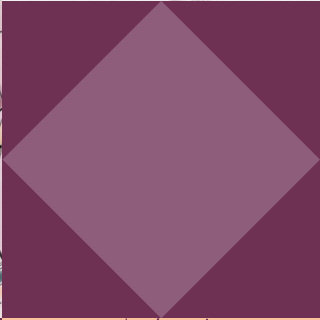
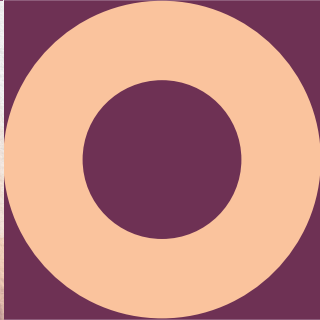
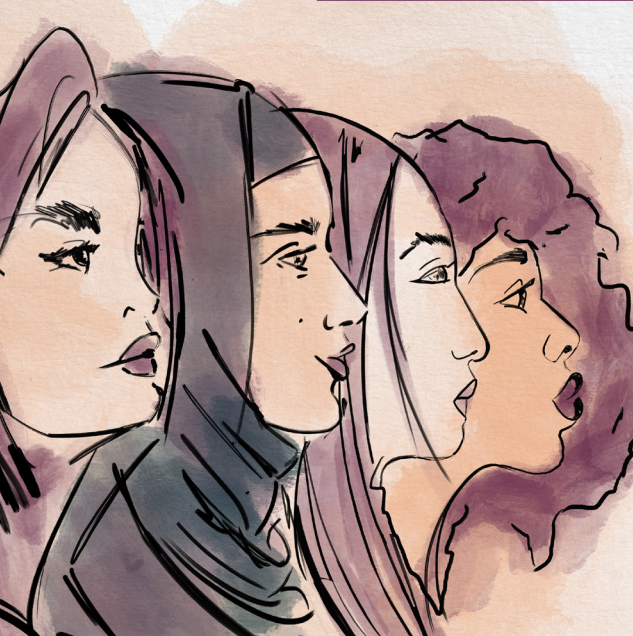




# Women in Fashion: The Changing Dynamics of Executive Leadership

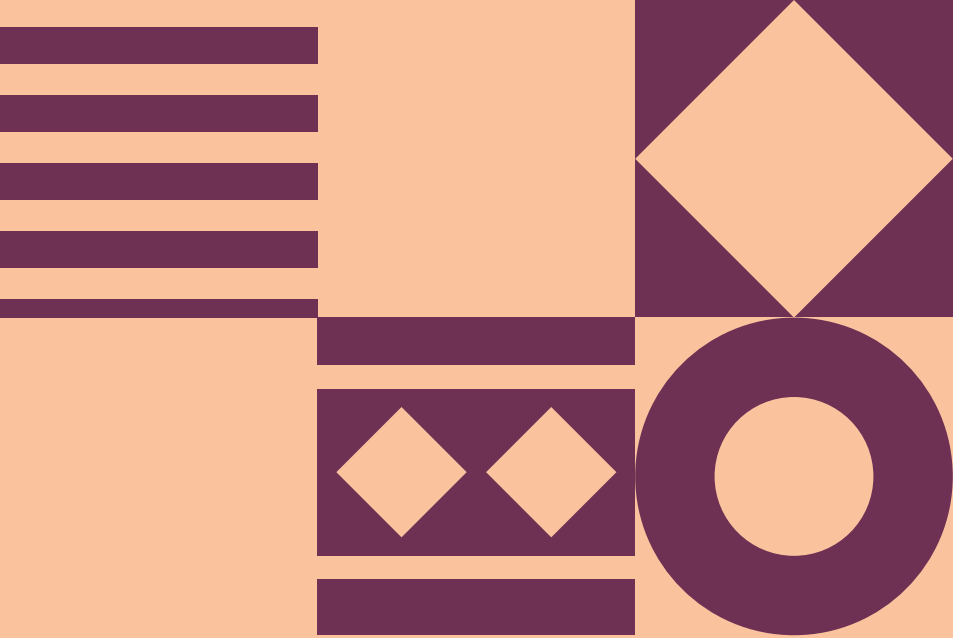


# **Women in Fashion:** **The Changing** **Dynamics of** **Executive Leadership**



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# Executive Summary

The Saudi fashion landscape is changing rapidly. One of the key developments is the growing participation of women in the workplace. Following global trends, women are moving into leadership roles across the Saudi fashion eco-system, including in education, design, manufacturing, and retail.

Greater levels of representation empowers professional women, in line with the aspirations of the Kingdom's Vision 2030. Female leadership also substantially strengthens the emerging fashion value chain in Saudi Arabia. This is consistent with the evidence on the effect of women leadership in business globally, and the fashion industry more specifically. International data <sup>1</sup> reveals that fashion firms led by women are, on average, more profitable than competitors, while both the academic literature <sup>2</sup> and stakeholder interviews suggest that inclusive leadership teams are better at navigating challenges and realising opportunities than teams comprised solely of men. The Saudi Fashion Commission has compiled this important paper to analyse these trends in the Kingdom's fashion industry, alongside work done by other national fashion industry bodies like the British Fashion Council, The Council of Fashion Designers of America, and the Camera Nazionale della Moda Italia.

"As we navigate the evolving Saudi fashion scene, it's crucial to acknowledge the profound impact of female leadership. Empowering women throughout the fashion industry not only supports Vision 2030 but also cultivates a robust ecosystem that fuels both creativity and profitability. Let's advocate for diversity, embrace inclusion, and pave the path for a future where every voice and talent is esteemed."

