

Diversity in Business Leadership

Stakeholder Meeting Report

Women in the Economy 2019

12 June 2019

Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammed's Executive Office
Sharjah, United Arab Emirates





Pearl Initiative

Stakeholder Meeting Report: Women in the Economy 2019, UAE

Summary

The business case for diversity is a topic of great discussion both globally and regionally. In the last few years, regional companies have increasingly begun to understand the value that promoting and increasing diversity in the workplace has for improved business productivity. Gulf Region organisations are taking progressive steps towards supporting women in their organisations in line with global standards. However, much remains to be done to support women's entry and retention in the regional economy, as women and organisations continue to report hurdles in the path toward women's representation in organisations across all economic sectors.

To this end, as part of the [Diversity in Business Leadership programme](#) (in collaboration with [NAMA Women Advancement Establishment](#)), the Pearl Initiative has embarked on research that aims to underline the business case for increased diversity in the economy within a regional context. The research will also examine

- Contemporary obstacles faced by women in their workplaces,
- Impediments faced by organisations in implementing diversity policies, and
- The solutions that could facilitate greater diversity within organisations for sustained business success and the happiness of their women employees.

As part of this mandate, on Wednesday, 12th June 2019, the Pearl Initiative and NAMA Women Advancement Establishment held a stakeholder meeting in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. This stakeholder meeting – the first of a series planned under the Diversity in Business Leadership programme – was designed to:

- Bring together business leaders and influencers in a discussion on women's contemporary status in the Gulf Region's economy,
- Understand the key concerns facing women in the regional workforce, and
- Propose potential solutions that regional organisations can implement to increase diversity within their offices and businesses.

The information collected as part of this stakeholder meeting will supplement the ongoing parallel research on women in the Gulf Region's economy and will be used in a Thought Leadership Report that is due to be published in December 2019.

As per standardised research protocols, all stakeholders are anonymised in the following report, and will be once more in the Thought Leadership Report.

Facilitator



Yasmine Omari

Executive Director

Pearl Initiative

An expert in governance for family firms, Yasmine joined the Pearl Initiative as Head of Programmes, and became Executive Director in 2019. She has experience in the implementation and operation of governance systems, as well as business performance and risk management capabilities for private companies and family offices. Prior to joining the Pearl Initiative, Yasmine was a Senior Manager at Deloitte and supported clients in navigating the business challenges faced by entrepreneurial families in business. Yasmine has a legal background and holds a degree in Law and Arabic from SOAS, University of London.



Key Takeaways

The stakeholder meeting was attended by business leaders and influencers from across the spectrum of all formal economic sectors. Each stakeholder had been previously briefed on the nature of the meeting, its purpose, and how the data collected would be handled.

The meeting was facilitated by Yasmine Omari, Executive Director of the Pearl Initiative. Ms Omari began with an introduction to the Pearl Initiative and its organisational mandate, followed by an overview of the Diversity in Business Leadership programme and the ongoing research that the stakeholder meeting is a part of.

After all the stakeholders introduced themselves, Ms Omari asked them to recount their experiences and observations on women's current engagement in the broader workforce and within their own organisations. Stakeholders reported that women tend to be hired by organisations in large numbers, but these numbers shrink significantly between entry-level positions and those in senior management. This **"leaky pipeline"** is evident when organisations publish data on their hiring practices, and see qualified women leave organisations.

Stakeholders' perceptions were that organisations were not doing enough to retain women and find solutions to problems that force women to leave organisations or the larger economic market altogether. Conscious and unconscious biases in management practices were highlighted as influencing company culture negatively when it comes to diversity and inclusion practices. Stakeholders also noted that their organisations did not take the cause of increasing personnel diversity very seriously, nor did they prioritise it within their operations.

"It is very important to have corporate engagement (on diversity)...they are the big guys...they are the ones who can change things."

A repeated theme that arose across the discussion was the importance that many women place on **work-life balance**, and the misconception that men do not value the same. **Social conditioning**, which maintains that women must inhabit the domestic sphere regardless of other social obligations, means that many women do not move outside their comfort zone at work and lose out on promotions. Social conditioning also means that women with **impostor syndrome** feel unqualified to move upward at work or demand change within their organisations.

The same social conditioning creates conscious and unconscious biases in management that penalise women for certain behaviours and / or expectations. Social conditioning and norms were identified as instituting barriers in the workforce, manifesting either as **conscious or unconscious biases** in behaviours toward women candidates and / or in management styles. Some stakeholders noted that men's management styles differed significantly from women's, and when men manage women, they tend to manage in ways that can alienate women employees. It was also noted that biases lead to organisations offering women lower salaries than men, and that social conditioning sees women broadly negotiate lower salaries than men in hiring processes.

Stakeholders also observed that organisations also have a comfort zone and do not often push back on internal biases and stereotypes. The example of traditionally women-led departments, such as administration and human resources, was used to demonstrate how silos can form within organisations and inadvertently limit women's upward career mobility.

"I don't think (the organisational) policies encourage you, but...mentorship programmes where you would have someone to confide in and share...issues with and they would share their own personal experiences."



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Solutions proposed to tackle these biases included **personality and skills development** seminars for both men and women, and **mentorship programmes** for women within organisations. It was noted that mentorship programmes for women led by men would be most helpful, as historically men have been given access to resources in the workplace that women have not (such as behavioural cues, management directions, and self-advocacy strategies). **Informal mentorship** at work is also of importance to women's success in the workplace, and many women are fortunate to have informal mentors. However, to guarantee that women gain access to resources and organisational insights, formal mentorship programmes would be of tremendous value.

“Corporates can't change the root of cultural norms but need to facilitate change at organisational levels.”

Other solutions proposed to address biases and to fix the leaky pipeline problem were **gender-blind hiring** and moving gender-related **quotas** away from higher organisational levels to the hiring level (i.e. an HR department or the department leading hiring and retention for an organisation). Both strategies would see women candidates' qualifications placed at the forefront of their applications while ensuring their alignment with a role, the company that is hiring, and the company's values. Gender-blind hiring would also largely mitigate biases that might arise in the hiring process, and hiring quotas would ensure that candidates are interviewed only once an equal number of men's and women's applications are seriously considered by a company.

Stakeholders also urged organisations to go beyond implementing diversity-positive policies and **execute monitoring mechanisms** to constantly track and assess the outcomes of these policies.

- Tracking data related to these policies would give organisations information on how they can improve or change their policies or modify internal practices to promote diversity.
- The data could also translate into feedback that women can be given in relation to their workplace performance by line managers to support and enhance their careers.
- The same monitoring mechanisms would also help identify gaps in older organisational policies that are hindering career progress and support for women within the workplace.

“You need champions for women...champions from the top who are all about women, but also policies in the middle...to build confidence.”

Finally, organisations were urged to apply a **multidirectional approach** to measuring and promoting diversity, as a simplistic top-down approach could potentially see management imposing unhelpful policies or directives. Feedback from employees and lower level management on policies aimed at promoting diversity would be extremely helpful in shaping them and ensuring their success in the long run.



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Acknowledgements

The Pearl Initiative would like to express its gratitude to all the stakeholders who attended and offered their candid insights on the subject of women's experiences in the regional economy. We appreciate their taking the time from their schedules to attend and engage with this research and programme.

The Pearl Initiative would also like to thank NAMA Women Advancement Establishment for their support and engagement on the Diversity in Business Leadership programme. We will continue to hold collaborative events and research with them under the umbrella of the programme.

Programme updates will be made available on the Pearl Initiative's [website](#) and social media accounts.