



Maximising Women's participation in the GCC workforce



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Introduction

This report by Oxford Strategic Consultants¹, makes specific recommendations that could increase the effective GCC workforce by at least 12%, allow over 2 million additional highly qualified women to enter the workforce and potentially contribute up to 30% (c \$363 billion) to GCC GDP (given a total GDP of c \$1,210 billion). Many of the relevant services could be provided to non-GCC export markets, thus contributing to the GCC balance of trade and increasing non-oil/gas revenues. The recommendations would also reduce costs of commuting and transport whilst retaining the national identity and culture of the GCC countries (Scott-Jackson 2008).

In order to investigate this question, a team of OSC consultants began extensive research by interviewing employers and employees of leading private and public sector companies across the GCC to identify the barriers and solutions for more women to work. This report will present the findings of the research and provide comprehensive and actionable proposals to enhance the participation of women in the GCC workforce.

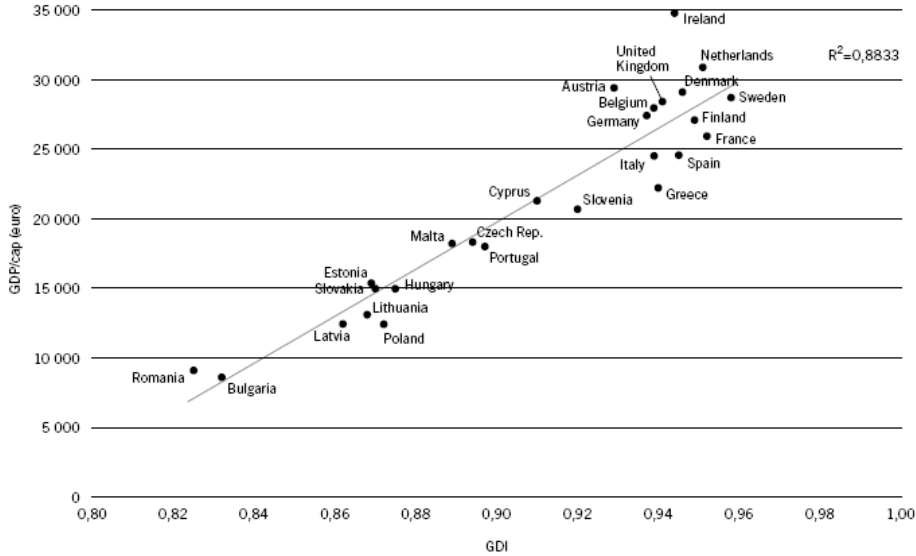
Why is women's participation in the workforce important?

The report will seek to provide a comprehensive framework for initiatives to ensure that highly-skilled female graduates take their full place in maximising economic and social development in the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and, in doing so, address an important issue facing these States today – to increase levels of female participation in the workforce. The economic and social prosperity of the GCC depends on fully utilising the skills and contribution of all citizens, including women. As Talwar et al 2009 state: "When women are not [fully] involved in the workforce, only part of the able workforce is being utilized and, thus, economic resources are wasted. Gender equality allows for an increase in women in the working sector, thereby leading to an expansion of the labor force and an increase in economic productivity." (Talwar et al 2009).

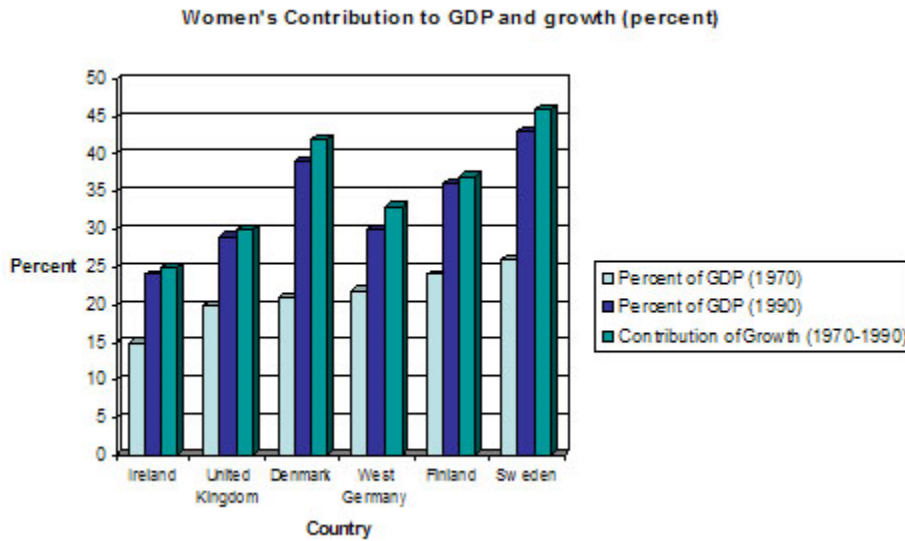
Löfström (2009) in a review of the many studies of the relationship between gender equality and GDP, calculates that if women in the EU were to participate to the same level as men, then,

¹ Oxford Strategic Consulting (OSC) works with major private and government organizations in the Middle East and Europe in dealing with challenges of rapid growth and increasing competition for markets and human resources. OSC specializes in building human capabilities through strategy, change management, talent management and successful implementation of mergers and acquisitions and has carried out extensive work in the Gulf region, particularly the UAE and Saudi. OSC has carried out research, development and delivery of a number of strategic and policy initiatives throughout the Middle East and the UK. In 2008, OSC assigned an expert team of consultants to focus on a proposal for increasing the rate of female economic participation across the GCC through home working. The project was named 'Shurouq' which means 'sunrise' in Arabic and this initiative aims to help create a brighter and more prosperous future for the GCC States.

on average, GDP would increase by 30%². For Greece, with a lower current participation of women of around 20%, the potential GDP impact is over 45%.



Gender Development Index and GDP per capita (euro) in EU member states 2007.(Excl. Luxembourg) (Löfström 2009:14)



Estimate of women's contribution to GDP 1970 and 1990 as well as women's contribution to growth 1970-90. (Talwar et al 1990)

² Although the causal direction has not clearly been demonstrated i.e. does women's participation cause GDP growth (through increasing the labour force and economic activity) or does a higher GDP increase women's employment (by generating more opportunities, reduced family sizes etc).

Thus, in the UK, for example, Women contribute around 30% of growth and 30% of GDP. This is broadly equivalent to the percentage of women in the workforce.

In the US significant increases in labour productivity have been ascribed to increases in the employment levels of women. As we shall see, although education and professional qualifications are high, thanks to government actions, current participation by women in the GCC workforce is relatively low at around 20%. In the UK, for example, 70% of women contribute via employment (mostly through part-time work). Of these, most of the women work in professional roles, sales, customer service, health or administrative (UK Office of National Statistics 2009). Two thirds of women with young children still work, but over 30% of them work from home or under flexible arrangements.

Other countries show similar levels - 63% of Singapore National women work and 74% in Norway and 55% across the EU as a whole. There is, clearly, an opportunity to increase female participation in the workforce, especially at the more qualified levels. This would increase overall national productivity, reduce dependence on expatriate skilled workers, increase family incomes (and reduce state dependency) and help raise women's esteem and sense of contribution to their countries.

Of course, the positive results of increased participation by women must be considered in the light of possible negative outcomes. Some commentators (Holdsworth 1997), on societies in the West, for example, suggest that the increased participation of women may have contributed (mainly through absence from the home) to social ills such as marriage breakdown, loss of national identity, destruction of family life and lack of discipline in youth and even youth crime rates. Many researchers argue that women's participation actually improves outcomes such as children's success (Hoffman and Youngblade 1999) and others would question whether these negative effects (if true) have actually been caused by increased women's participation in work (Reynolds *et al* 2003). However, this study does aim to mitigate any potential negative impacts on national identity, culture and family life. Our assertion is that these effects, if true, are not caused by women working *per se* but by women having to absent themselves from the family environment for long periods in order to work. The final recommendations in this report aim to maximise the positive impacts whilst mitigating any negative effects.

"Concerns that mothers' increasing labour-market participation means that they are becoming more rooted in their work life and more 'work-centred' at the expense of their family responsibilities were not borne out" Reynolds *et al* (2003 web site).

"The mother's employment status does have effects on families and children, but few of these effects are negative ones. Indeed, most seem positive" Hoffman and Youngblade (1999 web page)

GCC Current state of women's employment in the workforce



The GCC States include The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), The United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain and Oman. The IMF has predicted a 3.3% rise in 2009 (IMF, Aug 2009) for the combined GDP of these states and indicated that their economies are stabilising with the expectation of higher growth in 2010 (IMF, May 2009). In spite of the current global financial crisis that has sent shockwaves through the world's economies, the GCC seems to be back on the road to recovery, yet is the skilled labour force being utilised to full potential to maximise economic as well as social benefits? This report has found there to be a significant numbers of unemployed, highly-skilled women in the GCC States. These highly qualified women are extremely capable and willing to work yet only a minority are actually contributing to the work force.