**Burak Cakmak,**  
CEO, Saudi Fashion  
Commission

Internationally, there are 430 million people working in fashion <sup>3</sup>, with women comprising 80% (344 million) of apparel and textile workers <sup>4</sup>. Moreover, at the leading fashion schools globally, 85% of students majoring in fashion are women <sup>5</sup>. Yet most global fashion entities are far from reaching equality in positions of leadership, with women accounting for just 37% of executive positions in European fashion companies, and only 28% of C-suite roles in North America <sup>6</sup>. Additionally, only 12.5% of the fortune 1000 apparel companies are led by women <sup>7</sup>.

In 2022, the Saudi Arabian fashion industry employed 119,600 women, which constituted 52% of the total fashion workforce <sup>8,9</sup>. Female representation in "C-suite" leadership is seen in only one of the three large fashion retail companies headquartered in the Kingdom. Overall, only 11 industry leadership positions were held by women in 2023. Across all industries, Saudi Arabia is however making strong progress with female participation in the workplace, increasing from 22% in 2018 to 34% in 2022 <sup>10</sup>; surpassing its Vision 2030 goal. If female participation continues to increase at its current rate of progress, it is expected to boost the Kingdom's GDP by 3.5%, or USD39 billion by 2032 <sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, the proportion of women in managerial positions in all industries in Saudi Arabia has also grown substantially, increasing from 7.9% of management in 2018 to 19.5% in 2022 <sup>12</sup>. There is an excellent opportunity to build off this momentum, particularly in the fashion industry, which opens a range of leadership opportunities for the large number of female professionals graduating from leading institutions annually. This paper argues for a focus on four areas to support the continued positive transformation of the Saudi fashion eco-system:

- 1. Create and publicise leadership role models for young Saudi women entering the fashion labour market.**
- 2. Establish goals to increase female representation in leadership, and transparently measure progress of female leadership in roles across the fashion eco-system.**
- 3. Maintain support for existing programmes that encourage professional women to participate in the labour market.**
- 4. Encourage leading fashion firms operating in Saudi Arabia to develop and promote female professionals by celebrating progress made.**

As the global fashion ecosystem experiences volatility, increasing roles for women through enhanced education, inclusive recruitment processes, and on the job skills development are key. These interventions are also required to maintain the positive momentum experienced in the Kingdom over the last few years; and to ensure the fashion industry continues to support growing gender equality. This is for the benefit of men and women, and the broader Saudi economy - particularly as the local, regional, and global fashion economies are expected to grow substantially over the next few years.

# The dynamic landscape of the fashion ecosystem

## Women in the global fashion ecosystem: a brief history



**Women have always played a crucial role in the global fashion industry.**

The rise of the industrial revolution in England in the late 1700s and early 1800s resulted in the large-scale

employment of women as yarn spinners and textile weavers<sup>13</sup>. Given the societal dynamics of that era, there were almost no opportunities for women to move up into management roles or ownership<sup>14</sup>. Yet, despite severe societal restrictions, women steadily carved a path towards influence in the

emerging fashion world. The impact of the two World Wars resulted in women taking up roles that were previously dominated by men, paving the way for greater acceptance that women could play leading roles in high value-adding industries. The mid-20th century also saw the rise of leading female luxury



designers such as Gabrielle Bonheur (“Coco”) Chanel, founder of Chanel, and Elsa Schiaparelli, founder of the house of Schiaparelli <sup>15</sup>. These icons innovated in fashion excellence and business acumen, achieving global fashion success.

The location of production and design also started shifting from the mid-20th century. Improving communication technologies and logistics networks meant that production no longer needed to take place near where garments were sold <sup>16</sup>. Thus, fashion design and manufacturing, which had predominantly been undertaken in Europe, shifted around the world. In particular, the manufacturing of textiles and the sewing of garments moved to low cost, developing economy locations. These manufacturers largely employed women, most of whom were first generation factory workers, and therefore

at the vanguard of the social changes that would follow in these economies.

As the fashion ecosystem entered the 21st century the number of female executives, designers, and entrepreneurs surged: Miuccia Prada, Donatella Versace, Carolina Herrera, Diane von Furstenberg, Vera Wang, and Stella McCarthy became household names <sup>17</sup>. Beyond global and more niche fashion brands, women also entered key roles in fashion publishing, notably Anne Wintour as Editor-in-Chief of Vogue <sup>18</sup>. These women are but a few examples of the changing faces of the fashion ecosystem.

In 2019, apparel companies had the largest share of women joining as CEOs relative to industries such as real estate, financial services, or food <sup>19</sup>. In 2019, 67% of new CEO hires

in apparel companies were women<sup>20</sup>, as illustrated in the below figure. This is a substantial increase from 2018’s figure of 25% <sup>21</sup>. As access to education has increased, and businesses have recognised the importance of diversity and inclusion to their future success, a range of employment opportunities have been created for women. As women have thrived in the new opportunities that have been created, a positive cycle of growth and development has occurred, resulting in a transformation of the fashion industry. However, the fashion industry still has a lot of work to do to improve gender equality at the most senior level of organisations, with research revealing how women remain underrepresented at the board and executive levels of the largest fashion companies <sup>22</sup>.

