



# UAE Diversity & Inclusion in the Workplace Survey Report

Optimism and Opportunity – Results from a Quantitative Study



Supported by:

**naseba**  
**WIL**  
ECONOMIC  
FORUM

Commissioned by:

**WINSTON  
& STRAWN**  
LLP

Survey conducted by:

**YouGov**<sup>®</sup>  
What the world thinks



# Contents

- 1** Introduction
- 2** Executive Summary
- 3** About the Respondents
- 4** Workforce D&I: A Clear Strategic Priority
- 6** Representation and the Gender Balance
- 8** Flexibility and Mentoring in the Workplace
- 10** Society, Family, and Culture
- 11** UAE Nationals in the Workplace
- 15** Conclusion: Optimism and Opportunity
- 16** Get in Touch



# Introduction

Diversity and Inclusion has been at the heart of Winston & Strawn's values for many years, and is one of the core pillars of our International Strategic Plan. Since our opening in the Middle East in 2016, we have been committed to building a culture of D&I engagement in a manner which is both reflective of our firm's commitment to this business-critical subject, and the local environment. In this regard, we have a clear commitment to building our own practice in a manner in which a culture of equality and inclusion is core to the future development of all our staff. We commissioned the YouGov survey to better understand the challenges facing D&I in the region, and to provide a context in which we can support future development for businesses in the UAE. We welcome the findings, and look forward to working with the WIL Economic Forum to develop this key initiative in the years ahead.

## **CAMPBELL STEEDMAN**

Managing Partner, Middle East  
Winston & Strawn LLP

The UAE Government has been a regional leader in promoting gender diversity, and can be lauded for its efforts to effect change. In terms of the private sector, it is encouraging to see positive employee engagement and sentiment reflected in this report; however, until equal representation of men and women is consistently seen in influential business positions, further efforts will be required to create working environments conducive to gender diversity. Creating and enhancing opportunity, choice, and environments that attract and retain talent from all backgrounds is critical to business success. Challenging existing thinking and making the changes that promote and encourage real gender diversity is something that all business leaders should be prioritising.

## **CHRISTOPHER SKIPPER**

Partner, Dubai  
Winston & Strawn LLP

Enhancing diversity and inclusion is one of Winston & Strawn's key strategic business goals. Our vision is to cultivate a culture where all talented contributors firmwide can have and see a path to long-term success. Our Diversity and Inclusion Committee has developed a comprehensive diversity and inclusion action plan with seven strategic goals, along with a series of concrete and measurable action steps. Our efforts are producing results and have earned us important external recognition. However, diversity is more than numbers and statistics for us, it is a core value that is deeply embedded into the fabric of the firm.

## **SYLVIA JAMES**

Director of Diversity & Inclusion  
Winston & Strawn LLP

Women's participation in the economy not only boosts development, it also diversifies national economies and opens a nation up to new ideas. In short, diversity is good for business. It is encouraging to see such positive findings in the UAE D&I in the workplace survey, with 57% of people in the UAE perceiving their organisation as diverse. Further, 74% of women surveyed stated their ambitions to one day become a senior executive, while 62% of women reported being happy with their opportunities for advancement in their careers. Women in the Arab world are truly changing the rules, and, while there is still a long way to go, I am very optimistic for the future of the UAE and wider Middle East region.

## **SOPHIE LE RAY**

CEO, Naseba  
(WIL Economic Forum Founder)



# Executive Summary

The UAE Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) in the Workplace Survey was conducted between September and October 2018. More than 1,000 responses were elicited from men and women in full-time employment across the country. The private sector was the dominant workplace type, employing 76% of those who took part.

The majority of respondents (57%) perceive workforce diversity and inclusion (D&I) as a top priority for their organisations, with positive responses evenly balanced between men (55%) and women (58%). When asked how diverse they feel their organisation actually is, 57% of people saw their workplace as ‘relatively’ or ‘very diverse’.

Some 61% of respondents agreed that women are well represented in management at their organisation – with women (69%) notably more positive about the level of female representation in management than men (54%). However, 50% of respondents also noted males were the gender most represented in their organisation’s leadership.

The survey found a majority of women in the UAE aspire to senior leadership roles within their organisations. In fact, 74% of women, compared to 66% of men, have the ambition to be a top executive. A robust 62% of women were also happy with the opportunities for advancement within their organisation. Nonetheless, 24% of women believed their gender would make it harder for them to advance in their career.

Both genders identified societal/community expectations as the biggest barrier to them following the career of their choice. For women, societal/community expectations (46%) presented a bigger barrier than religion (13%) or family expectations

(28%). For men, societal/community expectations (44%) were near par with financial reasons (43%), while family expectations also loomed large (38%).

