁶ Businesses also benefit from being able to access a skilled and experienced talent pool, thereby building strong and sustainable leadership pipelines.

The question is – how can businesses in the region unlock this talent effectively?

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There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Introducing more customised models, such as job-sharing or project-based roles, would be beneficial. These align well with the dynamic nature of our industry and can also support female talent who want to return to work without the commitment of full-time roles.

Tarek Daouk
CEO, Dentsu MENA

Four key actions for employers to set change in motion:

- 1 Enhanced maternity and paternity benefits 
- 2 Alternative work models 
- 3 Returnship programmes 
- 4 Addressing unconscious bias through inclusive workplace policies and training 

Enhanced maternity and paternity benefits



While maternity rights and benefits are largely protected across the region, the extension of maternity leave policies and enhancement of related benefits could help increase the likelihood of women remaining in work. By providing longer maternity leave, women have ample time for postnatal recovery and to establish new family routines. This can significantly reduce the pressure on women to prematurely exit their careers due to insufficient maternity leave duration.

Current laws and regulations also largely assume that caregiving responsibilities fall primarily on women, with limited paternity benefits required by law, or offered by companies. Some countries (e.g. the Nordic countries, Canada, New Zealand and the UK) have gone even further by offering shared parental leave, which allows parents to share leave and pay after a child is born or adopted. Such policies offer enhanced flexibility and fairness in how couples navigate the work-family balance following the arrival of a new child.⁷

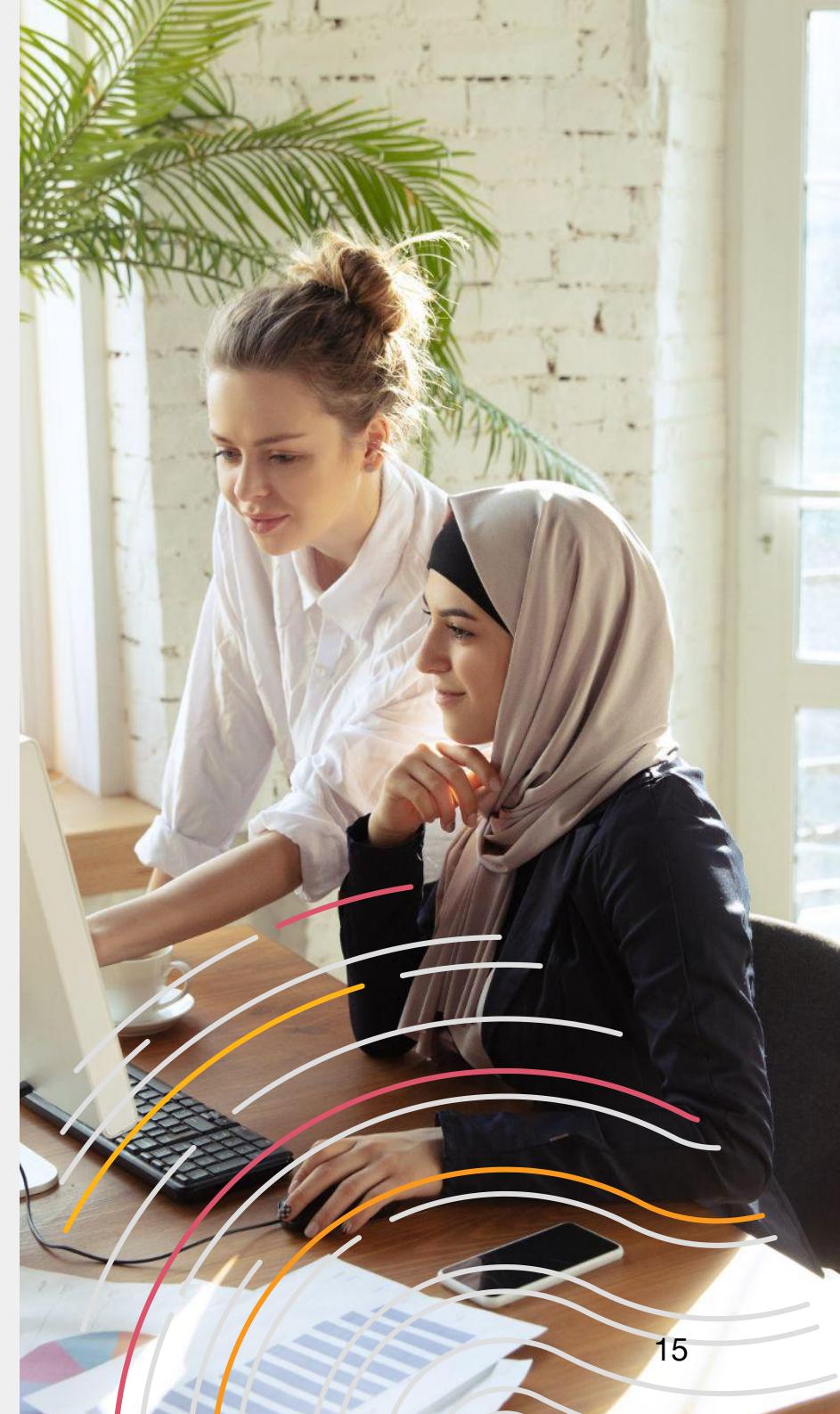
By providing more equitable parental leave benefits, businesses do not only help accelerate the return of women to the workforce, but also level the playing field between men and women, as well as shift the cultural narrative towards shared responsibility for caregiving.