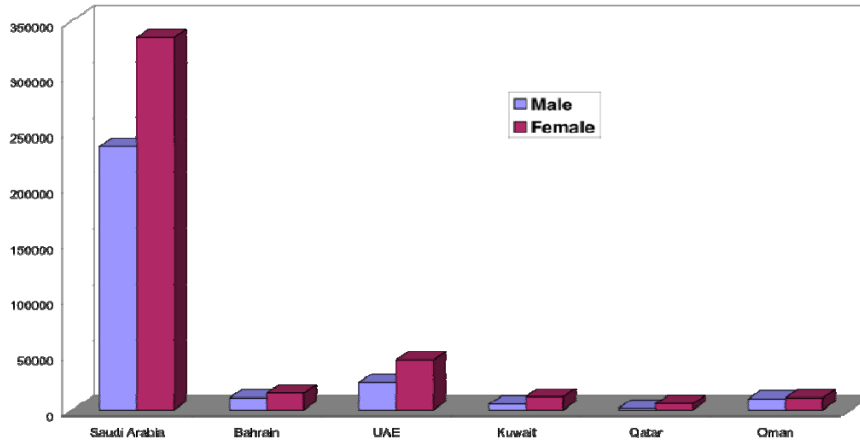
GCC Population, Education and Female Participation

Latest figures from 2006 show a GCC population of around 36 million, 48% of which are women; however, the rate of female participation across the states stands at 19.2% - only one fifth of the total labour force are female (al Yousef 2009). The various GCC governments have rapidly improved female access to higher education, to the extent, as we shall see, that in many States female graduates now outnumber males. This relatively low participation is not due, therefore, to the lack of educated and highly-skilled women who are available to enter the workforce. It is more likely a combination of factors ranging from cultural and religious sensitivities through to geographic isolation from major employment foci. These limiting factors, which hinder the advancement of these women and in turn negatively affect the economic development of these countries, will be analysed in more detail below. Investment in education has been a main priority for the GCC Governments and this has been reflected in educational attainment figures across the states. These government initiatives, like extensive public sector investments in health and education sectors as well as government policy guaranteeing Gulf women equal education rights, have been significant in bridging the gender gap as demonstrated by social indicators. Current statistics show that girls are equal to boys in primary and secondary education and have over taken male students at tertiary-level education with the level of female

university students across the GCC reaching 60% (*ibid*). This is further highlighted by the chart below, showing that in all the GCC States, the number of female students in University is higher than the number of male students:

Number of Students in University by Sex and Nationality

Source: al Yousef 2009



The benefits of GCC governments investing in education have been reflected in high literacy levels across the states: 89.1% in Qatar, 85% in Bahrain, 81.7% in the UAE, 71% in Saudi Arabia and 67.2% in Oman (ESCWA 2007). Extensive education has been made available to Gulf women and has resulted in producing a highly-skilled, capable workforce, which is not currently being utilized to its full capacity. Another useful indicator of relevant capability is shown in a recent study by the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) which states that IT illiteracy in the Arab world stands at 29.7% which is significantly higher than the global average of 19% (ALECSO 2009). Furthermore, the ICDL GCC Foundation, a governing body and certification authority of the International Computer Driving License (ICDL 2009) programs in the GCC countries and Iraq has noted that this IT illiteracy is significantly higher amongst Gulf women and has called for increased funding from GCC governments to make digital initiatives in the region more available to women in order to enhance the role of women at a socio-economic level (ICDL GCC 2009). Additionally, the ICDL GCC argues that digital initiatives implemented by the GCC governments to increase IT literacy amongst women will “create entrepreneurial opportunities for women and positively influence their country’s socio-economic growth” and empower women to “work in various areas and encourage them to take up eLearning and to establish home-based businesses, in areas such as design, translation, and financial market investments”.

The GCC Population Strategy

The GCC Population strategy outlines four major principles based on the future vision the states wish to attain (GCC Secretariat 2003) and all are consistent with the implementation of working initiatives for women. These are summarised below:

1. **Economic development and social/population development must be fully integrated:** The level of highly-skilled qualified women in the GCC far exceeds the level of employment. Home working can serve as a positive solution to increase economic development by expanding local labour force participation
2. **Future development must shift from dependency on immigrant workforce to dependency on GCC workforce:** implementing home working initiatives will allow the GCC Governments to maximise the full potential of the vast investments they have made in education for the local population by increasing the number of women in the work force
3. **Population structure policy should favour GCC citizens:** by implementing home working across the GCC, the number of jobs available to citizens of the region will increase allowing for a shift in balance of the population structure policy allowing GCC citizens to be more active in the economy
4. **Strategies must be adopted to recognize demographic changes in the GCC such as increased participation of women in employment. The main goals of this population strategy include: "Increasing the rate of economic participation of both male and female citizens and paying due attention to opening new avenues of work for the Gulf women"(GCC Secretariat 2003):** Providing educated and skilled women across the GCC with the means to work from home will act as a positive step for social and economic development in the region, increasing female participation in the work force and addressing the issue of employment disparity amongst qualified male and female citizens in the region

Another issue that the GCC Population Strategy seeks to address and which can be achieved through home working initiatives is the current demographic situation of Arab countries. According to UN estimates, young people are the fastest growing population segment of these countries with over 60% of the population under 25 years old, making the median age 22 whilst the global average stands at 28 (Aswad & Ruhayem 2009).

It is clear that female accessibility to the labour force must be increased in order to secure long-term economic goals and prosperity in the region. With a vision of a brighter future across the GCC, initiatives are needed to address the various factors that hinder these women from being a flourishing and valuable part of the workforce in their countries. This report aims to recommend solutions through examining the current employment situation of women in the GCC, outlining the results of the extensive research carried out by OSC and providing comprehensive, feasible proposals for the states to optimise the benefits of bringing more well-qualified women into the work force.

The GCC States



The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA)

The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is the largest of the GCC states, with an estimated population of 28 million in July 2009 (Economy Watch 2009). Women constitute 45% of the total population and latest statistics show that 56.5% of women in Saudi have completed university, overtaking the level of male graduates which is currently 43.5% (JCCI), yet only 14% of these women are currently active in the labour force (al Yousef 2009). This highlights a huge disparity between the levels of skilled female graduates completing university and the number of women who actually engage in the labour market, which severely hinders economic and social development. A recent trend which poses a threat to economic development in Saudi is the increasing number of female graduates from the kingdom being forced to look for employment in neighbouring GCC countries such as Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar due to the lack of opportunities available to them in Saudi (Afifi 2009). Future development in the kingdom will be hindered if this trend continues and initiatives to increase employment of Saudi women must be taken in order to utilise their existing skilled labour potential, rather than losing it to other economies.

Government Vision

The KSA Government has invested heavily in education for its citizens, resulting in a large increase in the number of students over the last decade, and it has implemented initiatives to finance this rise accordingly (KSA Ministry of Education 2005). In addition to this, the government has a clear vision to enhance the stature and equality of the country's female citizens by implementing these educational investment strategies in line with Islamic values, enabling them to gain appropriate knowledge and practice (*ibid*). The strategy also supports the vision of enabling students to acquire practical knowledge, skills and attitudes allowing them to positively face modern challenges with the ability to apply advanced technologies through efficiency and flexibility (*ibid*). These progressive visions and strategies will allow for future increases in female employment within Saudi's labour market providing that the measures are implemented efficiently and are in cohesion with the kingdom's social values and cultural sensitivities. The research carried out for this report seeks to establish the social backdrop to any such initiative, with the aim of foreseeing any implications or obstacles that may result so that the proposals put forward will provide feasible methods for government action.



A key aspect of the Saudi vision, consistent with the findings and proposals in this report, is the long-term strategy for *Manpower and Employment*. This addresses the issue of low levels of female participation in the work force and proposes measures aimed at expanding the supply of the national labour force through increasing

the number of job opportunities available to women from 10.3% to 30% by the year 2024 (KSA Ministry of Economy and Planning 2004). Implementing initiatives to allow home working for women in Saudi will not only result in sustainable economic growth but will create an increase in the number of jobs available to women which will cater for the rising number of female university graduates. Additionally, population forecasts suggest a 2.8% increase in the Saudi working population (15-64 year olds) by 2024 (*ibid*), which confirms the need to create more job opportunities. Home working can provide a practical solution in this context to reduce future disparity in the labour market.

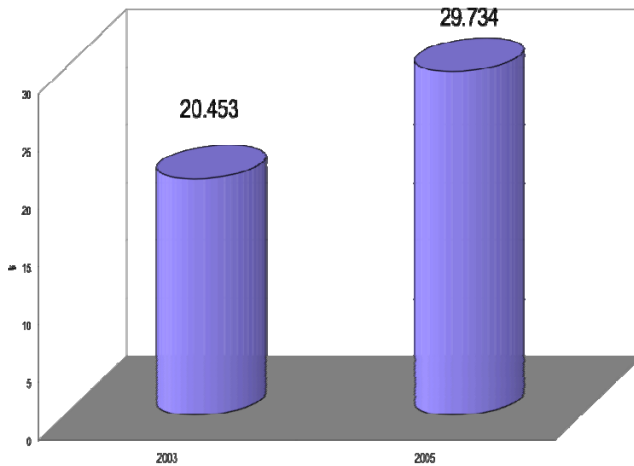
Various news reports from KSA have indicated that, in principle, the kingdom is not opposed to the idea of home working. A forum discussing the role of Saudi women in 2020 was held by the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry (JCCI) and highlighted the important role of women in the Saudi economy, with the need for women to have higher participation levels in the predicted labour force increase to 21 million by 2020 (Fatany 2007). Deputy Labour Minister, Abdul Wahid Al Homaid, stressed the necessity of female integration to the workforce for the progress and development of KSA with current figures showing 66% of university graduates are women (*ibid*). However, as highlighted by candid discussions during the JCCI Forum, there are many obstacles facing female integration to the workforce including government regulations such as segregation laws, enforcing the face veil, as well as the ban on women driving (*ibid*). Additionally, the lack of significant economic and social reform in KSA was attributed to some elements of the religious hierarchy who continue to oppose female integration initiatives put forward by government reformists (*ibid*).

These socio-cultural and political complexities do not necessarily have to be seen as obstacles to achieving female workforce integration. Home working can offer a feasible solution by providing opportunities for qualified women without compromising the Muslim values that are shared in KSA society and work initiatives can be tailored to minimize any such conflict.

In recent months there have been pioneer initiatives in Saudi with the aim of increasing female participation and cohesion in the economy. The Springboard Women's Development Program, established by the Prince Sultan Bin Abdulaziz Fund in collaboration with the Middle East British Council, aims to increase development and capabilities for women (Hawari 2009). This program has won international awards, through providing tools necessary for women to acquire skills and confidence, allowing them to contribute significantly to social and economic development (*ibid*). In addition to this, the Azzah initiative has helped to create more jobs for women in KSA through encouraging home working in order to further economic participation of women, increasing independence and contributing to community development (A1 Saudi Arabia 2009). These initiatives show progressive thought is present in Saudi – at a ministerial and social level – with regards to improving the situation of female economic participation. Home working schemes would be consistent with such government initiatives and educational programs, enabling future sustainable development in the role of women in the kingdom.

Number of Female Businesses in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Source: al Yousef 2009



Additionally, as shown by the chart above, nearly 30% of businesses in Saudi Arabia are owned by women according to 2005 figures and this represents a 10% increase over a two-year period (al Yousef 2009). Such positive developments in empowerment and independence of women offer encouraging potential for implementation of home-working initiatives in the Kingdom, leading to increased economic growth and social cohesion.



