

Women on Boards in the GCC:

Experiences, insights, and the path to progress



Research and recommendations by the GCC Board Directors Institute

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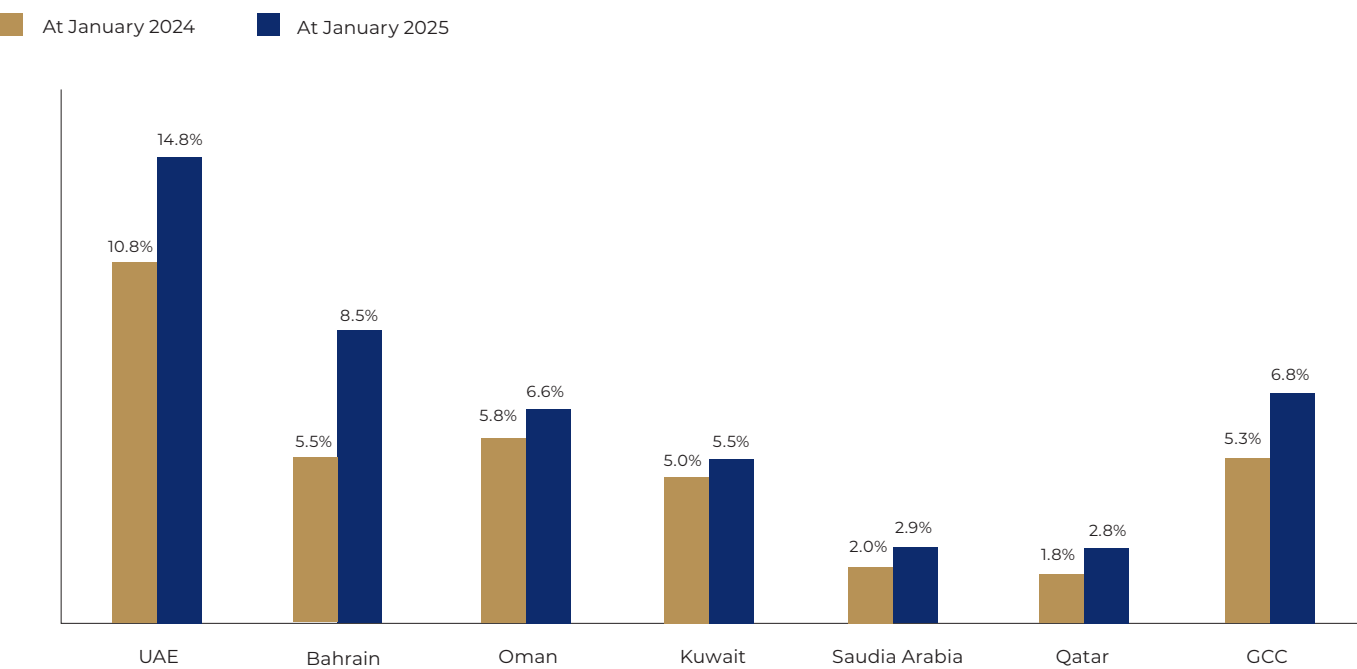
Introduction

Women all over the world continue to be underrepresented on boards, including in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. From a GCC perspective, this research seeks to understand the experiences of women on boards, or who aspire to be on boards in the GCC. This exploratory qualitative study¹ serves as an initial step to understanding the individual experiences of women in the region. The findings may be used to inform future research representing a larger population, as well as to inform action, policy, and approaches to supporting the advancement of women on boards in the GCC.

Women on Boards in the GCC

Women in the GCC are highly educated, motivated, and make strong contributions within government, the private sector and society, yet the representation of women on boards across the region is low. While progress has been made in this regard, women currently represent only 6.8% of board seats in publicly listed companies in the GCC. This is highest in the UAE at 14.8% where there is a mandated quota², and the lowest in Qatar at 2.8%³ (see Figure 1) below. Yet, as this research explores, women on boards bring significant value.

Figure 1: Percentage of Women on Boards of listed companies by GCC Country – at Jan 2024 vs Jan 2025



The GCC Board Gender Index Report 2024 and 2025, by Aurora50 and Heriot Watt University

¹ Qualitative research is suited to understanding social phenomena, and how, why, and the processes by which things happen: Bell, E., Bryman, A., & Harley, B. (2019). Business Research Methods (Fifth Edition). Oxford University Press.

² Aurora 50 (2024): New UAE board quota for private companies

³ Heriot-Watt University & Aurora 50 (2025): The GCC Board Gender Index Report 2025.

