

**The Rising Ranks
of
Women in The Middle East Workplace**

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Executive Summary

The Arab Human Development Report 2005 states “The rise of women in Arab countries goes beyond redressing historical injustices against them and ensuring their equitable treatment – notwithstanding that both are obligations for Arab societies. Indeed, the advancement of women is a prerequisite for a comprehensive Arab renaissance”.

While it is important to point out that the macro level indicators still put the region at the bottom of the list on a number of working women related issues - such as having the smallest proportion of the workforce composed of women (less than 33% across the region – AHDR 2005) and lower access to education generally as well as fields of education, significant advancements have taken place in recent years.

The latest online survey by Bayt.com and Yougovsiraj tackled the heatedly debated issue of women in the workplace and the results were both in keeping with general well-publicized workplace and education trends and yet at the same time in some aspects quite surprising. The study sought to understand how women in the region are faring within the workforce and their perceptions of this in addition to their expectations of employers and their long-term aspirations. The survey sought both to give female professionals an idea of how they are faring relative to their peer group attitudinally and in terms of career progress and workplace conditions as well to give employers an invaluable basis and framework upon which to base their female employee attraction and retention schemes.

A number of parameters were tackled in the survey:

- How women professionals are faring relative to their male counterparts
- How accommodating the workplace is to women, this includes views on maternity leave, flexible hours and other perks
- The issues that impact women’s career prospects
- Their motivation for joining and persevering in the workplace

As is true the world over to varying degrees, women’s welfare in the workplace in the Arab World has some way to go before reaching a level that is truly equitable, accommodating and incorporates a more feminine viewpoint taking into account the special set of needs and priorities that a female workforce can bring to the table.

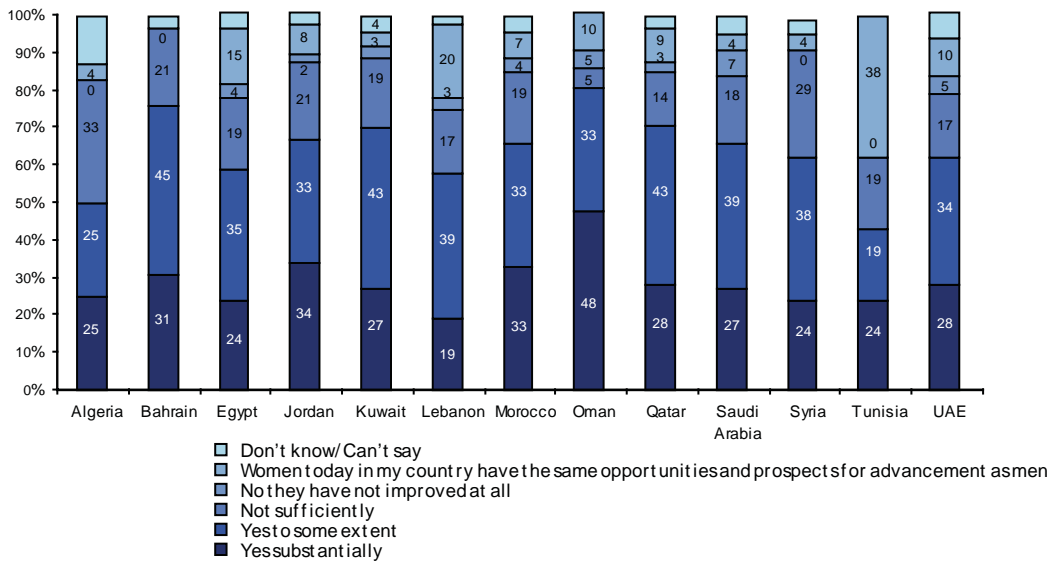
That said, the results of this groundbreaking survey indicate that women while still believing that their male counterparts have a gender based edge to some extent, do not see themselves as helpless victims of the system. This is largely due to what seems to be a sense of empowerment, ownership and control over their workplace destinies and careers, a sense of ownership that comes with professional maturity and with confidence in the system and in their own abilities and aptitudes for growth, learning, flexibility and change.

Nonetheless, it is always important to read in between the lines, especially when responses are seemingly contradictory or questions are reframed to get at the underlying issues. This is what this report tries to get at when attempting to understand and address the dynamics of the Arab workplace and the extent to which this workplace is already successful at including and enlisting the loyalty of its valuable asset base of professional women as well as the extent to which this success can be furthered and optimized.

How Are Women Faring In Relation To Their Male Counterparts?

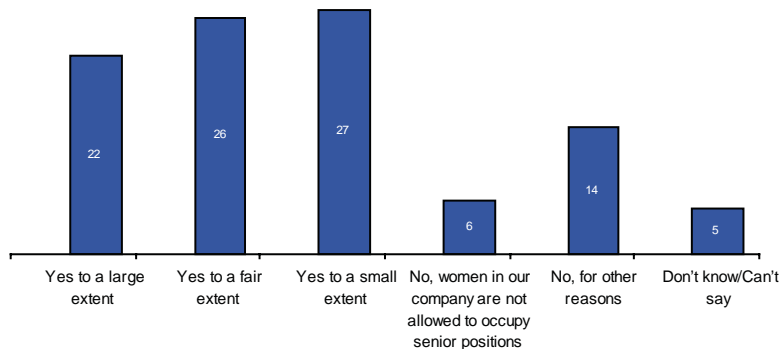
A cursory glance at the data may leave one with the impression that women are doing as well as if not better than their male counterparts at least in their perception. However, a detailed analysis paints a fairly different picture.

Do you believe prospects have generally improved for women in your country of residence?



When asked about the proportion of senior level women in their workplace, the general consensus was that the senior level ranks were fairly populated by the genders.

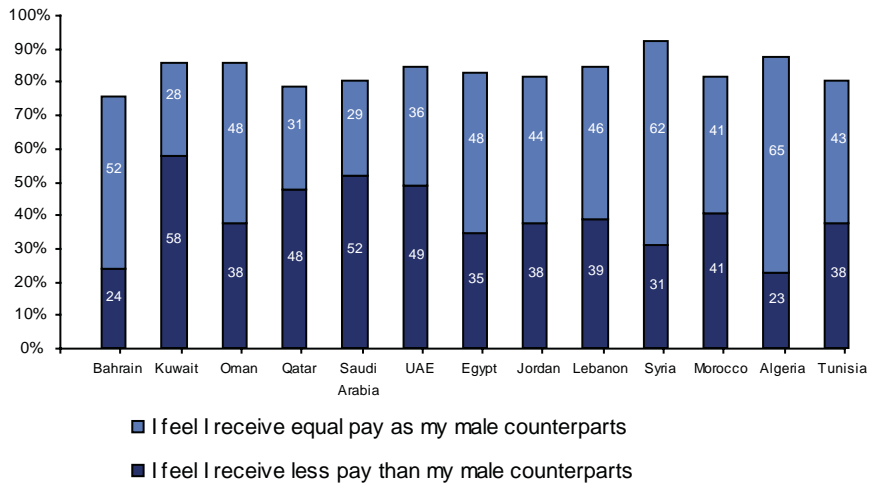
Are there women in the senior ranks of your company?



These results were similar across the region, Saudi Arabia included. Those least likely to see this were GCC nationals and Asian women, and those most likely to report positively on this point were Western Expats, perhaps indicating that gender alone was only one of the determining criteria.

