

THE POWER OF CHOICE

Insights into women's employment
decisions and societal perspectives
in the United Arab Emirates

Study Summary



INTRODUCTION

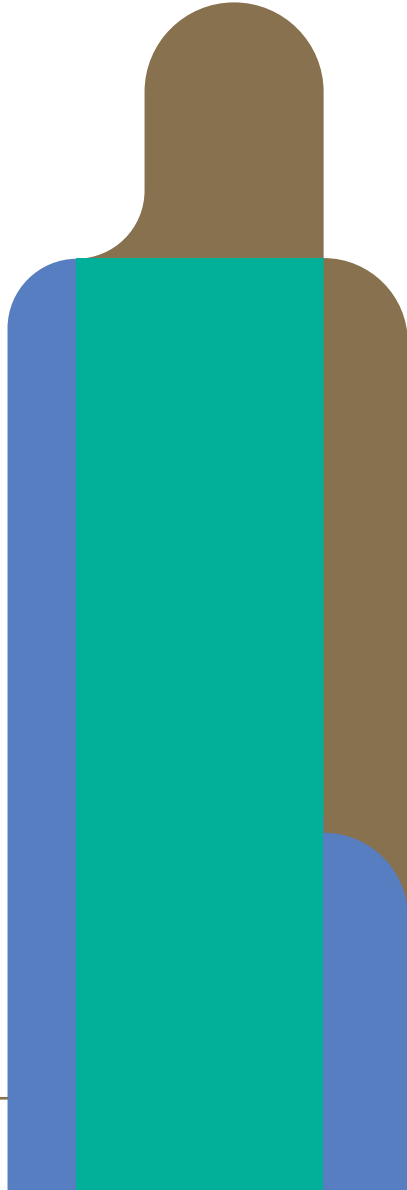
As Emirati society continues to evolve, understanding the aspirations of non-working Emirati women is essential for enabling all women in the UAE to contribute to society in whatever way they choose. Higher levels of educational attainment and supportive government policies provide national women with many choices. However, the relatively low proportion of working Emirati women is an area of concern for the UAE Government, which is looking at shaping policy to ensure that it does not discourage any woman who wishes to work from doing so.

Understanding the views, ambitions, and aspirations of non-working women is crucial to maximising their contributions to society. We chose the term 'Deciding Women' to describe the women in 'The Power of Choice' report because these women are currently unemployed and had already decided or were in the process of deciding whether or not to work. The findings of this study are derived from surveys and focus group data drawn from over 2,000 Emirati working and non-working women and Emirati men. To better understand Deciding Women and their attitudes toward employment, the study segments and analyses survey responses using Prochaska and DiClemente's Model of Change, the Transtheoretical Model of behavioural change (TTM).¹

1 Prochaska, J. and DiClemente, C. (1983) Stages and processes of self-change in smoking: toward an integrative model of change. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 5, 390-395.

80%

OF THE WOMEN IN OUR STUDY
HAVE AN INTEREST IN WORKING.
IT IS CLEAR FROM OUR FINDINGS
THAT THIS WORK MAY TAKE
MANY FORMS.



HIGHLIGHTS

ATTITUDES ARE SHIFTING

As the next generation of Emiratis evolves, so too does the thinking about what roles a woman can and should take on to contribute more widely to society. Women in leadership roles are valued by both men and women throughout the nation, and these roles can take many forms including volunteering in the community and participating in the labour force. Working outside of the home is becoming the norm for women throughout the UAE. In particular, younger women, who may have grown up with working female role models, are increasingly seeing work outside of the home as a desirable choice, given the right conditions. These shifts have placed today's Emirati woman in a powerful position: she can choose who she wants to be and how she wants to participate in society and the economy.

AMBITION FOR SUCCESS IN MULTIPLE ROLES

Emirati women feel empowered to make their own life choices. They have increasing aspirations for success in many roles: as wives and mothers, as career women, and as contributors to their community and country. These roles may differ at different life stages – for example, women tend to prioritise family when their children are young. They also value national and community service and want to leverage their education and entrepreneurial spirit for reasons such as self-fulfilment.

