

A call for clarity

Middle East
Women Leaders
Outlook 2025



Leaders worldwide are facing deep uncertainty over the global economy. The economic system under which most countries have operated for the past 80 years is being reset, and it's not clear yet what the new rules will be, according to the International Monetary Fund. Amid trade tensions, high policy uncertainty, and geopolitical unrest, economists are predicting slower growth and higher inflation for 2025 than they originally forecast.

Women leaders are as susceptible as anyone else to these global forces. Against this backdrop, nearly half of the respondents in the Middle East (49%) said they felt they were under more pressure than before. Globally, the number was even higher, with 62% saying they felt under more pressure.

In the Middle East, only 46% of women leaders surveyed said they were confident or very confident the global economy would grow over the next three years. A majority said they either weren't confident (20%) or were neutral (35%), meaning they could not predict whether the global economy would grow or not.

In fact, this neutral response proved to be one of the most surprising and significant findings of the 2025 Women Leaders Outlook. When it comes to the global economy, there are simply so many variables and so many unknowns that more than a third of women leaders locally (35%) and globally (38%) won't even hazard a guess as to what will happen. In that context, the undecided third as we've come to think of it is a rational response to uncertainty.

As this report reveals, however, the same indecision appears in other areas such as artificial intelligence (AI) and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) in response to questions that should have produced relatively straight forward answers.

In these cases, their responses can be seen as the canary in the coal mine. The neutral responses represent either a lack of strategy on the part of the organization, or a failure to communicate key strategies to the organization's leadership. These are areas where organizations should be absolutely clear on what they are doing and why, and yet they run the risk of following currents.

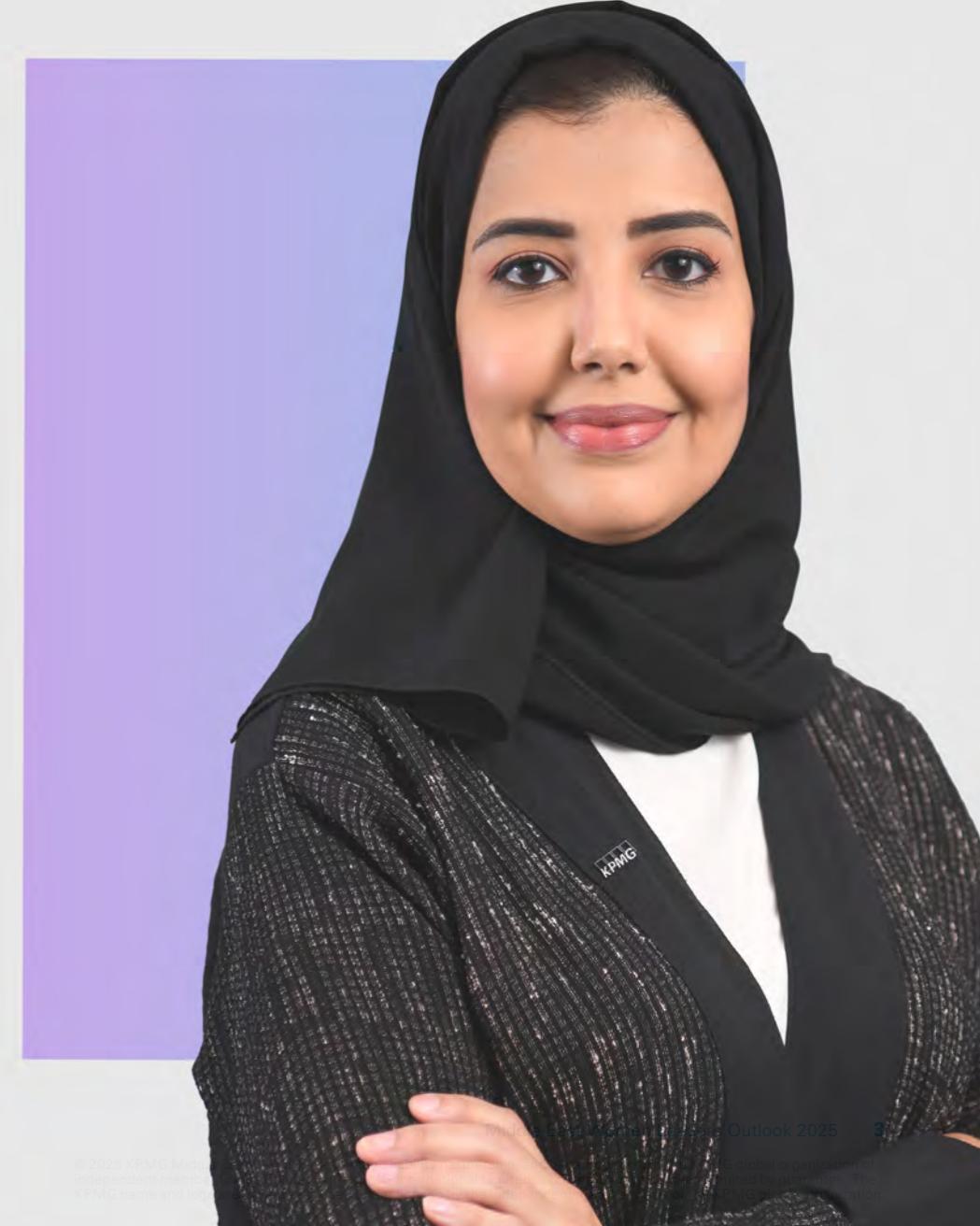
The survey can therefore be understood as a call for more clarity on some of the key topics that do remain within companies' control, regardless of whatever uncertainty lurks outside their doors. Read on to discover how women leaders in the Middle East are ensuring growth for their companies, responding to key issues such as AI and ESG, winning the talent arms race, handling the negative aspects of being women in high-profile roles, and supporting the next generation of women leaders.