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The region is still behind when it comes to mandated maternity and paternity benefits and rights. Improved paternity benefits will help redress the care burden that has traditionally fallen on to women’s shoulders.

Tarek Daouk

CEO, Dentsu MENA





Many women often have to combine work with ongoing caring commitments, which necessitates part-time or flexible working. However, their opportunities are constrained by the lack of flexible or part-time roles available, especially for senior positions and higher skilled jobs.

Our analysis shows that providing the right working models for women (for example, flexible and/or remote working) could improve labour force participation and enable women to remain in work. Enabling women to work additional hours by granting them flexibility, could generate additional GDP gains of US\$4.3bn across the nine countries covered in our study.⁸

However, alternative work models in the region are very limited. “It is either full time or no time,” as women in our focus group discussions have indicated. Businesses can change this by making alternative work models more widely available, which can include, but are not limited to, compressed work weeks (with longer hours for a shorter work week), part-time work, a phased return as hours are gradually increased, flexible working hours, remote working and even job shares. Employers can also make these opportunities more widely known and accessible.

Hybrid and remote working models are also highly dependent on building a culture of trust within teams, and a shift in assessing performance away from the hours that are put in, towards outcomes achieved.

US\$4.3bn

of total GDP gains would be generated as a result of flexible working arrangements.

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Flexible work options, such as hybrid or condensed hours, will help us achieve a critical mass of women in leadership positions.

Patrick van der Loo

Regional President, Middle East, Russia and Africa (MERA), Pfizer



Returning women greatly value returnship programmes, with 83% of women surveyed agreeing that such programmes are important in influencing their decision to rejoin the workforce. These programmes typically run for three months up to a year, and can help returning women transition back to work by offering a structured pathway for re-entry. The programmes include initiatives such as coaching and mentorship, internal and external networking opportunities, work shadowing, and training and reskilling to accelerate the reintegration of women returners.

We have mapped a pathway that MENA employers can follow (see Figure 7) to attract and advance returning women. These six steps, which include assessing suitable roles, setting up tailored learning journeys and activating professional networks, among others, are designed to help women transition into work effectively.