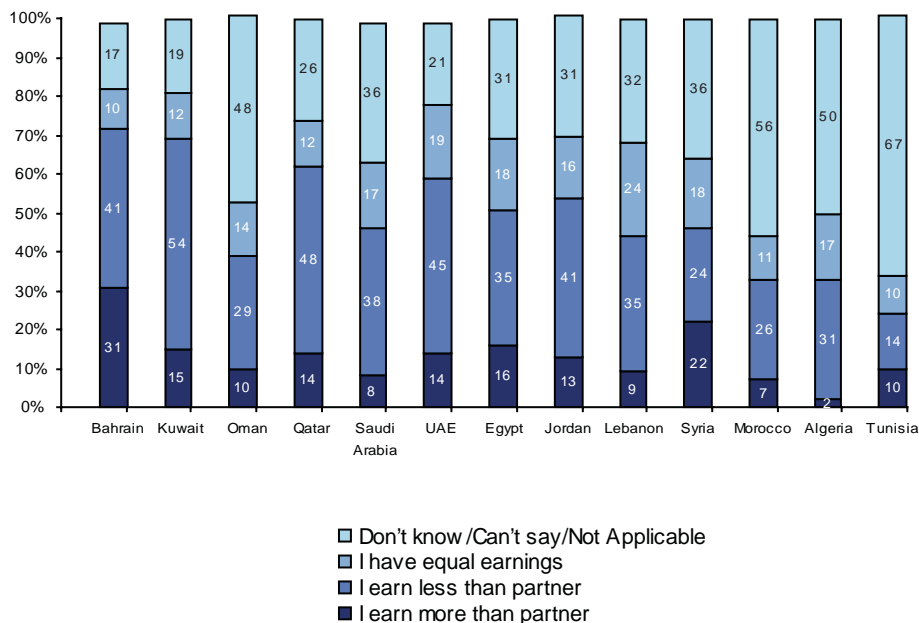
However, when it came to earnings potential, a significant portion of women felt they earned less than their male counterparts. This was especially true in the GCC countries, though Oman and Bahrain do fair a little better.

How do you feel your compensation package compares to those of your male colleagues in a similar position?



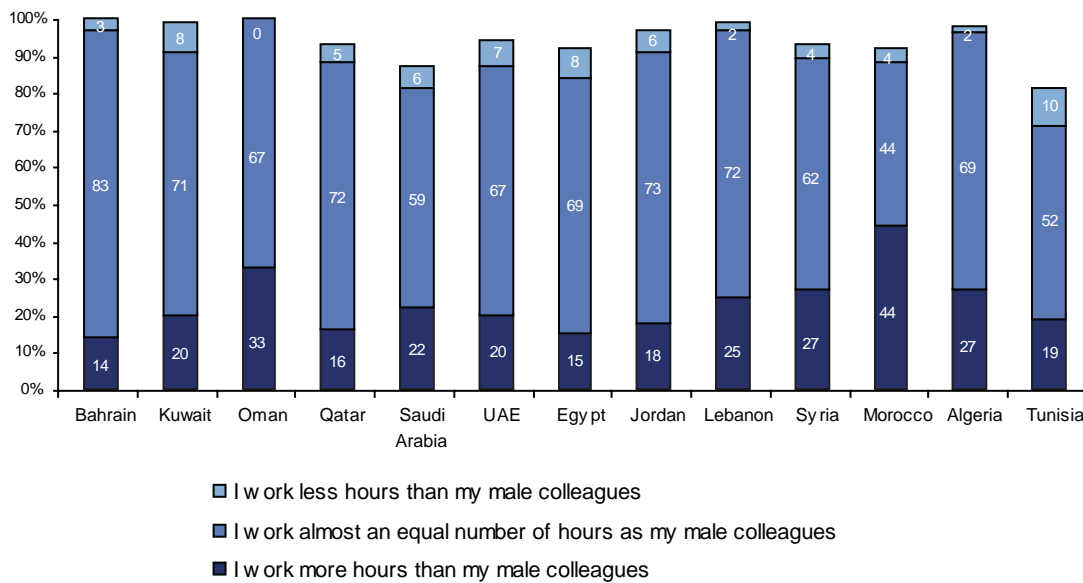
This picture of earnings disparity is further emphasized when women are asked to compare their earnings potential to that of their partners. Again Bahrain does fair somewhat better. The variation of “don’t know” is impacted by the number of singles in each location.

How do your earnings compare to those of your partner?

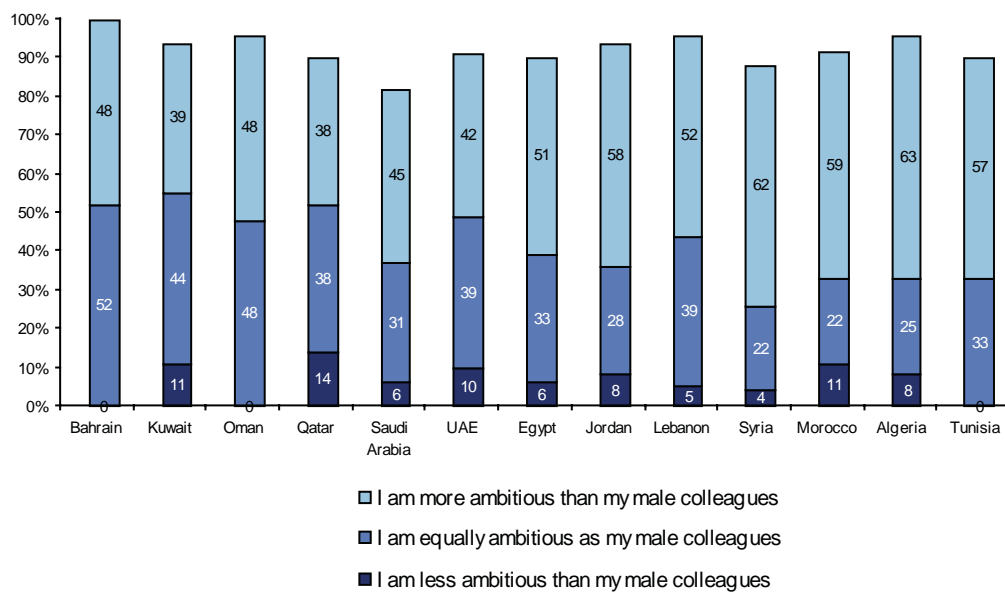


This discrepancy in earnings potential between the genders is by no means a reflection of the amount of work that women feel they do or their ambition. In fact women across the region feel they work equal if not longer hours than their male counterparts (a little less so in government organizations), and are generally more ambitious than their male counterparts as well.

How do your work timings compare to those of your male colleagues?

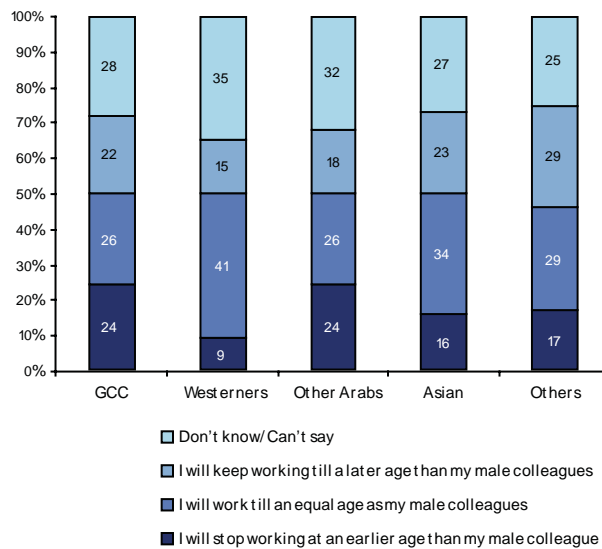


How would you compare your level of career ambition to those of your male colleagues?