As traditional economic models evolve, women leaders are navigating growing pressures and unpredictable shifts. Even amid uncertainty, their responses underscore the importance of staying grounded in what organizations can control: setting clear priorities, fostering strong leadership, and providing meaningful support to top talent."

Kholoud Mousa

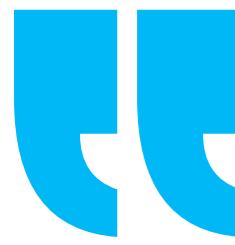
Partner,
Head of Our Impact Plan
KPMG Middle East



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Surround yourself with people who reflect your strength back to you. Whether it's mentors, your team, your sisters, or your day-ones—build a circle that uplifts you and reminds you of your light. Because leadership doesn't have to feel lonely. And the truth is, you don't have to feel "ready" to take the leap. Start scared. Start unsure. Just start. Confidence isn't a prerequisite—it's a result. Every time you show up, speak up, and lead with authenticity, you build it. You earn it. You've worked hard to be where you are. You deserve your seat at the table. Don't let anyone—including yourself—make you question that."

Mona Kattan
Founder and CEO, Kayali

01

Key findings



Key findings

Women leaders in the Middle East

87%

were confident or very confident their industries would grow over the next three years



60%

said their organizations were investing more in people than technology



listed increased efficiency and productivity as the top benefits of AI

62%

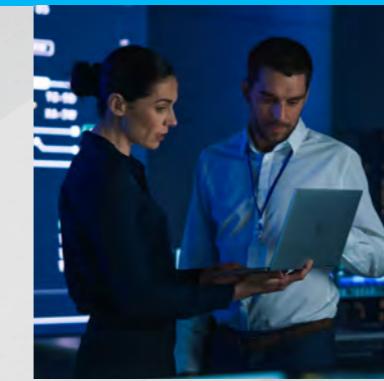
64% expect their companies to grow by 2.5 to 9.9% over the next three years

74%

said achieving gender equity in the C-suite would help their organizations meet their growth targets

44%

said artificial intelligence was a top investment priority



45%

said ESG had been fully integrated into their businesses as a means of creating increased value

72%

predicted their organizations would see a return on their AI investments in the next three years



26%

had been the victim of digital violence



65%

had faced bias or stereotyping

02

**A race for talent
among strong local
growth prospects**

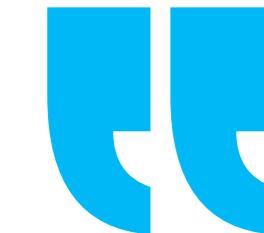


Despite the challenges facing the global economy, local women leaders are very confident about their local growth prospects.

The vast majority of respondents in the Middle East, or 78%, are confident or very confident their companies will grow over the next three years, echoing 74% of respondents worldwide. Most respondents in the Middle East (63%) expect their companies' earnings to grow between 2.5 and 9.99%, and they expect to do more hiring over the next three years than the global average.

Similarly, when it comes to industry growth prospects, women leaders in the region appear to be better positioned than their global counterparts. An overwhelming majority (87%) of women leaders in the Middle East were confident or very confident their industries would grow over the next three years, compared to 64% of respondents worldwide.

The responses suggest that government policies aimed at offsetting global challenges and uncertainty are working. An impressive 84% of women leaders in the Middle East reported being confident or very confident in their countries' growth prospects over the next three years, compared to just 43% of women leaders outside the region who could say the same.

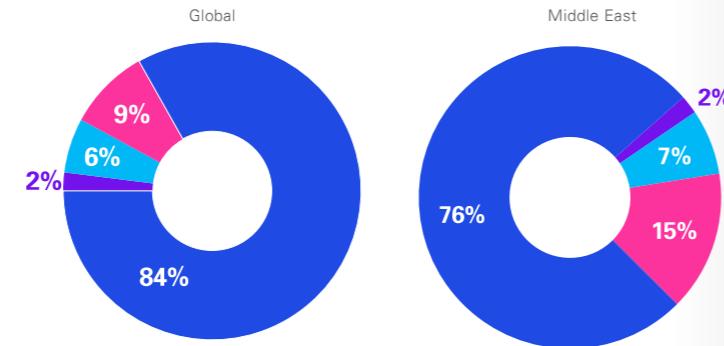


When navigating uncertainty, I rely on a solid foundation—clarity of values, depth of knowledge, and trust in my ability to adapt. I don't wait for direction; I define it. With each step, I take full ownership of the journey, knowing that even in ambiguity, I am building something that drives meaningful impact."

Maryam Telmesani
Vice President – Sustainability, Saudia Group

Above all, in an uncertain business climate, a truly resilient business is one that...