Women on Boards in the GCC Continued

Research finds that board diversity offers benefits, including a reduction in groupthink, better problem-solving and decision-making, improved market understanding, and increased innovation and creativity⁴. Most importantly, women on boards change board dynamics, dialogue, and interactions. They interact in ways that are contrary to existing board norms, which lead to constructive dialogue and interactions in the boardroom. As a result, they tend to be less conformist and are more likely to express independent views. They also de-politicize dialogue, act less competitively, and incorporate a greater diversity of viewpoints⁵. Women on boards and in leadership can also protect against risk, with one study finding that banks with more women directors and leaders faced lower and less-frequent fines for misconduct⁶. Importantly, women in leadership act as role models for future or aspiring women leaders.

From both a business and societal perspective, the GCC Board Directors Institute (GCC BDI), while respecting the religions and cultures of the Gulf, recognizes and supports board diversity. For this research, the spotlight is on women, given that they represent half of GCC society, are highly educated, motivated, and experienced, and play a critical role in GCC business, government and society. Yet, they are still significantly underrepresented on boards in the region, the highest level of organizational leadership.

To understand why this is the case, and from a GCC perspective, GCC BDI undertook this research to gain insight into the experiences of women who serve on boards in the GCC, or who aspire to serve on such boards. We interviewed 16 women in the Kingdom of Bahrain, the State of Kuwait, the Sultanate of Oman, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the State of Qatar, and 2 who reside in Europe⁷. All interviewees work in the GCC and have deep knowledge of the region. The participants served in various capacities, including board chair, vice chair, board member, board secretary, committee chair, and/or committee member. Most of the participants were paid for their board work, while some were not, due to the nature of the board, such as not-for-profit, educational, or membership organizations.

The objective of the interviews was to understand each interviewee's professional and board experience, the board appointment process, their motivation for serving on boards, their experience as a board director, and any challenges faced. The interviewees also offered suggestions to support the advancement of women on boards in the GCC. While the women who participated in this study represent different countries, nationalities, levels of experience, industries, board service, and many other diverse characteristics, they agreed on three points:

1. Women in the GCC contribute significant value to boards, or have the potential to do so if given the opportunity;
2. Women face some challenges or barriers to board directorship that men do not face; and
3. A system of support from regulators, investors, organisations, boards, and GCC BDI can play a valuable role in supporting the advancement of women on boards.

While this research focused on women on boards, some participants also noted a general lack of board diversity in terms of age and nationality, highlighting that these are areas worthy of focus as well.

GCC BDI is grateful to each of the women leaders who took the time to share their experience and their ideas to move progress forward. GCC BDI, along with our partners, is committed to advancing board effectiveness and the representation of women on boards across the GCC.

This research outlines eight key findings that emerged through the confidential interviews. It also makes four recommendations, based on the experiences and input of the participants, on what regulators, organizations, boards, and the GCC BDI can do in this respect. We invite you to consider our findings, and join us in the next phase of supporting the advancement of women on boards in the GCC.

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⁴ Australian Institute of Company Directors: Why is Board Diversity Crucial to an Organisation's Success?

⁵ Wiersma & Mors (2023): Women Directors and Board Dynamics: Qualitative Insights from the Boardroom, Journal of Management; Chen, Leung & Goergen (2019): When Women Are on Boards, Male CEOs Are Less Overconfident, Harvard Business Review.

⁶ Berinato (2021): Banks with More Women on Their Boards Commit Less Fraud, Harvard Business Review.

⁷ All participants are located in the GCC, except two who are located in Europe and do work in the GCC. All participants currently or previously served on boards in the GCC, except 2 who have only served on boards outside of the GCC.



Eight key findings

1. Women are motivated, experienced, and want to serve on boards, but only if their contribution is valued. This is important to them as they are busy with full-time jobs, and are also responsible for the majority of domestic work (including child and elder care) at home, leaving them with limited time to participate in additional activities. They stressed the importance of spending this limited time on activities where their contributions are wanted, needed, welcomed, and valued. Some participants indicated that international companies are more likely to welcome women on boards, or appear to do so, given their long-term commitment to and action on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and higher levels of women in leadership and on boards.

2. 'Who knows what you know' is critical, as is being on the radar of key decision-makers. All but one participant gained the board opportunity through their workplace, network, or being approached after having participated in an event or project where they had publicly demonstrated their capabilities. The one outlier applied through a board 'job' portal, adding that she also used her network to flag her application, which she says was likely the reason her application was viewed and considered. Most stressed the importance of the support they received from others, for example, their boss or another individual recognizing and putting them forward for the opportunity. Importantly, they indicated that this support came from both men and women. These experiences indicate that their job, their network, being connected to the right people or having the right people present at the right time are key factors for women in accessing board positions: that is, they described importance of not only 'who they know', but also who knows what they know and being on their radar.