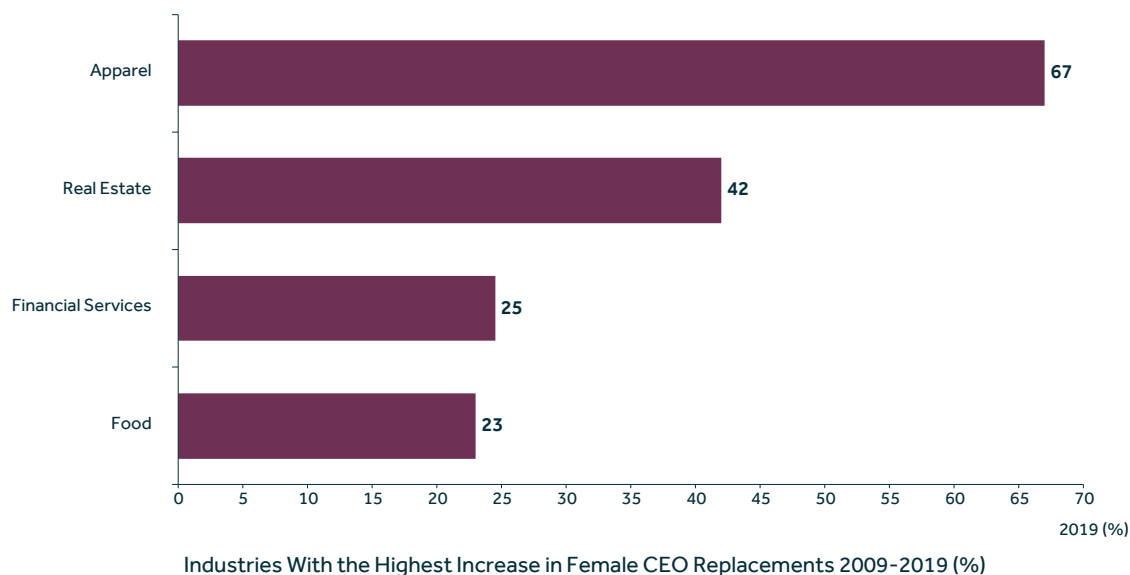


FIGURE 1  
Share of women joining as CEOs, 2019 (%).

SOURCE: CHALLENGER, GRAY & CHRISTMAS (2019)

# The global fashion leadership landscape



## Key insights

- Approximately **344 million women** work in fashion and textile production globally, making up 80% of apparel and textile workers
- A full **85% of students** majoring in fashion at the leading fashion schools globally are women
- Women occupy **37% of executive positions** in European fashion companies, and **28% of C-suite positions** in North America
- Only **12.5%** of apparel and retail apparel companies in the Fortune 1000 are led by women, compared to **20%** in the utilities, aerospace, and defence industries
- Gender diverse companies outperform less diverse organisations, sometimes by as much as **50%**

## Breaking barriers: women's workforce presence in the global fashion industry

Research conducted by the British Fashion Council found that women make up a large share of the industry's employment<sup>23</sup>.

An estimated 430 million people work in fashion and textile production<sup>24</sup>, with 80% of these

workers being women<sup>25</sup>. This equates to 344 million women working in fashion and textile production. A review of the leading fashion schools globally also points to a high share of women majoring in fashion: a full 85%<sup>26</sup>.

**80%**  
of people working  
in fashion and  
textile production  
are women



## Mapping women's impact in global fashion leadership

When it comes to senior leadership roles in fashion companies, women account for 37% of executive and 39% of board positions in Europe<sup>27</sup>.

In comparison, a study conducted on 276 organisations across North America found

that women account for 28% of C-suite positions<sup>28</sup>. Similarly, recent PwC research<sup>29</sup> revealed that only 12.5% of apparel companies in the Fortune 1000 are led by women, compared to 20% in the utilities, aerospace, and defence industries.

**12.5%**  
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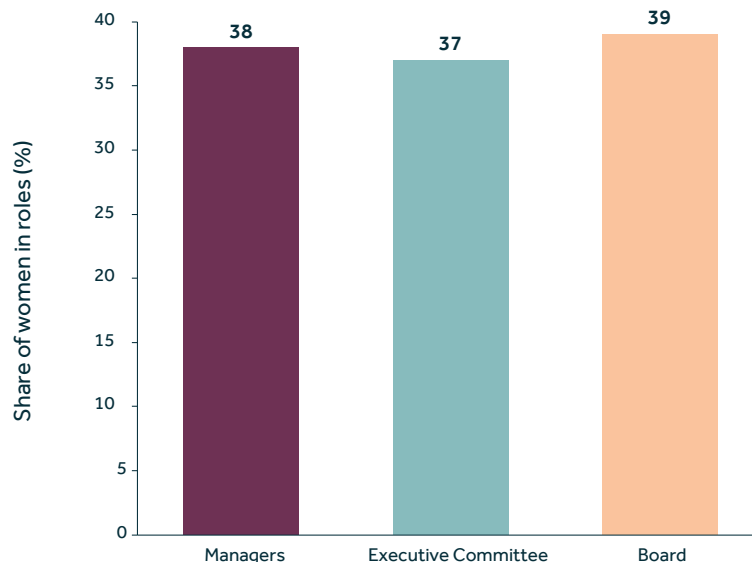


FIGURE 2  
Share of women in fashion leadership positions, 2022.

SOURCE: BRITISH FASHION COUNCIL (2022)

## A global perspective on opportunities and challenges for women in fashion leadership

Research on industry diversity, equity, and inclusion emphasises that gender equity should be a business imperative.

Gender diverse companies outperform less diverse organisations, sometimes by as much as 50%<sup>30</sup>. For example, PwC research<sup>31</sup> has revealed that women-led apparel companies (including retailers) in the Fortune 1000 were twice as profitable as

their counterparts led by men.

The benefits to increasing female participation in senior management levels was a theme that consistently emerged during interviews with leading female executives



in the global fashion industry. Arzu Ensari, previous Senior Director for George at Asda (whose wide range of products include apparel), explains: "In my direct experience, when women participate in the C-suite alongside their male counterparts, richer discussion and decision-making ensues. We often have different perspectives to those of our male colleagues, giving the company a real edge when it needs to deal with a complex challenge or opportunity". Judy Liu, an independent Board Member and President of Farfetch in Greater China and Asia Pacific expands on the benefits of female leadership: "As female leaders, we possess distinctive advantages in leadership, notably empathy, a critical skill for effectively managing the new generation. While overseeing day-to-day operations, it is imperative to maintain a strategic mindset. This involves identifying the significant aspects, letting

go of minor details, and simplifying complexity. Striking a balance between empathetic leadership and strategic focus positions us to thrive in the dynamic landscape of modern management."

While many young female professionals enter the fashion industry annually, and are typically as ambitious as their male colleagues, there is a shift towards greater work-life balance as promotions take place, and home responsibilities increase.

