



Shattering Stereotypes: Women in Construction, A Perspective from the Middle East

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In the world of construction, where cranes paint the skyline and steel structures touch the clouds, women have been quietly shaping the narrative of change. What do I mean by that exactly? Just that women are taking up more space, not only in the professional environment at large, but in leadership positions too. This trend appears to be a global one, but I'd like to share my perspective as a woman working in the Middle East.

Let's start with some numbers, tangible proof of a paradigm shift. Over the last decade, the percentage of women working across Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Saudi Arabia has swelled. **The latest available data shows that women have reached 57% of all UAE nationals employed in the private sector, a testament to the country's commitment to diversity and inclusivity.**¹

Dubai, with its audacious skyline and avant-garde architecture, stands as a symbol of this progress. Here, women armed with passion and belief aren't just entering the industry; they are rising to the top. Where once we were invited to the table merely as a token gesture, now our contributions are being recognised and reflected in the iconic landscape of the city.

The journey towards gender equality begins with education – and this is no different when it comes to construction. The UAE is witnessing a surge in programmes encouraging young women to pursue careers in the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields. As a result, 61 per cent of UAE university graduates in STEM subjects are women, a figure that reaches 57 per cent across the rest of the Arab world.² This represents a healthy pipeline of talented professionals ready to make their mark in construction.

But the UAE isn't the only country making strides in this way. Women represent over 50 per cent of all graduates in Saudi Arabia too.³ In fact, the country is crafting a new narrative for its future under its Vision 2030 initiative (a plan to diversify the economy away from its reliance on oil), spearheaded by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Women, once confined by traditional norms, are now beginning to step into the spotlight in the construction industry, contributing skills and new perspectives to projects that are redefining the boundaries of possibility. Take, for example, Abeer AlAkel, who has become CEO at the Royal Commission for AlUla. She will oversee the sustainable development of the historic location – Saudi Arabia's first recognised UNESCO World Heritage Site – transforming it into a global destination. There's a long road ahead, but Saudi Arabia is pushing for a more inclusive working environment. One of the kingdom's goals under Vision 2030⁴ is to increase women's participation in the workforce from 22% to 30%.

On a more personal note, my experience of the Middle Eastern construction scene has been both challenging and rewarding. Despite some stereotypes ringing true at times, they have been eclipsed by the genuine curiosity and openness I've encountered. **As a woman contributing to high-stakes discussions, I've found a supportive environment that values diversity not as a tick-box exercise but as a catalyst for innovation. Interestingly, I've seen that the region can be more open to having young, passionate women in conversations than in Europe – a reality I embrace while cherishing my European roots.**

Notes

[1] The United Arab Emirates' National Report, 2019

https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/CSW/64/National-reviews/UAE_en.pdf

[2] <https://www.thenationalnews.com/uae/education/2023/01/26/helping-emirati-women-launch-stem-careers-a-national-priority-says-uae-envoy/>

[3] Vision 2030 – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf

[4] Vision 2030 – Kingdom of Saudi Arabia - https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/media/rc0b5oy1/saudi_vision203.pdf



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Women aren't just invited to the table here; in some cases, we're steering the conversation. The region's leaders recognise the immense value that diverse perspectives, especially those of women, can bring to construction project management and execution. Our higher emotional intelligence and knack for reading people seem to be assets in this field.

So, as we continue navigating the ever-evolving landscape of construction, it is important that we acknowledge and celebrate progress for women in the Middle East. The numbers speak volumes. The projects epitomise innovation. And the personal stories of women in construction continue to inspire. **We aren't just witnessing change; we are actively participating in it.**



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