3. A mix of positive and challenging experiences. The participants described the many positive elements of board service which they have experienced, such as being valued, respected, being able to make a strong contribution, applying their many years of experience, expertise and industry knowledge, and contributing to the success of an organization or industry. They also felt supported by other board members, both male and female, and

described that generally, the men on the boards they serve were supportive of them, and also acted as allies. They were also able to build strong relationships and felt a real sense of purpose in their board work. Personal and professional development were also key themes, where participants described enhancing their leadership skills, strengthening their voice, and their confidence. By and large, the participants learned from the experience through applying their expertise, navigating complex situations, and drawing on insights from others around the table. Some of this learning occurred through efforts to overcome any challenges they faced, such as gender and culture-related barriers and less positive board dynamics. Several participants mentioned that they were left out of or did not feel comfortable attending board social gatherings. A consequence of this was that at times they did not have the opportunity to contribute to discussions and decisions that were held informally. Some participants indicated that challenges can be more prevalent on family business boards, and expressed a preference to serve on the boards of companies that have demonstrated a commitment to board diversity. Notably, the participants described learning from the experiences, both in instances where they felt welcomed and valued, and also in instances when they did not.

4. Women board directors proactively work to overcome the challenges faced. When some participants described challenges, they also described how they overcame them. For example, by finding a trusted ally in the board chair or another board member, building relationships across the board and/or coming prepared to challenge previously experienced setbacks. Some described strengthening their voice and their confidence through working to overcome challenges, for example, by speaking up more boldly to say "I just said that", when an idea they shared was initially ignored, and then repeated by a male board member. Importantly, when excluded from discussions outside the boardroom, they learned to proactively seek out information from their allies (e.g. the board chair or other board members), to ensure they are prepared to engage in discussion at board meetings. Their ability to overcome challenges improved over time, with experience, and they also

Eight key findings Continued

indicated that they are stronger and more confident professionals as a result.

5. A sense of responsibility for all women. All of the participants described the ways in which women add value to boards from a technical and interpersonal perspective: through their expertise, by being thoroughly prepared, asking challenging questions, changing boardroom dynamics, keeping discussions at the macro level by focusing on issues that make a material difference, moving decisions forward, helping to build consensus around the table, leading with empathy, putting the spotlight on people matters, and being the 'go to' for other board members in one-on-one discussions. Notably, some of the participants felt strongly that they have a responsibility to break down stereotypes of women in leadership and pave the way forward for other women. They achieve this by performing

exceptionally in their board service and by working diligently to overcome the challenges they face. For some, this sense of responsibility helps to persevere through difficult times, with one participant saying, "The better we do, the more valuable they see we are, the more we encourage them to want to have more women on boards" and another saying "Women bear the responsibility to change perceptions of women on boards. If women do well, and excel, this will encourage companies to want more women".

6. The barriers women face in accessing board positions. Most participants identified gender roles and expectations as the main barrier to accessing board positions, in three main ways, noting that most of these challenges are also commonly experienced by women in other parts of the world. First, that there is a preference for men in leadership, and their experience is that women are required to work harder



Eight key findings Continued

to obtain the same opportunities as men. Second, their responsibility for paid work, domestic work and childcare, leaves them with limited time to participate in additional activities such as board service. Third, due to the historical segregation of men and women in GCC society, women do not have the same networks and networking opportunities as men. Separate from this, non-GCC nationals interviewed mentioned that in some cases there is a preference to appoint local women to boards, which excludes them from some board opportunities, especially on the boards of family businesses.

7. Support for legislated quotas, with caveats.

Over-two thirds of the interviewees said or agreed that quotas can support the advancement of women on boards in the GCC, at least to 'kickstart the process', and give women the opportunity. Some highlighted the UAE as an example of where a women on boards quota is working. The participants also acknowledged that there can be challenges with quotas, such as perceived tokenism⁸, a symbolic effort of equality, resistance to quotas, and the mistaken perception that there are not enough qualified women to serve on boards⁹. One interviewee stressed that women in leadership carry the burden to prove their credibility and overcome assumptions without the existence of board quotas, and that unless supported as outlined below, quotas will exacerbate this challenge. However, the participants also believed that these challenges with quotas can be overcome by:

1. The right support from regulators and investors, such as vocal support for women on boards, and instituting a requirement that all board members receive director training,

2. Each board having a skills matrix which evaluates candidates against pre-defined and qualifying criteria, and

3. The important role of the board chair in facilitating boardroom dynamics where all voices are welcome and valued. Importantly, the participants are optimistic that over time, once the leadership gap is resolved, and perceptions about women in leadership change, quotas will have paved the way for women on boards to become the norm.