**As the principal carers in society, the pull to ensure work commitments do not overwhelm broader family and social responsibilities often leaves women professionals in a quandary.**

How to push for senior leadership positions, often in competition with men, when more work sacrifices are required to earn C-suite positions and an opportunity to lead businesses? This can cause a drop off in aspirations for C-suite positions by women, resulting in women either exiting the fashion industry, or occupying specialist fashion positions (such as design) that often provide a better balance of social and work responsibilities. In this way, the fashion industry loses some of its future powerhouses for business growth, and brand and product development. Leaders like Barbara Colarusso, Global Brand Director for Nayomi, having carved out an impressive career in fashion alongside her personal responsibilities, believe that women don't have to make a choice between family and career.

Breaking into the C-suite of fashion businesses can be a challenge for highly competent women professionals, but certainly a challenge that can be overcome. Those that have done so, such as Arzu as well as Aysin Bicioglu, Chief Concept Officer at Penti, a global lingerie brand, emphasise that their personal journeys were challenging, but that success was achieved through perseverance, a belief in their capabilities, and most importantly, the value creation they demonstrated within their organisations. This is a common theme amongst the fashion leaders interviewed, and the reason women are often successful once occupying C-suite positions: an intrinsic determination to create value and prove their worth. Aysin told us "as one of the only women executives, I was keenly aware I

was being closely evaluated, and this made me determined to prove my worth. This translated into several successful projects that I was immensely proud of". However, the challenges experienced by female leaders do not end once a C-suite position has been secured. In fact, the opposite often occurs: the pressure of balancing work and societal expectation remain, and, in many cases, appear to be amplified.

## Women often attain C-suite promotions when their parents are aging, partners have their own work pressures, and children are school-going.

These pressures require a careful balancing act for female leaders. However, it is this balancing that many believe make them more effective as leaders. Interviews emphasise five points here:

- **Coaching, mentorship and 'sponsorship' are identified as key support structures.** Having a coach and a mentor is important, but according to Fiona Lambert, current President of The Twenty Club, having someone who recommends you and mentions your name while networking; what she refers to as 'sponsors', is equally import. Fiona has extensive experience in leadership, having held executive positions in a variety of fashion companies such as River Island and George at Asda. "Female leaders having sponsors and mentors is really important, and people often don't realize they need both."
- **By undergoing the personal and professional journeys that they have, women fashion leaders have a clear perspective of, and empathy for, the challenges experienced by their female team members.** Understanding the tensions between work pressures and social responsibilities allows for honest discussions on how to manage tight deadlines and deliver excellence, while not over-burdening team members. Unsurprisingly, this allows both men and women team members to flourish.
- **When space is created for team members to flourish, they tend to stay with the organisations for longer periods, thereby reducing attrition, and improving institutional memory within organisations.** The benefit of a more stable workforce enables more rapid learning, and the ability of teams to better understand constantly changing markets, and design and technology trends.
- **By demonstrating inclusivity at the most senior level of the organisation, perceptions of a "fabric or glass ceiling" are removed.** This supports culture change within teams. When excellence is both recognised and rewarded irrespective of an individual's gender, the full ambit of creativity is unleashed within the team. The opportunity to progress based on demonstrated contributions creates a reinforcing cycle of contributions that propels learning and that empowers individuals to understand the key opportunities and challenges fashion organizations must constantly contend with.
- **The typically more nurturing leadership style of women in complex, high-pressure environments provides psychological safety for team members who may be struggling with anxiety in the face of "VUCA" conditions.** As highlighted by Aysin, "when the path forward is clear, team members want to be left to do their job; but when it isn't, they need to be supported, even nurtured, made to feel safe in making their decisions".

## How fashion economies are empowering diversity

**The British Fashion Council (BFC) has a strong focus on diversity and inclusion, with female leadership an important component of this focus.**

In a 2022 MBS Group report<sup>32</sup> commissioned by the BFC, several important lessons were noted in respect of enhancing female leadership in the fashion industry. These ranged from the importance of firms' attracting and then developing diverse staff; firms' prioritising action over statements of intent; and most importantly firms' measuring progress across the leadership tiers of their organisation. By making these figures transparent, and by establishing subsidiary organisations such as The Institute for Positive Change, which focuses on environmental and social transformation, the BFC is putting fashion industry change at the forefront of its support for the United Kingdom fashion industry.

A total of 80% of The Council of Fashion Designers of America, Inc. (CFDA) scholarships in 2021 and 2022 were awarded to women<sup>33</sup>, suggesting it follows a similar approach to the BFC in supporting the attraction and then development of women in the fashion industry. Diversity and inclusion is similarly being driven as a core institutional focus area by the Italian fashion body, the Camera Nazionale della

Moda Italia. From scholarships to secure greater representation, to open forums that engage on diversity challenges and opportunities, and formal subsidiary programmes focused on unlocking greater levels of diversity and inclusivity, it is clear that the world's leading fashion economies are embracing the need for change in the fashion industry.



## Global insights: learning from the world's collective experience

The World Benchmarking Alliance's annual Gender Benchmark compares 112 companies from across the apparel, food, and agricultural sectors. The benchmark assesses each company's policies, processes, and practices

in driving gender inclusion in the workplace. Out of a score of 100, the average for these 112 companies was a score of 23<sup>34</sup>. As illustrated in the figure below the top performing apparel companies were the VF Corporation (owners of

brands such as North Face, Vans, Timberland and Supreme), The Kering Group (owners of brands such as Gucci, Balenciaga and YSL) and Inditex (parent company to Zara), that all scored above average.