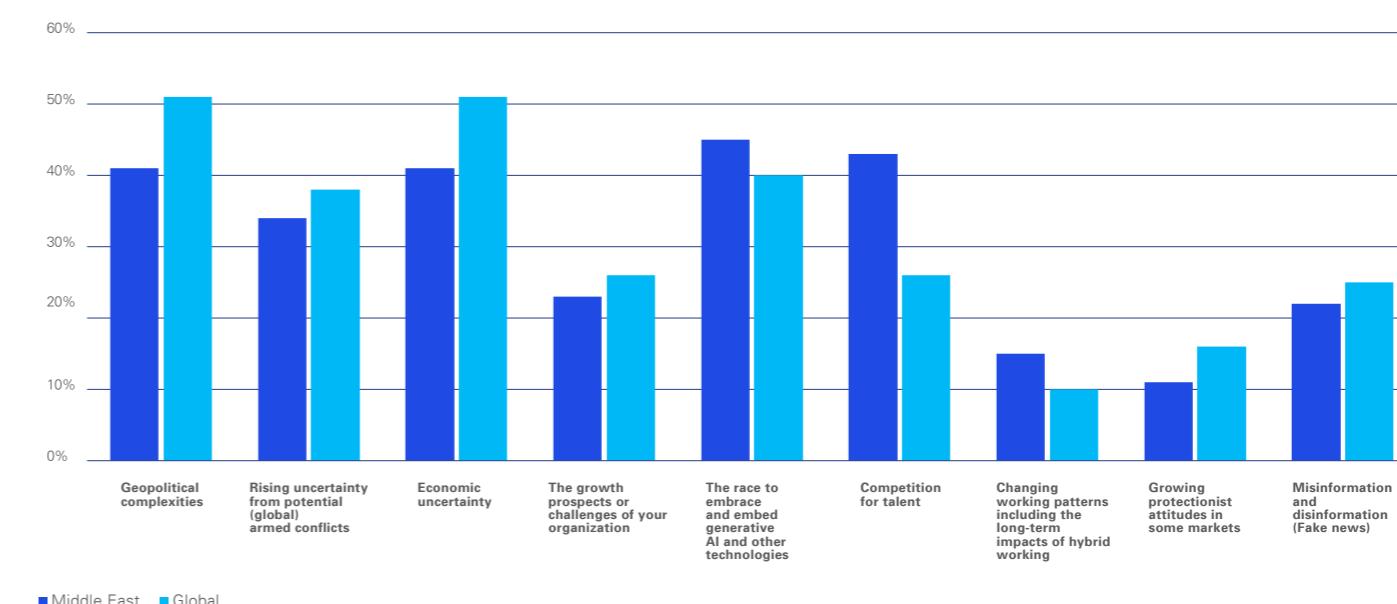
- None of the above
- Disrupts the market
- Protects the core business
- Adapts quickly to the changing business environment



"Doubt is just a sign you're doing something bold — trust your gut, stay anchored in your values, and build forward anyway."

Leena Khalil
General Partner, Key Capital

Which of the following challenges are top of mind right now?



03

Spotlight on the Middle East



Saudi Arabia

One of the goals of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 is to ensure and increase women's participation in the labor market. Nearly a dozen initiatives have been launched to support that goal, including efforts to boost women's participation in civil service roles, train women leaders, offer more flexible working conditions, and provide childcare services to working women.

Today, 35% of women participate in the labor force, with many entering high-skilled and traditionally male-dominated sectors like engineering and finance. The government has also begun championing prominent Saudi women and celebrating their accomplishments in an effort to shift cultural norms. In recognition of the rapid reforms Saudi Arabia has achieved, the UN's Commission on the Status of Women unanimously appointed Saudi Arabia to chair its 69th session in 2025.

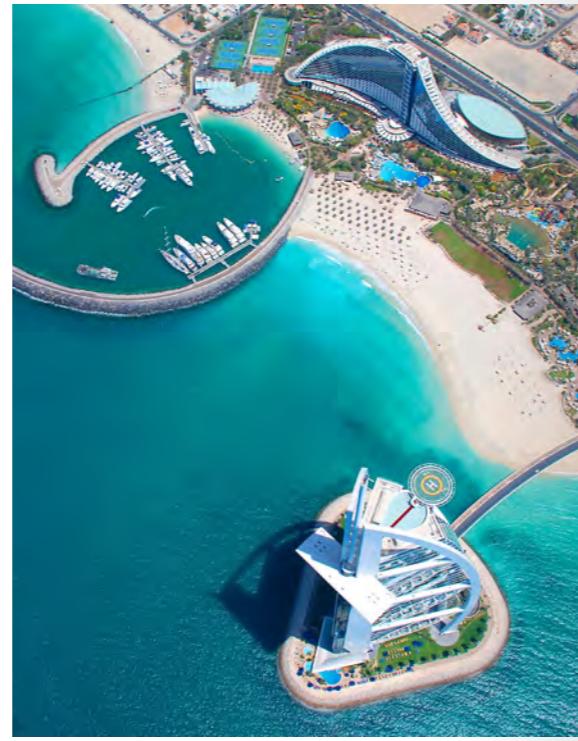


United Arab Emirates

The General Women's Union was formed in 1975 to provide a national mechanism for women's empowerment and leadership. Then in 2015, the UAE Gender Balance Council was created to reduce the gender gap across government sectors, achieve gender balance in decision-making positions, and promote the UAE's benchmark status for women's participation in business, government, and science and technology.