Among the positive contributors to D&I, workplace flexibility stood out. More than half of female respondents (51%) indicated that their workplace offers support for reduced hours, working from home or extended maternity leave. Similarly, 47% of men reported that they work in a flexible environment.

Mentoring also plays a key role in helping people make career progress. Just 21% of female respondents report never having had a senior staff member actively assist them in getting ahead. However, it is clear that many mentors are men, with only 52% of women saying they have a mentor of the same gender, as opposed to 80% of men who reported having a mentor of the same gender.

Overall, the results of this survey can be viewed as a cause for optimism. Data demonstrates workplace D&I in the UAE is stronger than many might assume. The survey also points to factors that contribute to greater workplace D&I, offering a path forward for organisations looking to improve their performance in this area.



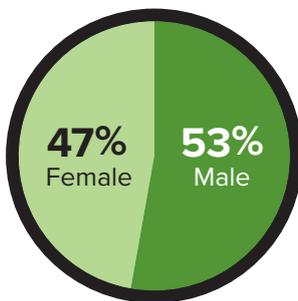
# About the Respondents

International law firm Winston & Strawn LLP commissioned YouGov to survey the state of workplace diversity and inclusion (D&I) in the UAE. Questions also gauged respondents' attitudes and perceptions regarding the impact of D&I on their professional experiences and long-term careers.

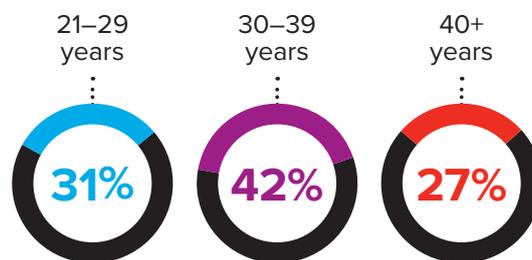
Respondents were drawn from diverse nationality groups, including UAE Nationals, expat Arabs, Asians, and Westerners. Most had a higher education background, with 74% possessing a university degree. The youthful nature of the UAE workforce was also evident, with 73% of respondents under the age of 40.

The private sector was the dominant type of workplace, employing 76% of those who took the survey. Construction was the largest single industry represented – employing 13% of respondents – but the UAE's healthy economic diversity was reflected in the wide range of industries represented by respondents. All income levels were well represented, with the respondents evenly spaced along the income spectrum.

