



نماء للارتقاء بالمرأة
NAMA WOMEN ADVANCEMENT

**PROMOTING
BUSINESS
SUSTAINABILITY
THROUGH
WOMEN IN
LEADERSHIP**

**EXPO 2020
PANEL DISCUSSION: SUMMARY**



INTRODUCTION

The challenge of women's inclusion in the labor force has gained increasing momentum in recent years. To date, disparities between men and women persist in the form of uneven opportunities for career advancement, pay gaps, and unbalanced representation in positions of influence. That is why many governments globally, including the UAE, have taken significant steps to promote and achieve gender inclusion outcomes in the economic sector. This includes amendments to labor laws and legislations, different types of incentives for businesses, and the establishment of dedicated mechanisms to strengthen women's rights and support their economic empowerment.

Nevertheless, businesses are still falling short in terms of women's representation in leadership positions. A United Nations (UN) study found that women held only 28% of managerial positions worldwide in 2019, which is almost the same as in 1995.¹ This constitutes a missed opportunity for both the private and public sectors across the globe. Research shows that businesses that actively promote diversity and inclusion tend to be more profitable and make better decisions up to 87% of the time.² Moreover, increasing the number of women in the workforce can add trillions of dollars to global GDP and drive more sustainable economic growth.³

With this in mind, NAMA Women Advancement – in collaboration with Pearl Initiative – organised a high-level panel discussion on 13 October 2021 at the Women's Pavilion at Expo to explore ways of championing diversity in the workplace and increasing the number of women in leadership positions. The event brought together key private and public sector decision-makers and leaders to share solutions, ideas, and best practices that can drive concrete progress in closing gender gaps within organisations.

¹ United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2021): The World's Women 2020: Trends and Statistics. Available at: <https://worlds-women-2020-data-undesa.hub.arcgis.com>.

² Cloverpop. White Paper: Hacking Diversity with Inclusive Decision-Making. Available at: <https://www.cloverpop.com/hacking-diversity-with-inclusive-decision-making-white-paper>

³ McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) report (2015): The power of parity: How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth. Available at: <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

WELCOME REMARKS

H.E. Reem Bin Karam, Director of NAMA Women Advancement, opened the session by welcoming participants to the Women's Pavilion, a place that inspires action and celebrates women's past and ongoing contribution to society. In this regard, Her Excellency emphasized the UAE's commitment to helping advance the gender equality agenda globally.

Referring to the role of the private sector as a catalyst for closing gender gaps in society, Her Excellency invited participants to engage in a meaningful conversation on how businesses can promote women's economic empowerment and leadership. She further elaborated that investing in women can have a multiplier effect since women are more likely to reinvest a large portion of their income on education, health, and economic activities at the community level.

Her Excellency concluded her remarks by citing H.H. Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, Chairperson of NAMA Women Advancement Establishment, and wife of the Ruler of Sharjah: "achieving gender equity is an economic necessity, as it will boost productivity and growth while also supporting economic resilience."



MAKING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

In recent years, there has been growing recognition of the intrinsic value of women holding leadership positions in the workplace. The panelists highlighted how companies have much to gain by becoming inclusive workplaces. Increasing women's representation in leadership positions is not just the right thing to do, but it is also the smart thing to do from a business perspective. The following are some of the reasons why businesses need to prioritise women's representation in the workplace:

- Having more women on executive teams can improve decision-making and increase profitability.
- Broader range of viewpoints and greater company-wide innovation, as women bring different perspectives and approaches to business.
- Improved employee satisfaction leading to higher retention and a healthier work environment.
- Access to a larger pool of talent and a wider selection of qualified applicants.
- Enhanced consumer insight, as women account for the majority of consumer purchases.

Today, many companies are accepting the business imperative for increasing women's representation in the workplace, particularly in leadership positions. However, their progress to change the status quo has been slow. That is why the need to make available resources, such as toolkits or guidance notes (eg. NAMA, 30% Club, UN Women), to guide and support corporations seeking to deliver on their commitments to improve gender equality in the workplace.