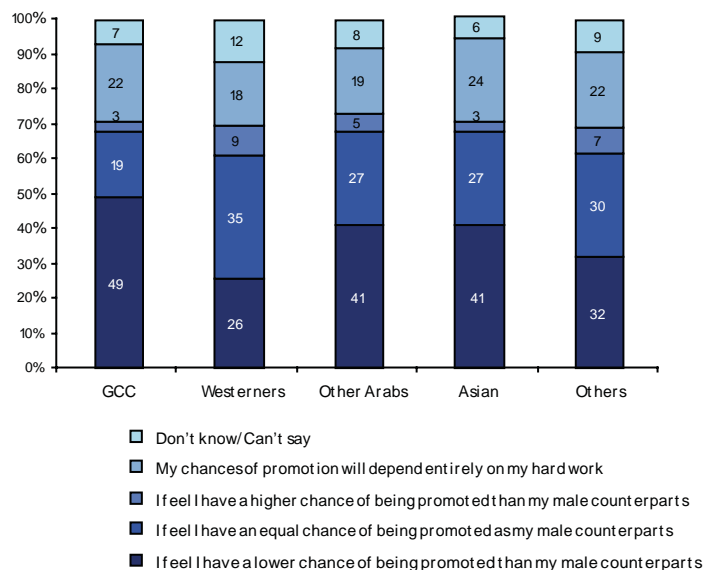


While totally pervasive, this inequality does manifest itself in a number of other ways too. While most women believe they will spend an equal amount of time in their career path as their male counterparts, regardless of other obligations they may have, there is a general sense that their chances of promotion are more limited. This does vary by nationality with GCC nationals having the least sense of equal opportunities when it comes to promotions and western expats feeling they are the most likely to progress up the career ladder on equal footing. There was not much in terms of regional differences in these aspects.

How long do you see yourself working compared to your male colleagues?

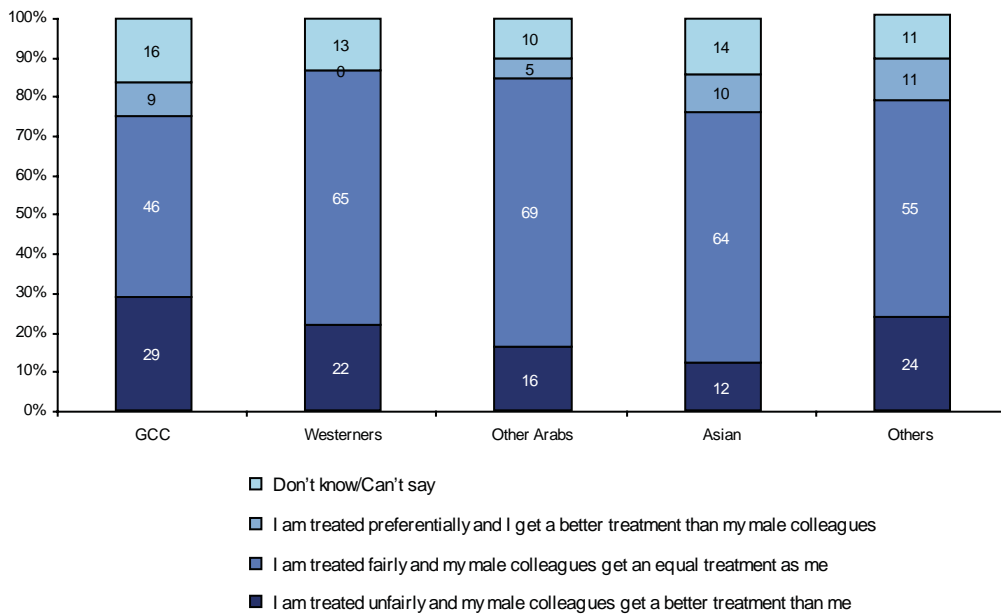


What do you feel about your chances of promotion compared to those of your male colleagues in similar positions?



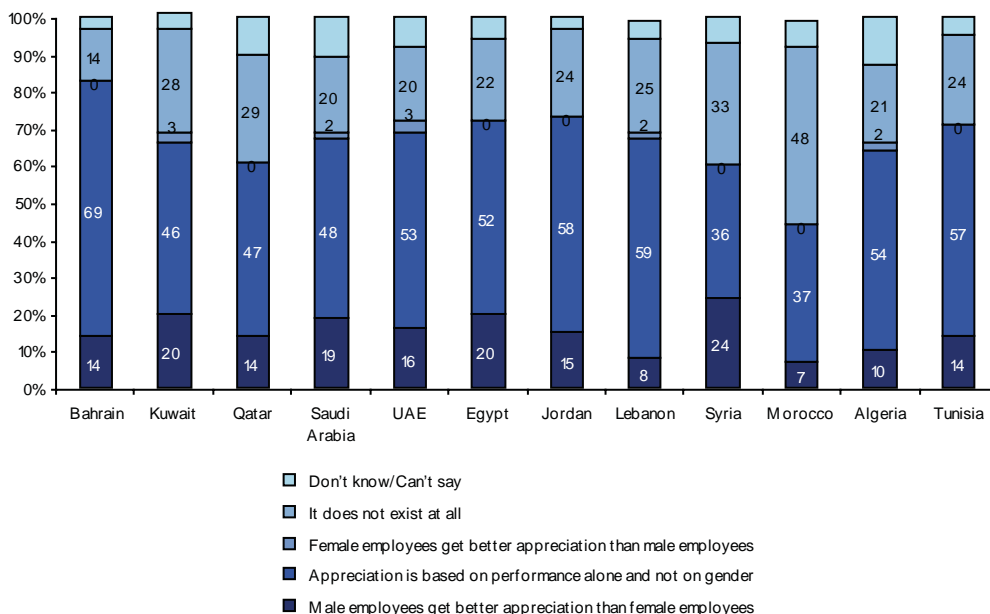
However, across the region, professional women display a sense of fair play and responsibility for their ultimate career progression, as reflected in an attitude leaning towards seeing the workplace as a level playing field. That said, GCC nationals are most likely to feel unfairly treated in the workplace as compared to their male counterparts. Interestingly, women who have made it into the workplace in KSA do not feel any more disadvantaged than anyone else across the region.

Do you feel you are being treated fairly as compared to your male colleagues?



Overall, perceptions of inequality are by no means overwhelming, a reflection of both an improving work environment as well as what seems to be women's will to overcome these obstacles. Furthermore, while quite a few women do not feel as appreciated as their male counterparts, a significant portion do.

What do you feel about the system of appreciating, recognizing and rewarding employees in your company?