8. A call for concrete action by organisations such as GCC BDI.

The participants were clear that what is needed is action that leads to change, to increase the representation of women on boards. They indicated four main ways that GCC BDI and other similar entities can influence the advancement of women on boards in the GCC:

- Work with regulators and investors to support the advancement of women on boards, and a requirement for all directors to take director education,
- Support with equal access to director education, including through discounts and/or organizational support, as women are more likely to self-fund¹⁰,
- Boards should advertise their support for women applicants, and search firms and organizations like GCC BDI should put women board directors forward for board roles, and
- Engage with boards, regulators, and other stakeholders on the benefits to and importance of women on boards in the region.

⁸ Tokenism is defined as "the practice of doing something (such as hiring a person who belongs to a minority group) only to prevent criticism and give the appearance that people are being treated fairly" (The Britanica Dictionary, 2023)

⁹ GCC Board Directors Institute has certified 59 women directors in the region as at 15 December 2025, and there are women in the region who have been certified by other Institutes, have extensive leadership or board experience, or have taken other forms of director education through GCC BDI and elsewhere

¹⁰ GCC BDI has undertaken analysis of funding source, and found that women are 42% more likely to self-fund their participation in the GCC BDI Director Certification Programme



Four key recommendations

The participants appreciated the effort and value of women's empowerment events, but expressed a need for concrete action that leads to change. Given the significant benefits of having women on boards, GCC BDI makes the following recommendations, as supported by the participants interviewed for this research, to advance the representation of women on boards in the region.

1. More funding support for women, and education for all.

Analysis of women participants in the GCC BDI Directors Certification program found that women participants are 42% more likely to self-fund their program fees than male participants, presenting a gender gap related to the funding of director development. To support women with access to the Director Certification, GCC BDI offers a discount to women participants who are self-funding. GCC BDI also recommends that employing organisations consider greater financial support for women's director education, signaling a commitment to their development and advancement. Going beyond this, the participants in this study said that while it is great to educate women on how to be effective board members, it is equally as important to engage with key stakeholders and decision-makers on the benefits of women on boards and the promotion of board diversity. The deepening of this understanding, and active allyship, will in part contribute to ongoing change.

2. Boards should work with third party search firms, rather than board member networks, to fill board positions.

Search firms can help find the best person for the role by advising on any criteria that may limit the pool of qualified candidates, developing position descriptions that encourage diverse candidates to apply, and proactively sourcing diverse talent, including women, that meet the skills gap the board is seeking to fill. An important caveat is that board members should avoid recommending candidates to the search firm, as this could potentially bias the process. Some boards go one step further to signal their support for board diversity by stating in the position description the type of profiles and skillset they are seeking. Doing so provides a clear signal that the board values a diversity of perspectives, and will support candidates who can bring this value.

3. Consider options to support the advancement of women on boards. One option is for more regulators to consider a **women on boards quota**. While quotas are contentious due to perceived tokenism or viewed as a 'check the box' exercise, they can be effective with the right support in place. Norway was the first country to mandate a gender balance of 40% on public and private boards, and has met this target¹¹. The UAE is currently the only GCC country with a mandate of one woman on the board of listed and private joint-stock companies, and it has the highest representation of women on boards in the GCC¹².

Another option is for regulators to adopt a '**comply or explain**' approach, which is a voluntary target relating to women on boards that requires listed companies to comply with the target, or be required through mandatory reporting to explain why they have not complied. This model signals formal support, promotes transparency, and allows boards flexibility to work within their own needs, while also having to think critically about their approach to board composition and the ways in which they can achieve diversity that suits their mandate. This approach is taken in countries such as Canada and the United Kingdom¹³, which at time of publication have 30.5%¹⁴ and 43% representation of women on boards respectively.

Importantly, either approach should also be supported by a system of regulators, investors, boards, organizations, search firms, and director institutes working towards achievement of the target. To overcome barriers such as perceived tokenism or check-the-box compliance, either approach could be supported by a requirement for all directors to receive director training through an accredited qualification. In addition, recruitment through the use of a skills matrix would evaluate candidates against pre-defined and qualifying criteria to ensure that all board members, regardless of their characteristics, possess the necessary skills to contribute to board effectiveness.

Any target should consider going beyond one woman on the board towards at least 30% representation. This is the 'critical mass' at which an under-represented group can effectively move

Four key recommendations Continued

beyond tokenism towards the right conditions to add value and make change¹⁵.