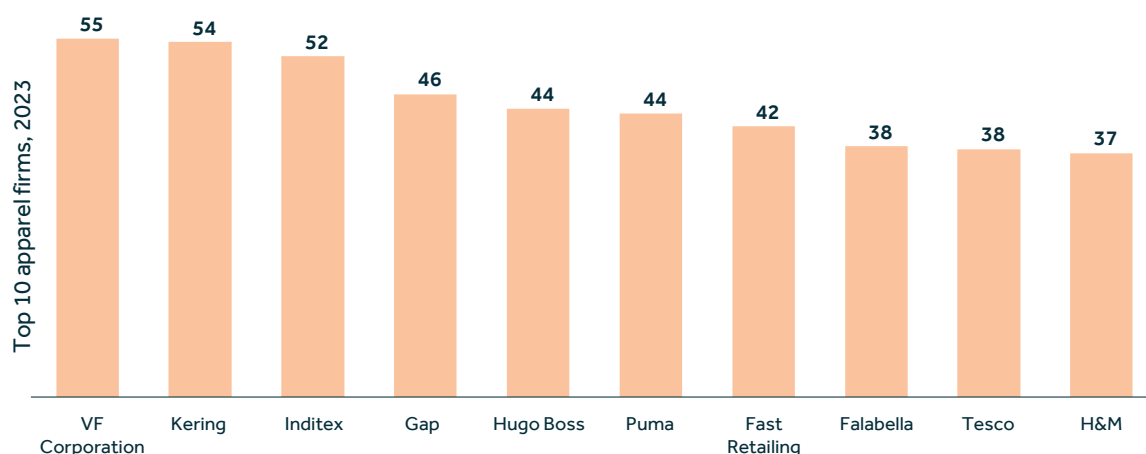


FIGURE 3:

**Global Gender Benchmark's assessment scores for the top 10 apparel firms, 2023, of how each company's policies, processes, and practices in driving gender inclusion in the workplace (out of a possible score of 100).**

SOURCE: GLOBAL GENDER BENCHMARK (2023)

**A key difference in respect of the fashion industry relative to other industries is the mismatch between the large number of female professionals entering the industry and the disproportionately low number of senior female executives.**

The benefits of promoting women to C-suite positions has been shown, so why does this not happen more? And more importantly, what are the lessons for the emerging Saudi fashion industry as a vehicle for female empowerment in the Kingdom? The literature and the Saudi Fashion Commission interviews point to several lessons.

The PwC study highlighted above noted several barriers faced by women globally, including unconscious bias, societal constraints, and a disparity of

opportunities as people progress through their careers<sup>35</sup>. This includes the fact that more men than women are often admitted to executive training programs. Other obstacles include institutional "blind spots" with respect to unconscious biases by men-dominated leadership teams, and the absence of appropriate support structures for women<sup>36</sup>.

Companies can break this cycle by formulating and implementing family-friendly policies that promote a positive work-life balance<sup>37</sup>. Companies should also work to address unconscious biases, eliminate opportunity discrimination, and strive for gender equality on their boards<sup>38</sup>. Companies can reassess their hiring and on-the-job training processes, ensuring that both men and women have equal opportunities and training to advance their careers<sup>39</sup>. A case example of a company that has sought to address such issues is the LVMH Group, which established a program to

support high-potential women and nurture them into senior leadership roles<sup>40</sup>. The group reported a substantial 21% increase in the proportion of women in key positions from 2007 to 2021, resulting in a Gender Equality Index score of 92 out of 100<sup>41</sup>.

In recent years, the global fashion industry has been increasingly influenced by the changing values of society and the impact of social media, prompting a focus on the principles of diversity, inclusivity, and equality<sup>42</sup>. This is not only positive news from an inclusivity perspective; it also suggests the fashion industry is more likely to effectively grapple with the uncertainties of "Destination Unknown".

As the global fashion industry moves towards a stronger, more inclusive, and more durable leadership structure, how does the Saudi fashion industry look in relation to global and regional trends?

# Leading elegance: women executives in Saudi fashion



## Key insights

- Participation rate by women in the labor force across all industries has increased rapidly in recent years; from **22%** in 2018 to **34%** in 2022 <sup>43</sup>
- If women participation continues to increase at its current rate, it is expected to boost the Kingdom's GDP by **3,5%**, or USD39 billion by 2032 <sup>44</sup>
- The proportion of women in managerial positions in all industries in Saudi Arabia has increased from only **7.9%** of total employed in management in 2018 to **19.5%** in 2022
- The fashion industry employed 119,600 women in 2022, making up **52%** of the fashion workforce
- Women representation in the C-suite was observed in only one of the three large fashion retail companies. Women representation stood at **13%** and **11%** in 2022 and 2023 respectively



## Women in the Saudi fashion ecosystem: a brief history

As part of Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is focused on raising the participation rate of women in the labor force.

Saudi Arabia is actively encouraging women to take on leadership roles across a variety of industries, including fashion. Historically, women in Saudi have played a role in home-industries, dyeing garments, and making and repairing clothing and embroidery. Presently,

Saudi women are active as seamstresses, designers, buyers, and leaders across the full fashion ecosystem – from manufacturing through to retail. The role of women in fashion has evolved, resulting in increasing levels of leadership responsibility.

## Unpacking the data: Saudi's fashion executive leadership

Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, has a clear goal: to achieve a 30% female participation rate in the labour force across all industries by 2030.

And yet, by 2021, Saudi Arabia had already achieved this, with the participation rate increasing rapidly in recent years; from 22% in 2018 to 34% in 2022<sup>45</sup> (see Figure 4 below). This has

been achieved through a range of efforts by the government to enhance women's rights and to establish support systems that encourage greater levels of female participation in the Saudi labour force. In 2022, over 1.4 million women were employed in the Kingdom<sup>46</sup>. If female participation continues to increase at its current rate of progress, it is expected to boost the Kingdom's GDP by 3.5%, or USD39 billion by 2032 according to S&P Global Ratings<sup>47</sup>. In addition to the participation rate

increasing, the proportion of the total labour force that is women has experienced a substantial increase recently, from 15% in 2018 to 19% in 2022<sup>48</sup> (see Figure 4 below). The proportion of women in managerial positions in Saudi Arabia has also grown, increasing from only 7.9% of management in 2018 to 19.5% in 2022<sup>49</sup> (see Figure 5 below). This represents a substantial increase of 147%<sup>50</sup>. It is also bringing Saudi Arabia closer to the global benchmark of ~28%<sup>51</sup> (see Figure 5 below).