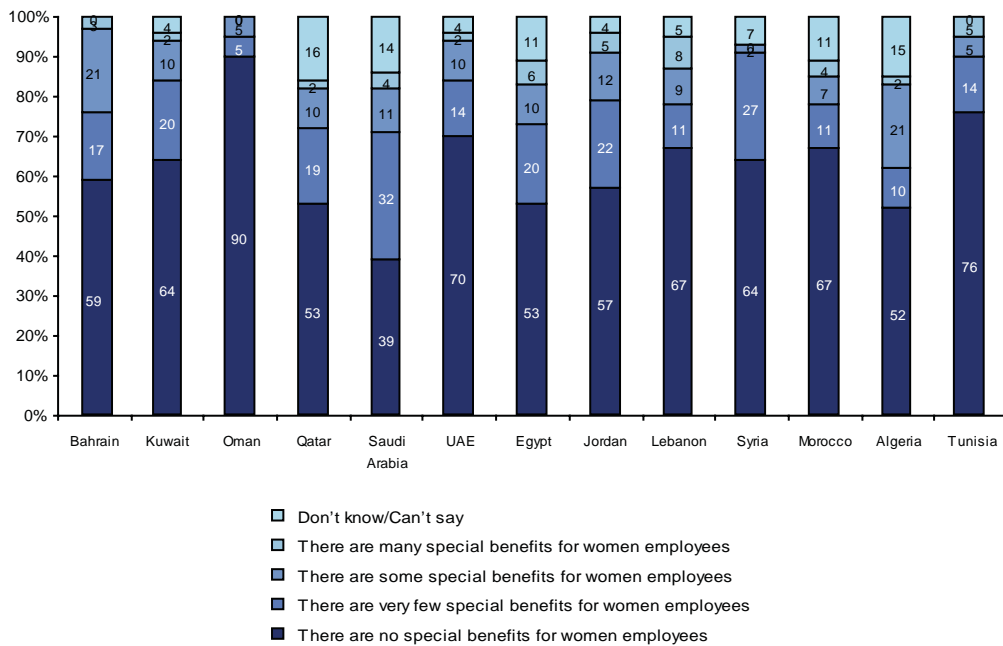


That said, and given the weight of the oft overlooked statistic of “I don’t know”, employers would do well to ensure that perceptions of inequality are not developed but rather addressed through clarity of position on the matter if not progressive and adaptive human resource policies and schemes that seek to level the playing field for women on a meritocratic basis.

An (in) Accommodating Workplace

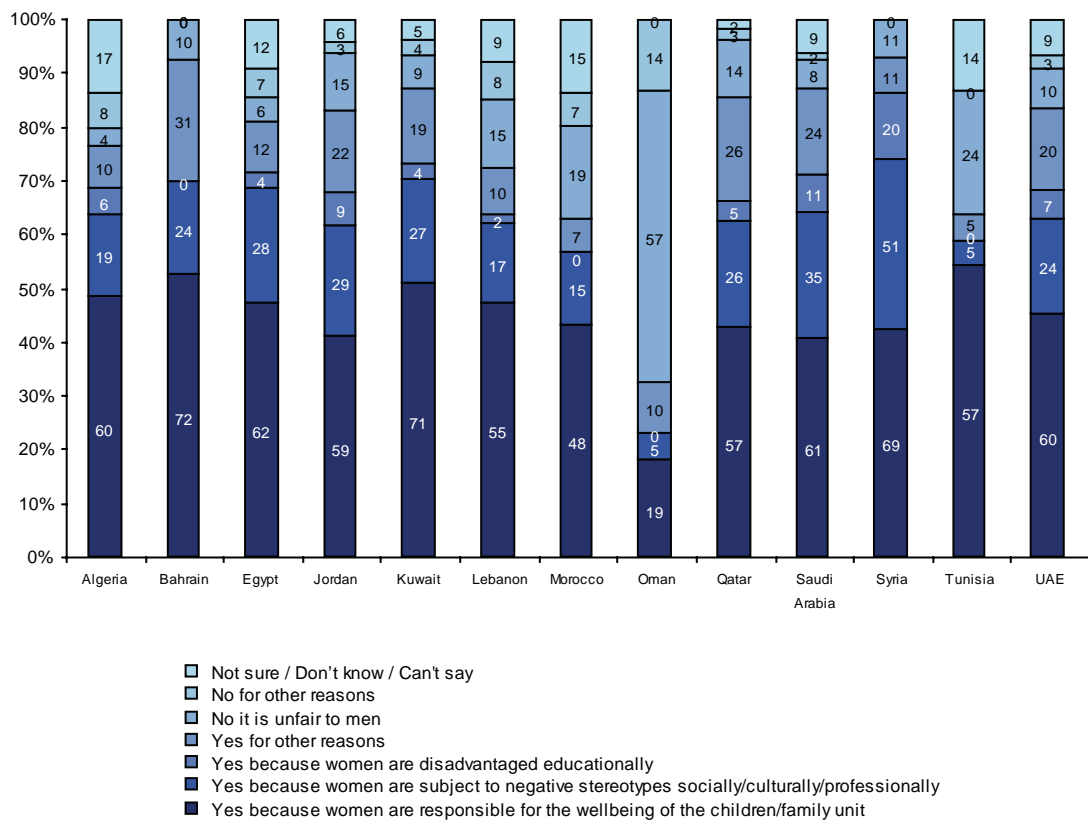
For the most part businesses in the region do not seem to offer much in terms of special set up to accommodate women, except in KSA where government regulation is in place to ensure certain workplace procedures involving women are observed.

Does your current employer provide any preferential treatment or special benefits for women employees?



A gap exists between these perceptions and women's expectations. A majority believe that some special benefits are required for women because they also have to look after the welfare of their families at the same time as managing their careers and must also to some extent counteract a back-drop of being subjected to various forms of negative stereotyping and overcome certain still prevalent educational disadvantages. While the sample is small in Oman, generally and keeping with the rest of the data, there seems to be a greater resistance to the idea of special treatment for women, hence a smaller gap between expectations and perceptions.

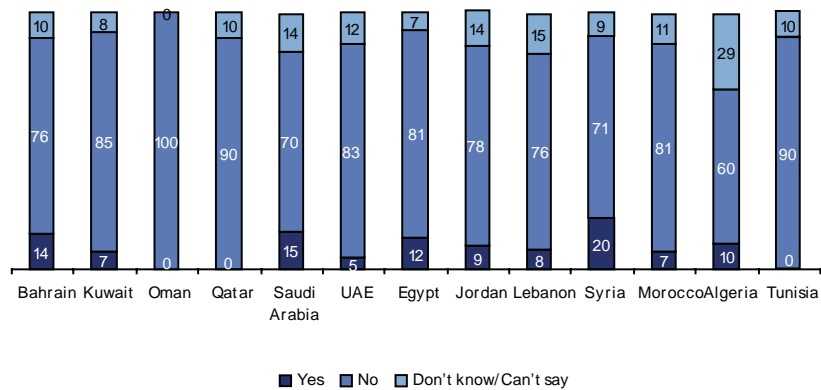
Do you believe employers should provide any preferential treatment or special benefits for women employees?