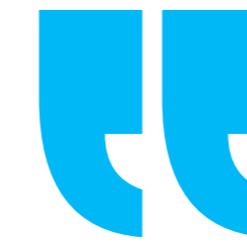
Today in the UAE, women make up almost two-thirds of students at public universities, and more than half of students at private tertiary-level institutions. Women make up 70% of all university graduates and 56% of graduates in STEM courses at public universities. They constitute 46% of the labor force and account for 66% of public sector workers. Women represent 45% of the national space sector and 20% of the nuclear sector.

The UAE has nine female ministers of out of 33, or 27%—one of the highest percentages in the region. The UAE was also the first country in the Arab region to require female presence in boardrooms. On the boards of its governmental corporations, 17% of the seats are held by women.



Oman

Oman's Foreign Ministry actively supports Omani women on the global stage, encouraging them to serve in leadership roles with the Arab League, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation and the United Nations. Women from Oman have been elected to serve on the UN Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, UNICEF's Executive Board, and the Islamic World Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.



True progress is measurable. By tracking gender equity across hiring, promotions, and pay, organizations make equality a strategic priority—not just an HR goal."

Professor Arwa Yousuf Al-Aama

Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Advisor to the Provost, King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST), Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

04

The potential and limitations of artificial intelligence





This year's survey revealed some surprising tensions and lack of clarity surrounding artificial intelligence. For example, a significant number respondents in the Middle East (44%) and a majority worldwide (54%) agreed or strongly agreed that generative AI was a top investment priority for their companies. Large numbers, however, said they neither agreed or disagreed. In the Middle East, 42% of respondents didn't have an opinion on whether AI was a top investment priority; 30% of respondents worldwide gave the same response.

This surprisingly ambivalent response suggests that the companies themselves don't know whether they are prioritizing or ought to be prioritizing AI. Alternatively,

these companies do have a strategy in place, they are failing to effectively articulate it to their own leadership. This could be an area where companies feel like they need to compete, but they don't know yet how to implement AI in a significant, value-added way.

To address this indecision, companies should develop a clear AI strategy, governance framework and operating model that directly connect AI initiatives to business priorities, embedding the technology in the core of the organization to drive sustainable growth, efficiency and innovation. Companies should also engage leaders and create internal communications structures that guarantee buy-in across the organization.

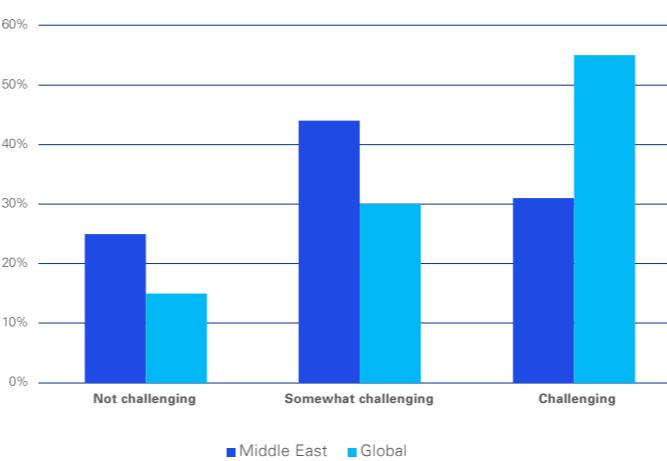
AI has been hailed as a disruptive technology with the power to revolutionize entire industries, and yet the survey suggests that most companies have not yet figured out how to unleash its full potential. In the Middle East, just 9% of respondents chose "increased innovation" as AI's top benefit to their organizations. Globally, the number was even lower, at 4%.

Instead, 62% of women leaders in the Middle East listed increased efficiency and productivity as the top benefit, similar to 57% worldwide. Locally, the number two benefit was innovation, while globally it was faster data analysis (15%).

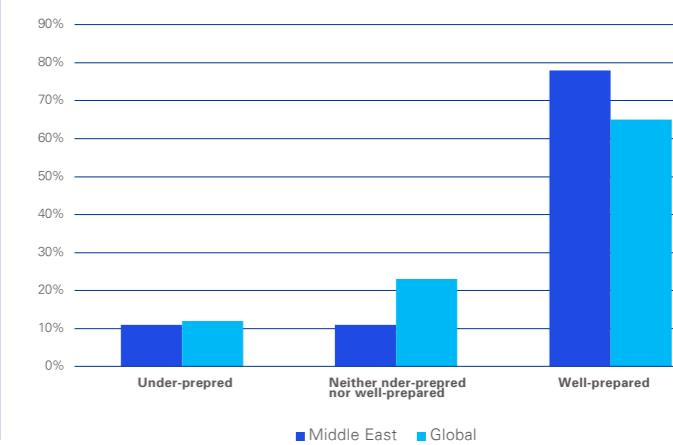
Despite the uncertainty, the vast majority of local respondents (72%) are expecting fast returns on their investment and predict they will see the benefits in the three years. A sizeable number (26%) think it will take three to five years to see a return on investment.

When it came to the barriers to implementing artificial intelligence, job redundancy, technical capability, cost, time of implementation and security and compliance were listed as the top challenges in the Middle East. More than 45% of respondents listed these issues as "mostly challenging" or "very challenging."