4. Inclusive board dynamics led by the board chair are critical.

The board chair and other board members should support the success of all board members through a structured onboarding. Board culture is also a key responsibility of the chair, who should facilitate inclusive participation of all board

members. Inclusive participation is supported by keeping board discussions within the boardroom, including women in discussions that occur outside the boardroom, and/or updating all directors on discussions that occur outside the boardroom to facilitate their full participation in all critical discussions and decisions.



¹¹ Folkestad (2024): Reshaping boardrooms: research on gender quotas

¹² Securities and Commodities Authority (2025): Significant Increase in Women's Representation on Boards of UAE Public Joint-Stock Companies: A 200% Growth in Just Three Years

¹³ Reuters, 25 February 2025: Women now make up 43% of Britain's top boardrooms, report says

¹⁴ Osler (2025): Report: 2025 Diversity Disclosure Practices: Diversity and leadership at Canadian public companies

¹⁵ Oliver, Pamela (2022): Critical Mass Theory; The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Social and Political Movements

Conclusion

This exploratory research outlines 8 key findings from the experiences of women on boards in the GCC or who aspire to serve on boards in the GCC. It also outlines 4 key recommendations to support the advancement of women on boards in the region. These findings highlight that there is no one action that can be taken, but instead require several actions facilitated by a supportive system of regulators, investors, boards, organizations, director institutes, search firms, and individuals all working together towards the same goal of selecting the best people to contribute to board effectiveness. GCC Board Directors Institute invites key stakeholders who support board diversity to join us in our next steps to support the advancement of women on boards in the GCC.



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About GCC Board Directors Institute

GCC Board Directors Institute (GCC BDI) is a not-for-profit organisation that guides board directors of organisations, from family-owned businesses to listed companies, to acquire the know-how and tools to reach and sustain effective governance. GCC BDI is supported by nine leading regional corporations and professional services firms who serve as our strategic partners: First Abu Dhabi Bank, National Bank of Bahrain, Oman Investment Authority, SABIC, Saudi Aramco, A&O Shearman, Heidrick & Struggles, McKinsey & Company and PwC. We are also supported by a number of Corporate Affiliates – Elm, Nesma & Partners, stc group, Saudi Investment Bank, Tasnee and Vision Invest, as well as the regional regulatory authorities, including, among others, the Capital Market Authority of Saudi Arabia and the Saudi Central Bank (SAMA), the Securities and Commodities Authority of the UAE, the Capital Market Authority of Kuwait, the Central Bank of Bahrain and the Financial Services Authority of Oman.

GCC BDI's mission is to make a positive impact on the economies and societies of the region, by promoting professional directorship, good governance, and raising the level of board effectiveness. We are proud of our membership network which includes over 4,600 directors, board secretaries and business leaders across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries.

Our main objectives are:

- To enhance GCC board member capabilities and further their understanding of best practice board governance;
- To create a regional network of board members;
- To disseminate high-quality corporate governance knowledge; and
- To put corporate governance higher on the region's agenda.

Over the last 18 years, GCC BDI has grown to become the leading organisation in the region for board directors. We have delivered over 700 programmes and events to top-tier companies in the Gulf, and our 4,600 members, have extensive knowledge and experience of operating at the most senior levels of business in the GCC. Our member network is probably the most influential group of senior board directors and business leaders in the Gulf. Our members are our greatest ambassadors. We are highly regarded among the international community and are the only director institute in the GCC to have been admitted as a member of

the prestigious Global Network of Director Institutes. This is a network of 26 global institutes, which includes the Institute of Directors (IoD) in the United Kingdom, the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD), Hong Kong Institute of Directors (HKIoD), Institute of Corporate Directors (ICD) in Canada, Institute of Directors in New Zealand (IoDNZ), Singapore Institute of Directors, Institute of Directors in South Africa (IoDSA), and the National Association of Corporate Directors (NACD) in the United States, among others.

GCC BDI has a successful and proven track record of working with the top companies in the GCC. We work with a large and talented pool of high-calibre international, regional and local experts, providing a mix of best international practice and actual board experience, combined with specialist knowledge and experience of corporate governance and directors' issues in the Gulf. We would like to take this opportunity to thank all our founders, strategic partners and corporate affiliates for their collective collaboration and support in nurturing GCC BDI over the past 18 years and helping us to work toward achieving our mission.

GCC BDI has a unique combination of local experience and understanding, strong corporate governance and regulatory knowledge, practical director expertise, and tried and tested programmes. We look forward to continuing our mission to make a positive impact on the economies and societies of the region.