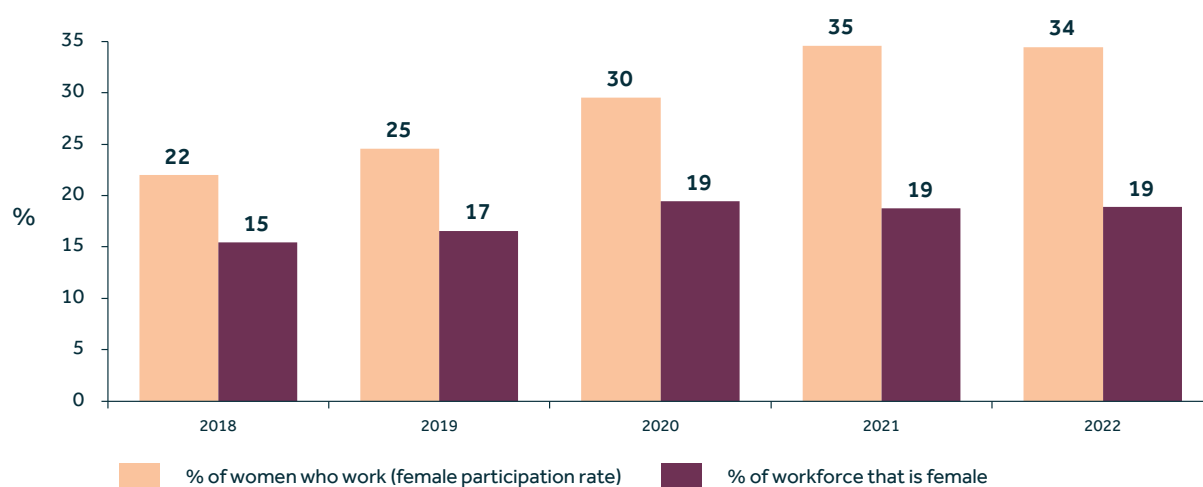


FIGURE 4  
Participation rate by women in the labour force and the proportion of the total labour force that is female in Saudi Arabia, 2018-2022.

SOURCE: WORLD BANK (2023)

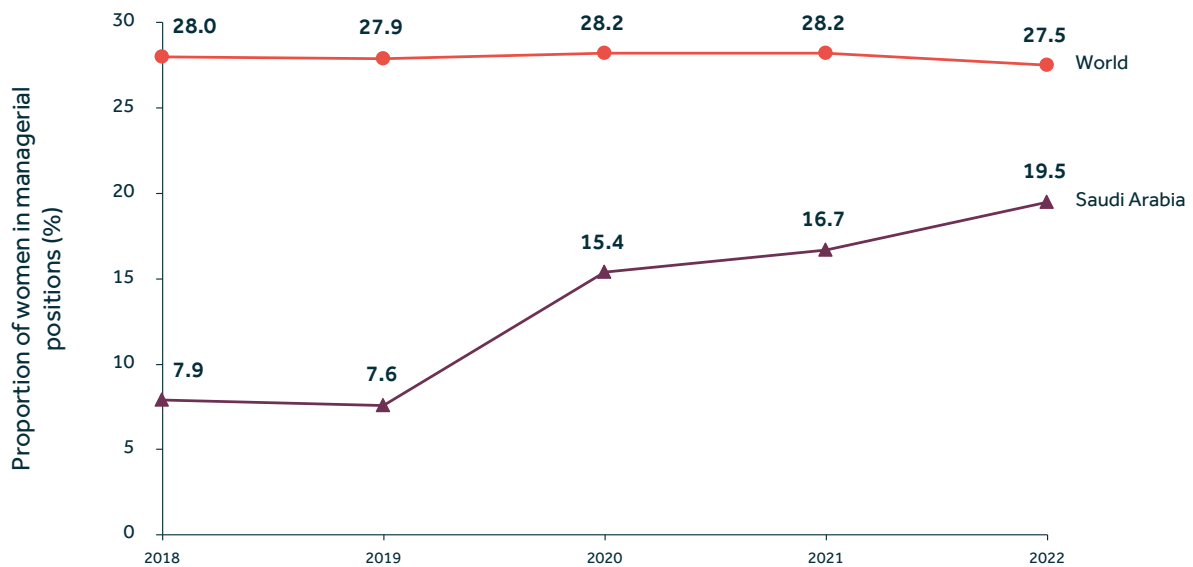


FIGURE 5  
Proportion of women in managerial positions for Saudi Arabia and the world, 2018-2022.

SOURCE: INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION (2023)

The role of women in the Saudi economy is rapidly shifting, both in terms of active labour market participation, and increasingly in terms of managerial roles. The shift from 2018 to 2022 has been dramatic, suggesting a major structural change in the economy, and the unleashing of the Kingdom's full human potential. It is within this context that we specifically explore female representation and leadership in Saudi's emerging fashion sector.

This section of the paper will explore how this representation has changed over time as well as what the literature and interviews with female leaders reveal as major opportunities and challenges, and how these have been catalysts for positive change. Qualitative insights were gathered from interviews with four Saudi women in executive leadership positions in fashion. Quantitative insights were gathered using publicly available

data of representation across senior managerial positions (Presidents, Vice Presidents, Directors, and C-suite) in the nine largest fashion retail companies in the Middle East, as ranked by Forbes<sup>52</sup>, encompassing six firms from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and one each from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Lebanon. The study was expanded to include two large retail firms from Saudi Arabia, based on the availability of publicly accessible data for these firms. Data for these large retail firms were drawn from representation in the senior managerial positions at the group level of the company and did not include at the level of the brands managed by franchise holders.