Please indicate the extent to which understanding and adoption amongst employees presents a challenge when it comes to implementing generative AI within your organization.



How well prepared is your organization for a cyber-attack?



To unlock the full potential of women leaders, organizations must shift from rewarding visibility to recognizing real impact, redesign roles with clear KPIs and progression paths, and build systems that enable equity. True change begins when passive mentorship becomes active, vocal sponsorship."

Jaimesha Patel
CEO, Créo

05

A call for clarity on ESG



Just as many leaders reported a lack of clarity surrounding AI investments, ESG was another area where a surprisingly high percentage of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with several of the questions.

The Middle East has embraced ESG, including the energy transition. The Saudi Exchange has partnered with the UN's Sustainable Stock Exchanges Initiatives since 2018, working with market participants—including issuers and investors—to promote ESG awareness, advance ESG disclosure in the Saudi capital market and encourage sustainable investment. In 2021, the UAE became the first country in the MENA region to announce its goal of reaching net zero emissions by 2050. The country's Net Zero 2050 Strategy is expected to create 200,000 job opportunities in the renewable energy field and will contribute about 3% to the national GDP.

Asked whether ESG had been fully integrated into their businesses as a means to create increased value, 45% agreed that it had compared to just 22% who said it had not. But a full third (33%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

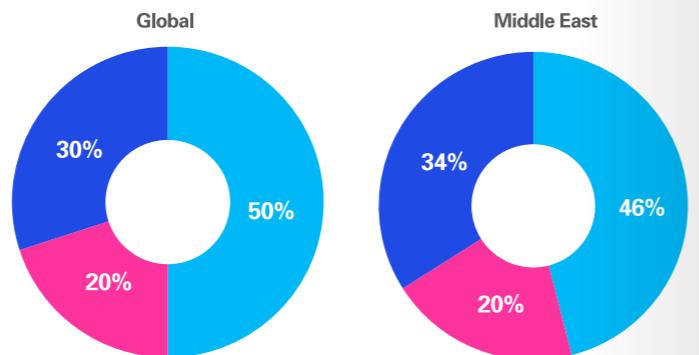
Even higher rates of indecision emerged in response to questions about whether respondents were confident their organizations would meet their net zero goals by 2030: 32.5% agreed, 20% disagreed, and an incredible 48% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Asked whether stakeholders' expectations with regard to ESG changed faster than companies were able to adapt their strategies, 24% said they agreed, 29% disagreed, and 48% were neutral.

Given that ESG has been a key corporate trend for several years now—even since the emergence of generative AI—we would have expected most organizations to know whether ESG had been fully

Thinking about inclusion, diversity and equity, to what extent do you agree or disagree that progress on diversity and inclusion has been slowed down in the last three years?

■ Disagree
■ Neither agree nor disagree
■ Agree



integrated into their businesses, what their stakeholders expect when it comes to ESG, and whether they are on track to reach their net zero goals.

Once again, this is an area where strategic alignment, engagement with leadership, and internal communication will be crucial to long-term success.

Just like hiring and talent recruitment, AI seems to have complicated the ESG landscape.

AI has the potential to tackle some of the world's biggest environmental challenges, but if not deployed strategically, it can exacerbate those same problems. The proliferating data centers that house AI servers produce electronic waste, consume large amounts of water, use significant amounts of electricity, and rely on critical minerals that are often mined unsustainably, according to the United Nations.

Despite these environmental challenges, more than half of respondents in the Middle East (51%) and 41% of respondents worldwide said that environmental sustainability presented either no challenge or only a slight challenge to implementing AI.

In fact, one of the themes that emerges from the survey is that environmental concerns and net-zero strategies seem to be taking a backseat to other priorities. Locally, only a fifth (20%) of respondents said that implementing a net-zero strategy was a key driver for accelerating ESG, compared to 29% worldwide.

Instead, the biggest driver both locally (46%) and globally (38%) was increased measurement and governance. For those organizations that were pursuing net zero, the biggest barriers in the Middle East were identifying and measuring agreed metrics (21%), lack of skills and expertise to implement solutions (18%) and "other" (16%).