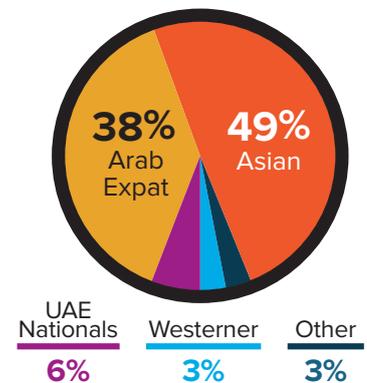
## GENDER



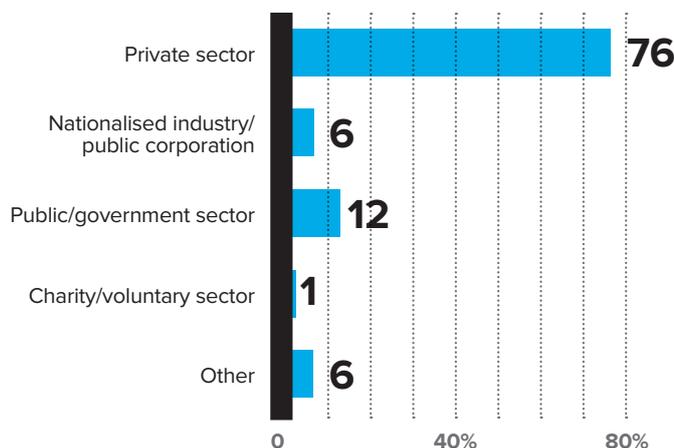
## AGE



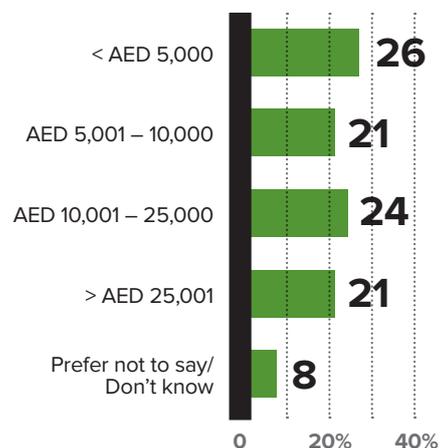
## NATIONALITY



## SECTOR



## INCOME (AED)



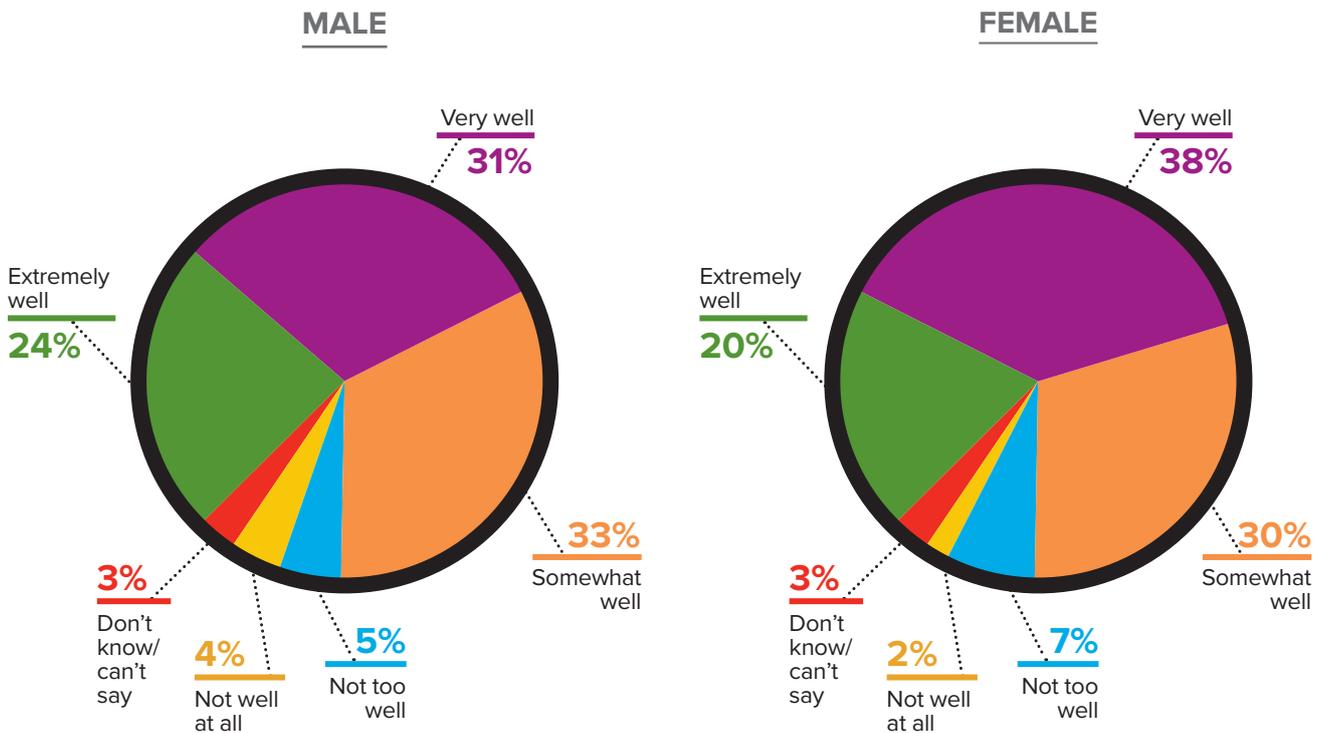
YouGov Disclaimer: Due to rounding, some totals may not correspond with the sum of the separate figures.



# Workforce D&I: A Clear Strategic Priority

The results of the survey reveal real cause for optimism on the issue of D&I in the workplace. The majority of respondents (57%) perceive workforce D&I as a top priority for their organisations, with positive responses evenly balanced between men (55%) and women (58%).

How well does the following statement describe your organisation: Workforce diversity (e.g., gender, race/ethnicity, age, religion, nationality) is a top priority for my organisation?



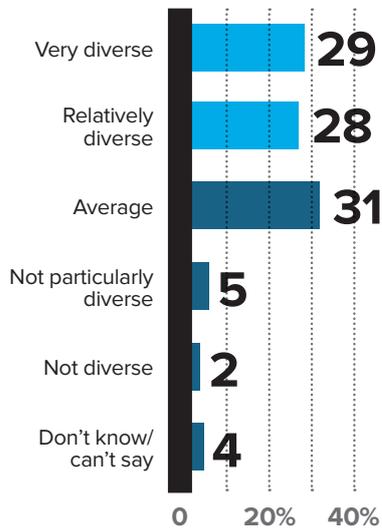
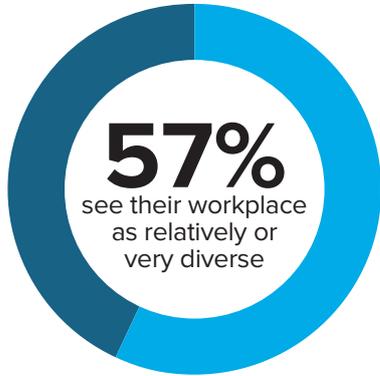
Not only do respondents perceive D&I as a top priority, but they also believe they see it in action. When asked how diverse they feel their organisation actually is, 57% of people saw their workplace as 'relatively' or 'very diverse'.