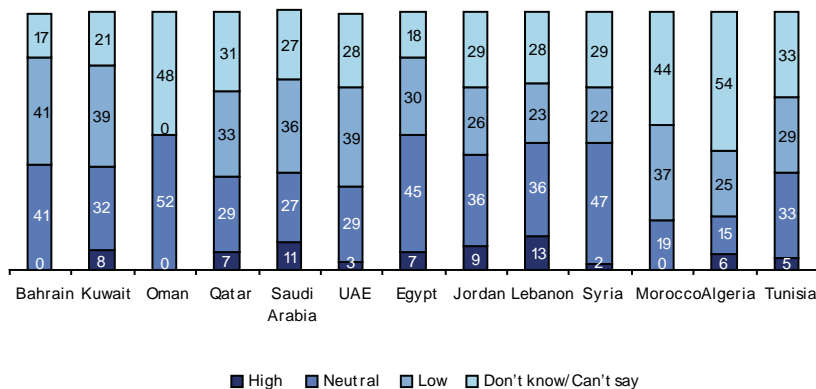
While GCC Arabs, expat Arabs and Asians mostly believe that there should be special benefits for women because they also need to look after the wellbeing of their families, this perspective is shared only in part by their western expat counterparts. The difference in nationality is quite possibly down to family sizes and expectations of shared household responsibilities which other research leads us to believe is greater in western expat households than it is in Arab or Asian households. Overwhelmingly, the need for special benefits is attributed to the women's sense of responsibility at home – employers this suggests need to bear in mind women's other priorities given existing regional social contexts, the dependence on women to manage and nurture the family unit and childbearing and child raising needs.

These responses are not surprising in the context of what workplaces do and don't provide. Very few businesses seem to offer daycare facilities to women with children, flexible hours are not an option for most and maternity leave length is very limited. A very small minority of working women are satisfied with maternity leave and benefits available at their current job.

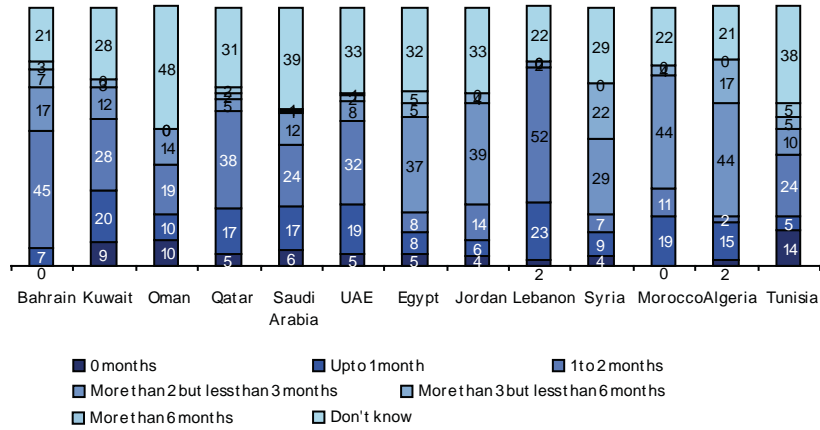
Does your company provide any daycare facilities for children of women employees?



How would you rate your satisfaction with the maternity leave and benefits available at your current job?

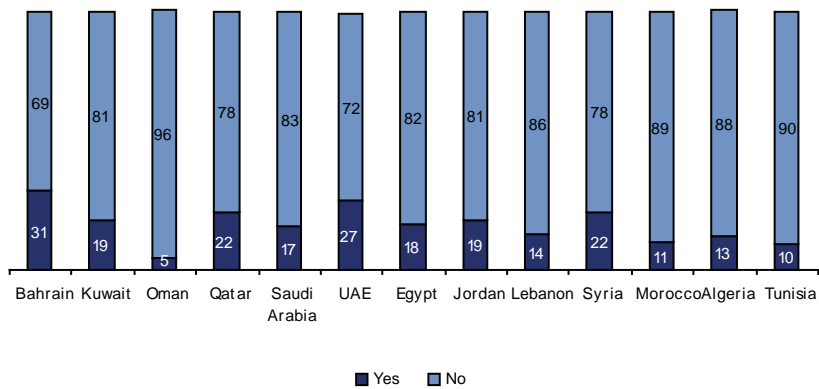


How many months of maternity leave are you able to get at your company?

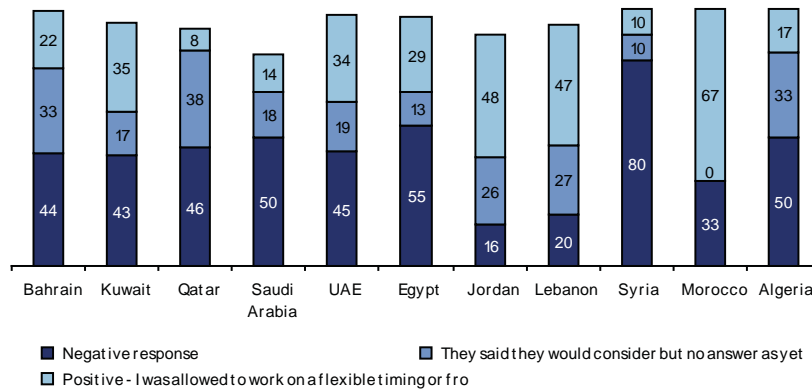


That said, it appears that those who ask, in many cases get. Professional women who have taken the initiative to ask their employers for flexitime arrangements have in many cases succeeded in garnering their employers approval. The proportion of women who have taken that initiative remains however very low.

Have you approached your company regarding your working on a flexible timing or working from home?

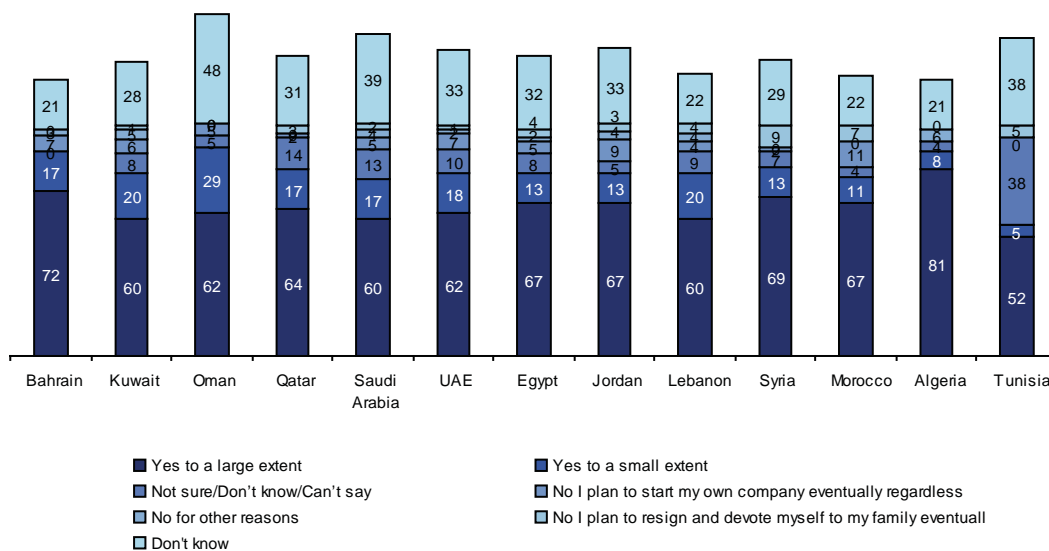


What response did you get from your company regarding flexible timing or working from home?



