



# Emerging stronger

**UAE Female Leaders Outlook 2020**  
**Covid-19 special edition**

February 2021



# Foreword

The Covid-19 virus has affected supply chains and operations, globally disrupting key sectors such as healthcare, education, oil and gas, travel, tourism & hospitality, and financial services. The multitude of changes stemming from the ongoing pandemic include fast-tracked digitalization, a shift toward low-contact/no-contact systems and an increased focus on environmental, sustainability and governance issues.

While governments and organizations have been swift in adopting measures to cope with the macroeconomic implications of the disease, the pandemic has brought about profound changes in the professional and personal spheres, often disproportionately affecting women. For example, school and nursery closures have increased pressure on caregivers—typically female family members. Women also often bear the burden of caring for their household and educating children, leading some to refer to the current scenario as a “crisis of women” or a “Shecession”.<sup>1</sup>

Contrary to the opinion of many analysts, this year’s survey has found female leaders are less pessimistic about Covid-19’s impact on business and women. In fact, some female leaders around the globe believe the crisis may create new opportunities as a result of improved digital communication, other advances in technology and changes in stakeholder expectations.

This is the third edition of the UAE Female Leaders Outlook. Within these pages, we examine economic and business outlooks, risks and opportunities, as well as career and gender diversity factors. We note differences with global findings and compare results from last year’s edition of our UAE report.

Our goal is to provide a better understanding of female leaders, their mid-term outlook, views on technology and innovation and what it means to be a woman in the workplace.

We hope this report proves to be an interesting read. We would be delighted to discuss the findings in more detail with you.



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# Key findings

The KPMG UAE Female Leaders Outlook: Covid-19 special edition offers insight into how local female leaders are reacting to rapidly evolving events. In the last quarter of 2020, KPMG surveyed 675 female leaders around the world, including 18 in the UAE. While many topics remained the same year on year, we also included questions specific to the pandemic.



## Female leaders in the UAE embrace Covid-19-related changes

- Two-thirds (66%) have seen the **digital transformation** of their business accelerate during the pandemic
- Three-quarters (73%) expect their organization to **recover** from the crisis within two years
- Almost two out of three (61%) cite securing long-term **customer relationships** as the most important measure taken to deal with the effects of Covid-19



## Making a positive impact is a top motivator

- More than half (56%) believe **gender inequality** was the number one issue they should act on in order to address stakeholder concerns
- Nearly three-quarters (72%) believe their personal **communication** with employees has improved during the crisis
- Nine out of ten (89%) want to lock in **sustainability and climate change gains** made as a result of the crisis



## The inclusion and diversity agenda

- Nearly two-thirds (61%) believe the measures their company has recently taken to fight discrimination and racism are powerful and that **progress will not slow** after the pandemic
- More than four out of ten (44%) believe the Covid-19 crisis will **not impact their career**
- Approximately three-quarters (72%) say they live in a truly **equal family structure**





# Embracing change with a realistic outlook



## Growth in times of Covid-19

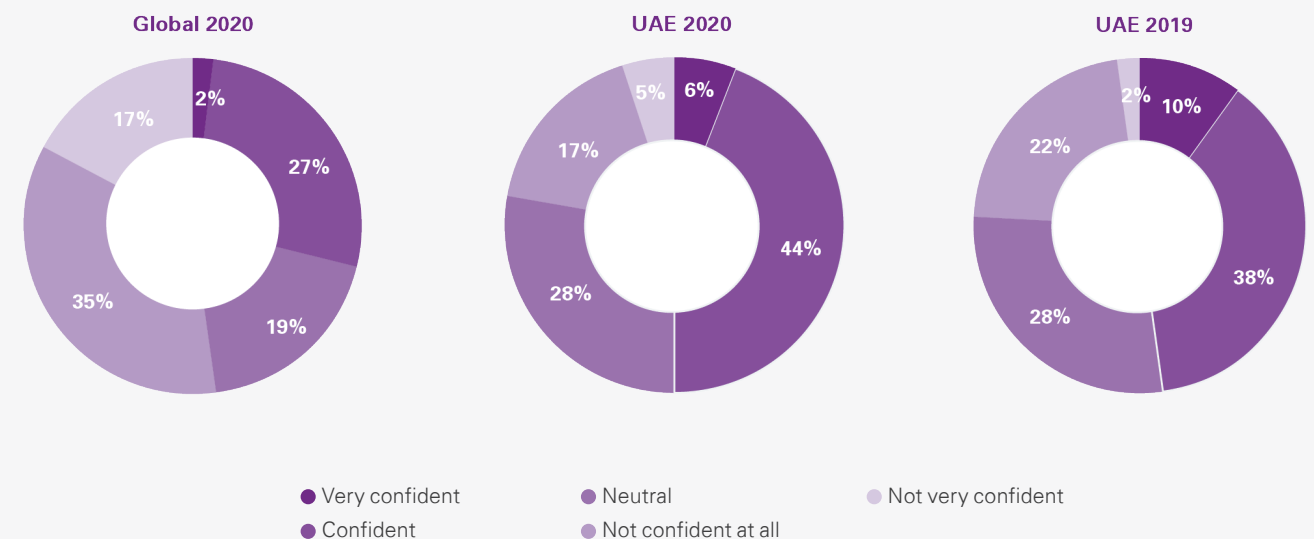
The economic impact of Covid-19 resulted in a sharp economic downturn for many countries around the globe. For the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and other major hydrocarbon-exporting nations, this was compounded by a significant drop in demand for oil and gas which resulted in lower prices.<sup>2</sup>

Locally, negative economic consequences were addressed with a bevy of financial and regulatory support and relief measures. Recently, the Central Bank of the UAE announced plans to extend its AED 256 billion (20% of GDP) package of measures by six months, starting 1 January 2021.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps as a result of such initiatives taken at the federal and emirate levels, one out of two female leaders in the UAE are optimistic about the country's economic outlook over the next three years (50%) compared with only 29% of their global counterparts. Further underscoring this sentiment, confidence in the local economy is in line with findings from last year's UAE Female Leaders Outlook report (48%).

Respondents were less bullish about the global economy, however: only one in five (22%) of local female leaders expressed confidence in it, compared with 29% globally.