Additionally, 47% of respondents agreed that their organisations regularly communicate about D&I. Respondents who work in the public sector

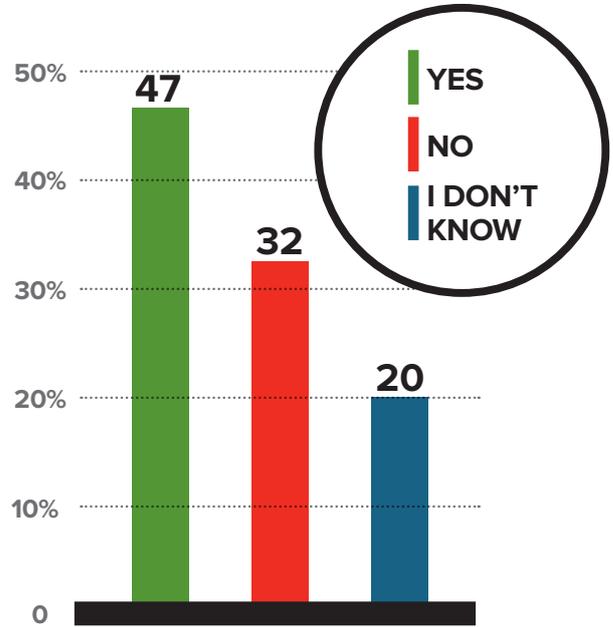
showed a higher positive response rate (59%) to this particular question, compared to those who work in the private sector (45%). This may reflect the leadership role that the UAE government has taken in promoting gender diversity in the workplace, a key pillar of the UAE government's Vision 2021 initiative.



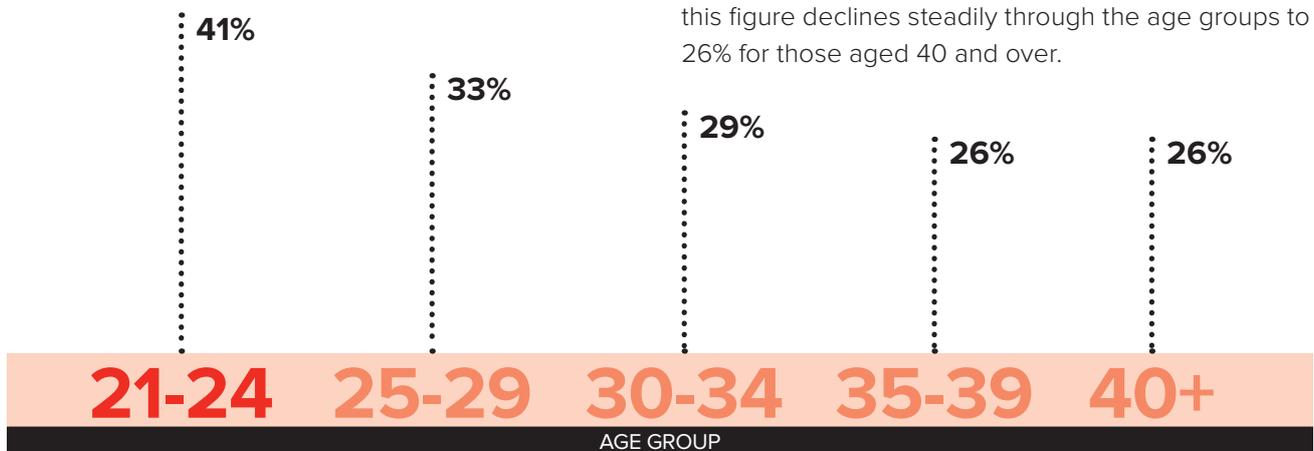
How diverse do you feel your organisation is?



My organisation regularly communicates about diversity.



Another interesting differentiator was age – younger employees were more likely to see their workplace as diverse than their older colleagues. While 41% of 21-24 year olds viewed their organisation as ‘very diverse’, this figure declines steadily through the age groups to 26% for those aged 40 and over.