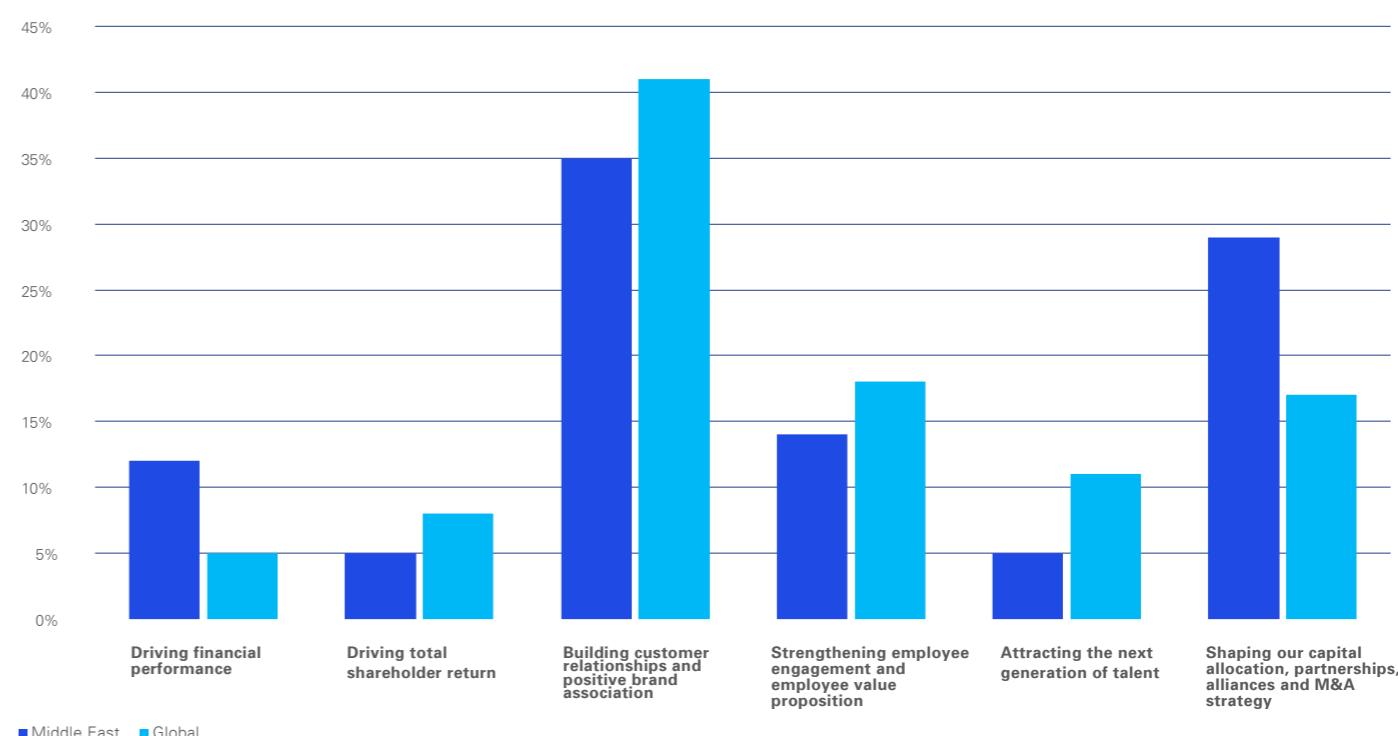


I believe a common misunderstanding is that women have a natural career ceiling either through motherhood or carer responsibilities, which means their leadership potential will be limited. Whilst the impact to a woman's career through becoming a parent cannot be underestimated, we have a collective responsibility, with our allies, to ensure we lay the foundations for career minded women to thrive. Women's leadership potential has no boundaries, it's the tools in place that need to be there, through flexible policies, leadership programs and advocacy to break through barriers.

Emma Smalls

Chief Control Officer Global Private Banking, HSBC UAE

Where do you see your ESG strategy having the greatest impact over the next three years?



“As a sustainability leader, navigating ambiguity begins with embracing it—not resisting it. AI, climate change, and geopolitics are deeply interconnected and evolving fast. I approach them through three lenses: adaptability, values, and systems thinking. First, adaptability means I stay scenario-ready rather than prediction-dependent. We use data, but we also prepare for uncertainty. Second, I lean on core values—equity, resilience, and long-term impact—as decision anchors when the path ahead is unclear. Finally, I view challenges systemically. For instance, AI isn’t just a tool; it impacts labor, emissions and ethics. Climate change isn’t just environmental—it’s economic, social, and political. Navigating ambiguity means listening more, collaborating widely, and making bold but flexible choices rooted in purpose.

Dr Dina Alnahdy
Founder and Chairperson,
CES Consulting



06

Digital violence on the rise



The relationship between gender diversity and business success is clear. Studies show that companies with more women in leadership roles are more profitable and earn a higher rate of return on equity. Correlation is not the same as causation, but the data has been so consistent over the past decade that there's no denying that organizations that incorporate a variety of perspectives perform better than competitors with homogenous leadership teams.

As women take on higher profile roles, the added visibility can be both positive and negative. This year's survey revealed that organizations need to be prepared to support women in the C-suite as they navigate one of the potential downsides of that visibility: digital violence.

Unfortunately, about half of the women surveyed agreed that as women gain more visibility by taking on leadership roles, they are especially vulnerable to online abuse. Nearly half of the women in the Middle East (49%) and more than half of women worldwide (57%) agreed that digital violence has risen over the past three years.