Figure 7: Pathway for employers to attract and advance returning women



Key enablers for a smooth transition back to work

01. Safe channels of communication for candidates to discuss challenges and support required.

02. Business-specific support groups of experienced returners.

03. Awareness building, e.g. unconscious bias and allyship training for all.

Addressing unconscious bias through inclusive workplace policies and training for teams, leaders and talent acquisition

The stigma of career breaks can sometimes carry over into the workplace, with women having to combat misconceptions about their skills, capabilities and dedication to work. These unconscious biases, which are often subtle and invisible prejudices, can affect recruitment, promotions, team dynamics, and overall employee satisfaction. Women in our focus groups spoke about the need to prove themselves constantly, or face challenges where their colleagues do not always respect alternative working arrangements (such as part-time or flexible working). Some women also fear broaching the subject about provisions or support specific to returning women at the recruitment stage for fear of being judged as less committed to work.

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A woman's career can be made or broken by the level of empathy her team and leadership have in supporting her.

Female professional
early 40s, healthcare sector

Leaders and managers play an important role as allies and advocates that can drive meaningful change. They have the responsibility to spot and address these biases by developing policies that promote an inclusive culture and leading by example. This applies to the entire career lifecycle – from recruitment to promotion and retention, and re-entry into work. For example, at the recruitment stage, the skills and experience of returning women should be objectively assessed. They should also feel comfortable discussing any support that may be available to them as they transition back into the organisation.

Other policies can include unconscious bias training at all levels of the organisation – both to raise awareness of biases, and to provide practical strategies for mitigating them.