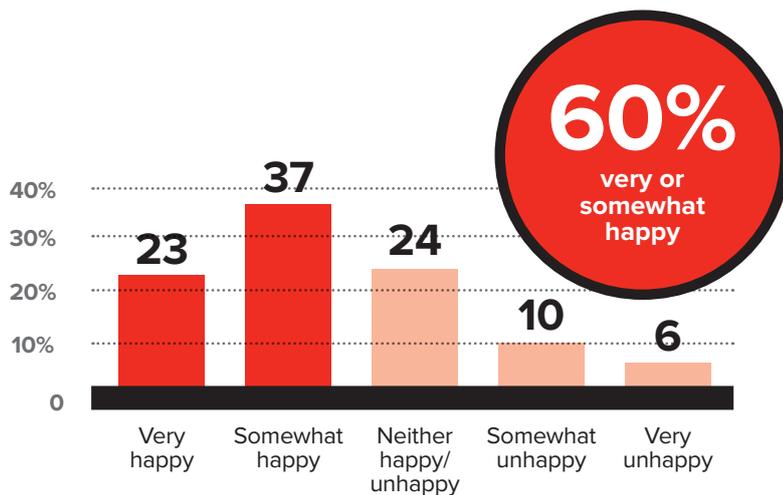
This age-based shift may also reflect a decline in gender diversity at the senior levels of any workforce. While this is a global issue, each instance, whether driven by stereotypes, family demands, societal pressure, or structural barriers, each instance needs its own solution. The responses from the UAE are cause for optimism; however, continued improvements will be needed if the workplace D&I that employees see at the start of their careers is to carry through as they become more senior.



# Representation and the Gender Balance

This survey found that the majority of women in the UAE aspire to senior leadership roles, with 74% of women, compared to 66% of men, aspiring to be a top executive. This is consistent with findings from other regional studies, including the *Women’s Careers in the GCC*, a 2015 report by the Pearl Initiative, which noted that “women in the GCC are ambitious and over half of the survey respondents see themselves taking senior roles.”

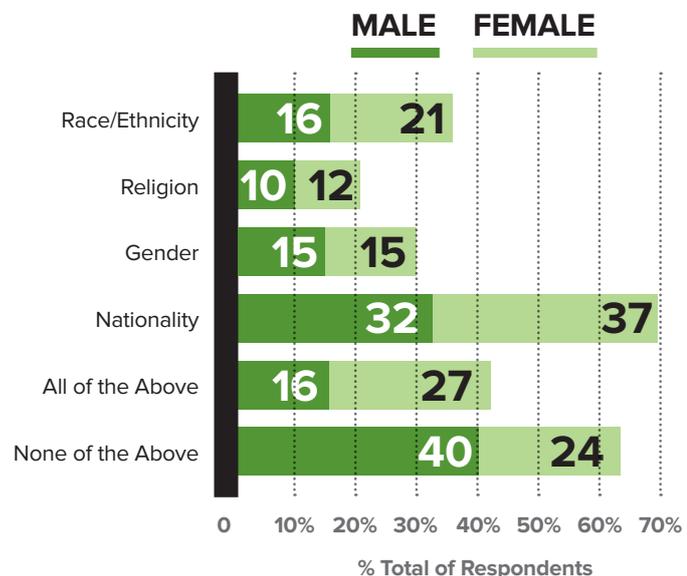
**How happy or unhappy are you with your opportunities for advancement at your organisation?**



Additionally, 60% of respondents were happy about the opportunities for advancement within their organisation – 57% of men, compared to a slightly more positive 62% of women. Despite positive sentiment towards opportunities for advancement, 24% of women – compared to just 17% of men – believe their gender would make it harder for them to advance in their career.

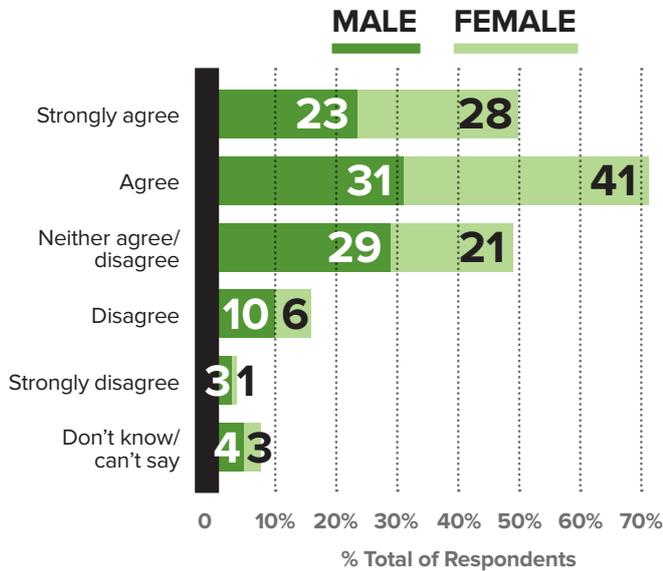
**Do you believe any of the following has an impact on employees’ progression/success in your workplace? Please select as many as applicable:**

Women were also more likely to believe that factors, including ethnicity, religion and nationality, have an impact on an employee’s success or progression at their current workplace. Only 24% of women thought none of those factors were relevant where they worked, compared to 40% of men.