## Level of confidence in your country's growth prospects over the next three years.



Single response

Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2019 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

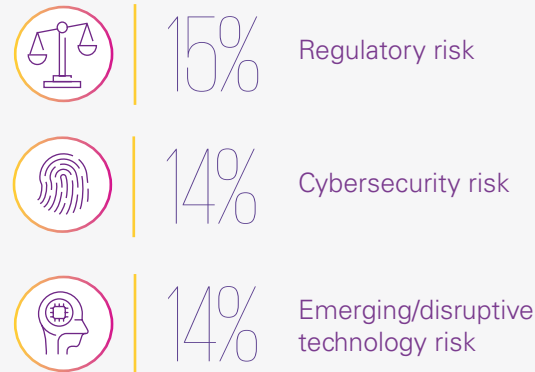


While Covid-19 has presented ample challenges, other factors are also at play, shaping the business landscape across the supply chain. The pandemic may be described as a global stress event—one which is testing organizations’ financial, operational and commercial resilience.

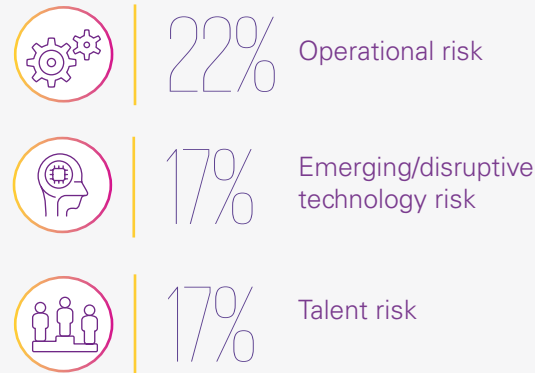
For female leaders around the globe, regulatory risk tops the list of potential threats. This is clearly linked to the multitude of regulatory changes brought about by Covid-19, resulting in trade restrictions, operational interruptions, and data privacy issues, among others. In a similar vein, we see operational risk top of mind for UAE-based female leaders this year, followed by emerging/disruptive technologies and talent risk. These will likely remain key concerns for the near term, as organizations adapt their operations to the new normal of a rapidly digitalizing market.

Aside from global health security/pandemic risk, what risk poses the greatest threat to your organization’s growth over the next three years?

Global 2020



UAE 2020



Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

When asked about revenue, two out of three (67%) indicated that their company has the potential for growth in the next three years, while a third (33%) expect their organization’s earnings to increase by at least 5%. Notably, one in ten (11%) expect to experience growth of 20% or more over the same period.

Female leaders in the UAE are more optimistic about headcount than female leaders around the globe, with four out of ten (45%, 36% globally) anticipating an increase in the next three years. This is in line with their confidence in the nation’s economy and expectations for growth in the medium term.

According to **Shabana Begum, Partner, KPMG Lower Gulf**, “The pandemic has transformed the way we think about the future of work. Externally, we are creating future-oriented solutions for our clients that are flexible and technically robust enough to withstand extreme and unexpected change. Internally our high-performance culture promotes a diverse and flexible workforce. To that end, we continue to monitor the development of remote working options in order to ensure we attract and retain the best talent.”

Organizations are pivoting to meet their own changing business needs, as well as those of their stakeholders.

We are creating future-oriented solutions for our clients that are flexible and technically robust enough to withstand extreme and unexpected change.



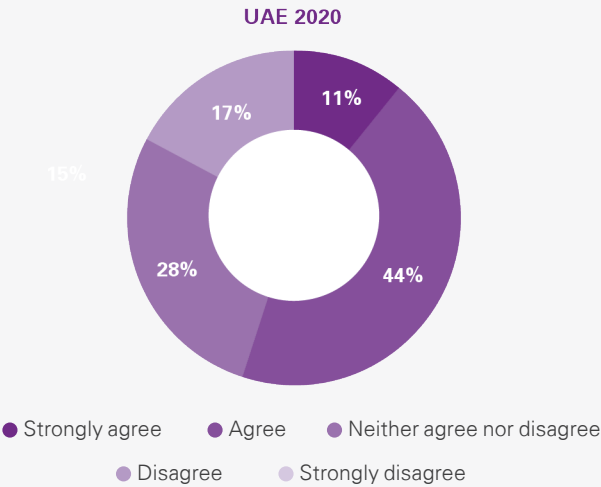
Shabana Begum, Partner, KPMG Lower Gulf

Digital for the win

In a post-Covid world, business leaders will likely be expected to give greater importance to the customer voice in order to grow. In 2020, we witnessed the rapid evolution of e-commerce and the expansion of digital communication, as consumers sought to avoid face-to-face interaction across most sectors. Providing an omni-channel experience has become more important than ever before. As a result, we have seen brand development and even entire business strategies influenced.<sup>4</sup>

Given the UAE’s long-term focus on innovation, it is no surprise that more than half (55%) of local female leaders found their pre-Covid-19 business models enabled them to shift to and/or focus on digital.<sup>5</sup>

Our business model has enabled us to change easily/ focus on digital business.



Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook



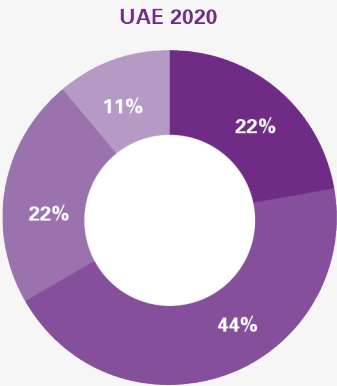
Further highlighting the importance of digitalization, nearly all (95%) female leaders in the UAE (87% globally) are confident that digital economy and e-commerce companies will be the winners coming out of the current crisis. Our findings indicate that two-thirds (66%) of organizations in the UAE are fast tracking digital transformation projects. According to **Dipika Ailani, Director, New Age Insurance Brokers L.L.C.**, “Covid-19 taught us to be adaptable and innovate in a short time span. It put us on a journey of digital transformation, which will enable us to serve our clients better, reduce costs and maintain employee engagement, while becoming a more flexible workplace.”

Covid-19 taught us to be adaptable and innovate in a short time span.



Dipika Ailani, Director, New Age Insurance Brokers L.L.C

The Covid-19 crisis has accelerated many of our digital transformation projects.



● Strongly agree   ● Agree   ● Neither agree nor disagree  
● Disagree   ● Strongly disagree

Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

As businesses push to keep stride, the majority (94%) of female leaders in the UAE indicated that they want employees to feel empowered to innovate without worrying about negative consequences if the initiative fails. Given the pace of change in 2020, support for fast failing work culture may make or break an organization’s ability to keep up with the competition.