The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Abu Dhabi & Dubai

The UAE consists of seven emirates: Abu Dhabi, Dubai, Al Shariqah, Al Ayn, Ajman, Ras Al Khaymah and Al Fujayrah. Current figures show the total UAE population has reached 4.5 million (World Bank 2009) with populations of Dubai (1.6 million) and Abu Dhabi (1.5 million) being the largest of the emirates (City Population 2008). In economic terms, UAE capital Abu Dhabi has shown the highest level of success and development amongst the emirates with record oil prices resulting in an 82% economic growth rate in 2008 (Haider 2009). Despite non-oil industries in Dubai, such as real estate, being affected by the global financial crisis, the second largest emirate (Wikipedia 2009a) has also enjoyed economic success with a 0.3% GDP rise in the first quarter of 2009 (UAE Interact 2009). With this in mind, this report has decided to focus mainly on these two emirates in terms of implementing home-working initiatives for the female population

Figures indicate that women constitute 30% of the total UAE population (Asia Rooms 2004). Educational attainment has been consistently high across the emirates with literacy rates reaching 90% in 2007 and with 77% of Emirati women achieving university degrees (Wikipedia 2009b), demonstrating the availability of qualified women to enter the workforce. There is a growing need in the UAE to accommodate indigenous female graduates into the labour market for economic development of the Emirates. This pressure has been a result of higher foreign labour inflow (in 2003 only 19.5% of the UAE population were nationals) accompanied by rising unemployment and high population growth amongst nationals over the past decades (Khaleej Online 2005). Female participation in the UAE workforce is as low as 15.2%, with varying levels across individual emirates: 10.5% in Abu Dhabi, 29.5% in Ajman and 17% in both Dubai and Sharjah (*ibid*). Although these figures might appear quite low at first glance, there have been positive developments in the UAE workforce with the number of national female workers rapidly increasing from 16,000 in 1995 to 52,000 in 2003 as a result of substantial social and economic changes that have solidified the position of women in the domestic economy (*ibid*). These are promising developments that show economic advances in the right direction, seeking to promote gender equality in the UAE labour market. Such developments could be further improved and sustained through the introduction of home working across the UAE to allow wider access for women to the workforce.

Government Vision

UAE Governments have taken positive and innovative steps in recent years to ensure development and participation of qualified, skilled women in the labour force. Dubai Women's Establishment (DWE), for example, launched an initiative in 2008 that will focus on working women in order to increase the number of female leaders in the country (Zawya 2008). The five-year plan will lay down the "foundation required to achieve the targets of our plan according to the best international practices, while retaining the religious, traditional and cultural values of the UAE", according to DWE President Sheikha Manal bint Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum. More than 50% of government jobs are occupied by women and the DWE initiative seeks to provide opportunities for qualified women to develop their potential, through implementing training programs amongst other initiatives (*ibid*). Such initiatives and long-term plans are essential to accommodate for rising levels of female graduates from UAE universities ready to enter the work force, with current levels reported as one of the highest in the world at 92% (*ibid*).



In 2006, the Government of Abu Dhabi launched the Abu Dhabi 2030 Economic Vision Report which seeks to further economic development in the Emirate through measures such as private sector empowerment, sustaining a knowledge based economy and the optimisation of the Emirate's resources. A clear goal put forward by this vision is the maximisation of female participation, particularly nationals, in the workforce through increasing employment opportunities for them (US-UAE Business Council 2006).

In Dubai, the Mohammed Bin Rashid Programme for Leadership Development (MBRPLD) announced this year its launch of the UAE Women Leadership Programme (UAEWLP) aimed at promoting sustainable development in Dubai through establishing strategies for the

development of women leaders in the Emirate (Al Bawaba 2009). It is with this vision in mind that the program aims to motivate and inspire a greater number of women to participate in a variety of socioeconomic activities in Dubai and the UAE (*ibid*).

Both Emirates are clearly on the path to establishing significant groundwork to bring women into the labour force and all these initiatives and government visions will lead to enhancing female economic participation. Home working can encourage and promote such developments by offering qualified females an alternative way of utilising their skills and education whilst remaining active in the labour market. Cultural and organisational restrictions are much less critical in the UAE, where, for example, men will work for women and many women hold senior roles in organisations but the desire to balance work and family commitments as well as geographical distance from main employment centres, for example for women in the Western Region of Abu Dhabi or the eastern regions of Sharjah.



Qatar

Latest figures show that the population of Qatar is 1.4 million, of which 25% are female (UN 2008). With literacy rates as high as 88% amongst females (Wikipedia 2009c) and the level of female university graduates reaching 89% (The Free Library 2007). The rate of female employment in Qatar was as low as 30% (Online Qatar 2007) even though there are substantive opportunities available to accommodate this surplus of high-skilled potential labour, particularly in the private sector of the economy (*ibid*). This disparity is further widened through the extent of the foreign labour force in Qatar which has increased rapidly over recent years, resulting in higher levels of unemployment amongst Qatari nationals (The Free Library 2007). Introducing home working to the Emirate would provide ample opportunities for Qatari women to enter the labour force, leading to sustainable, long-term economic growth whilst maximising the use of skill potential available.

Qatar has witnessed a progressive wave of initiatives to ensure gender equality in the state which only consolidates the necessity to provide further opportunities for the female population to enter the workforce through proposals such as home working. Since Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani assumed power of the Emirate in 1995, he has been committed to the full participation of women in public life, with female participation reaching 44% in Qatar's first election in 1999 (UNDP Qatar 2001). The second elections were held in 2003 and saw Qatar's first ever female elected official, Sheikha Yusuf al-Juffairi (*ibid*). These positive developments in terms of women's rights and participation have set the ground work for new openings and initiatives that can develop the role of women further, particularly with regard to economic activity and social development.

Government Vision



The Qatar National Vision 2030 sets out the Emirate's workforce development goals which outline the importance of increased opportunities and vocational support for women in addition to enhancing the capacity of women through empowering them to fully participate in political and economic spheres (GSDP 2008). Other female development initiatives in the Emirate include the launch of the pilot organisation Qatar Business Women Forum in 2000 which was set up with the aim of helping businesswomen contribute to economic development in Qatar (QBWF Website). The Forum has undertaken significant work over the last year, including hosting a dinner with a range of influential professionals and prominent Qatari businesswomen to enhance business opportunities and provide networking prospects for Qatari women (AME Info 2009). Additionally, the Commercial Bank of Qatar recently hosted an event in collaboration with QBWF aimed at sharing and discussing ideas about the contribution of women to the economy and workforce in Qatar (QBWF 2009). With the Qatar National Vision goals in place and initiatives like the QBWF further female participation in the workforce, it is evident that Qatar would benefit and prosper by the implementation of home working as it would provide a perfect opportunity to narrow the gap between the level of female graduates and the number of those actually entering the labour market.



Kuwait

Kuwait has a population of 2.9 million (2009 estimate 3.4m including 2.3 expatriates), of which 40% are female (UN 2008). The State has one of the highest literacy rates in the Arab world at 93% (Wikipedia 2009d). Over 67% of university graduates in the State are female, demonstrating high educational attainment amongst the youth population. A recent estimate by the AAAS (2006) suggested that 49% of the workforce were female (one of the highest proportions in the Gulf), largely in medicine and the public sector. An earlier UNDP report had suggested that 31.8% of Kuwait's workforce was female (UNDP Kuwait 2001).

Certain labour market regulations have restricted female participation in the workforce, notably the banning of women working between the hours of 8pm and 7am (*ibid*). However, gender reforms have been implemented since 2005 which have given women full political and electoral rights and which saw many women holding senior positions in government, for example Dr. Ma'ssoumah al-Mubarak appointment as Minister of Planning and Administrative Development shortly after these reforms took place (*ibid*). These positive developments aimed at enhancing female participation in the economy can be further expanded and capitalized on through implementing home working opportunities for women to enter the labour market while remaining in congruence with certain regulations and restrictions on terms of employment.

A recent United Nations Development Program (UNDP) report on *Gender Discussion with Women Activists in the State of Kuwait* examined various issues regarding gender mainstreaming and women empowerment in the State (UNDP 2008). The report outlined the need to further the empowerment of women in line with state regulations and proposed substantial recommendations including a centre for women research and studies, the establishment of a leadership skills training institute for women and enhancing capabilities of women enabling them to enter the political and economic sphere (*ibid*). These positive initiatives clearly heed the necessity of incorporating a higher number of women into the workforce in order to achieve optimum economic development and prosperity.

Government Vision

Earlier this year, the Kuwaiti Government was praised for its human development initiatives by the UNDP with the State's Human Development Index (HDI) rating being first place amongst all other Arab countries (Kuwait Times 2009). UNDP drew attention to Kuwait's commendable achievements with regard to adult literacy rates, schooling rates and high levels of technology development and implementation in education and the work place (*ibid*). The progressive vision of the Kuwaiti Government is further highlighted by the State's participation in the Arab Planning Institute's (API) conference on *Women and Youth in Arab Development* due to be held in Egypt, 2010 (API). The conference is aimed at addressing issues such as the empowerment of women and the advancement of their economic, social and legal positions, with the agenda focused on analysis of the current gender situation and measures needed to be taken to enhance the level of female involvement on a social and economic level (*ibid*).



Other positive initiatives implemented in Kuwait aimed at the advancement of women include the launch of Business Professional Women (BPW) Kuwait which seeks to motivate women to continuously develop their capabilities and increase their participation across social, economic and political activities (Arab Times 2009). The *BPW Kuwait Expo* held earlier this year capitalised on these aims and visions by providing women access to several small and medium businesses owned by BPW women that were displayed throughout the exhibition, allowing them to engage in and explore the various options available to them in terms of employment as well as providing ample networking opportunities (*ibid*). Such exhibitions provide extremely important societal frameworks for women to be able to understand and engage with other women who have successfully entered the labour force.

The long-term benefits of these developments to the Kuwaiti economy will be seen through increased female economic participation, allowing optimal use of their skills and qualifications, which will eventually aid in closing the gender gap in terms of educational attainment and employment.



Bahrain

With a total population of 791,000, Bahrain is the smallest of the GCC States (UN 2008) and is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, with 89% of citizens living in the two main cities Manama and Al Muharraq (US State Department 2009). The Kingdom of Bahrain has a record of high educational achievement with a female literacy rate of 85%, close behind male literacy which stands at 91% (*ibid*). Despite this, women constitute only 18% of the labour force and 30% of unemployed females are university graduates. This confirms that initiatives are needed to ensure higher numbers of qualified women are able to utilise their skills and enter the labour market, particularly female graduates. Data from the Supreme Council for Women, Bahrain (SCW 2009), showed that in 2006 of the total Bahraini nationals, only 30% (225,000) were women.