The fashion industry in Saudi Arabia currently supports 230,000 jobs<sup>53</sup>. In 2022, the fashion sector in Saudi Arabia showed broadly equal gender representation, with women making up 52% of the

workforce<sup>54,55</sup>. This suggests the fashion industry employed 119,600 women in 2022. For the Saudi Arabian company Kamal Osman Jamjoom, 70% of their workforce are Saudi Nationals, 'most of whom are women'<sup>56</sup>. Overall, the proportion of female employees in the fashion industry is far higher than the national average across all industries, indicating the important role of fashion in the transformation of the Saudi labour market<sup>57</sup>. This, however, is at employment and managerial levels. What of C-suite executive participation?

The fashion industry in Saudi Arabia currently supports

**230,000**  
jobs

## Women in leadership roles within the fashion sector: trends over the past five years

Research undertaken as part of this white paper reveals that female representation in the C-suite in large retail firms in the Middle East has remained relatively unchanged from 2019 to 2023: falling 1% from 20% to 19%.

These figures are not far off from female representation in the C-suite across North America (28%)<sup>58</sup>. In Saudi Arabia, female representation in the C-suite was observed in only one of the three large retail companies<sup>a</sup>, with representation of 13% and 11% in 2022 and 2023 respectively. These three companies are some of the largest fashion employers in the Kingdom and would be important starting points to secure real and rapid change.

Companies in the Middle East, like Chalhoub Group are taking positive steps toward gender equality in leadership, with 61% of their workforce being women in 2023<sup>59</sup>. It has also increased women in leadership positions

from 25% in 2018<sup>60</sup> to 30% in 2023<sup>61</sup>. The Group is moreover aiming to increase this to 50% by 2024<sup>62</sup>.

It remains to be seen what the level of female representation has been achieved in Saudi Arabia across the entire value chain, including retail brands, education, production, and design, as this will allow for a truly holistic view of what progress is being made to boost women leadership in the fashion industry in the Kingdom. However, industry engagements suggest that women leadership participation is much higher in the education and design portions of the value chain, with lower levels of participation in production.

## What has most enabled and challenged Saudi women executive leadership?

While data shows the progress being made in Saudi Arabia, the lack of narratives of Saudi female leaders has been identified as a gap in the existing literature<sup>63</sup>.

This study consequently represents a milestone in the Kingdom's fashion industry: it endeavours to share insights from current Saudi women in positions of leadership: exploring their experiences, challenges, and opportunities encountered along their personal and professional journeys.

Many of the Saudi women in fashion leadership positions are pioneers. Having had no female Saudi role models before them who had walked a similar path, many of the existing women in leadership positions carved their own path, driven by a strong sense of self-belief and a passion for what they were doing and what they wanted to achieve. Rajaa Moumena, CEO of the Future Institute of Higher Education noted how, when the institute was founded in 2018 it offered courses to women that included English and Information Technology. In 2018, the institute expanded its offerings to include courses in fashion design, graphic design,

jewellery design and others as the opportunities for women to participate in the workforce flourished. Rajaa knew that what she wanted to establish was much needed and with support from the government was able to establish an institute that now offers over 60 courses to women. Similarly, Sarah Abudawood worked tirelessly in pursuit of her dream, driven by a strong vision of what she wanted to develop both in terms of exquisite, disruptive, fine jewellery but also for her brand Yataghan Jewellery. As one of only a few women entrepreneurs in jewellery at that time, Sarah felt a community of female leaders was missing. Many of the

<sup>a</sup> The three Saudi retail companies included Cenomi Retail, Kamal Osman Jamjoom and Al Malki Group

other female industry leaders interviewed agreed that creating a sense of community, and a space where mentors can be found and ideas shared, is critical for personal and professional development. Through her brand, Sarah developed YT Lab to enable just that: to allow up and coming designers access to a platform that supports shared experiences and learnings, as well as a space for mentees and mentors to connect. Leaders like Barbara Colarusso and May Kanounji, CEO of Blooming Wear, also recognise how valuable it is to network, with both women seeing an opportunity to develop spaces for female leaders to network, specifically where Saudi women and women from other nationalities working in the Kingdom and the GCC can share and learn from one another's experiences. Barbara explains: "this ability to network could really benefit Saudi women who are embracing executive roles but who don't yet have a role model yet in the Kingdom. This ability to network could equally benefit ex pats working in the region who are bringing with them international leadership experience, but who could benefit from having a better understanding of the journey that Saudi women have had to walk."

Where the new generation is fortunate is that there are more women in leadership positions for them to look up to today. As a young but highly ambitious CEO of the Fashion Association, Lulwah Alshaqha entered the workforce in 2013. She began working at a time when there were very few women in the professional workplace, but today she states, 'increasingly, we are finding that women

are leading the conversation. Whether or not this is intentional does not matter, it is a great thing to see and be a part of this exciting time in Saudi Arabia'.

In 2018, women in Saudi Arabia were granted the right to drive by government. It was anticipated that doing so would improve their mobility and thus their ability to be employed<sup>64</sup>. Mobility had a fundamental shift on the ability of women to enter the workforce. Rajaa considered this to be one of the most important opportunities given to Saudi women to increase female participation in the workplace: "Once women were given the right to drive, then we could start to see real change". With the arrival of mobility services such as Uber in Saudi Arabia, mobility options for women have increased even further, which bodes well for the economy.

