

TILTING THE GENDER SCALES

The United Arab Emirates has taken a strong lead in Middle East efforts to put women in leadership roles, say Brunswick's **HEATHER SALMOND** and **JEEHAN BALFAQAIH**



Gender balance in the corporate boardroom is not a goal commonly associated with the Middle East, a region whose reputation is usually determined by the policies of a small group of countries. While women play a critical role in Middle Eastern society, they are not widely recognized as full partners with men.

But a recent push for reforms by the United Arab Emirates and the founding of a Gulf region branch of the 30% Club – the global initiative aimed at advancing female participation on boards – highlight how seriously leaders are taking the issue of gender equality in both business and politics. In 2015, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice-President of the United Arab Emirates and Ruler of Dubai, founded the UAE Gender Balance Council, a government body dedicated to achieving the goal of women's equality.

"Emirati women have proved their competence in all fields and we are proud of every achievement they made, and thus, we are committed to support them until they achieve the highest degrees of excellence," Sheikh Mohammed said at the UAE Gender Balance Council's first meeting last year.

The UAE is a young nation, only 44 years old, and its leaders see gender equality as a signature of its innovative approach to social reforms.

Emirati women have always been the backbone of family life and social structure, a role that derives from traditional Islamic and Bedouin culture. As society has evolved, so has the role of women, with education and leadership training opening up new opportunities – including on corporate boards.

Businessman and entrepreneur Badr Jafar, the CEO of UAE conglomerate Crescent Enterprises, has been a leading voice on gender equality. He insists that gender imbalance in the boardroom cannot be corrected without addressing it at the executive level first.

"The good news is that the UAE continues to have more women than men enrolled in higher education, making it more likely they will enter the workplace," he says. "We need to focus our efforts to ensure that a maturing corporate culture bumps outdated attitudes."

Jafar, along with a number of other leaders, both men and women, last year launched the Gulf Cooperation Council Chapter of the 30% Club. He sees increasing female representation in the boardroom not as a women's issue but as a business issue. "The evidence is overwhelming that both businesses and economies need more female leaders to strengthen decision making and create more lasting value," he says.

That objective faces a number of hurdles, both corporate and in society, including the limitations that Middle Eastern women place on themselves, says Rana Ghandour Salhab, a Talent and Communications Partner at Deloitte, focused on the Middle East. "Arab women need to believe that it is possible for them to have careers and build families," she says. However, she points to the 30% Club's efforts to build equality worldwide as evidence that such challenges are not isolated to the Middle East.

"Obstacles to advancement for women transcend culture and tradition," she says.

HEATHER SALMOND and **JEEHAN BALFAQAIH** are Partners in Brunswick's Dubai office and members of the Steering Committee of the GCC Chapter of the 30% Club.