According to a recent United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia report in 2006, Bahrain is the fastest growing economy in the Arab world, largely due to the regional oil boom (Arabian Business 2007). However, women represent over 85% (Wikipedia 2009e) of the 3.8% unemployment rate (Gulf Daily News 2008) in the Kingdom which is likely to result in long-term negative economic implications.

Government Vision

The Bahrain Economic Vision 2030 shows that the Kingdom's government aims to take progressive action for future generations to ensure sustainability and competitiveness in terms of the country's social and economic development (Bahrain Education Board 2008). Measures proposed include the development and expansion of Bahrain's private sector in order to provide ample employment opportunity to the 4,000 qualified Bahrainis entering the labour market



every year (*ibid*). Incorporating home working into this strategy as an outsourcing option for private sector employers will help to provide more jobs for graduates, particularly women, and in turn benefit the expanding economy through long-term sustainable development. Another aspect of this vision is fairness across society, in terms of employment, human rights and law (*ibid*), and this could be well supported by expanding the female workforce through home working, resulting in narrowing the gap between gender participation in Bahrain's economy.

There have been significant initiatives and developments in Bahrain which have served to pave the way for increasing female economic and social participation in the Kingdom and these have been reflected in the society in a positive and welcoming light. Tamkeen was set up as part of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 to implement labour market reform through facilitating talent competencies amongst Bahrainis, enterprise growth, improving policies and standards, as well

as human capital investment (Tamkeen 2009). There has been recent collaboration between Tamkeen and the Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in Bahrain which aims to synergise efforts from both organisations to assist the contribution of women in the Bahraini economy through attracting them to the field of private business management (*ibid*). This initiative focused on developing current achievements that have helped to increase female productivity and efficiency by providing the appropriate environment to integrate women into the labour market (*ibid*). This highlights the importance of the right balance with regard to the socio-cultural background in Bahrain and home working can provide the ideal environment to motivate a higher percentage of qualified women to enter the labour market.

During the Arab Women's Organisation Conference held in the UAE last year, Bahrain was hailed for entering a 'new era' with regard to Arab women by addressing the importance of issues relating to legal rights and security (Bahrain Embassy 2008). During the conference, dialogue was called for to ensure that necessary precautions were taken in light of the ongoing financial crisis to protect citizens from market turmoil, particularly women, including long-term planning to ensure women are sufficiently protected and empowered (*ibid*). Such progressive thinking can only serve to boost gender equality in the Kingdom and assist long-term advancement of women in terms of economic participation and social cohesion. Home working can further empower women, contributing to this vision, by giving them the flexibility to work in an environment they are comfortable in whilst maximising usage of their skills and qualifications, adding to economic development and prosperity.



Oman

According to recent figures, the Sultanate of Oman has a total population of 2.9 million (MONE 2009). In terms of educational attainment the Sultanate suffered from low adult illiteracy rates during the 1970's due to the lack of schools for girls, and 84% of women were illiterate by 1984, however, this figure was dramatically reduced to 34% when the government implemented female education (UNDP Oman 2001). Other initiatives have been taken by the Omani government to achieve gender parity including the launch of a nationwide scheme to abolish adult illiteracy in 2004 (MOI 2009a) which has led to current rates of adult illiteracy falling to 28% (Wikipedia 2009f).

Government Vision

Despite these difficulties in educational attainment amongst the female population, recent figures show that 19% (Blue-Chi 2009) of the labour force is female and although this is relatively low in terms of gender equality, the figure is rising as the government increases educational investment to ensure there are more qualified women available for economic participation. Additionally, the Omani government has undertaken other measures to pursue gender equality, including the introduction of voting rights for women in 2003 which saw a

turnout of around 95,000 women (UNDP Oman 2001). These positive initiatives towards gender equality will facilitate future increases in female economic participation and social development.

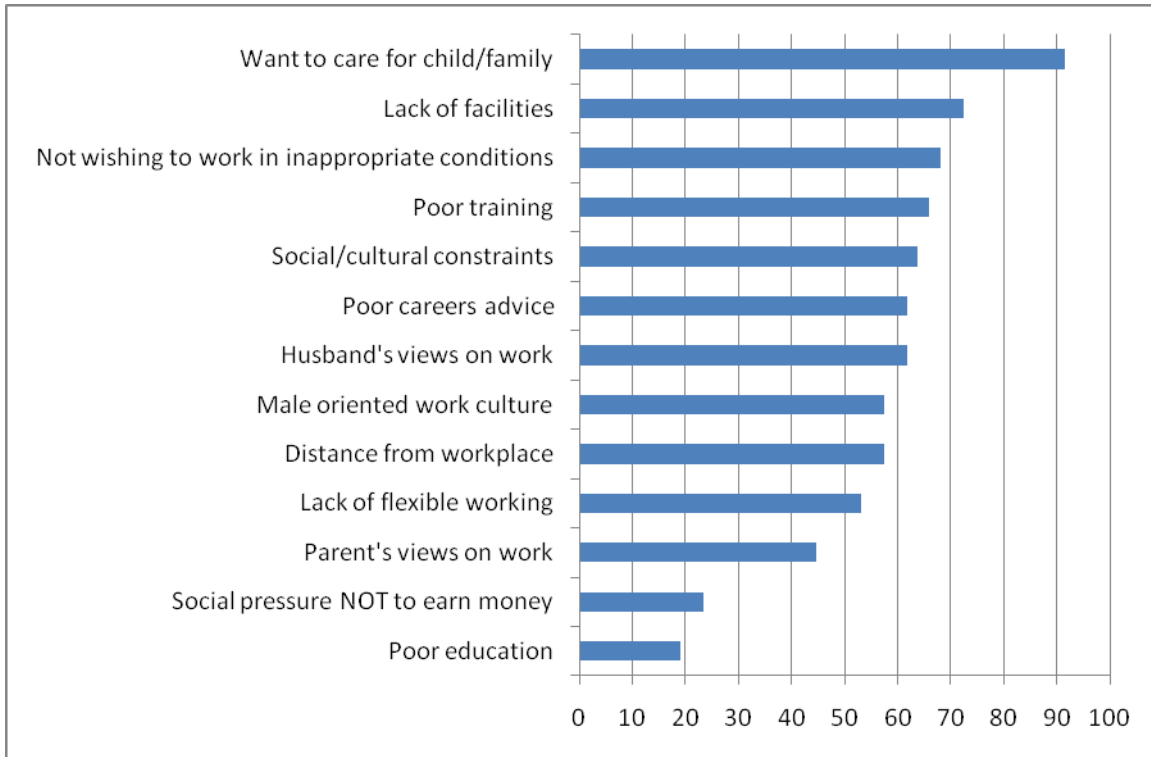
The ruler of Oman, Sultan Qaboos bin Said, has a clear vision for sustainable economic development of the Sultanate and has implemented several development plans, including the current Seventh Five-year Plan (OCCI 2009) aimed at achieving a 3% annual growth rate and improved living standards for Omani people. In 1996, Oman acted as a pioneer with progressive vision by submitting a proposal entitled *The National Plan for Action for the Advancement of Women* to the UN Arab Meeting for Planning which outlined a framework for achieving women's rights, alleviating poverty and empowering women to enter the labour market and become independent (UN Women Watch 1997). These ongoing developments are a clear indication of Oman's commitment to reaching economic prosperity and stability by ensuring gender equality, which can be expanded further by the introduction of home working to the labour force resulting in increased female participation.



The Sultanate also passed a Royal Decree on labour law in 2003 which guarantees women to work on an equal platform with men, with the only main restriction being the prohibition of female employment between the hours of 6pm and 6am (MOFA 2009). Another progressive initiative implemented by the Omani government in 1988 is the *Omanisation Policy* which seeks to eliminate the disparity between economic activity of expatriates and Omanis in the Sultanate by replacing expatriates with trained Omani personnel (MOI 2009b). So far, this initiative has exceeded set targets with the level of Omani employees in government departments reaching 86% by 1999 and has achieved success in other areas, ensuring future job security for Omani citizens and reducing dependency of the Sultanate on expatriate employees (*ibid*). This will result in long-term economic and social sustainability for Oman and will enable a higher percentage of women to enter the labour market as job supply is increased.

Barriers to women working

The following table shows the major barriers that could act against women participating in the workforce, as defined by our interviewees:



As can be seen, the factor mentioned most often was that women wish to care for, and be with, their children and their families. Of course, this factor is common in all societies, including those where women form a much larger part of the workforce. There may be value in considering whether the working practices designed to overcome this problem in other countries could also be applied in the GCC.

The second factor is that there are inadequate facilities to allow women to work effectively. This does not just include the obvious childcare facilities but also flexible working practices (to allow women to carry out domestic and work roles) and more basic facilities such as separate cloakrooms and prayer rooms.

There were a range of social and cultural constraints including, in particular, women not wishing to work in inappropriate environments e.g. working closely with unknown males, serving alcohol etc and influences of families and husbands against occupations which are seen as demeaning or culturally unacceptable. Most of these constraints focus on mixing with non-related members of the opposite sex or occupations seen as 'Haram'. Just over 20% (mainly from KSA and Qatar)

mentioned the barrier of a husband not wanting the wife to work because it would suggest that he was incapable of supporting her. *"If she needs anything - I can it give her – why should she work?"*. This view is confirmed by a recent survey by the Royah (Vision) Center for Social Studies (2009), which found that 68% of Saudi men said they did not want their wives to go out to work, preferring them to be a full-time housewife instead (Royah Center for Social Studies 2009).

Interestingly, although over 60% thought that women were poorly trained for the work environment and that career guidance was inadequate, very few (less than 20%) thought that women's level of education was a barrier. This is consistent with the extremely successful initiatives to improve education for women but also with earlier findings (Scott-Jackson 2008) that GCC nationals should be better prepared and trained for the world of work and careers guidance could certainly be improved.

In common, again, with many other societies, over 50% thought that the working environment was 'male-dominated'. This can range from women being treated as second class through to inappropriate language, sexual harassment or simply not allowing women to contribute in ways which reflects their strengths. Interestingly, this comment was more prevalent in the UAE, where women often do work alongside men, and less in KSA for example, where as yet very few women will have experienced a male dominated working environment.