**Do you agree with the following statement: Women are well represented within management at my organisation.**

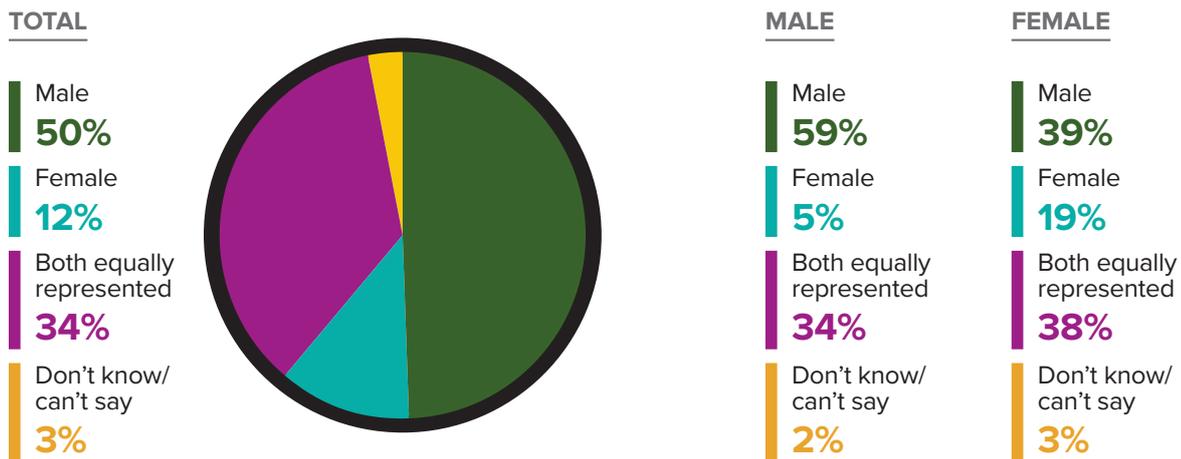


Sixty one percent (61%) of respondents agreed that women are well represented in management at their organisation – with women (69%) notably more positive about the level of female representation in management than men (54%).

Responses varied by type of employer with a 70% positive response rate coming from nationalised industries or public corporations, compared to 59% from those in the private sector. This likely reflects the mandate by the UAE government to advance gender balance in the workplace, especially in senior roles.

The perception of how well women are represented in an organisation’s management is also influenced by age. An overwhelming 71% of 21-24 year olds agree or strongly agree that women are well represented in management at their organisation. For those aged 40 or older, this drops to 52%.

**Which gender is mostly represented in your leadership teams?**



Interestingly, 19% of female respondents, compared to 5% of men, said that the leadership teams at their organisation included more women than men. This may indicate that female talent is more likely to be interested in roles at organisations with a strong female representation in senior positions. It is clear

that there is still room for improvement, with only 36% of respondents noting that both genders are equally represented.

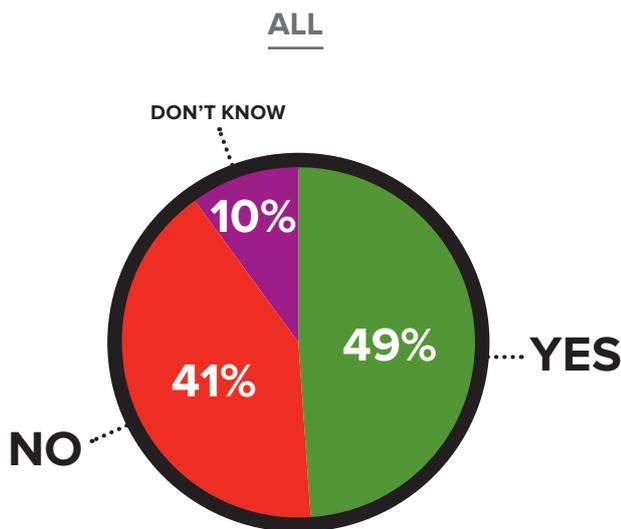
On balance, male and female survey respondents see many things in a similar light, give or take a few percentage points.



# Flexibility and Mentoring in the Workplace

D&I in the workplace is just one of several positive indicators that signify an organisation as a good place to work. A core characteristic that is often correlated with a diverse organisation is a flexible working environment, supporting employee engagement beyond the confines of traditional office hours and locations.