FAMILY IS IMPORTANT

Family remains at the core of an Emirati woman's life and identity, and her family plays a prominent role in her decisions. Those who are wives and mothers consider their life choices primarily in light of fulfilling their important family roles. Unmarried women's choices are most often shaped by their parents, while married women are most influenced by their husbands. A woman's openness to working outside of the home is also directly related to the role models she had growing up.

Emirati men are also influenced by the actions and attitudes of their family members. They hold similar attitudes towards working women as the men in their own families did while they were growing up. Our findings show that when men grow up in families where women work, they are more likely to have wives and sisters who also work.

A DESIRE FOR FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Over 80% of our study's Deciding Women have children. While being a wife and mother remain a priority, many want a successful career as well. Flexible working options, including part-time work, shorter work hours, and small business opportunities, are a necessity for these women to appropriately balance their work and family lives. Working in the private sector is also viewed as a viable option for many women, as it provides them with the opportunity to expand their horizons and exposes them to new skills, people, and working environments.

EMPOWERMENT THROUGH KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL BUILDING

Deciding Women are well-educated (47% have a Bachelor's degree or higher), yet they still value opportunities for continued learning. Deciding Women want skills training, career guidance, and particularly support for pursuing entrepreneurial ventures. If they choose to work, they prefer opportunities that leverage their education, which is primarily in business, education, and information technology.

A large graphic of the number 80 followed by a percentage sign, rendered in a thin, brown, sans-serif font.

OF DECIDING WOMEN HAVE CHILDREN

A large graphic of the number 47 followed by a percentage sign, rendered in a thin, brown, sans-serif font.

OF DECIDING WOMEN HAVE BACHELOR'S DEGREES OR HIGHER

WHO ARE THE DECIDING WOMEN?

Deciding Women are Emirati women who have either never worked or have worked in the past but not actively looked for work or held a job for a minimum of four months prior to this study. The Deciding Women in this report fall into the first three TTM stages, based on how they described themselves at the beginning of the study.

While none of the women in our study were working outside of the home, they vary in their attitudes towards considering paid employment; this differentiation is captured by the TTM stage segmentation.

20% of our respondents are not interested in working (Pre-contemplation), although they gave indications as the survey progressed that they might consider working under certain circumstances. The rest of the Deciding Women are interested in joining the labour force, although most (57%) have not yet taken steps to do so (Contemplation), and less than a quarter (24%) having taken active steps to achieve this goal (Preparation).

The majority of respondents live in the same Emirate in which they grew up. Of the 1,550 respondents

42%	25%	13%
LIVE IN ABU DHABI ²	LIVE IN DUBAI	LIVE IN SHARJAH

Figure 1.

The Transtheoretical Model and percentage of Deciding Women respondents in each stage



THE DECIDING WOMAN IN MODERN EMIRATI SOCIETY

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT

Emirati women's socio-economic development has kept pace with the UAE's upward developmental trajectory. Emirati women surpass their Arab states' counterparts along the United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) gender inequality indicators, and rate nearly equal to women in very high Human Development Index (HDI) countries. In 2016, the UAE ranked 42nd out of 188 countries on key economic, health, and education indicators for women.

MATERNAL HEALTH

The UAE's transformation into a developed, high-income nation, has been accompanied by improvements in health outcomes. The nation as a whole has benefited from the decline in child mortality, maternal mortality, and fertility rates. Moreover, the wider availability of quality healthcare has benefited women the most, with improved ante- and post-natal outcomes and overall better health outcomes for the children they raise. Combined with lower fertility rates and smaller families, more women are, in theory, able to explore more opportunities outside the home, such as advanced education, volunteering in the community, or paid employment.

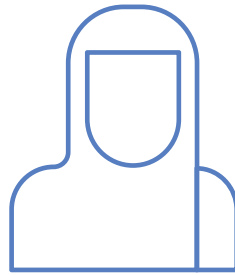
WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Emirati women enjoy access to wide-ranging educational opportunities from primary through tertiary education. In terms of higher education, Emirati women are amongst the most highly educated in the region.

Paradoxically, it has been shown that an inverse relationship exists between unemployment rates and education levels for women as compared to men in the UAE. (Strategy&, formerly Booz & Company, 2012), indicating that employment and education have different associations for women and men in the context of the UAE.