Nearly 60%, especially from Oman, KSA and the remote regions of the UAE, noted that many women live far away from major cities and so would find it impossible to work. Many of the countries are trying to develop these regions to improve employment, but it is a slow process. In western societies this issue has generally resulted in a 'commuter' culture where people travel, often large distances, to work. There may be an opportunity to move to a different and far more efficient model based on increasing home-working for professional women.

Given these barriers, what solutions could be identified to help women take a more active role in work and the economy?

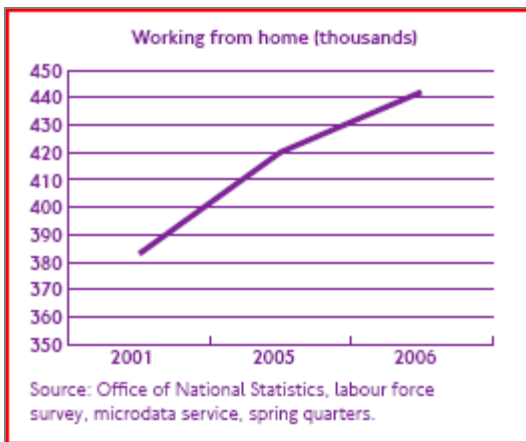
Maximising women's employment through home-working

The countries that have large proportions of working professional women offer more flexible working arrangements and more work-based facilities for women. These arrangements can include part-time working, flexible hours, return to work after maternity leave, job-shares and so on. There should also be a greater emphasis on vocational training (in the sense of preparation for the working environment) and on career guidance.

It is, however, striking that one working practice in particular is not prevalent in the GCC for professional women. Home working is very common for individual, locally based craft and catering workers but not for professional highly qualified women. Yet, as has been shown in many countries, Home working can offer a productive and efficient alternative to office-based working as well as overcoming many of the barriers mentioned above. There are other societal benefits including reduced transportation costs through less commuting. This does not, of course, just apply to women. The same principles can be applied to men and other categories such as disabled workers.

According to a global survey by networking technology firm Mitel, two-thirds of workers believe that home working allows them to be more flexible and 41% believe that it can boost productivity (Mitel 2007).

In the UK, there are 5.4 million employees who work under a formal or informal flexible working agreement, of which 2.2 million are men and 3.2 million are women. Of these, 3.3 million employees work from home in some form (TfL 2007). The graph below highlights the steep rise in UK home working since 2001:



London home-working increase (TfL 2007)

In London alone, over 120,000 people work from home. This represents around 4% of the working population. 38% of London's home workers are women (TfL 2007).

There are many benefits in home working for employers and employees, which in turn are transferred to the customer. These benefits were highlighted by Transport for London (TfL 2007) as:

Employer Benefits

Becoming an employer of choice by:

- Attracting and retaining staff, and thereby building the capabilities to achieve long-term organizational objectives
- Appealing to a wider pool of talent
- Reducing time spent on journeys to meetings and for commuting, increasing organizational efficiency
- Providing a better work/life balance for staff, boosting productivity through increasing employee satisfaction

Employee Benefits

- Work/life balance improved
- Stress reduced
- Long working hours reduced
- Travel time reduced, increasing flexibility, productivity and efficiency

A recent survey of 2,000 workers in the UK carried out by Business Green found that workers collectively waste 4.6 million hours a day commuting and around a third of respondents would like to be given the option of home working in order to reduce travel time (Business Green 2009). The survey also found that any employer resistance to home working is often outdated because smart commuting, remote working and flexi-time can offer ideal solutions to reduce travel time which in turn benefits both employers and employees (*ibid*). BT (a major UK based global telecoms firm) introduced a home working initiative and demonstrated that each home worker represented a saving of £6,000 a year for the company and a reported 15-30% increase in productivity amongst these employees (TfL 2007).

A recent survey by Bayt.com (Bayt 2009) of 9,923 job seekers across the Middle East, found that 72% of professionals think that working from home (described as telecommuting) would be a good idea for both employees and employers. The main benefits cited for employees were: increased time with family, reduced costs and time in commuting and flexibility in working hours. Benefits to the employer included better employee motivation, retention and staff loyalty and greater productivity.

All these benefits would collectively be transferred onto clients and consumers through offering them a more efficient and productive service, increasing their levels of satisfaction which in turn serves to promote future business growth.

Another example of a successful home working initiative is highlighted by outsourcing and IT company Steria (previously Xansa). Xansa, which merged with the Steria Group in 2007, was formed in the 1980's to employ female IT specialists who wanted to work from home. The

company grew rapidly and now employs 9000 workers and enjoys annual revenues of over \$300 million (Steria 2009). Similarly, Avon, one of the world's leading beauty companies and a major employer of women, implemented an Avon Representative scheme which allows women to work from home and sell their beauty products through self-employment (Avon 2009). This initiative provided a vast number of women with the opportunity to have a flexible lifestyle and rewarding salary - using their skills and expertise whilst being self-employed home workers (*ibid*). The success of this scheme is further highlighted by a large increase in the number of women opting to work as Avon Representatives as a result of the recent global financial crisis, allowing them to maintain income stability while living a flexible lifestyle (Softpedia 2009).

Home working is a well-proven approach to work and if implemented correctly, can be extremely successful and beneficial to all those involved. Through finding the right framework in the context of varying geo-political and cultural backgrounds, the GCC States could experience similar success and allow women to use their skills and qualifications whilst boosting the economy through maximizing labour force potential in the region. Our research therefore next explores the issues, problems and benefits of home-working for the GCC context in particular.

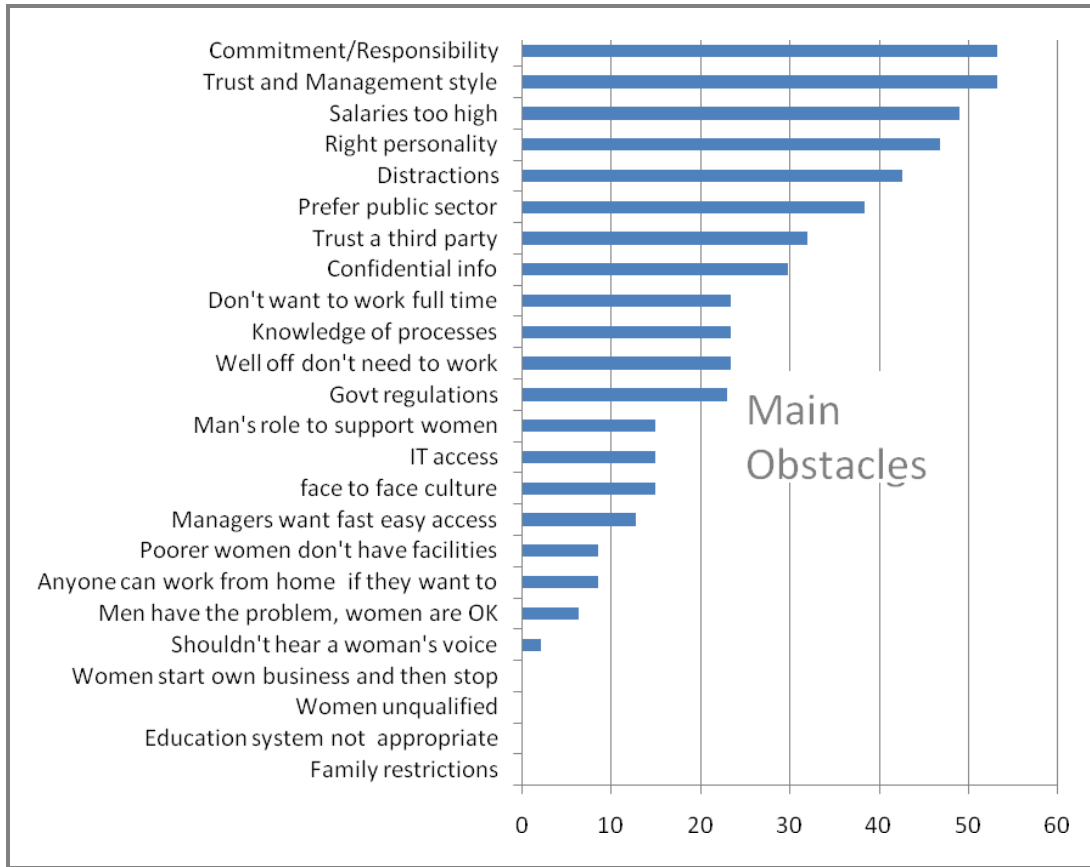
Research into home-working as a solution to increase women's participation

Earlier this year, a team of OSC consultants began interviewing employers and employees of over 50 leading private and public sector companies across the GCC to understand how to increase women's participation in the workforce. Following the first stage (identifying barriers and candidate solutions, the option of home-working for professional women was explored in more detail. Information was gathered through completed questionnaires and interviews which were then processed into usable data in order to establish the socio-cultural context that home working initiatives would be met with in the GCC. This section will present the findings of OSC's research and relate them to the feasibility of actionable proposals to enhance the economic participation of women through outsourcing employment to qualified women willing to work from home.

Main Obstacles

The interviewers asked two questions to try and identify the major issues which might prevent qualified women working in professional roles from home.

First, all the respondents (women and potential employers) were asked: 'what would be the main obstacles to women working from home?'



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The two main perceived obstacles to home working for qualified women in the GCC are commitment/responsibility and trust and management style, with 53% of respondents voicing these concerns. These obstacles are common in all countries that have introduced home-working and are largely overcome through a combination of training (for both worker and managers) and familiarity over time. In the UK, for example, attitudes to home-working have changed so that both parties now see it as an accepted way of working and both parties understand their obligations in such a system. Managers now generally understand that they can trust their home-workers and home-workers understand that they must live up to that trust.

It does seem to be the case that people who are self-managing, committed, able to work alone and good time-managers may be more suitable for home-working. These characteristics can be assessed through a structured interview process with clearly defined personal specifications so that employers and the employee can ensure that home-working is right for them. Additionally, the employee can be trained to maximise the benefits of home-working through skills and techniques (e.g. IT and time-management) and attitudes and behavioural training. The recent Bayt survey (Bayt 2009) also suggested that the most suitable home-workers would have to be self-disciplined and ideally in roles with low levels of face to face interaction required with colleagues. 27% said that the main concern was underperformance due to lack of close monitoring.

Concerns about access to confidential information from home can be overcome through technology and ensuring that the home-worker has a private location and is careful about IT and physical security. Of course, confidentiality requirements mean that some roles would not be suitable for home-working.