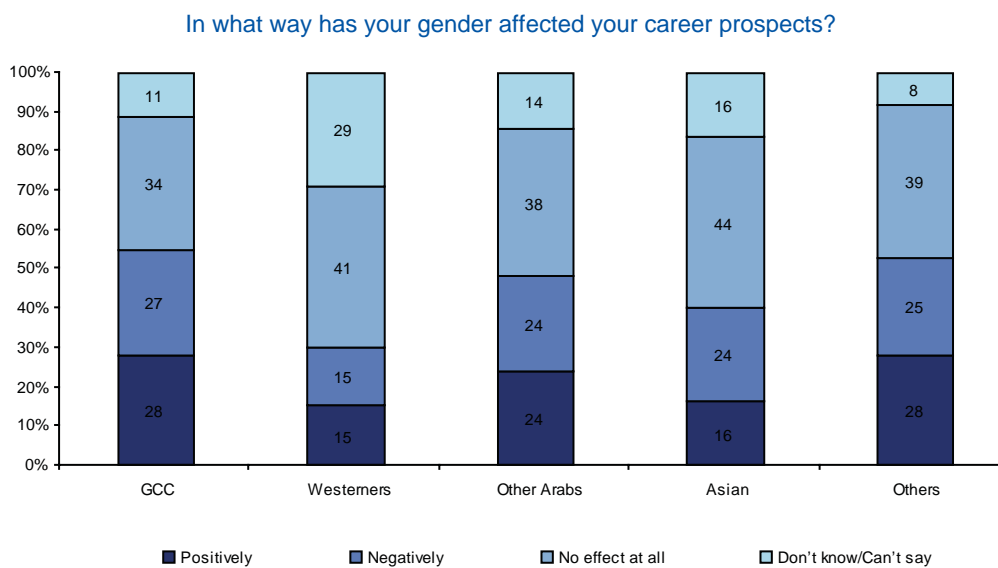
Despite benefits schemes that are less than exemplary, there is a certain level of acceptance of this status quo, as most women do not perceive they are being treated unfairly, and assert that their career progression is predominantly their responsibility. To some extent this is driven by perceptions that things have improved drastically for women in the workplace. While at first glance maintaining the status quo seems like a viable option for businesses, it would be a missed opportunity if more is not done for their female employees given that against this backdrop, most women across all demographics believe that if businesses were to introduce benefits to better accommodate them their longevity in the workplace would be significantly impacted.

Do you believe employers extending more benefits for working women would extend your working life as a female employee?



Issues Impacting Career Prospects

While their gender is viewed by most women as either having had zero or only a positive effect on their career, Arab women are more likely to feel that their gender impacts their career prospects negatively on a relative basis. However, overall, even Arab women are still more likely to perceive their gender as a neutral issue in their career progression or even a strength.

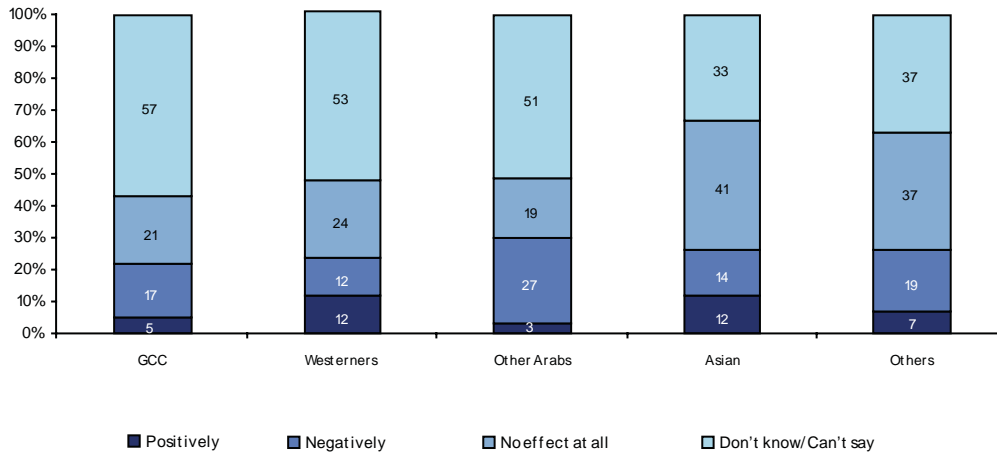


When it comes to having children however most women were unsure or thought that having children has and will have a negative impact on their career prospects. This again was especially true for Arab women; others were less certain or did not want to contemplate this issue as having a negative impact on their career.

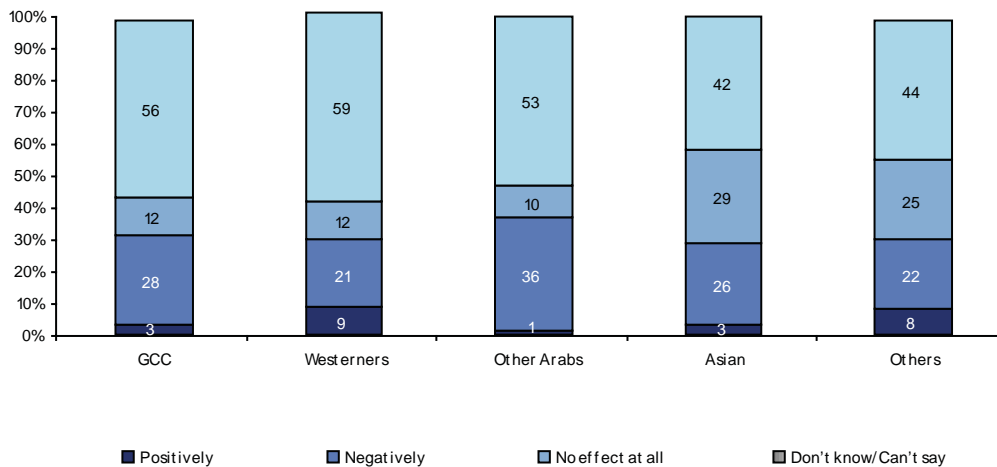
In light of the fact that a gap does exist, not surprisingly, between needs/ expectations and what is actually available in terms of accomodating policies, attitudes and infrastructure, this places additional stress on women who want to pursue careers and have children, in terms of the need to compromise one or the other.

While this may remain less of an issue in a male skewed work environment, the continued growth of women in the workforce will inevitably mean that employers will need to develop strategies that address these issues if they want to attract and retain high caliber female employees.

In what ways has your choice to have children affected your career prospects?



In what way will your choice to have more children affect your career prospects?



The same was true of the impact of career on marital bliss. While most women either couldn't tell or thought it neutral, more were inclined to view their careers as having had a negative rather than a positive impact on their marriages. Again, this is truer among Arab women; this is at least in part due to them having broader responsibilities in the home with less sharing of household responsibilities with their partners. In a separate study conducted by YouGovSiraj, less than 10% of Arab households had any significant contribution from the male to household responsibilities.

