

NEW FINANCE PATHWAYS OPENED FOR SAUDI BUSINESS WOMEN

Localization strategies support investment and employment opportunities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

By Melissa Goertzen, Staff Writer

Industry giants [Saudi Aramco](#), [GE](#) and [Tata Consultancy Services \(TCS\)](#) announced a joint venture to launch the first all-female business process services center located in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. It is estimated that the project will create more than 3,000 jobs for professional women working in human resources, accounting, finance, and supply chain management services. The announcement reflects the growing commitment in Saudi Arabia's localization strategies to diversify the Kingdom's economy and enable the growth of a viable employment sector.

During the launch ceremony held in Dhahran, Chairman and CEO of GE, [Jeffrey Immelt](#), spoke with the Saudi Gazette about his commitment to the program: "GE is partnering with the Kingdom in helping to achieve their social and economic growth aspirations and goals. Today, Saudi Arabia is placing high emphasis on creating jobs for its youth and women and we are proud to be supporting female employment opportunities in the Kingdom, offering placement opportunities and world class training programs."

The three stakeholders agree that supporting female professionals will contribute to long-term economic progress in the country. In the coming years, they will partner with Saudi universities to launch specialized training programs that further promote the development of business-related skill sets and job creation within the region.

New Opportunities for Women Entering the Workforce

Saudi Aramco, GE and TCS are not alone in their plans to provide employment opportunities to women. Rather, their work points to larger economic trends and business strategies moving across the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

A growing number of retail shops are staffed by female employees. Their roles within these operations are diverse and include postings as cashiers, sales representatives, and accountants. These workers are equipped with skills that promote sales and have a positive impact on customer satisfaction; many are bilingual and have an in-depth knowledge of customer relations. Retail managers found that hiring female staff, particularly in shops that feature women's products, resulted in increased sales.

The [Arab News](#) reported that women are now assigned with responsibilities previously reserved for male employees. For instance, at commercial malls women were seen closing shop at 2:30 p.m. in accordance with Ramadan timing. During an interview with the Arab News, an employee at the mall said, "a woman closing a store is just about a change in mindset. This is an ordinary job in today's technological age. We have automatic electrical shutters that roll down at a click. Anybody can click a button and it should not be gender specific."

The Growth of Women-Only Banking and Investment Services

The trend towards female sales representatives serving female customers is not confined to retail environments. Financial institutions discovered that hiring professional women in service and accounting roles has attracted a large female client base.

A report published by the [Boston Consulting Group](#) stated that women in the Middle East control \$500 billion, or 22 percent, of the region's total assets. In the United Arab Emirates (UAE) alone, a third of women-owned businesses generate over \$100,000 a year. In comparison, only 12 percent of female entrepreneurs in the United States clear this mark on an annual basis. Unlike their American counterparts, women working in the UAE tend to focus on [investments](#) within the Gulf Arab region because they know the market and find it accessible. Many desire sophisticated banking services aimed at high-level investments. However, female investors struggle with service barriers because traditionally, financial advisory roles have been assigned to men. It is counter to Islamic principles for women to discuss finances with men outside of family circles.

To bolster the economy, financial institutions in Saudi Arabia are working to remove this barrier. For instance, the [National Commercial Bank](#) created 46 women-only branches and the firm [Al Rajhi Capital](#) created the Ladies Wealth Management Division for female investors. All services are targeted towards women who wish to diversify investments and build wealth.

While the new economic environment is opening the door to female investors, analysts say that the development of desirable services will require more women in senior level positions in the banking industry. [Nida Raza](#), Director of Capital Markets at the Bank of Alkhair, said that many female clients are interested in programs that benefit families, and the development of venture capital funds that invest in Islamic pensions or education funds would be attractive to this demographic.

A female client at the National Commercial Bank spoke with the [Saudi Gazette](#) about investments she made on behalf of her two-year-old daughter: “I’m thinking of just opening an account for her right now, but maybe in the future, I can help her open a business as well. Maybe she’ll be a future financial advisor.”

The increasing number of finance services targeted towards women, as well as new career aspirations for the next generation, signal the continued growth of finance and employment opportunities for female professionals in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. As the country continues to focus its strategic efforts on localizing business and production, there is little doubt that women will play a role in strengthening the economy.