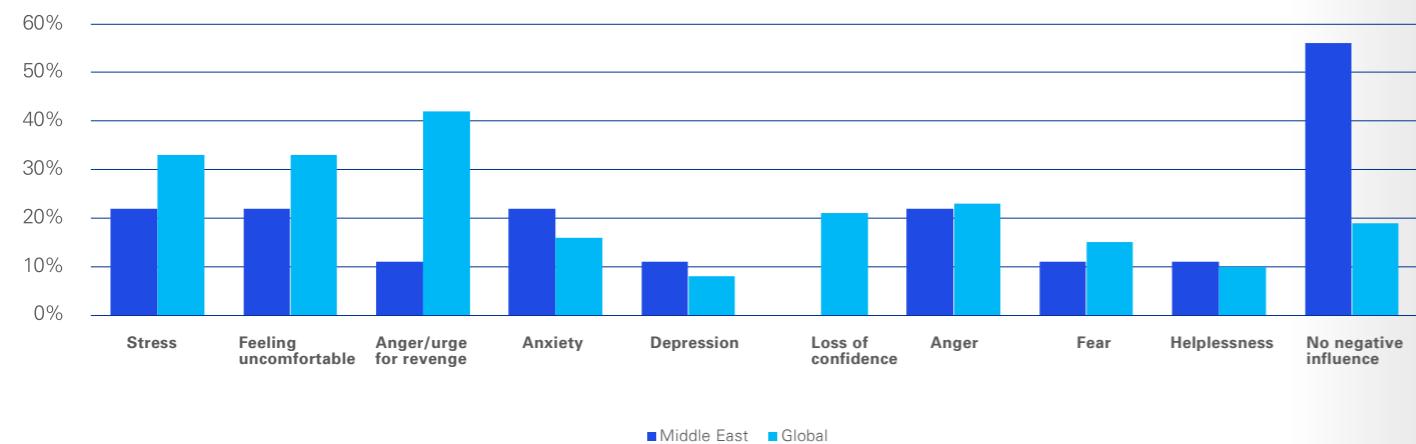
Of the local women surveyed, 26% had been subjected to violence on social media or digital platforms, more than double the percentage of global respondents (13%).

Of the Middle Eastern women who reported suffering online abuse, 54% had been subjected to harassment, unwanted personal messages, and abuse from fake profiles, while 39% had suffered cyberbullying and defamation online. Most of the abuse came from strangers (79%), though customers and acquaintances were also responsible in 21% of cases.

In most cases, the women blocked the perpetrators and reported the incident to the platforms. In about 44% of cases, though, the abuse was bad enough that it was reported to the police. The respondents also dealt with the abuse by changing their privacy settings, consulting with lawyers and colleagues, and just ignoring it.

These women reported that in most cases (56%) the online violence did not impact their emotional or psychological wellbeing, but in about 20% of cases they felt stress, discomfort, anger, and anxiety. In one case, online violence spilled over into real work in the form of physical stalking, threats, vandalism, or avoiding places.

How has the digital violence affected you emotionally and psychologically?



07

Supporting the next generation of women leaders



A large majority of women leaders in the Middle East (74%) said achieving gender equity in the C-suite would help their organizations meet their growth targets, similar to 72% worldwide. Most respondents (55%) were optimistic that it would happen in the next decade, with 25% predicting gender equality in less than five years.

The respondents were split, however, on whether they supported mandated quotas, with 36% agreeing with the policy, 33% disagreeing, and 31% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Beyond quotas, the survey revealed several areas where companies can promote organic growth for women team members. Women leaders in the Middle East listed their personal networks, women's leadership programs, and organizational flexibility as keys to their success.

Local women in particular described women's leadership programs as vital, with 40% of women in the Middle East saying they were crucial, compared to 22% worldwide. The top three traits they listed as crucial to their career success were being a good leader and strategic thinker, and having strong communications skills.



Flexible, inclusive policies are essential. Women should be able to lead without compromising their roles as mothers or caregivers. We must also recognize that empathy, collaboration, and long-term thinking are not soft skills—they are powerful leadership assets that deserve equal value.”

Professor Arwa Yousuf Al-Aama

Vice President of Institutional Advancement and Advisor to the Provost, King Abdullah University for Science and Technology (KAUST)

Far too many women leaders, however, said they had faced gender bias, with 65% of women in the Middle East and 62% of women globally saying they had experienced stereotyping in the last three years. Their answers also revealed that pay transparency is lagging worldwide. In the Middle East, 44% of respondents said their organizations had transparency around equal pay, compared to 53% worldwide. Notably, 30% of women leaders locally said they had never asked for the information, compared to 18% of women leaders globally.

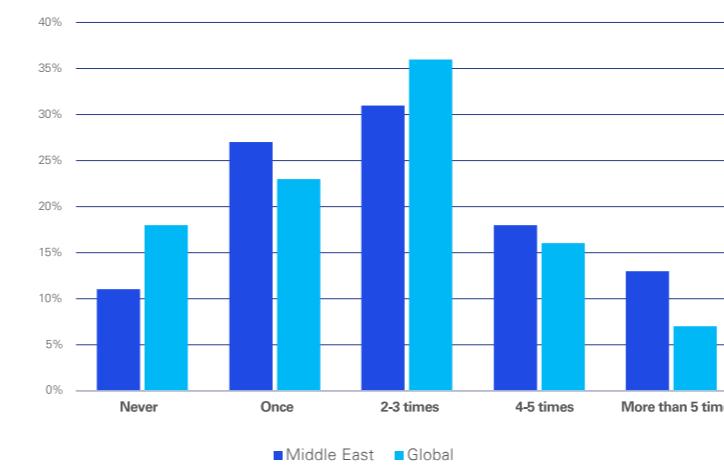
Organizations can therefore support their women team members by ensuring they have access to leadership programs and giving them opportunities to expand their networks. They can also implement pay transparency and actively work to create environments that are free from bias, where talent is recognized and rewarded regardless of gender, and where there are no artificial barriers to advancement. Finally, organizations should ensure all their team members—including women—have a chance to develop the strategic thinking and communications skills that will help them grow into effective leaders.