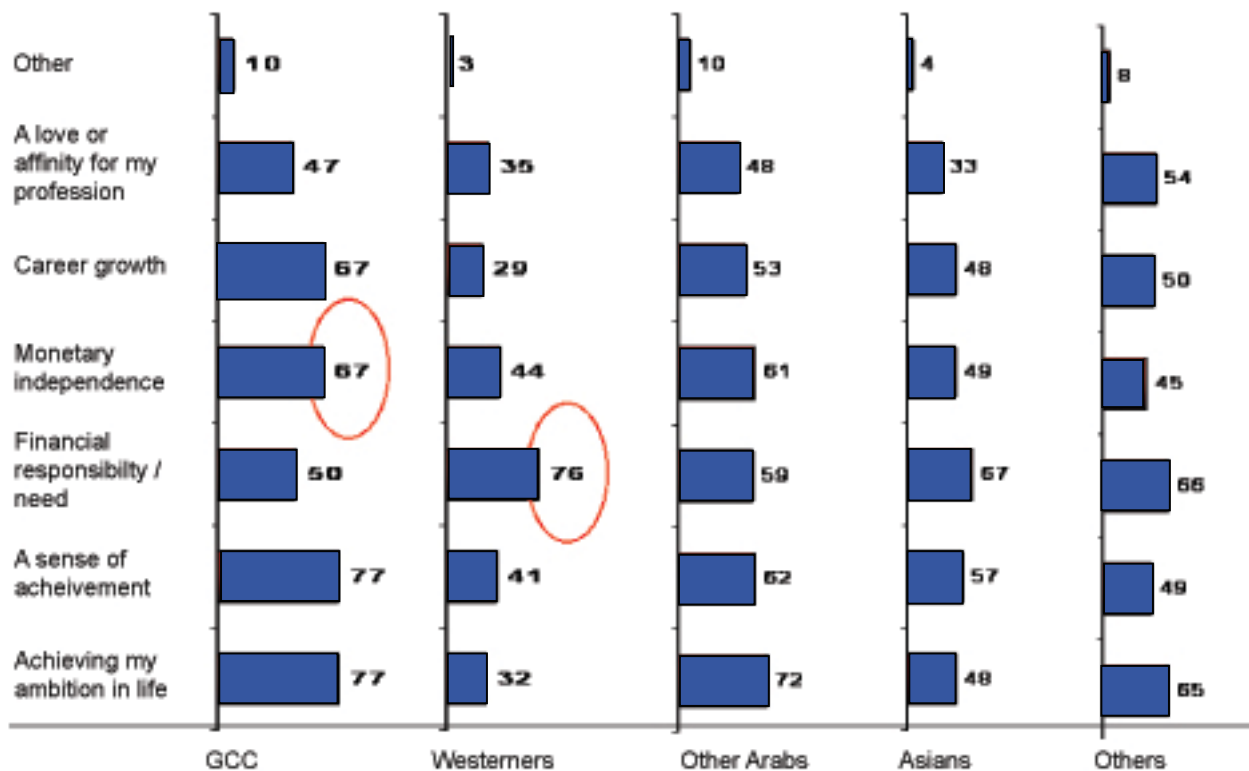
While these may not be visible factors to most employers, it's likely that they do impact productivity in an incalculable way. Taking them into consideration will likely yield a happier and more productive workforce that is likely to be less open to considering forced choices of new employment or giving up on careers altogether.

Motivation For Joining And Persevering In The Workplace

Apart from Western expats and Asians, most of those surveyed placed achievement ahead of financial responsibility as an incentive to work, and within the monetary rewards framework, a quest for financial freedom was more valued than a sense of financial responsibility. This poses both an opportunity and a threat for employers.

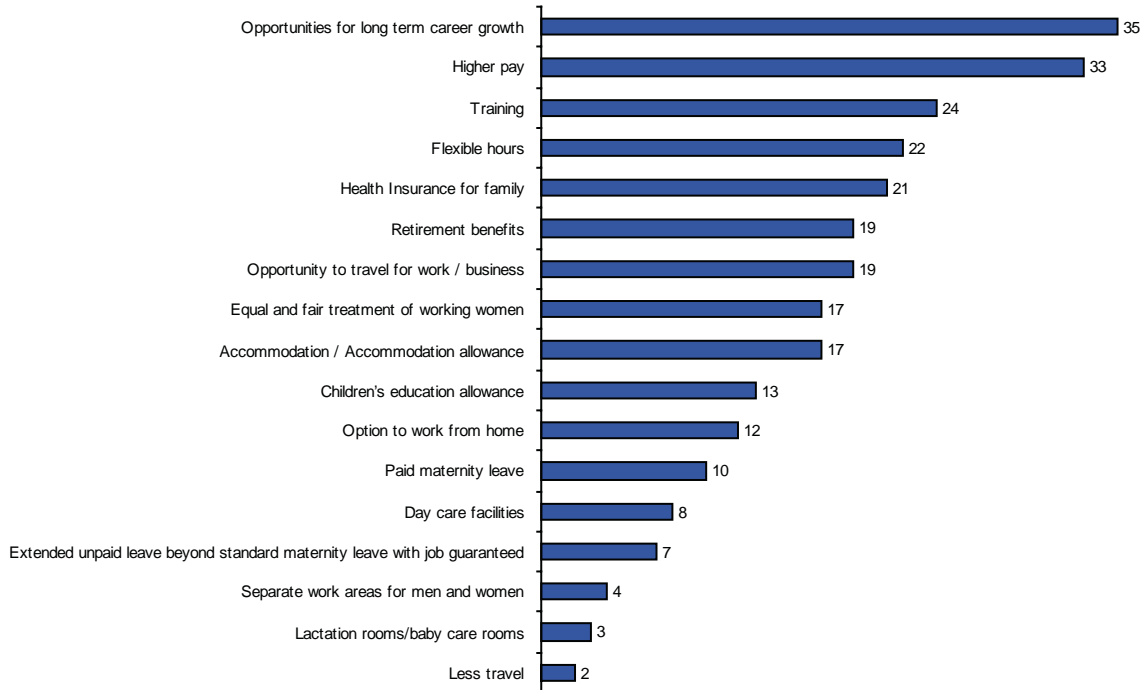
When financial responsibility is not as important in one's mind, the potential to explore more fulfilling alternatives becomes easier, as does considering leaving the career path completely to pursue more challenging and rewarding opportunities where one's talents can be better put to use, skills can be honed and career progression can be optimized. Conversely, this also means that many of the benefits that women seek can be delivered in a fairly cost effective manner.

Which of the following are the main reasons for you to work?



Career growth opportunities, higher pay and training were quoted as the most important benefits that women sought from their employers. All three are generally accepted as hygiene factors in terms of job satisfaction, for more insight it is important to look beyond these to understand what else would motivate employees to either move or stay loyal to a company. The next most important factor almost across the board was flexible working hours. Flexible hours was also what was seen as the most important obstacle to career development – while personal responsibility for career development was seen as key, lack of flexible hour arrangements was seen as the main external barrier to career advancement.