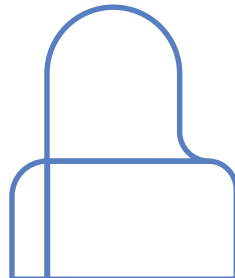
Previous research on Emirati women and work indicates other reasons for lower representation in the labour market to date:

- > Highly-educated Emirati women experience a disconnect between the roles they believe they are qualified for and the work conditions that often accompany such roles.
- > Decisions about work are influenced by family dynamics and reinforced by the collectivist Emirati culture.
- > There are a limited number of role models to help shape Emirati women's career decisions and expectations.



90%

OF NON-WORKING
MEN
Have a secondary or
lower education



90%

OF NON-WORKING
WOMEN
Have a secondary or
higher education

HER VIEWS ON HERSELF AND OTHER WOMEN WITHIN THE EMIRATI COMMUNITY

UNDERSTANDING THE MIND-SET OF THE DECIDING WOMAN

Psychological theories and prior research studies provide some insight into Deciding Women's ways of thinking.

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) and Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1982) help explain why some women choose not to work, especially during the family formation life stage, when their roles as wife and mother are a priority.

Behaviourist theories also play a role. Positive and negative reinforcement at a societal, cultural and policy level can either encourage or discourage employment-seeking behaviours. For example, limited maternity leave and inadequate childcare in some sectors act as negative reinforcements.

In this study's findings, younger women who grew up with working mothers or other female working role models, for example, are found to be increasingly seeking work outside of the home, given the right conditions.

This study finds limited evidence of strong patriarchal influence in shaping mind-sets

Although previous studies have highlighted the impact of paternalism in the UAE, there is limited evidence for its influence in this study. When asked who influences their decision about whether or not to work, respondents predominantly cite themselves as the main driver for this decision. Husbands and fathers play a role, but it is usually a supporting role and a small one at that.

PERSPECTIVES ON WORKING WOMEN VS. NON-WORKING WOMEN

When survey respondents were asked to describe working and non-working women, the adjectives they had used for working women convey a sense of strength and confidence, while adjectives for non-working women convey a sense of comfort, relaxation, and organisation.

It is clear that Emirati society values both these roles and their accompanying attributes. However, while there is admiration for Emirati female leaders in general, our study suggests there are still challenges in creating a family environment from which such leaders might emerge.

86%
OF DECIDING WOMEN

FEEL THAT THEIR FAMILIES WOULD NOT BE SUPPORTIVE OF THEIR LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS.

69%
OF THE MEN

IN OUR STUDY WOULD NOT ENCOURAGE THE LEADERSHIP ASPIRATIONS OF WOMEN IN THEIR OWN FAMILIES.

REASONS FOR ENTERING AND LEAVING THE WORKFORCE

EMIRATI MEN HAVE SIMILAR, BUT SLIGHTLY DIFFERENT, PERSPECTIVES. THOSE WITH WOMEN IN THEIR FAMILY WHO WORKED WHEN THEY WERE GROWING UP OR WITH WORKING WIVES OR SISTERS BELIEVE THAT WORKING WOMEN ARE

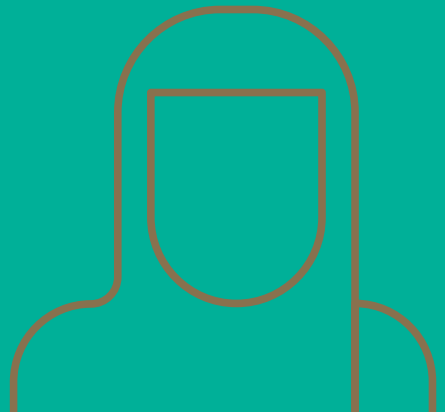
65%
CONTRIBUTING
TO SOCIETY

59%
BEING A ROLE
MODEL FOR THEIR
CHILDREN

33%
FEELING HAPPIER

30%
CONTRIBUTING
TO HOUSEHOLD
INCOME

28%
USING THEIR
EDUCATION



THE MOST FREQUENTLY CITED FACTORS FOR ENTERING INTO WORK ARE

73%

FINANCIAL INDEPENDENCE

60%

FULFILMENT

45%

AN OPPORTUNITY TO USE ONE'S EDUCATION

DECIDING WOMEN MOST FREQUENTLY CITED REASONS FOR LEAVING THE WORKFORCE AS BEING:

30%

UNSUITABLE WORK HOURS

20%

A JOB THAT IS ROUTINE IN NATURE

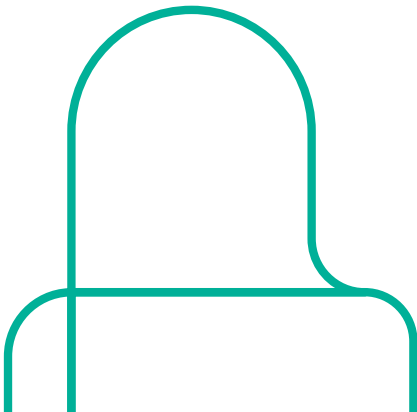
15%

A JOB THAT IS TOO DIFFICULT TO PERFORM

42%

BEING MARRIED WITH CHILDREN

The findings indicate that both Emirati Deciding Women and Emirati men feel that women have much to contribute outside the home. However, with family responsibilities and the unsuitability of working hours being the top reasons cited by men and women, respectively, there is a clear indication that their priorities remain firmly in the home.



HER VIEWS ON THE INFLUENCE OF FAMILY AND SOCIETY

While Deciding Women play pivotal roles in their families as wives and mothers, their families are also influential. To better understand their views on family size, the survey used Alibeli's (2014) Reproductive Attitudes and Behaviour Scale (RABS) to assess attitudes toward childbearing. RABS includes questions to determine how many children a woman currently has, how many more she would like to have, the ideal number of children for her as an individual, and the ideal number for Emirati women in general.

The RABS scores varied by TTM stage. Those in the Preparation stage had lower scores than either women in the Contemplation or Pre-contemplation stages. These findings suggest that employment has some correlation with an Emirati woman's attitude towards having children: women who work tend to have or desire fewer children on average than those who do not.

WHO ARE THE INFLUENCERS AND WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

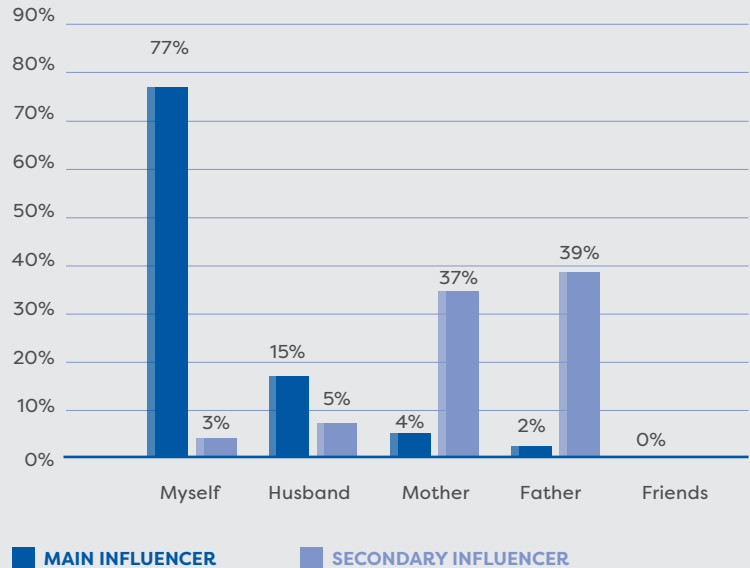
Deciding Women feel that they make their own decisions about whether or not to seek employment. However, the study finds that others within their social network can either support or deter them. Focus group findings reinforce the idea that parents play an important role in encouraging women to seek jobs. Several Deciding Women indicated that their mothers were highly influential, encouraging them to find employment before marriage so that it would be less of a challenge to obtain their husbands' approval to pursue a career once married. Furthermore, fathers play a much more significant role for single women, 23% of single women cited their fathers as an influence, compared to 8% who indicated their mothers. Husbands were the strongest secondary influence on married Deciding Women who chose not to work.

Figure 2.