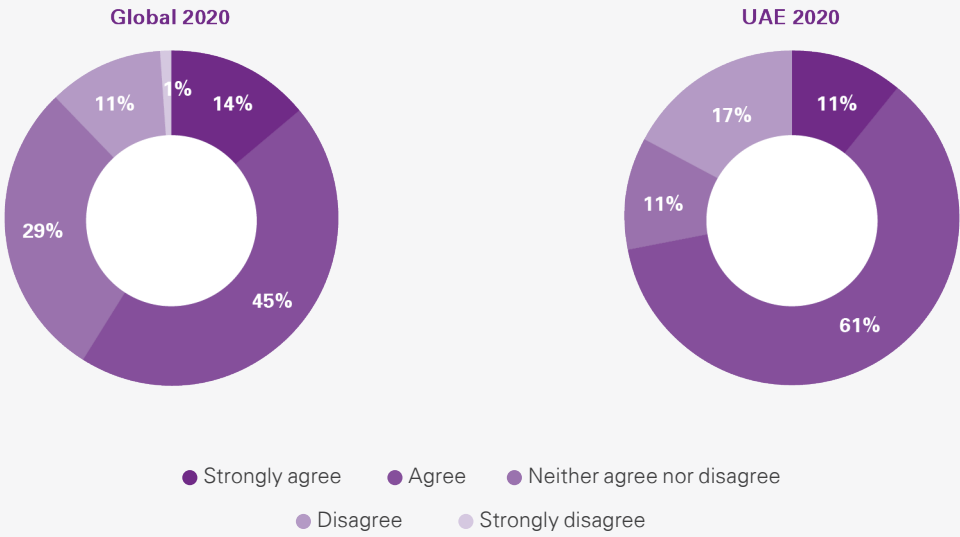
With the rapid and widespread implementation of technological solutions, e-commerce platforms and digitalization in 2020, it is important to note that three-quarters (77%) of female leaders in the UAE (84% globally) believe that protecting customer data is one of their most important responsibilities when it comes to retaining and growing their customer base. This is significant given the surge in cyber attacks witnessed in 2020. According to a recent KPMG report, UAE-based organizations experienced a significant increase in phishing (50%) and email spamming (46%) in 2020. Fort-six percent reported that the pandemic significantly increased their exposure to cybercrime.<sup>6</sup>

An evolving working world

For residents of the UAE, as with most of the world, work-from-home (WFH) arrangements were the exception prior to the pandemic. In March 2020, the landscape changed rapidly when government-mandated restrictions were put in place. Employers and employees adapted to remote working quickly and successfully—thanks in part to the country’s long-term focus on innovation. After months of what may be described as an enforced, large-scale WFH experiment, flexible working arrangements could be here to stay. In fact, six out of ten (61%) female leaders in the UAE (59% globally) plan to downsize their office space.

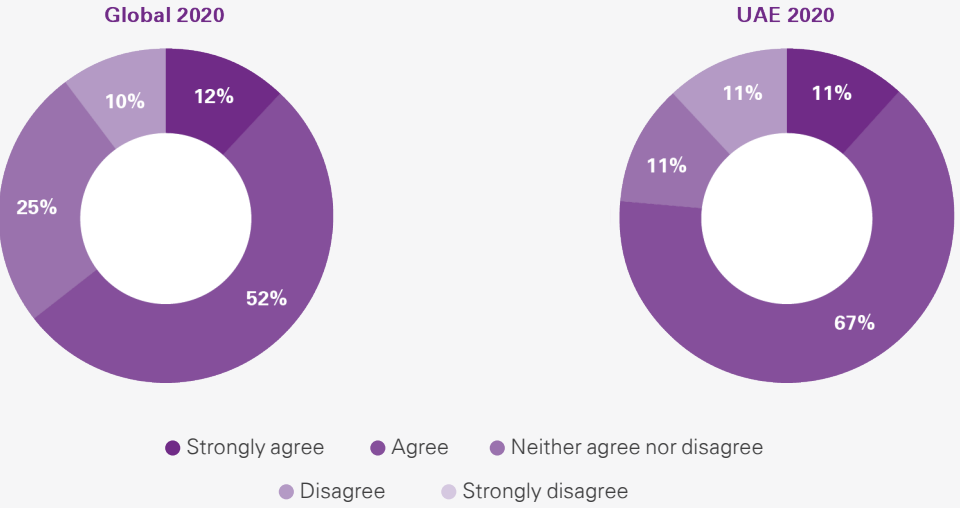
While the way we work may be shifting, a recent study found approximately two-thirds of UAE-based workers would prefer returning to the office, citing concerns about their physical and mental health.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps paradoxically, seven out of ten (72%) local female leaders (59% globally) indicate communication with their employees has improved during the crisis. It is not surprising that nearly the same proportion (78%, 64% globally) have made significant changes to policies in order to nurture organizational culture, perhaps in part to address employees’ WFH health-related challenges.

Communication with my employees has improved during the crisis.



Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

Remote working has caused us to make significant changes to our policies to nurture our culture.



Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook



The growing importance of employees as valued stakeholders is a trend that will likely continue for years to come. In fact, some developments can already be seen in this area with respect to the digital working environment. Remote working has, to a degree, pushed leaders into a position of applying a more trust-oriented, rather than control-based, leadership style.<sup>8</sup>

While the right talent will play an increasingly important role in realizing companies’ digitalization strategy, whether or not attracting and retaining the most suitable people poses a challenge is debatable. Four out of ten female leaders in the UAE (44%, 49% globally) indicate their talent pool has, in fact, expanded thanks to organizations’ increased acceptance of remote working.