Many of the respondents believed that a far greater degree of trust between Managers and staff would be required due to the inevitable lack of proximity between employers and home-working women. Trust is the major component of good employment relations in any organisation but it is easier, in a face to face environment to manage through hands-on monitoring and control. In managing a home-worker, however, mutual trust is crucial. Good practice in recruitment is therefore very important, such as ensuring candidates supply valid references during the application process, ideally from previous employers. A specific management style is required in regard to home-working employees which can be taught through training sessions for managers, allowing them to become more familiar with the management styles required to ensure home working is a successful option for their organisation. The formation of a specialist company for home working in the GCC would be ideal to address this issue of trust and management style, as its people and managers would be expert in home-working and will have had specialist training as part of their induction.

Over 40% of respondents believed 'distractions' were also a major challenge to the success of home-working initiatives. Whilst this is a potential obstacle to successful home working, as there are inevitably more distractions in a home environment than an office work place, employers can monitor progress through productivity checks to ensure they are satisfied with the quality and quantity of work provided by the women. Additionally, training and initiation workshops can be set up for home-working women to ensure that they establish the right environment and offer them guidance on how to set up an office place at home to ensure maximum productivity and efficiency. This training would also include time management and priority setting. The potential obstacles above can also be overcome by initiating output measures of performance. For many office based jobs, the fact that an employee starts work on time and is 'present' is seen as a good measure of contribution. In fact, of course, the employee's output and results are far more important. This is even more the case with home-workers where output is the key measure – not just time spent or hours attended.

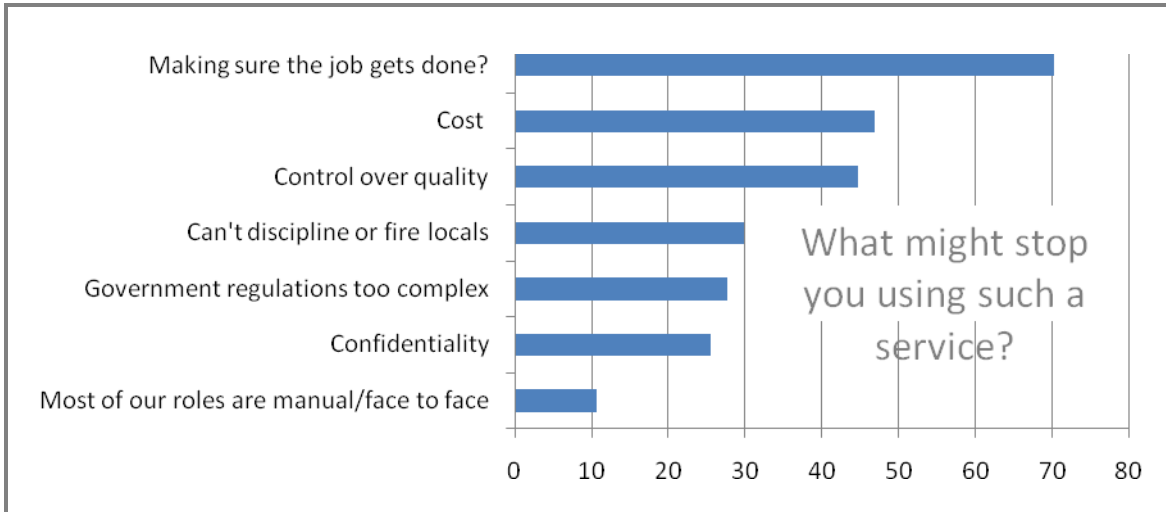
Interestingly, our results show that less than 1% of respondents believed that women would not be qualified for such home-working roles, indicating a certainty of available qualified and skilled women who could potentially enter the GCC labour force through such an initiative. Similarly, very few respondents believed there to be family restrictions on home-working, which indicated a positive socio-cultural framework for such an initiative as home-working would not be considered as socially unacceptable in the GCC. In fact, as in the UK and other western countries, many families and the women themselves would welcome the opportunity to spend more time with children and family members whilst also having responsible careers.

Many of the respondents' answers to this question were actually dealing with more general issues of employment – for example, preferring 'public sector' and 'salaries too high' are actually concerns about nationalisation in general, rather than national women working from home in particular. Similarly 'well-off don't need to work' and 'man's job is to support the woman' reflect issues of women working in general where, on the one hand, there is a misconception

that women who have enough money will not wish to work and, on the other, that some GCC men might feel embarrassed if their wife works as it reflects on their ability to support the family. Some of the female interviewees did not want to work full time - home-working, of course, is very suitable for part-time working.

Employers were also asked to consider obstacles from the employer's viewpoint.

Obstacles from the Employer's Perspective



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The above data shows that over 70% of respondents believe that 'making sure the job gets done' is the main obstacle that might prevent them from using a home-working service. This highlights a potential lack of confidence on the part of the employer in terms of embarking on integration of home working into their workforce. However, this obstacle can be overcome by ensuring effective productivity and quality checks are in place from the beginning to ensure that women working from home are successfully integrated into the organizational structure and have the capacity to become valuable assets by utilizing and building upon their qualifications and skills.

The two other issues that respondents indicated to be of concern were quality control and cost. Regular quality control checks on work carried out by home-working women will ensure that high standards are always being met and employers will have the flexibility and autonomy to re-evaluate job processes with employees if they feel that different approaches may reap more productive, high-quality results and can offer professional guidance to these women to ensure they maximize the potential of the qualifications and skills they have gained. With regard to cost, as mentioned earlier, the cost of setting up home workers is normally cheaper than the cost of expanding current office space and installing new equipment in order to recruit in-house employees to do the same job. Many women who could potentially work from home will already have access to computers and phone lines which leaves training as the main cost of implementing such an initiative. Resources that companies spend on training should always be viewed as long-term human investment tools which will result in advantages that far outweigh

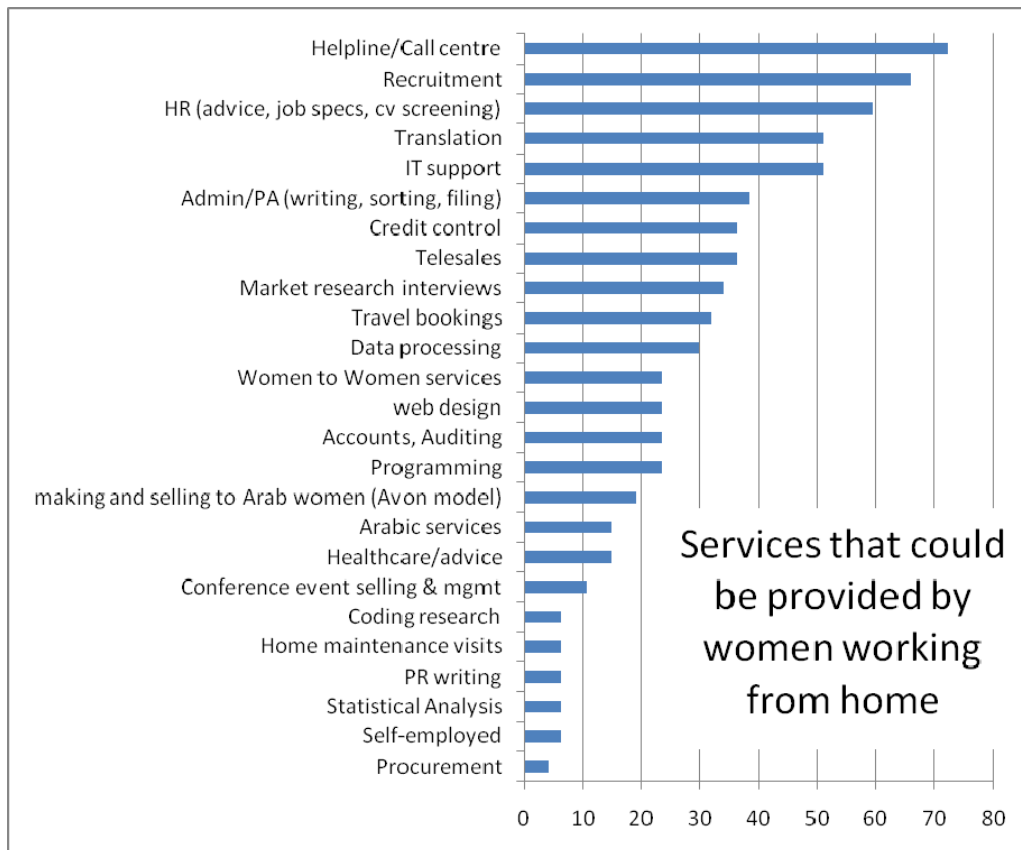
the disadvantages of having to commit to the initial capital for the project. With this in mind, the cost of home working should be seen in the context of long-term potential gains rather than short-term loss of capital as the inclusion of more women to the labour force will result in significant long-term social and economic benefits across the GCC States.

The issue of not being able to fire locals is again a response to the employment of nationals generally, not women or home-working in particular. This is a reflection of the stronger legal and political employment rights of nationals. Less than 10% of employers felt that their roles mostly required face to face work, again suggesting that a reasonable number of roles would be suitable for home-working women.

Overall, the challenges mentioned were similar to those encountered in countries where home-working has become widely used (e.g. the UK) and in practice have been relatively easy to overcome. Many of the more serious obstacles require a change in management style and commitment of individuals but even this has proven much less difficult to change than might have been predicted.