**Other key reasons for the increasing proportion of women in the workplace are the improvement in the ability for women to access excellent higher education, as provided in the Kingdom.**

In addition, increasing the ability of women to work either remotely, or as part of a hybrid work arrangement has also facilitated increasing levels of women participation in the economy. Furthermore, empowering women to start their own business without requiring a male guardian meant that more women could start their own businesses. These reforms, which were all facilitated through government

support programs and changing legislation, have been crucial to empowering greater representation in the workplace in the Kingdom. Sarah noted, "Women feel appreciated, and our talent celebrated". Speaking about women in leadership positions, Sarah believes that women and men in leadership positions are strategically complimentary. Overall, there is a strong sense of belief and pride in the Kingdom. The list of governmental support programs to develop and empower women in the workplace is extensive<sup>65,66</sup>. It is clear that the country is serious about increasing women representation in the workplace.

May Kanounji was present in the Kingdom at the time that women began entering the workforce in Saudi and recalls how "overnight the lingerie sector in Saudi was feminized". Like any seismic shift in a sector, some initial challenges were encountered. However, she believes that this significant positive change could not have happened as fast without the government's insistence. She believes further improvements can happen if the Kingdom has more female decision makers. "Saudi is doing it well, we have many workshops about leadership and companies are investing in female leadership programs. With time people will change their opinion about female leaders. We have many great Saudi female leaders." At Blooming, May is enabling and developing female leadership by mentoring Saudi leadership talent. "As a mentor, it's a great experience. I go through the journey with them, when they tell me about their first board meetings, I can share their joy as their talents become recognized."

## Key impacts of female fashion leadership growth in Saudi

International and domestic case studies have shown how increasing equality in the workplace can have positive economic benefits.

International data also indicate the positive link between greater levels of women representation and climate governance, which in turn has been linked to more

sustainable business practices<sup>67</sup>. As the fashion industry and the country more broadly moves towards a more sustainable future through Vision 2030 and beyond, having increasing levels of women in leadership in the fashion industry will benefit not only the Saudi economy but the country's sustainability objectives as well.

With the country's recent shift toward a more equal workplace and growing representation of

women in managerial positions, it is important that the fashion industry continues to drive women representation in leadership positions. Drawing from international experience, doing so will have positive benefits for companies in terms of business revenue growth and sustainability measures. By measuring this impact the growing role of women leadership in the Kingdom can be understood, shared, and celebrated.

## Inclusivity lessons from Saudi Arabia

The government of Saudi Arabia has put in place several programs aimed at empowering women and achieving equality<sup>68</sup>.

These include a program to fund internships at governmental or private entities for new graduates<sup>69</sup>, a program that supports working women to cover their cost of transport<sup>70</sup> and a childcare subsidy program for working women<sup>71</sup>. From a leadership perspective, the Kingdom has developed creative tools to help develop and strengthen women leadership talent. One such initiative is **the Qiyadyat platform**. The platform is an initiative of the Ministry for Human Resources and Social Development and serves to connect women leaders and share their stories<sup>72</sup>. Although women labour market



participation rates are increasing strongly, representation by women in leadership positions remains behind the average for the Middle East and the rest of the world. This presents an exciting opportunity for the Kingdom's rapidly growing fashion industry.

Vision 2030 has aligned the country's ambitions through a selection of achievable goals. This includes the goal of increasing the participation rate of women in the labour market

to 30% by 2030. This was already accomplished by 2022, showing the Kingdom's ability to unite and achieve remarkable goals to support more women entering the workplace. Further increasing the number of women leaders could function as a catalyst, inspiring more women to participate in the economy, and providing the next generation of Saudi women with role models that encourage them to achieve their ambitions, and contribute to the continued development of the Saudi economy.



# Conclusion

**Fashion companies have had to contend with a range of major challenges over the last few years.**

Market and broader economic complexities have grown as a result of numerous factors, including the global pandemic, a sequence of global supply chain disruptions, fast-changing consumer preferences, and increasing concerns relating to the impact of the fashion industry on global warming and environmental pollution. The fashion industry is having to adapt to the new “VUCA” environment. CEOs are having to be ‘professionally ambidextrous, charged with steering their brands in the face of mounting market uncertainty and innovating to reveal new growth opportunities’<sup>73</sup>. female leaders interviewed as part of this study, both from Saudi Arabia and internationally, all described how the ability to quickly pivot and adapt when facing new challenges or opportunities was one of the key reasons behind their success.

The gender gains made in the Saudi fashion ecosystem over the last few years have positioned it well for further positive change. However, many of the gains are off a low base, with several gaps still evident in respect of broader transformation. One key focus area, and the focus of this paper, is the need for - and the benefit of - gender equality in leadership in the fashion value chain. This is a challenge globally, but one that is particularly important in Saudi Arabia, given the central role of the fashion industry in growing women participation in the labour force. However, evidence from the international fashion value chain shows that the real benefit lies not only in the creation of employment opportunities for women, but in the dynamic skills development and career progression opportunities it provides. Wherever this has been nurtured and developed, the fashion value chain has created women role models that inspire and motivate further generational progress, as more women are encouraged to enter the industry, and contribute to its further development. As Saudi Arabia enters this positive cycle, and with the support of various government programmes, the future of the industry, and the role of women leaders in its dynamic development, looks positive.



However, this positive outlook could be further enhanced through a focus on four opportunities:

- 1. The creation and publicising of leadership role models for young Saudi women entering the fashion labour market.**
- 2. The setting of goals to increase women representation in leadership, and transparently measure progress in women leadership roles across the fashion eco-system.**
- 3. The maintenance of existing support programmes that encourage professional women participation in the Saudi labour market.**
- 4. The provision of recognition to leading fashion firms operating in Saudi Arabia to develop and promote women professionals through the celebration of progress made.**

Leaders are the role models for future generations, creating a potential domino effect of positive change. As Lulwah noted: “The shift is happening fast, and yet we see this as the new normal. Saudi men and women are adaptable; if the change is positive, we encourage it.” This change is happening in a variety of sometimes subtle ways too. “As a woman in education, I see that how we engage with women is different now, we are more progressive.” says Rajaa, noting further that “... as women’s education and knowledge grows and changes, markets change, in the right direction.”



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