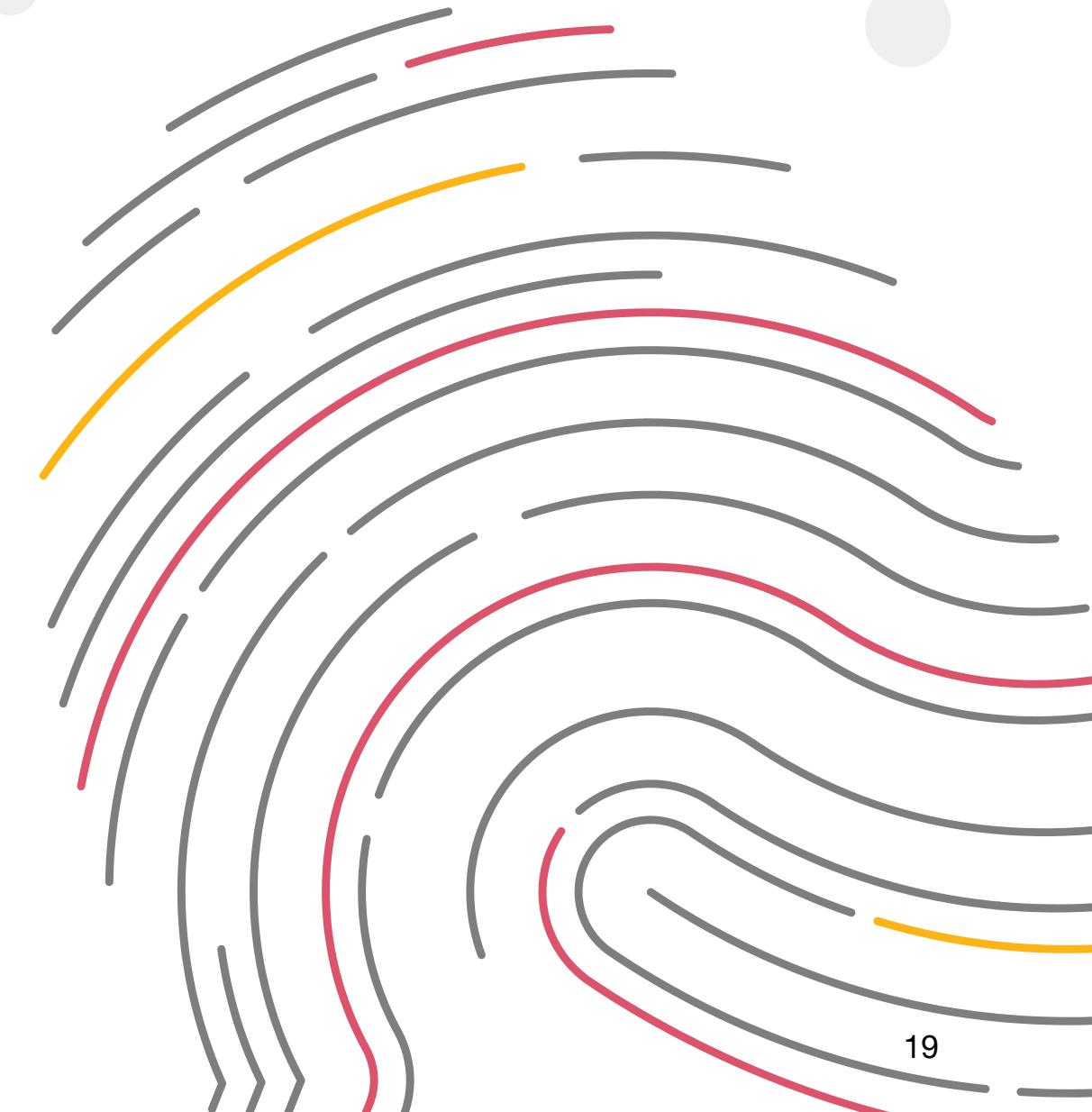
Conclusion

Retaining the vast pool of talent that women re-entering the workforce bring is crucial for the success of businesses across the region. Our study identifies several practical measures business leaders can adopt to tackle the challenges that returning women typically face, and create a more inclusive and diverse work culture.

Making alternative work models, such as flexible or remote working, more widely available can help women balance their work and home responsibilities in a way that suits them best. More equitable parental leave policies, coupled with well-designed returnship programmes, can help accelerate the return of women to the workforce. At the same time, businesses must also address the risk of unconscious bias through inclusive workplace policies and training for teams, leaders and talent acquisition as well as provision of effective mentorship and sponsorship programmes.

This also means examining recruitment and performance management processes to ensure that they are free of bias. Actively encouraging women to re-enter the workforce is a strategic imperative that brings together diverse perspectives, more innovation and richer skill sets, leading to better business performances and sustainable leadership pipelines.

In the war for talent, failing to harness this talent pool means missing out on vital skills. By taking proactive action, businesses can move the needle from awareness to action and results. Embracing women's roles in the workforce is not just a moral imperative, it is a key catalyst for growth.



References

1 Latest data available based on ILO modelled estimates for women aged 15-64 across the 9 countries covered in our study (UAE, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, and Oman).

2 This impact is estimated based on survey estimates of the share of women in the labour force that have taken career breaks and GDP contribution per employee

3 This is based on analysis of additional hours (expressed as full-time equivalent employees) that may be contributed based on survey data and GDP contribution per employee.

4 See for example: Lucifora, C., Meurs, D. and Villar, E., The “mommy track” in the workplace. Evidence from a large French firm, August 2021; Felfe, C., The motherhood wage gap: What about job amenities?, July 2011; Adda, J., Dustmann, C., Stevens, K., The Career Costs of Children, April 2017.

5 Abu Jaber, M., Time to stop ignoring cultural barriers to female employment in the MENA region. Brookings, September 2017.

6 This impact is estimated based on survey estimates of the share of women in the labour force that have taken career breaks and GDP contribution per employee

7 See for example: Andersen, S. H., Paternity leave and the motherhood penalty: New causal evidence, 2018; Bacheron, J., The impact of paternity leave on mothers' employment in Europe, 2021.

8 This is based on analysis of additional hours (expressed as full-time equivalent employees) that may be contributed based on survey data and GDP contribution per employee.



About the study

Conducted in October 2023, the 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. Survey respondents and focus group participants include both nationals and expatriates.