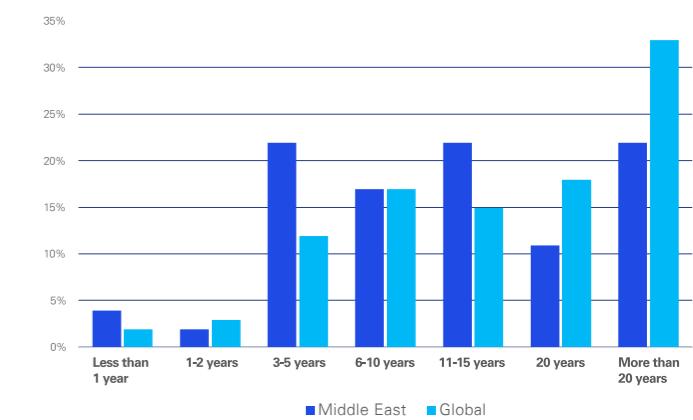
“Unlocking the full potential of women leaders starts by recognizing leadership in all its forms—visionary, empathetic, strategic, and collaborative. It’s not just about giving women access to the table, but reimagining the table itself to value different voices, leadership styles, and lived experiences. When women lead as their whole selves, organizations don’t just perform better—they evolve.”

Maryam Telmesani
Vice President – Sustainability,
Saudia Group

How often did you have to change the organization in order to make the next career step?



How long have you been in management positions overall in your career?





Methodology

The 2025 KPMG Women Leaders Outlook surveyed 447 women worldwide, of whom 43 were based in the Middle East, specifically in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Oman.

Globally, the most common field represented was finance (25%) followed by strategy (19%), human resources (10%), risk, legal and compliance (9%), operations (7%), marketing and communications (7%), and ESG (3%), with 14% in listing their field as "other."

In the Middle East, the most common fields were also finance (33%), strategy (13%), and human resources (10%), followed by operations (7%) and marketing and communications (7%), and then ESG (2%). In the Middle East, 21% of respondents chose "other" for their field.

Most of the women surveyed in the Middle East (55%) had more than a decade of management experience, with 22% reporting more than 20 years of experience, 11% reporting 16 to 20 years, and 22% reporting 11 to 15 years. Another 17% had 6 to 10 years of management experience, 22% had 3 to 5 years, 2% had 1-2 years, and 4% had less than 1 year.

Sources

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About KPMG Middle East

KPMG Middle East is a part of the KPMG global organization of independent member firms that operate in 143 countries and territories and are affiliated with KPMG International Limited. We provide audit, tax and advisory services to public and private sector clients across Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman, and Iraq, contracting through separate legal entities. We have a strong legacy in the region, where we have been established for over 50 years. KPMG Middle East is well-connected with its global member network and combines its local knowledge with international expertise.

KPMG serves the diverse needs of businesses, governments, public-sector agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and the capital markets.

Our commitment to quality and service excellence underpins everything we do. We strive to deliver to the highest standards for our stakeholders, building trust through our actions and behaviors, both professionally and personally.

Our values guide our day-to-day behavior, informing how we act, the decisions we make, and how we work with each other, our clients, and all our stakeholders. 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.

Our purpose is to inspire confidence and empower change. By inspiring confidence in our people, clients and society, we help empower the change needed to solve the toughest challenges and lead the way forward.

KPMG's Our Impact Plan guides our commitments to serving our clients, people and communities across four categories: Planet, People, Prosperity, and Governance. These four priority areas assist us in defining and managing our environmental, social, economic and governance impacts to create a more sustainable future. We aim to deliver growth with purpose. We unite the best of KPMG to help our clients fulfil their purpose and deliver against the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, so all our communities can thrive and prosper.

We are dedicated to delivering growth with purpose, helping our clients achieve their goals, and advancing sustainable progress to ensure that all our communities thrive. Empowered by our values, and committed to our purpose, our people are our greatest strength.

Together, we are building a values-led organization of the future. For better.

Contact us



Kholoud Mousa
Partner
Head of Our Impact Plan
kmousa@kpmg.com



Marketa Simkova
Partner
Head of People
MSimkova@kpmg.com



Hanan Alowain
Partner
Government and Public Sector
hananalowain@kpmg.com



Sarah Varghese
Global Head of Cities
Partner, Infrastructure Advisory
sarahvarghese@kpmg.com



Anan Sijini
Partner
Tax, Corporate Tax
asijini@Kpmg.Com



Aabha Lekhak
Partner
Head of Tax - Oman
alekhak2@kpmg.com



Gunjan Shroff
Partner
People and Change
gshroff1@kpmg.com



Dr. Jigna Sampath
Partner
Tax, Transfer Pricing
jignasampath@kpmg.com



Anita Khanna
Partner
Head of Ethics and Independence
akhanna4@kpmg.com



Iman Aljawini
Partner
Partners Affairs
ialjawini@kpmg.com



Marcelle Magnus
Partner
Audit
mmagnus1@kpmg.com



Estella Dzhantukhanova
Partner
M&A and International Tax
edzhantukhanova@kpmg.com



Rouge Sana
Partner
Leadership Talent and Transformation
rsana@kpmg.com

kpmg.com/sa
kpmg.com/ae
kpmg.com/om

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