**Does your organisation offer support/flexibility programmes (e.g., reduced hours, extended maternity leave, and ability to work from home)?**



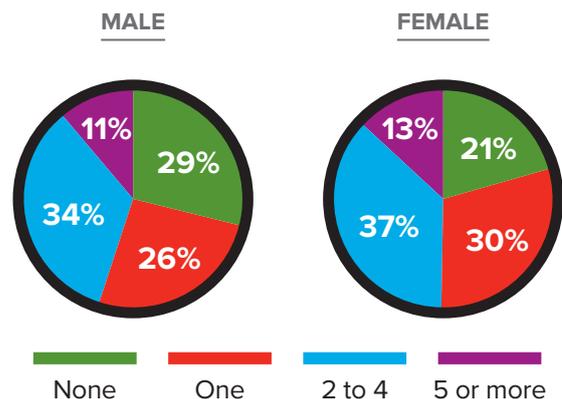
Workplace flexibility was one of the stand-out results, with more than half of female respondents (51%) indicating that their workplace offers support for reduced hours, working from home or extended maternity leave. A similar 47% of men reported that they work in a flexible environment.

When it came to having a direct personal mentor, men and women were about equal, with slightly more than half reporting that they currently have or have had someone guiding their career path.

Of note, individuals with higher education qualifications are also more likely to work in organisations that offer flexibility. For example, 58% of respondents with a higher university degree described their workplace as flexible.

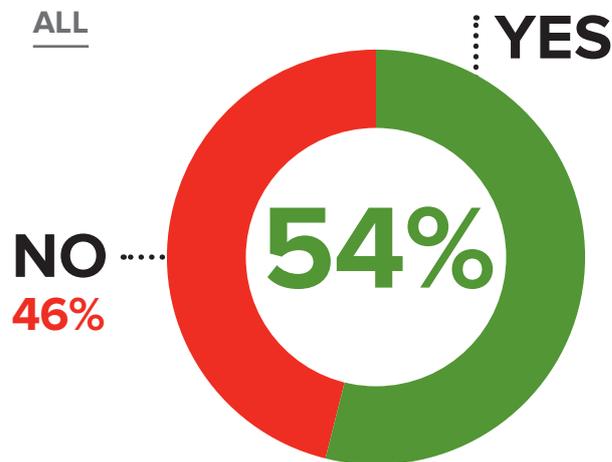
**How many senior-level staff members have actively assisted you in getting ahead in your career?**

Career guidance from senior colleagues and mentors is a crucial contributor to successful D&I and career progress, notably more so for women. Twenty-one percent (21%) of female respondents report never having had a senior staff member actively assist them in getting ahead, whereas 29% of male respondents report having had no help.

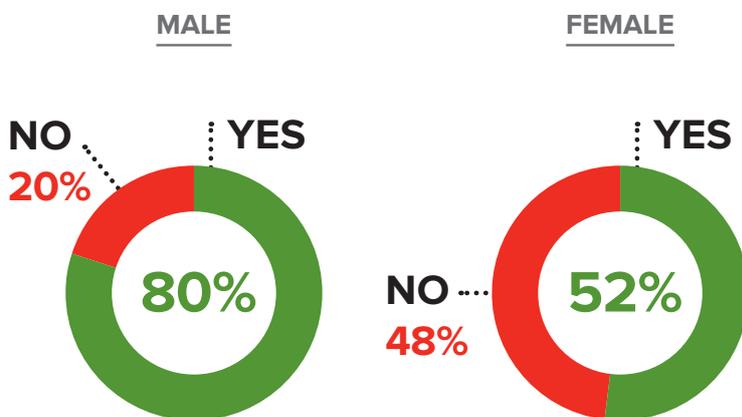




Do you have a mentor who has guided your career path?



If so, is that mentor the same gender as you?



It is clear that many of these mentors are men, with 80% of male respondents having a mentor of the same gender, while only 52% of women responded the same. This may reflect the lower numbers of women in positions to offer effective mentoring, and demonstrates the impact when there is a decline in gender diversity at senior levels of an organisation.



# Society, Family, and Culture

In a country populated with people from diverse backgrounds, some traditional family values unite the varied cultures found in the UAE workplace.

The 2015 research by the Pearl Initiative and McKinsey’s 2014 Women Matter GCC survey both found that women in the GCC, considered balancing work and family life as the single most important obstacle to their career aspirations. Interestingly, in this survey respondents were of different opinion, with 53% of women – compared to just 42% of men – responding that their culture or background presented the biggest challenge to them following the career of their choice.