The interviewees were also asked what kinds of services might be most suitable for home-workers:

Potential Services

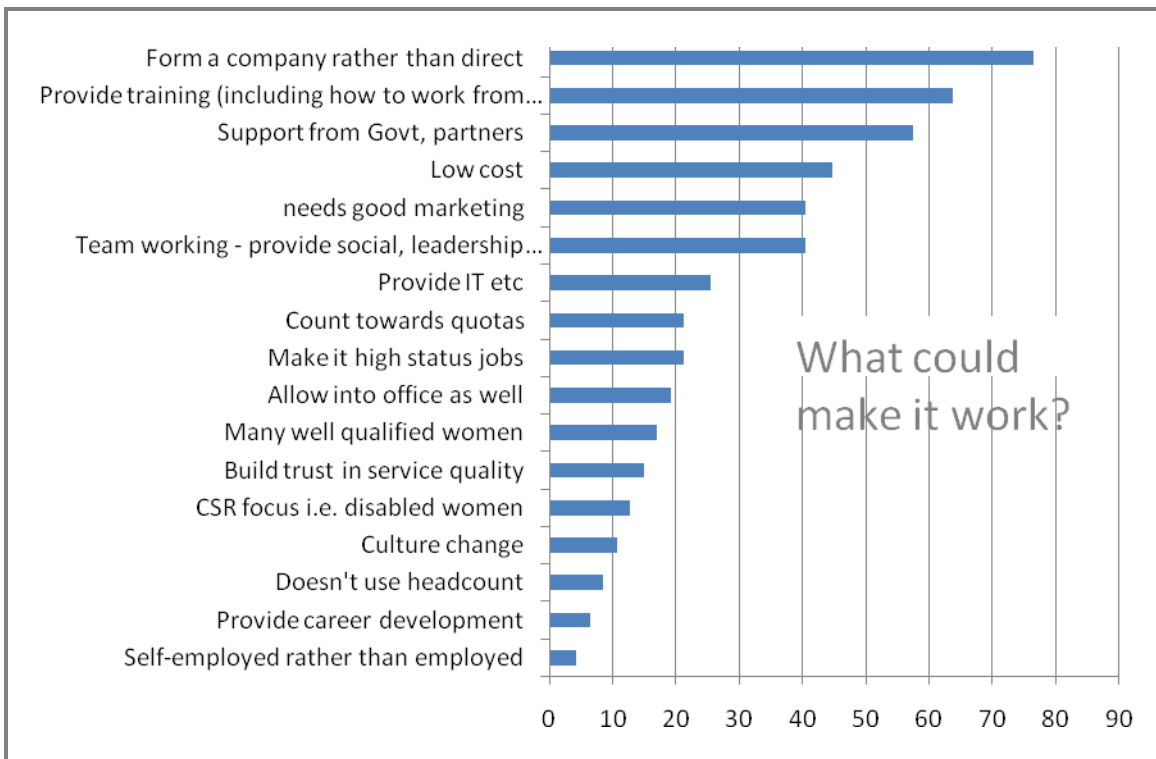


As shown by the chart above, the top four services that companies believe could be outsourced to women working from home are call centres, recruitment, HR advice and translation services. All these services require relatively minimal training and are generally roles that require individual, rather than group work, making them ideal for outsourcing to home-working women with the right qualifications. Over 50% of respondents also indicated IT support as a potential service that could be provided through home working and this further emphasises the necessity for maintaining levels of investment in education and skills training by the GCC governments to ensure that IT literacy is at a high standard amongst qualified females, making them ideal for such a role.

A recent survey by Bayt.com (Bayt 2009) of 9,923 job seekers found that home working would be suitable for roles such as call centres, sales, telesales and client services in many sectors but also, due to increases in internet and telecommunications access, roles such as PR, management consulting, market research and publishing.

This suggests, overall, that there are many suitable roles for women to work from home and that a market for such services is feasible. The next question for the interviewees was to identify the main factors that would help such a service to be successful and allow women to work from home effectively.

Making it work



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As shown above, 77% of respondents believed that the formation of a company to facilitate home working for women would be necessary to implement such an initiative. This could certainly be a more efficient way to implement such a service as the specialist company would

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allocate sufficient resources, facilities and personnel needed to set up these women working from home. This would eliminate potentially high levels of initial investment required on the part of the company or organisation wishing to outsource such a service as well as the necessary management and facilities required (Woodall, Scott-Jackson 2009). It would even be in the interests of GCC governments to help fund the formation of such a company, allowing the home working sector to grow steadily and efficiently through allocation of resources targeted at a specific sector, with the option of centralised initiation, training and mentorship for qualified women willing to start working from home.

Provision of training for home-working women was also a frequent response from the research, with employers and employees both in support of facilities to train women in home-working and guide companies in management of home-workers. Investment in training produces long-term results in terms of efficiency and productivity, making it an essential factor for implementing such an initiative across the GCC. 57% of respondents stated the need for support from governments and partners in order to achieve successful implementation of home-working services provided by women. Creating the right environment for home-working is essential for success and this can be supported by governments through funding and partners offering moral support at home will enable and empower women to achieve their full potential in terms of economic participation when embarking on home-working as a career.

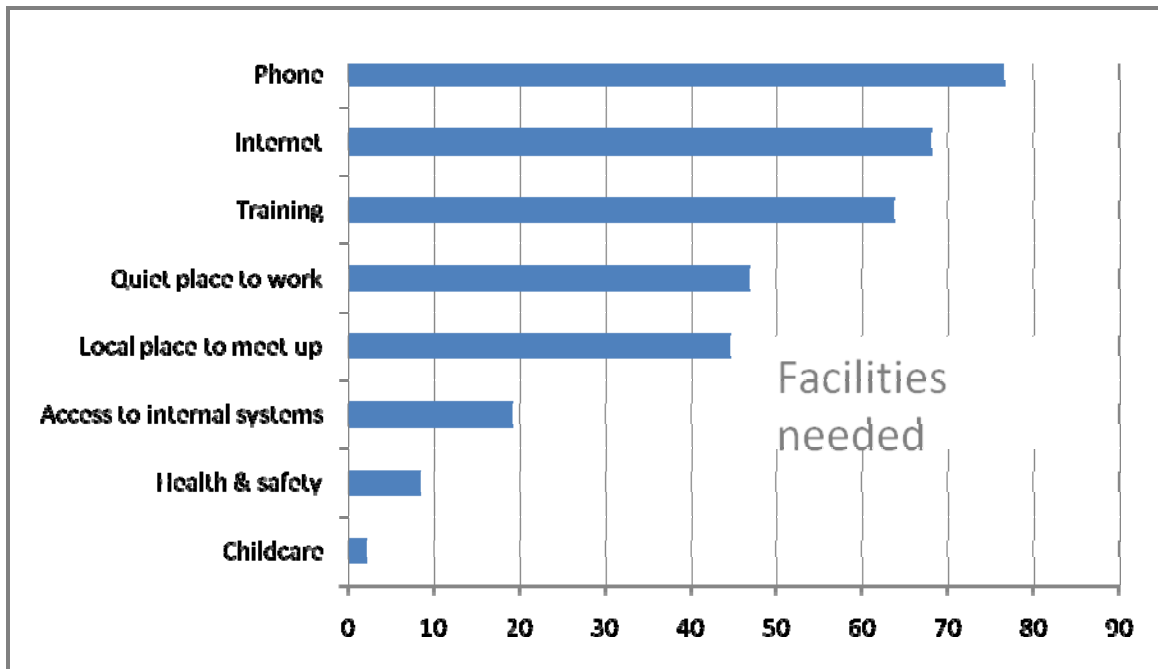
Low cost of home-working services was also an important factor cited for successful implementation of such a project and this could realistically be achieved due to the lack of travel costs involved, making slightly lower salaries more acceptable to women working from home compared to other company employees. However, the initial investment required to facilitate home-working successfully cannot be ignored. It should not be regarded as an obstacle to achievement but rather as a long-term investment that will secure more jobs for women through increasing economic participation and productivity, which will in turn feed back to companies in the form of profitability and sustainability.

Interestingly, only 4% of respondents believed that home-workers should be self-employed rather than employed. For home-workers, particularly those involved in professional roles, the support, infrastructure, management and career development provided by the employer are extremely important. This would support the idea of a company being set up to employ the home-workers whilst, in turn, providing services to other organisations.

In the recent Bayt survey (Bayt 2009), 52% of respondents said that clear guidelines, trustworthy, well trained employees and supportive managers were the major success factors for home working.

In terms of the facilities required, there was wide agreement:

Facilities needed



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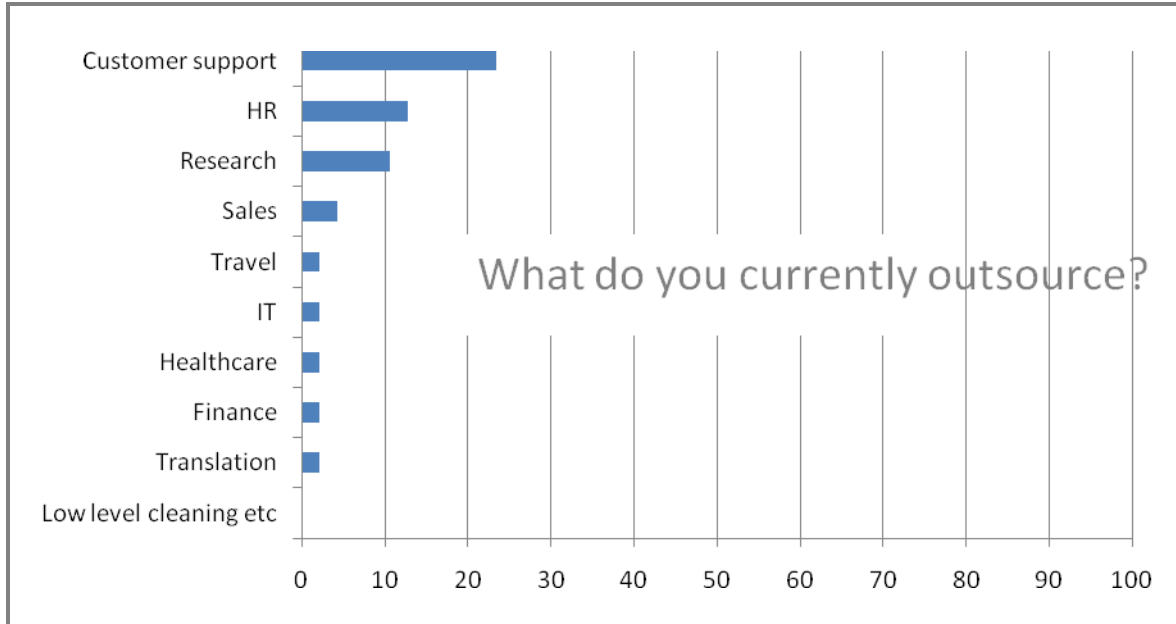
Understandably, the top three facilities respondents believed were need to set up successful home-working initiatives are phones, internet and training. Home working is a relatively new concept to the GCC labour force compared to the UK, for example, which emphasises the need for comprehensive training to ensure home-working women are confident and comfortable in such a working environment in order to maximise productivity and efficiency of their work methods.