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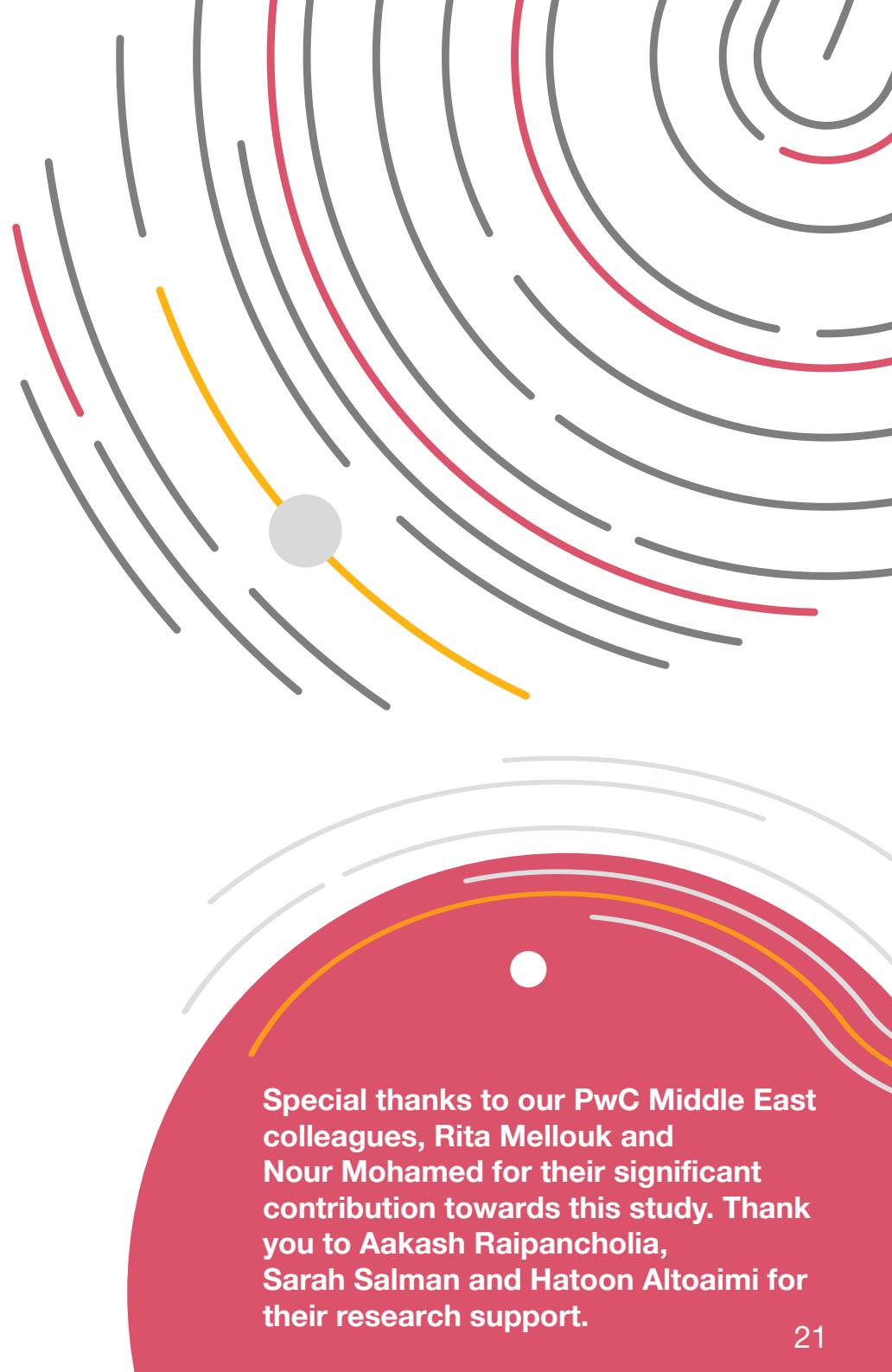
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