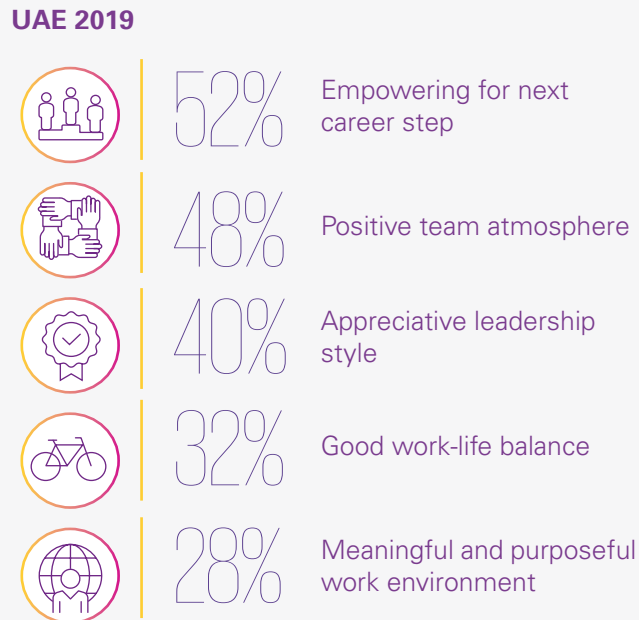
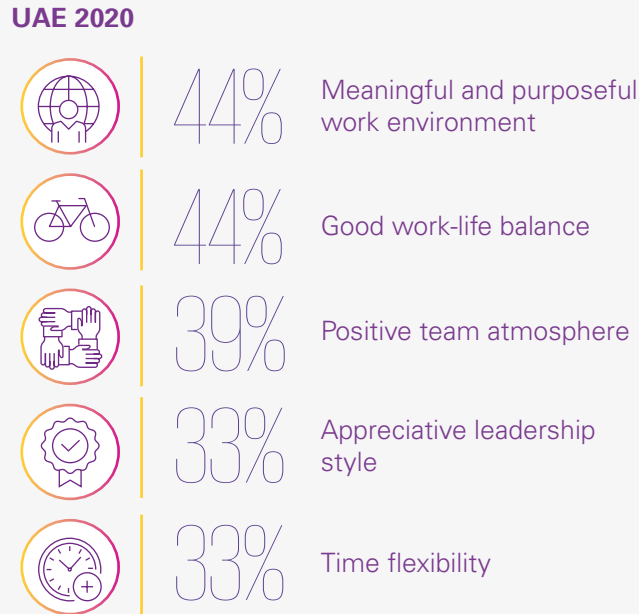
According to **Maryam Zaman, Partner, Head of Corporate Governance Services, KPMG Lower Gulf**, “Covid-19 has reduced the dependency on travel and physical presence at our client sites. As a result, we are no longer constrained by the geography in which we operate from. With acceleration of digital technologies enabling us to service our clients from anywhere across the globe, we now have easier access to subject matter experts from our global network of KPMG member firms. Further, it is now easier for us to provide our services to clients spread across geographies, who trust in the quality of work delivered by KPMG despite remote working.”

With acceleration of digital technologies, we now have easier access to subject matter experts from our global network of KPMG member firms.



In addition to remuneration, new incentive systems can be introduced to draw and keep the best people, as employee priorities shift. UAE-based female leaders indicated that a meaningful and purposeful work environment, good work-life balance and a positive team atmosphere are most likely to prove effective.

What would you rate most effective to raise employee satisfaction?



Multiple choice  
Source: KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2019 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

When examining results year-on-year, we find one particularly notable shift in terms of what may raise employee satisfaction. In 2019, ‘meaningful and purposeful work environment’ ranked as the fifth most effective approach to raise employee satisfaction (28%). In 2020, four out of ten (44%) cited this as one of the three most effective approaches, tied with work-life balance (44%). This provides a view of the new working world and will help leaders better understand employees’ shifting values, as they reconcile family and professional life.

According to **Marketa Simkova, Partner, Head of People & Change at KPMG Lower Gulf**, “Throughout the last nine months, a large number of people have experienced a sense of isolation as they worked from home and avoided social gatherings,” she says. “At the same time, the lines between professional and personal spheres have been blurred. For many employees, a meaningful and purposeful work environment—along with good work-life balance—has become increasingly important. The pandemic has provided an opportunity for companies to show employees how they fit into the bigger picture and contribute to their organization’s overall strategy. This can only be achieved with support for the physical and mental wellbeing of human capital.”

The pandemic has provided an opportunity for companies to show employees how they fit into the bigger picture.



Marketa Simkova, Partner, Head of People & Change, KPMG Lower Gulf

Overall, this year’s results reflect a trend we have seen developing over the past few years: traditional, entrenched incentives, such as ‘taking on a leadership role’, ‘additional team bonus equally split’ or ‘out-of-the-box experience’ are losing their significance. Retaining the existing workforce, as well as recruiting the next generation of employees may well force organizations to adapt to fundamental changes in values and priorities





# Making a positive impact



## The rise of sustainability

Around the world, environmental, social and governance (ESG) issues are becoming increasingly relevant for all stakeholders—internal and external. In response, many companies are realigning their business strategies toward a more sustainable and climate-friendly approach.

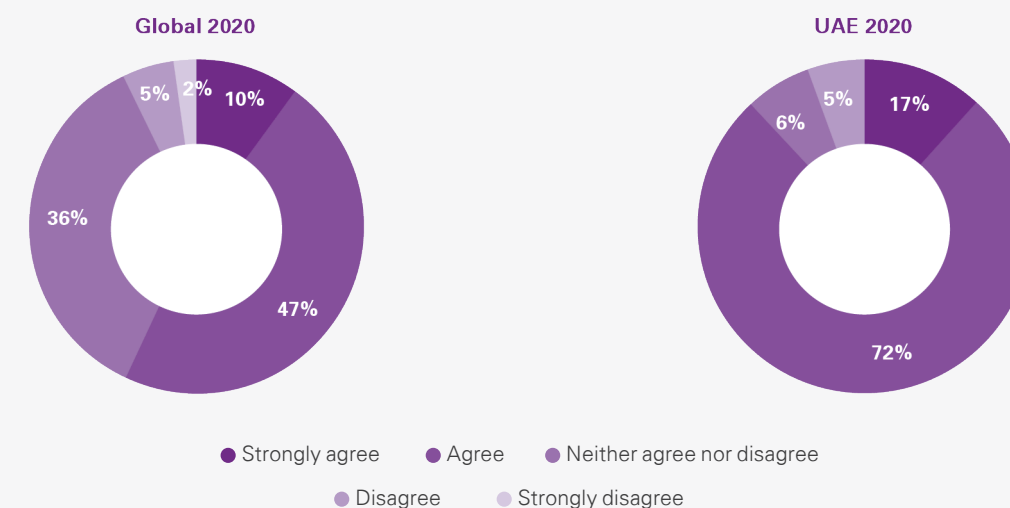
In the UAE, sustainability has been and remains a priority. From the nation's Vision 2021<sup>9</sup> to Expo 2020,<sup>10</sup> the country strives to consolidate its position as a global sustainability leader. This has been reinforced by national development agendas and charters, such as UAE Energy Strategy 2050,<sup>11</sup> UAE Green Agenda 2015-2030<sup>12</sup> and the National Innovation Strategy.<sup>13</sup>