BARRIERS TO WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT TO LEADERSHIP ROLES IN THE WORKPLACE

Historically, women have faced greater barriers than men to rise to leadership positions. The global pandemic has been a poignant reminder that greater effort is required to close gender gaps to boost business sustainability and economic growth. The panelists highlighted the following main barriers hindering women's career development and advancement:

- Women's self-imposed restrictions and uncertainty about their abilities to succeed in a leadership position.
- Employment biases, particularly against women who return to work after giving birth.
- Inflexible work arrangements make it difficult for women to balance their work and family roles.
- Discrimination with regards to promotions and career advancement. This is largely due to unconscious biases that reinforce the perception of male leadership. In addition, women are not always offered the required support and mentorship opportunities as men in order to advance in their careers.
- Not having women in leadership positions as role models prevents women from applying to positions of influence within the company and creates a false perception among employees that women are unlikely to be appointed to senior positions.
- Perceived barriers for women are larger in particular sectors, such as finance and tech. STEM (science, technology, engineering, and math) industries overall tend to be male-dominated.

It is important to address these barriers to pave the way for a more inclusive and diverse workplace. Particularly in the current context of the global pandemic, it is necessary that companies start to reimagine the workplace and introduce changes to the working environment that would benefit both men and women, such as family-friendly policies, flexible working arrangements, and increased childcare services.



SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS PRACTICES TO PROMOTE WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP

While there is growing recognition of the need to create a more diverse and inclusive workplace, many companies are still uncertain as to how they can effectively promote women's inclusion and empowerment in a way that fits the company's unique context and operation. For this reason, the panelists shared examples of several initiatives and successful practices applied within their respective organisations to increase women's influence and representation in the workplace. These include:



Using a variety of qualitative (staff perception on internal policies) and quantitative (e.g. number of women in leadership positions) data sets to develop a comprehensive assessment of the company's standing with regards to gender inclusion and women empowerment. This assessment needs to be reviewed on an annual basis and linked to concrete targets in order to ensure sustainable results.



Offering internship programs for young women to get first-hand experience working in traditionally male-dominated sectors. This can be an effective way of overcoming stereotypes and increasing the number of successful female applicants.



Improving the recruitment process so that it is not focused on years of experience only, since this usually puts women at a disadvantage in the hiring process. Instead, the recruitment criteria should equally emphasize factors such as eagerness to learn and succeed.



Engaging with initiatives such as the 30% Club which advocates for women's representation on boards and C-suites globally.



Organising networking events to encourage regular conversations with women employees about career development opportunities and other issues of concern. This is a simple and cost-effective initiative that can have a positive impact on all employees.



Establishing a shadow committee composed of women and other under-represented groups to counteract the underrepresentation of women in executive boards. The shadow committee would be responsible for providing timely advice and assistance to the executive board with regards to integrating gender-specific considerations across the work of the organisation.

KEY TAKEAWAYS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discussion touched on various aspects of today's realities in the corporate world and how gender equality has become a business priority. Participants acknowledged that while there have been positive developments, particularly in the UAE context, a lot more needs to be done to change the status quo and advance women's leadership in the workplace. The following are some of the main recommendations that came out of the discussion:

Companies need to make strategic and deliberate decisions around increasing the number of women leaders. This is a long-term systemic issue that requires commitment and action from all employees.

The need for male champions in senior leadership positions who are personally invested to advance the gender equality agenda and work towards developing the necessary conditions within the organisation to empower women.

It is important to construct a positive narrative around women in leadership positions and create an inclusive work culture where women are given the same opportunities and development support as men. Policies and rhetorical emphasis on women's representation are not enough; employees need to see and perceive equality and fairness in their workplace.

There is a need for a shift in mindset, whereby corporate leaders place more emphasis on results and productivity, rather than working hours and arrangements. By encouraging flexible working modalities for both men and women, businesses can achieve productivity.

Changing perceptions around labor-intensive business sectors and the promotion of gender-neutral industries should start in primary school, so that boys and girls have the confidence and tools to enter and succeed in any business sector.

It is important to celebrate women's successes and increase the visibility of women leaders and their contributions to business growth.

Further research is required to understand what defines 'success' for women to ensure that company policies and procedures are in line with women's needs and aspirations.



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