Sources of influence for
Deciding Women

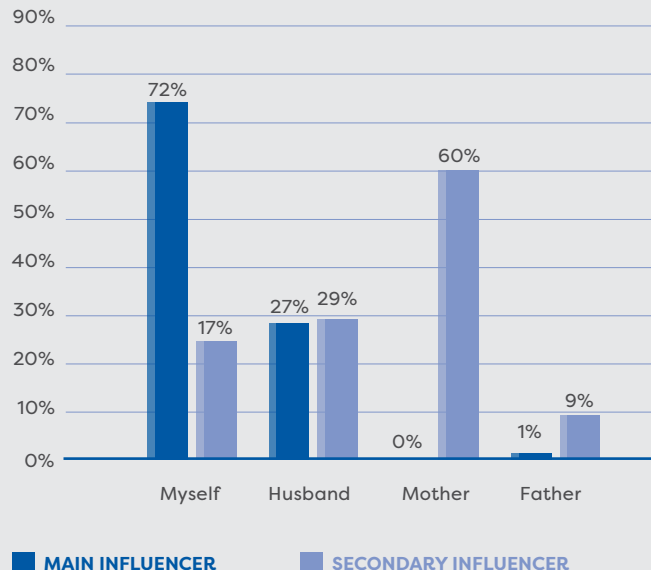
Deciding Women who seek employment

- 77% say they play the greatest role in their decision to seek employment
- Husbands are cited as the second major influence for choosing to work by 15% of our Deciding Women
- Parents are the most important secondary influencers, with mothers and fathers exerting similar influence (37% and 39%, respectively)



Deciding Women who do not seek employment

- 72% say they play the greatest role in their decision not to seek employment
- Husbands are cited as the second major influence for choosing to work by 27% of our Deciding Women
- Mothers are specifically the most important secondary influencer (60%)



There is a correlation between female workforce participation and observing other working women in the family when young. 45% of the Deciding Women in the study who had previously been in paid employment grew up seeing other women working, compared to 24% of those who worked without seeing other women doing so in their childhood.

The perspective from male focus group participants is that traditional gender roles make more sense for the good of society and that men are more productive, a fact not supported by the views of many employers.⁴ They also believe that there is little need for a woman to work if her husband can provide for her and their family. Our data suggests that there is a correlation between early exposure to working women in the family and whether men support working women in their own family spheres.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS WOMEN WHO WORK

The survey included questions that are part of the Multi-Dimensional Aversion to Women Who Work Scale (MAWWWS). The questions measure traditional role preferences and employment scepticism to determine how opposed a person is to working women. The survey findings are near the mid-point which shows that respondents hold relatively accepting attitudes towards working women. The attitudes for Deciding Women overall and Working Emirati women are more positive than those of older Emiratis ten years ago—it appears to be progressively more acceptable for women to work outside the home.

LIFE STAGES AND THE WORKING WOMAN

Family is important to shaping ideas for both Deciding Women and Emirati men. As women go through different life stages, different members of the family, mainly male, inform their decisions. There is support for working women in most life stages, although there is concern about women working when they have young children at home.

However, while our study's respondents are generally accepting of working women, there remains an underlying theme that indicates concerns about a working woman's ability to fulfil her traditional roles of wife and mother.

78%
OF MARRIED MEN

WHO HAD GROWN UP AROUND WORKING WOMEN HAVE WIVES WHO WORK

COMPARED TO

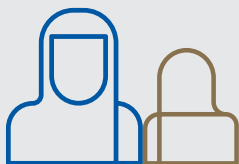
35%
OF MARRIED MEN

WHO HAD NO PREVIOUS EXPOSURE TO WORKING WOMEN IN THEIR FAMILIES.

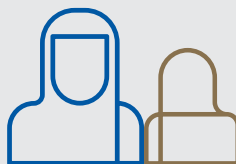
Figure 10.
Acceptance Levels among
Emirati men and Deciding
Women for women working
at various life stages



DIVORCED OR
WIDOWED



UNMARRIED



MARRIED WITHOUT
CHILDREN



MARRIED WITH
CHILDREN

EMIRATI MEN

98%

EMIRATI MEN

92%

EMIRATI MEN

83%

EMIRATI MEN

25%

DECIDING WOMEN

94%

DECIDING WOMEN

90%

DECIDING WOMEN

42%

DECIDING WOMEN

45%

DECREASING OVERALL ACCEPTANCE



HER VIEWS ON THE WORKPLACE

While only one-third of Deciding Women have worked in the past, most of the women in our study hold clear ideas about the workforce. The following list summarises the key findings:

- The majority of Deciding Women believe that there is a shortage of jobs linked to their educational qualifications and desired geographical location, as well as a shortage of part-time (54%) and private sector (58%) jobs.
- Running her own business and healthcare were the top two choices of the best types of jobs for Emirati women, and over half of the Deciding Women (54%) are interested in the armed forces.
- Once in the workforce, Deciding Women desire support for skills training (83%), starting a business (82%), and career guidance (81%).
- Deciding Women view working with expatriates positively, particularly those who have worked in the private sector previously. They are comfortable working in mixed-gender environments but prefer to work with Emirati, as opposed to expatriate men.
- They desire shorter work hours that better align with part-time work. Survey respondents suggest an optimal average workday of 6.44 hours (32.7 hours/week). Women who had never been married before are willing to work the longest hours (7 hrs/day and 35 hours/week).
- Trustworthy and affordable childcare is critical for many women who wish to pursue a career.

- Deciding Women, particularly those in Pre-Contemplation, respond positively to salary increases. 60% of Pre-Contemplation stage women, who had initially expressed no interest in working, are very likely to accept a job offer for 40,000 AED per month. Deciding Women in other TTM stages are also responsive to salaries, though at higher levels.
- They view private sector jobs as more interesting than public sector but see them as offering lower salaries and fewer career opportunities.
- Due to policy differences by sector, federal and Emirate-level government positions are typically more attractive to prospective Emirati employees than private sector positions.

Whilst our findings suggest an overall willingness of Deciding Women to enter and remain in the workforce, a lack of awareness about the options and many practical factors impact their decision to do so.



KEY AREAS OF FOCUS

In the final chapter, the study discusses areas that require sustained focus to best support Emirati women in achieving their goals for themselves, their families, their community, and country, whether they choose to work or not. Many of these areas are staple features of local and global discourse on women in the workforce. Although initiatives are currently underway in the UAE in a significant number of these domains, there needs to be a strengthening in the scale of implementation, continued debate, more innovative thinking, and increased engagement of relevant policymakers and thought leaders.

PRE-CONTEMPLATION STAGE

(Those not interested in working outside the home)

Recommendations include support for establishing small businesses, home-based work and improvements in health outcomes for their families and communities. Providing resources for women to explore entrepreneurship and small business ownership could be the first step to attract these women into the workforce. Examples include the Intilqa Programme run under Dubai SME and the Forsaty Programme. Encouragement and support to pursue community leadership roles could also further utilise the talents of women in this stage.

CONTEMPLATION STAGE

(Those who have an interest in working)

Contemplation stage women need more information and insight into the workforce and how to establish a career. Career guidance and



awareness building in secondary and higher education or helping these women understand the different sectors, industries, and opportunities that are available are ways to encourage them to take the next step.

Schools, colleges, and universities can play a role in addressing this gap, but this requires more than job fairs. Establishing an on-site career guidance office staffed by career counsellors with broad work experience and offering internship opportunities and mentoring programmes by working professionals can make a difference. PwC's Watani programme is a successful example of encouraging more young Emirati graduates to enter the private sector.

Other recommendations for this group include increasing options and awareness of more flexible working arrangements as well as launching public awareness campaigns on working life. Our study suggests that many Deciding Women in the Contemplation stage simply don't know where to go to discover more about working life or where and how they might contribute their energy and skills outside of the home.

PREPARATION STAGE

(Ready to take steps towards employment)

Women who intend to work need support for childcare. Corporate childcare facilities such as the Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA) Childcare Centre Service are successful examples that could be adopted by other employers. Other recommended initiatives include lactation rooms and optimised maternity leave benefits.

Many of the Preparation stage women have previously worked. Re-entry training provides a solid foundation upon which these women can build both skills and confidence and find a suitable way to resume their careers. Providing such training can be a challenge for smaller employers, and incentives may be necessary. Alternatively, this responsibility can be assumed by non-governmental bodies, training institutes, or professional associations.