Recently we have also seen a push for companies to divulge their ESG performance. Notable examples include

ESG disclosure guidelines released by the Abu Dhabi Stock Exchange<sup>14</sup> and the Dubai Financial Market.<sup>15</sup> According to a recent KPMG report, among the top 100 companies in the UAE (determined by revenue), 51% are formally reporting sustainability performance.<sup>16</sup>

According to this year's findings, three out of ten (28%) female leaders in the UAE believe activities aimed at combating climate change will be of even greater importance in the post-Covid-19 era. And two-thirds (67%) state that these factors will remain as important for strategic decision making. Implying a long-term commitment, nine out of ten (89%, 57% globally) want to lock in the sustainability and climate change gains made as a result of the crisis. This indicates that the UAE's national agenda is being successfully inculcated into local business practices.

## We want to lock in the sustainability and climate change gains we have made as a result of the crisis.



Single response

Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook



In circumstances where leaders are required to make critical decisions quickly, a strong corporate governance framework is vital. Such a foundation helps maintain sustainable growth by safeguarding good business practices. For this reason, governance issues have become even more important during the pandemic, according to three-quarters of UAE-based female leaders (72%, 70% globally). Well-established governance processes enhance the concepts of justice, transparency, integrity and achievement of various stakeholders’ interests—all key to overall ESG goals.<sup>17</sup>

**Thuraya Afeef Al Maskari, Vice President of Group Corporate Governance at ADNOC,** underscores the importance of strong guidance from the top, “Good governance, when championed by company leadership, drives values, purpose and culture. In 2020, we saw this across the UAE in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The organizations which are proving to be the most resilient are those which consistently drove governance from the top, enabling cultures with even greater focus on innovation, diversity and employee wellbeing.”

The organizations which are proving to be the most resilient are those which consistently drove governance from the top, with focus on innovation, diversity and employee wellbeing.



Thuraya Afeef Al Maskari, Vice President of Group Corporate Governance, ADNOC

Resilience and purpose redefined

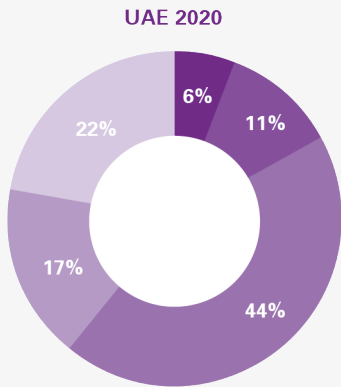
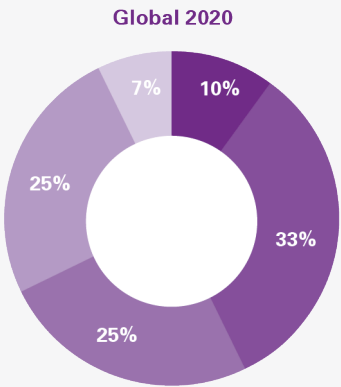
Our results indicate that despite—or perhaps because of—ongoing challenges, local female leaders are continuously developing and refining strategies for survival and growth. Given the speed at which we see events unfold day to day, it is no surprise that three-quarters (78%) believe a resilient business is one capable of quickly adapting to the changing business landscape.

From all crises emerge significant advances. UAE-based female leaders indicate that the most important change to come from Covid-19 is an uptick in digital communication and collaboration. All (100%) plan to continue developing related tools in future. It follows that nearly all (95%) agree their business’s innovation processes and execution must be improved over the next three years.

According to **Rola Abu Manneh, CEO, Standard Chartered Bank, UAE,** “We were early to adapt to the environment by leveraging the latest technology that helped us keep close to our clients and colleagues. At one time we were able to host over 5,000 attendees simultaneously in a single video call and these kinds of engagements kept our people and clients informed and engaged throughout this unprecedented period. No matter the environment, organizations need to make employee engagement a front-and-center issue, while leaders need to learn to trust their employees by providing the necessary skills and tools to reach their full potential. To that end, communication will always remain key.”

In terms of linking their organization’s growth strategy to a wider societal purpose, only 17% of UAE-based female leaders (43% globally) feel their organization struggles, indicating that UAE-based businesses are leading from the front.

We are struggling to link our growth strategy with a wider societal purpose for the organization.



● Strongly agree    ● Agree    ● Neither agree nor disagree  
● Disagree    ● Strongly disagree

Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

Organizations need to make employee engagement a front-and-center issue, while leaders need to learn to trust their employees by providing the necessary skills and tools to reach their full potential.



Rola Abu Manneh, CEO, Standard Chartered Bank, UAE

**Vidya Chhabria, Chairperson, Jumbo Group,** shared her organization’s approach to giving back during these unprecedented times. “We are a company with very strong CSR values. Cognizant of the pandemic’s impact in the UAE, we proudly supported the Rashid Center for People of Determination, helping their students seamlessly continue their education and physical rehabilitation. We also leveraged our expertise in 3D manufacturing, printing and supplying protective face shields to frontline healthcare professionals. This was our small contribution, made in an effort to support the UAE government and our local communities.”

We proudly supported the Rashid Center for People of Determination and also printed and supplied protective face shields to frontline healthcare professionals. This was our small contribution to support the UAE government and our local communities.

Vidya Chhabria, Chairperson, Jumbo Group



Shifting stakeholder orientation and customer expectations

The notion of shareholder primacy was, for many years, an underpinning element of corporate governance. Prior to the pandemic, this was challenged, as business leaders began to formally recognize the importance of five key groups: customers, employees, suppliers, communities and shareholders. As a result of Covid-19, new values and expectations are emerging as drivers for change, highlighting that no one stakeholder group may remain a fixed priority.<sup>18</sup> One of the clear findings from this survey is the need for companies to live up to all stakeholders’ expectations—not only shareholders’—according to nine out of ten (89%) of local female leaders.