The GCC States have advanced technology and communication integration throughout their economies and have embraced technological developments, with governments investing in programs to increase levels of adult IT literacy levels. Therefore, there is a relatively low probability of home-working women not having sufficient access to modern methods of communication such as telephones and the internet. In the unlikely scenario that these facilities are lacking, they can be installed with ease and employees can learn how to use them quickly and efficiently through minimal training, making this a negligible obstacle to such an initiative.

45% of respondents believe that the availability of a local place for employers and employees to meet up is needed for home workers. This can be easily facilitated through meetings at local halls, cafes or at centres provided by the organisation itself so that transparency and trust can be increased between the home worker and employer, which will enable the establishment of a successful working relationship. This will increase employee morale and productivity as well as employer satisfaction.

Given the proposal that a company acts as intermediary, providing services to organisations whilst employing home-working women, we asked the employers what kinds of services they currently outsourced:

Outsourcing

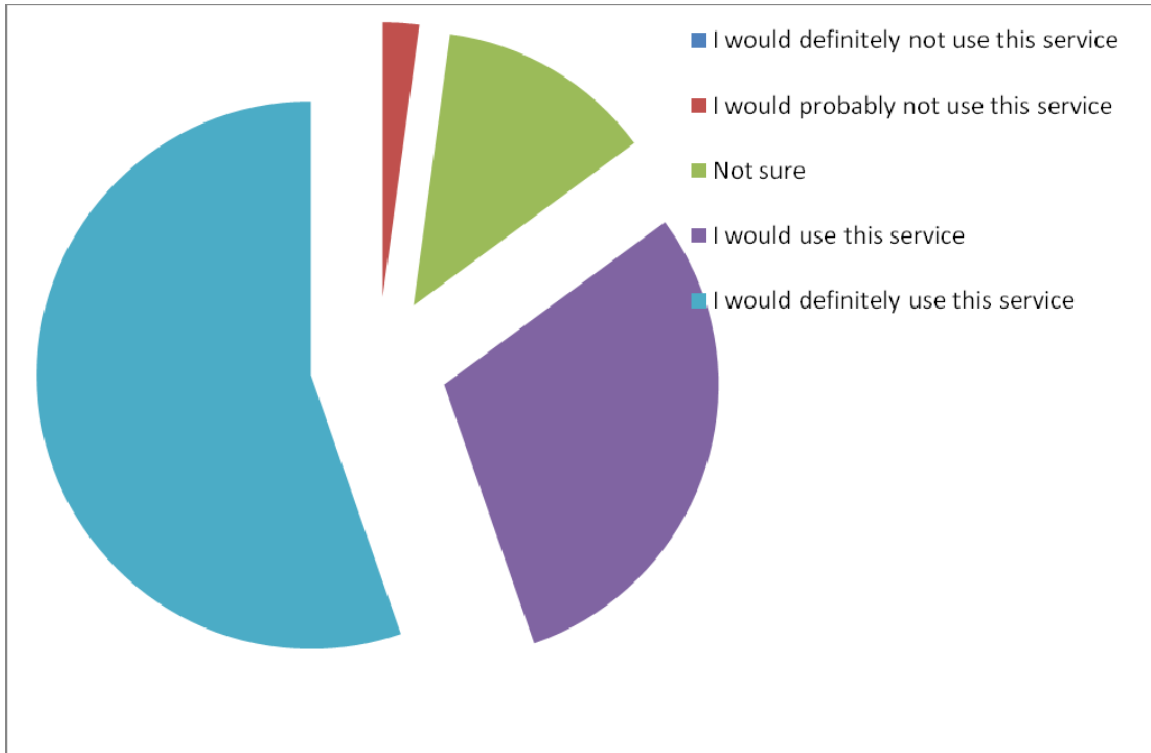


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As shown by the chart above, Customer Support is the most outsourced service, with 23% of respondents. In terms of facilities and training, this service is likely to be the most feasible for qualified home-working women to partake in successfully as little training would be required for telephone usage and training courses on procedural logistics of the organisation as well as how to maintain a good telephone manner to ensure high-quality client service will enable these women work effectively to a high standard. The benefits to the employer of outsourcing a service like Customer Support would be the reduction of in-house costs incurred by the provision of such a service in the company offices and will in turn result in economic gains across the GCC by providing ample opportunities for women to enter the labour force by working from home. For those women who do not wish to carry out telephone work, the best alternatives would seem to be research, IT, translation etc. These are largely individual tasks, working from computer and communicating by email.

We also asked the employers if they would be likely to use such a service:

Would Employers use services provided by a company employing women working from home?



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The above chart reflects the potential success of implementing a home working service that employs women across the GCC, with 55% of respondents indicating that they would *definitely* use such a service and a further 30% stating they would use this service. This positive response is also a reflection of how home working could be successfully integrated into the GCC economy, resulting in socio-economic benefits through increased employment of women paving the way for long-term sustainable economic growth and gender parity in line with values and visions that embody current government strategies.

Interviews

During the research carried out by OSC, many senior-level employers and employees were interviewed. Below is a selection of quotations from these interviews which highlight the positive outlook on home working initiatives as well as the socio-political and cultural context in which they would be implemented.

“The main thing is people would welcome an idea like this because this is what all the Saudi people want, I mean Saudi is a Muslim country and Islam doesn't allow women to talk to the man or mix with him , so by finding a job for the women they can do from home is the greatest thing you could ever do for Saudi ”

“This idea has been in the news for almost a year , but no serious action has been taken to make it work , maybe the private sector should sponsor this project not the government sector, but they are both worried if it is going to work or don't know how to make it work or where they should start and how.”

“Our company has been in KSA for many years. 29% of our employees are women and 45% of those women are Saudi nationals. Most of them are young graduates and we are always planning to employ more women, but sometimes there are barriers, for example:

A) 76% of the Saudi women are well qualified graduates due to high government investment in education, but there has not yet a similar investment in creating jobs for women and encouraging them to enter the labour market. There is great potential for women to work from home and we would use such a service.

B) KSA is a rich country and most of the people think that there is no need for women to work, either from home or in an office, despite the fact that work is not only about money but also about personal development and economic contribution to the country .

C) Other reasons include aspects of religion and culture that do not welcome the idea of a woman going out to work or mixing with the men at all.

D) Some women don't want to work, even though they have good qualifications. The higher their qualifications, the better her husband will be, so most of the young female graduates in Saudi will get married straight after university, start a family, become housewives and slowly forget about what they learnt .

E) The main problem is that the whole society needs to be more open minded and consider the right of women to be the same as men and this is happening very slowly at the moment but it is a great improvement compared to 20 years ago when you would never see a working woman.”

Private Health provider

“We would love to consider the opportunities. Hospitality is a difficult sector in the credit crunch but even now we would love a team of Arabic speaking ladies engaged in sales and marketing.”

Top Middle Eastern Hotel & Leisure Company

“The UAE is a perfect country to develop outsourcing as legislation is very supportive. I am not aware of any professional outsourcing companies and feel that this could be very successful if we were able to come up with creative and professional solutions in these areas.”

International Foods Company

"I would be encouraged to use outsourcing as it reduces headcount and would enable us to utilise space in the work place, making it a better environment for those who are permanently office based. It would be assisting the community. We have not made any real investment in this area, but would consider doing so." Major Global Bank

As shown by the results of extensive research carried out by OSC across the GCC States, it is evident that initiatives to facilitate home working for women in the GCC would be well received. Respondents' answers indicated it would be perceived to be successful and would be embraced as a positive innovative development that would serve to enhance and encourage female economic participation, resulting in long-term sustainable economic growth across the GCC States.

Conclusions & Recommendations

This report has given an outline of the current situation in the GCC States with regard to employment of women in a socio-economic and political framework, and recommends a specific home working initiative to increase the economic participation of women.

As a result of GCC governments investing heavily in education to achieve gender parity and further the development of women, considerable economic and social gains have been achieved. Women have made significant achievements in terms of educational attainment and labour market participation, especially in the field of politics, government, health and education.

There have been commendable and numerous initiatives that have been implemented by GCC governments in line with their country visions and strategies. These initiatives have helped empower women to set up prosperous small businesses, including home-working, and have enabled them to utilise their skills and qualifications. Although these developments have been successful, they have mainly been on a small scale, with women selling handicrafts or providing catering, as well as other non-professional occupations. Whilst achievements have been commendable, there is currently a far wider availability of highly-educated, skilled women across the GCC willing to enter the labour market and large-scale home working initiatives could increase participation that whilst maintaining national identity and culture.

The GCC States have achieved substantial advancements in communication technology, with the use of telephones and internet constantly increasing. This provides a fertile platform for home-working initiatives to be a great success, allowing women to work from home for several different departments of an organisation, giving them increased flexibility when using the skills and qualifications they have achieved. The variety of services that could be provided by women working from home in the GCC were highlighted by respondents' answers, for example, helplines, HR (advice, job specifications, CV screening), IT support, credit control and market research interviews. This demonstrates employers' need for outsourced services and that the broad range of skills that qualified women have in the GCC could be utilised to their full potential.

However, although the potential success of a home working initiative for women in the GCC has been made evident through the findings of this report, prospective employers do not currently have the infrastructure or management systems or skills needed to facilitate its implementation. This highlights the need for initial capital investment into the initiative and the extensive training required to ensure that objectives are met with efficiency and expertise. A practical solution to this problem is the establishment of an intermediary company in the GCC States that will facilitate the employment of professional women working from home through extensive training, investment and guidance so that this service can be outsourced to major companies in the region. Additionally, companies will need to invest in recruiting managers who are experienced in managing remote workers so that the facility works in harmony with the organisation and can be smoothly incorporated into its structure.

According to a recent report, expatriates account for 58% of the GCC workforce, further increasing the employment gap between locals and expatriates in the region (Emirates Business 2009). Moreover, according to Madar Research (2009), expatriates account for 87% of the labour force in UAE and Qatar. These figures indicate that GCC economies are heavily reliant on expatriate labour and this is detrimental in the long term and cannot ensure sustainable economic development. GCC governments have the opportunity and the means to change this through reclaiming full control over their economies by establishing a new trend of home working which will bring qualified females into senior and professional roles in the labour market.

The current level of female economic participation across the GCC States stands at 19.2% (al Yousef 2009) and this report has shown there are many potential services that companies could allocate to women working from home which would greatly increase this figure. This would result in extensive economic and social benefits for the GCC by not only increasing the percentage of female employment but also reducing dependency on expatriates by providing more jobs for GCC nationals. This has been an underlying goal in the governments' visions for a brighter future and it is evident that every GCC State has the potential to make it happen.

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