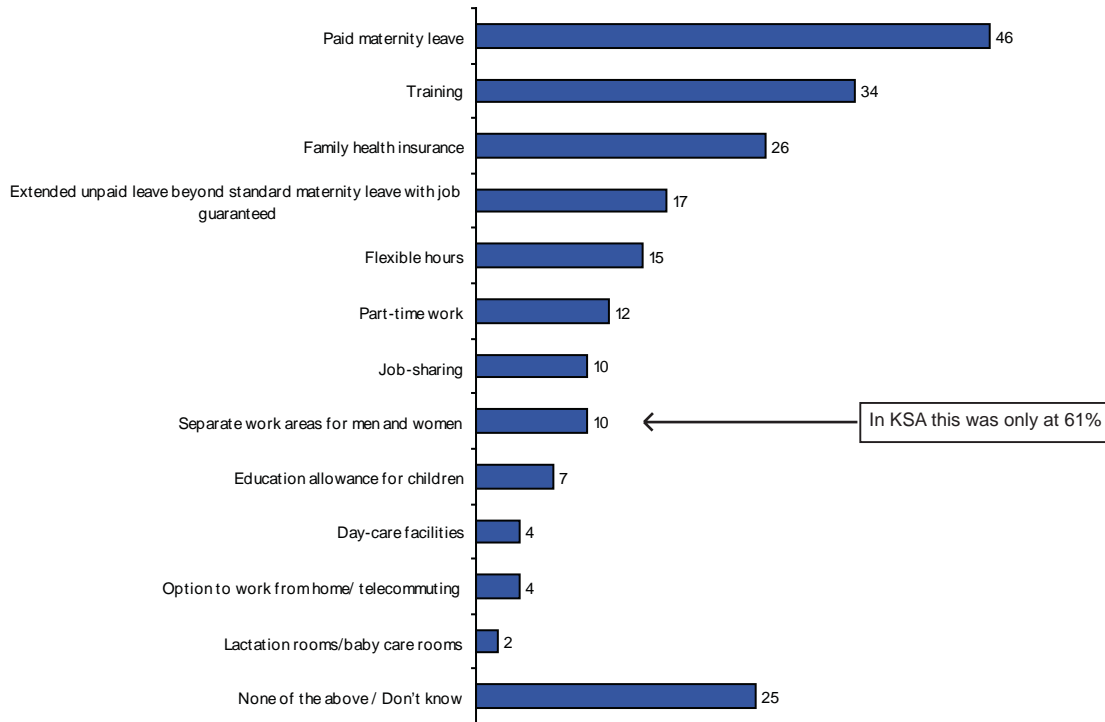
Which of the following which would be the most important benefits for you as a working woman?



While some regional differences do exist, the gist of the findings is very similar. In KSA, while a bigger proportion of women sought separate work space for women, this group was a minority.

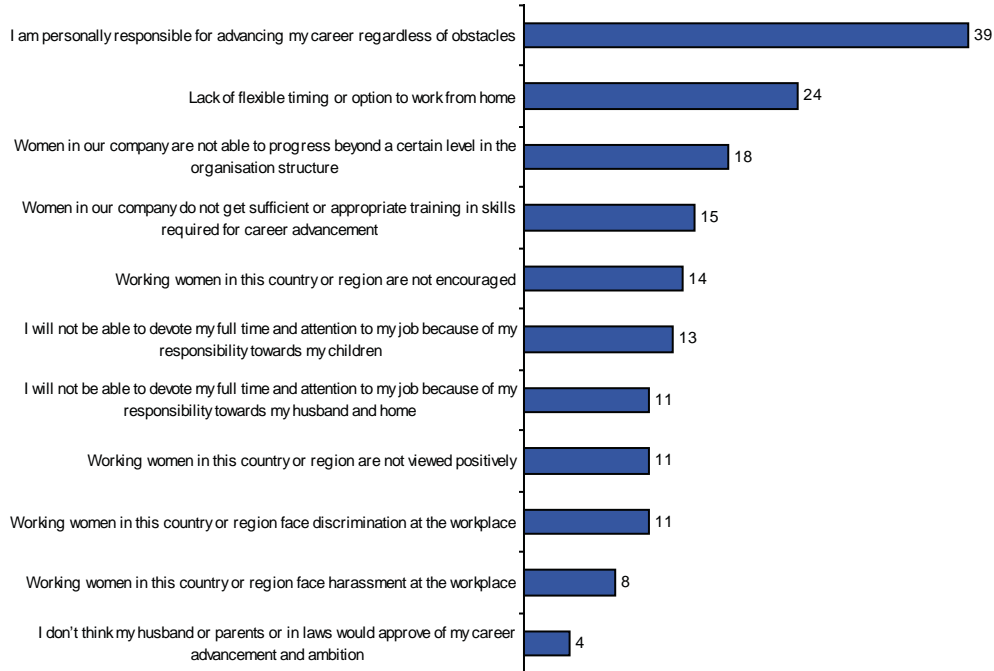
In this context, a gap still exists between what is required, and what is on offer. This is especially true given that many companies are still not even offering the hygiene factors, let alone the more developed benefits that will likely make the workplace somewhat more accommodating for career women in the long run.

Does your company offer any of the below for working women?



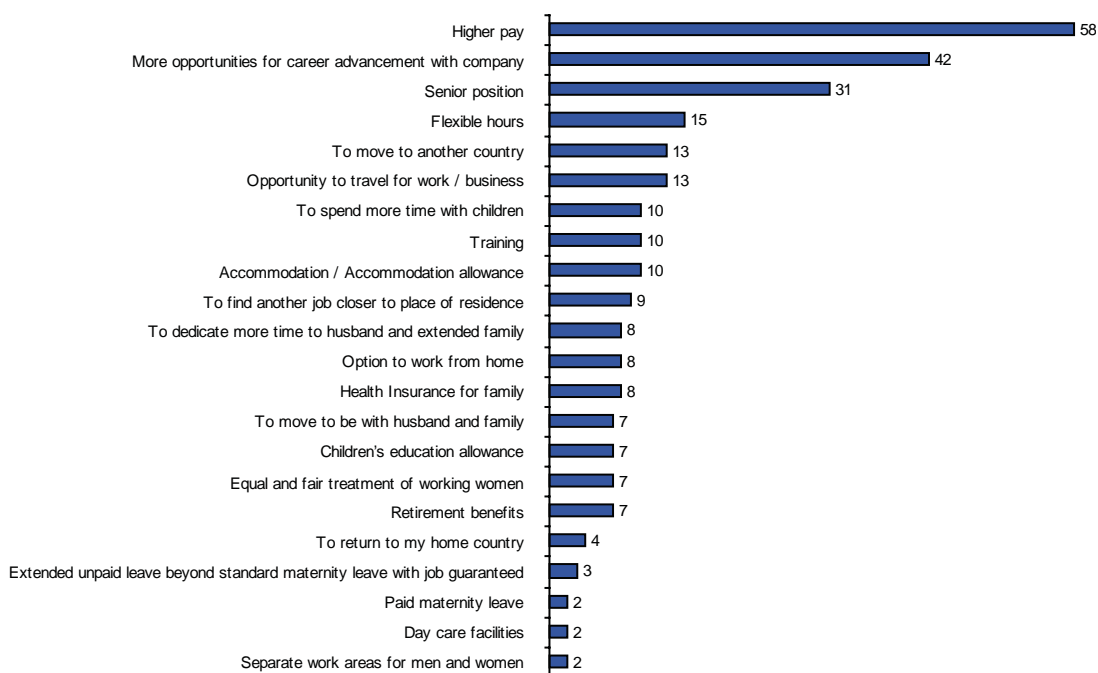
In keeping with the theme of personal responsibility towards career development that the survey results highlighted, across the board the main driver and simultaneously barrier to career growth and development was seen as oneself. Far from resting blame for career impediments on external influences and barriers, personal ability and commitment were predominantly seen to be the key influencers of career growth. Interestingly the next most important barrier was seen to be the lack of flexible working hours or option to work from home. In light of the global phenomenon of rising expectations of women and their requirement to juggle a significantly busier schedule than their male counterparts in the simultaneous presence of household and family responsibilities, as well as trying to achieve life fulfillment and work/life balance it is not surprising that the time factor is seen as a key criteria.

Which of the following obstacles do you think you face in advancing your career?



It is probably important to point out that even a step change is likely to be received positively by women in the workplace, and if priority is to be given, flex-time as a newly implemented measure would be key. It is also important to point out that while pay and career advancement are hygiene factors, this only means they are not differentiating, but their importance is not to be overlooked.

Please indicate the most important reasons that might influence you to leave your job and accept another job?



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