According to **Peter Haugaard, Partner, Head People, Performance and Culture, KPMG Lower Gulf**, multiple initiatives have sought to address employee and community needs during the pandemic. “Fostering a sense of community has been crucial throughout the past nine months,” he says. “We have taken extensive steps to support not only our colleagues, but also members of the community. Internally, we have offered a variety of online courses focusing on exercise and wellbeing, as well as virtual team get-togethers to uphold morale. We also promoted the availability of mental health services, as we strongly believe that having open, transparent conversations around these difficult topics is essential in removing any stigma that might still persist. Externally, our colleagues enjoyed participating in several fundraising events, and even donated laptops to support distance-learning initiatives.”

Fostering a sense of community has been crucial throughout the past nine months. We have taken extensive steps to support not only our colleagues, but also members of the community.



Peter Haugaard, Partner, Head People, Performance and Culture, KPMG Lower Gulf

Our new working reality will be characterized, more than ever before, by ESG. The shift away from shareholder primacy is also reflected in the following:

- More than half (56%) of UAE-based female leaders believe there is an expectation to act on gender equality
- A third (33%) feel pressure to take action to address climate change
- A quarter (28%) believe they are expected to address migration and/or integration issues

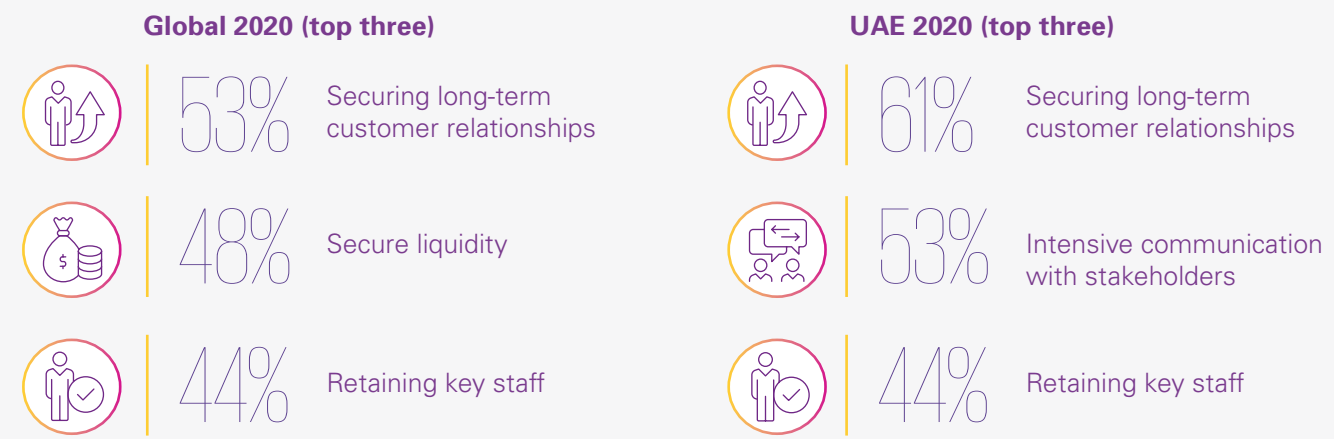
A stakeholder-oriented strategy has proven useful when coping with the negative effects of the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> According to female leaders in the UAE, the three most important measures they have taken are to protect long-term customer relations, communicate with stakeholders and retain key employees. **Muna Al Gurg, Director, Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group**, states, “At ESAG, our focus was on frequent empathetic communication to reduce fear and uncertainty. At the core of all of our messages were people—both employees and customers. It was paramount for us to give them peace of mind. We did this by reinforcing the importance of exercising caution, along with emphasizing the measures taken by the organization to limit the spread of the virus.”

At ESAG, our focus was on frequent, empathetic communication to reduce fear and uncertainty. At the core of all of our messages were people—both employees and customers.



Muna Al Gurg, Director, Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group

Which measures are/have been most important for you to deal with the effect of the Covid-19 crisis?



Multiple choice  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook





# A diversified agenda



## Inclusion and diversity

In December 2019, H. H. Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, Vice President and Prime Minister of the UAE and Ruler of Dubai, and H. H. Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the UAE Armed Forces, declared “Towards the next 50” the theme of 2020. The announcement includes a statement that “the year 2020 will involve all segments of the UAE society in shaping life in the UAE for the next 50 years.”<sup>20</sup> Recognizing the value of diversity, inclusion has been ingrained in the national planning agenda.

In terms of female representation in the UAE, terrific strides have been made in promoting gender parity—particularly in the public sector. Women occupy nearly two-thirds of government jobs and almost a third of the federal cabinet.<sup>21</sup> This agenda is supported by multiple government initiatives, including the UAE Gender Balance Council,<sup>22</sup> and has resulted in tremendous progress: the contribution of national women to the economy grew from 9.6% in 1987, to 33.4% in 2007 to more than 50% in 2019.<sup>23</sup>

According to **Nader Haffar, Chairman & CEO, KPMG Lower Gulf**, “The UAE recognizes the power of women and is ranked high amongst GCC and Arab countries in terms of closing the gender gap. Women empowerment is a key target under the UAE Vision 2021 program, in which the government aims to become one of the 25 leading countries in the world in terms of gender equality. Diversity and inclusion is a priority for our firm. Our workforce currently comprises 40% female employees. We will continue to ensure parity in terms of opportunity, salaries and of course respect, in order to achieve a more equal world.”

Turning to the private sector, how do the UAE’s female leaders feel their organizations perform in terms of equality and inclusion?

Regarding discrimination and racism, six out of ten (61%, 41% globally) believe that recent measures taken by their company have had a positive impact. Despite 2020’s black swan event, nearly eight out of ten (78%, 73% globally) expect recent progress will not be affected by Covid-19. Only one in five (22%) believe there will be a setback after the crisis.

Despite clear progress, strong support from the government and acknowledgment of recent achievements, nearly all female leaders in the UAE (95%) indicate there is still a good deal of work to do to build gender diversity on boards and at management level. To that end, almost two-thirds (61%, 43% globally) indicated that targets or quotas may be an effective approach.

Diversity and inclusion is a priority for our firm. Our workforce currently comprises 40% female employees. We will continue to ensure parity in terms of opportunity, salaries and of course respect, in order to achieve a more equal world.



Nader Haffar, Chairman & CEO,  
KPMG Lower Gulf



Another indicator of women’s standing in the workforce compared with that of men is the gender pay gap. Compared with last year, UAE figures show a significant and positive change. In 2020, six out of ten UAE-based female leaders (61%, 46% globally) confirmed their company is transparent regarding equal pay, compared with only 26% in 2019. Nonetheless, one out of four (28%) are in companies that still do not practice transparency. One out of ten (11%) local female leaders did not ask for a salary comparison, compared with 26% in 2019.

Do you have transparency in your company regarding equal pay?



Single response  
Source: KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2019 UAE Female Leaders Outlook

This sudden jump in perceived transparency around remuneration may well be connected to recent legislative updates. The Decree of Federal Law No. 06 for 2020, issued by H.H. Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, specified equal wages for women and men in the private sector, stating, "Female employees shall receive wages equal to that of males if they perform the same work, or another of equal value." Implementation of equal wages for women and men in the private sector came into force on 25 September 2020.<sup>24</sup> This builds on Federal Law No. 06, issued on 25 August 2020.

Not only are we seeing year-on-year progress in the UAE, but findings also imply that local organizations are ahead of their global counterparts in terms of transparency regarding equal pay.

Succession arrangements also play a vital role in improving gender diversity. Less than half (44%, 53% globally) believe their successor will also be female. Unfortunately, this may indicate a decline in the number of women in leadership roles.

Strengths and motivation in the workplace

Today’s leaders face a multitude of obstacles, stemming in large part from the current pandemic: a large-scale shift to WFH, changes in stakeholder primacy and the increased importance of ESG, among many others. When asked which personal strengths are necessary to overcome the Covid-19 crisis, ‘being a strategic thinker’ tops the list for two out of three local female leaders (61%, 43% globally), followed by good business acumen. Flexibility, resilience and empathy are also seen as key strengths essential to achieving success in the new reality.

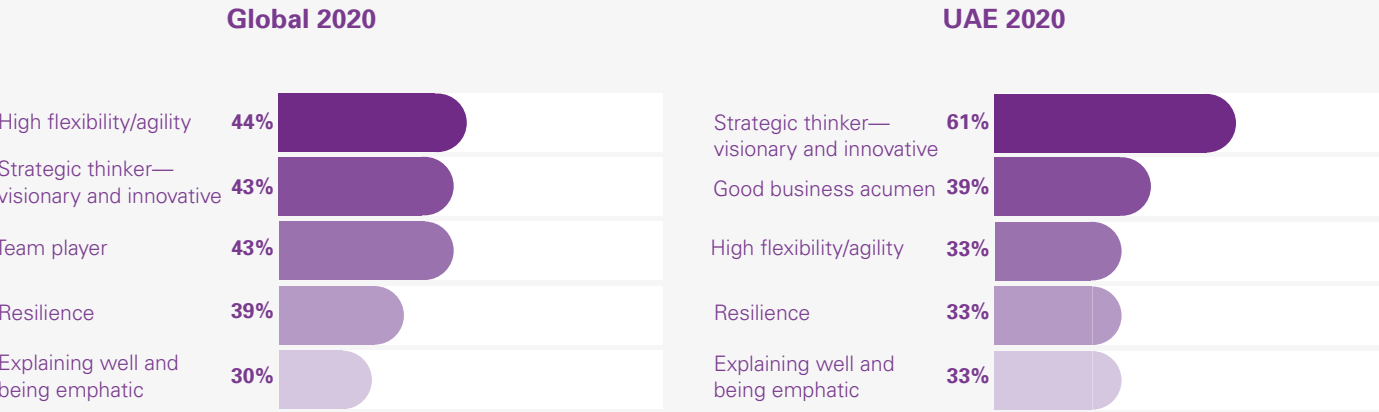
Regarding future personal success, female leaders in the UAE are clear on which characteristics they use to get ahead. A quarter rely on support from a mentor or current boss (44%) and active personal networks (39%), while a third depend on strong communication skills (33%). **Mandip Dulay, Founder and Board Member, COO Network,** says “Women are tremendously underrepresented as chief operating officers, particularly as this role often emerges from a financial background, which traditionally has been occupied by male peers. In order to drive change, we must ensure inclusion and diversity exists from academics through to the boardroom, with each of us playing a crucial role in acting as mentors and champions.”

In order to drive change, we must ensure inclusion and diversity exists from academics through to the boardroom, with each of us acting as mentors and champions.



Mandip Dulay, Founder and Board Member, COO Network

What are your personal strengths, as a leader, that will help you overcome the Covid-19 crisis?



Multiple choice  
Source: KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook

In addition to personal strengths, motivation is an equally important success factor. In line with the national focus on ESG, three-quarters (73%) of female leaders in the UAE ranked ‘making a positive impact on the world’ as one of the top three factors motivating them, compared with 57% globally. This was followed closely by ‘enabling long-term business success.’

“My passion lies at the intersection of entrepreneurship, education and employment—the “three Es. This is where I always felt I could make the most impact—especially for the next generation,” states **Najla Ahmed Al Midfa, CEO, Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center.** “I believe it is our responsibility, as leaders, to serve as role models and to create opportunities that enable the youth to elevate their ambitions and fulfill their potential. That’s why my North Star has always been cultivating an environment where future generations can truly thrive.”

It is our responsibility, as leaders, to serve as role models and to create opportunities that enable the youth to elevate their ambitions and fulfill their potential.

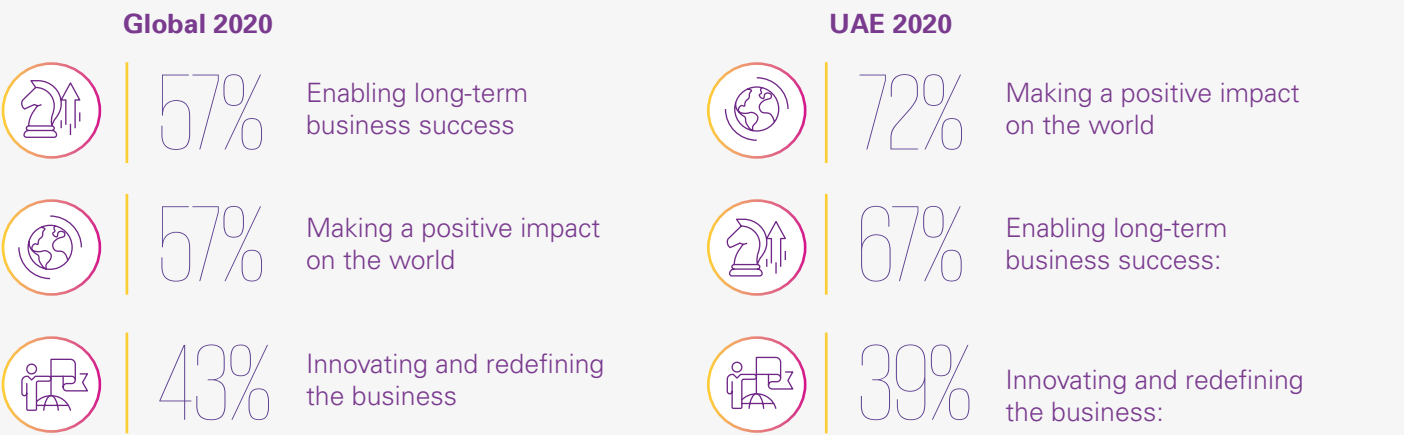


Najla Ahmed Al Midfa, CEO, Sharjah Entrepreneurship Center





What personally motivates you the most?



Multiple choice  
Source: KPMG 2020 UAE Female Leaders Outlook, KPMG 2020 Global Female Leaders Outlook

Career perspectives

Is the Covid-19 crisis particularly burdensome for women? The pandemic has affected private and professional realms alike. As a result, many are taking on the double burden of managing both their employer’s and family’s needs. For numerous women with children, this has been compounded by the closure of schools and nurseries during lockdowns,<sup>25</sup> implemented on 22 March 2020, by the Ministry of Education. <sup>26</sup> Approaches to reopening have varied, as parents and educational professionals navigate face-to-face, virtual and hybrid options.<sup>27</sup>

Despite these developments, four out of ten female leaders in the UAE (44%) do not believe Covid-19 will have an impact on their career, while a third (33%) are still uncertain. This is in line with global findings.

Family structures

Family structures and role models are both thought to have a strong impact on female career development.

Eight out of ten (78%) local female leaders in the survey were mothers, and nine out of ten (93%) of those with children have taken maternity leave. Yet, virtually all respondents (98%) carried out maternity leave duties alone, as their partners did not take paternity leave. While local findings are aligned with global results this year, we may see a shift in the future. As of August 2020, paid paternity leave is mandatory in the private sector. <sup>28</sup>

Notably, seven out of ten local female leaders (72%, 51% globally) believe they live in a ‘truly equal family structure,’ with an additional fifth (22%) considering themselves to live in a ‘moderately equal structure.’

This is in sharp contrast with what today’s female leaders experienced themselves as children. For those hailing from the UAE, one in five (39%) described their families as having a ‘moderately equal structure.’ Only one in four (28%) believe their family structure was ‘truly equal.’





# Conclusions



## **Making a positive impact on the world is a personal and commercial imperative**

Incorporating ESG measures has never been more important for an organization's relationship with stakeholders—customers, employees, suppliers, communities and shareholders. As a result, companies increasingly connect commercial success to ESG factors, including broader stakeholder engagement and increased attention to governance. Successful organizations will likely be those capable of incorporating these priorities into company culture and clearly communicating progress to stakeholders.



## **Leaders capable of tapping into the digital economy and e-commerce will come out ahead in a post-pandemic world**

New technology and innovation will drive wealth and growth. Companies positioned to thrive are those capable of adapting to the new digital reality. Such changes must encompass both internal and external processes, services and offerings. While great strides have been made since the onset of Covid-19, digital transformation is expected to remain a priority in the medium term. Although digital transformation agendas have been accelerated, organizations capable of looking ahead and preparing for the next technological revolution will lead from the front.



## **Leaders are being pushed to change their management style and approach to incentivizing employees**

In line with organizations' focus on ESG policies, leaders find employees to be most motivated by a meaningful and purposeful work environment. Companies looking to retain their existing workforce, as well as recruiting the next generation of employees, will not only have to compete in a hybrid office/WFH environment, but also meet fundamentally changing values and priorities.





# Demographics and methodology

The survey was conducted during the last quarter of 2020. KPMG surveyed 675 female leaders from 52 countries, including 18 in the UAE. While many of the information areas remained the same year on year, we also gathered information related to the pandemic.

## Job title:

Business unit or functional head: 17%

C-level executive: 22%

CEO/chairwoman: 11%

Founder: 17%

Head of department: 22%

Vice president: 11%

## Tenure in a management position:

Less than 1 year: 6%

3-5 years: 11%

6-10 years: 28%

11-15 years: 17%

16-20 years: 39%

## Have children:

Yes: 78%

No: 22%

# About KPMG

For almost 50 years, KPMG Lower Gulf Limited has been providing audit, tax and advisory services to a broad range of domestic and international, public and private sector clients across all major aspects of business and the economy in the United Arab Emirates and in the Sultanate of Oman. We work alongside our clients by building trust, mitigating risks and identifying business opportunities.

KPMG Lower Gulf is part of KPMG International Cooperative's global network of professional member firms. The KPMG network includes approximately 227,000 professionals in over 146 countries. KPMG in the UAE and Oman is well connected with its global member network and combines its local knowledge with international expertise, providing the sector and specialist skills required by our clients.

KPMG is widely represented in the Middle East: along with offices in the UAE and Oman, the firm is well established in Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan and the Lebanon. Established in 1973, KPMG in the UAE and Oman employs 1,485 people across four offices, including about 100 partners and directors.

Our latest initiative, KPMG IMPACT, aims to help clients future-proof their businesses amid times of increasing focus towards issues such as climate change and social inequality. The goal is to help them achieve success across 17 major Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and become more

resilient and socially conscious. For FY21, the firm has earmarked a global budget of USD 1.43 million for the initiative.

As we continue to grow, we aim to evolve and progress, striving for the highest levels of public trust in our work. Our values are:



**Integrity:** We do what is right.



**Excellence:** We never stop learning and improving.



**Courage:** We think and act boldly.



**Together:** We respect each other and draw strength from our differences.



**For Better:** We do what matters.

To meet the changing needs of our clients, we have adopted an approach aligned with our global purpose: Inspiring Confidence, Empowering Change. Our three pillars – exceptional quality of service, an unwavering commitment to the public interest, and building empowered teams – are the foundation of our firm.

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