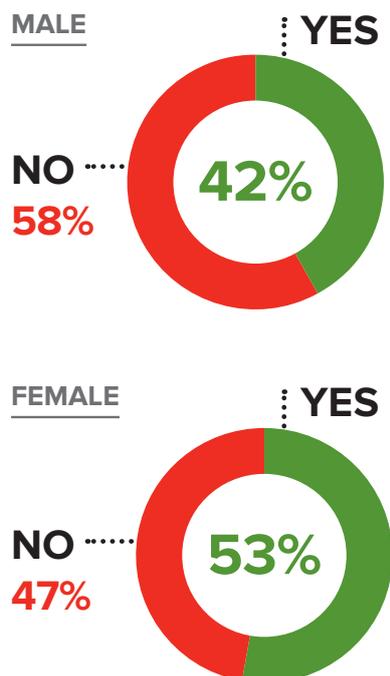
Both genders identified societal/community expectations as the biggest barrier. For women, societal/community expectations (46%) presented a bigger barrier than religion (13%) or family expectations (28%). For men, societal/community

expectations (44%) were near par with financial reasons (43%), while family expectations also loomed large (38%).

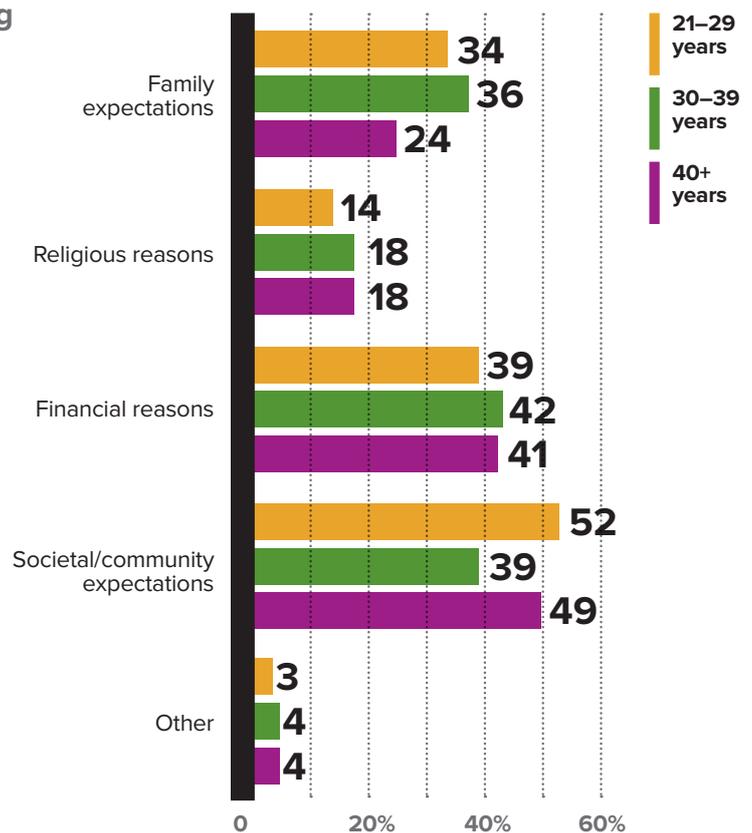
It is notably the youth who most acutely carry the resulting burden of family and community expectation. Among the 21 to 24 year olds, 49% reported feeling that their culture or background prohibited them from or presented challenges to pursuing the career of their choice.

Of those that felt these pressures, 55% pinpointed family expectations as the reason. The pressure of family expectations diminishes significantly for those over 40, but by contrast the pressure of societal and community expectations remains relatively steady.

**Do you feel that your culture/background has prohibited you from, or presented additional challenges to you in, pursuing the career of your choice?**



**What was the reason?**

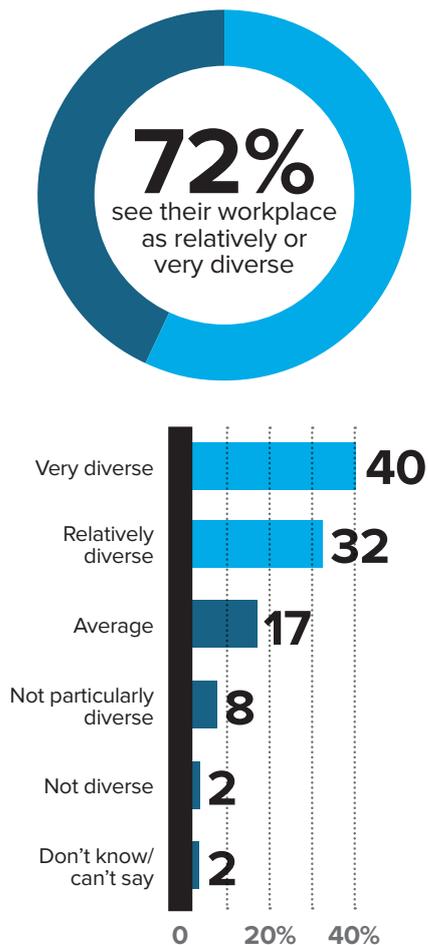




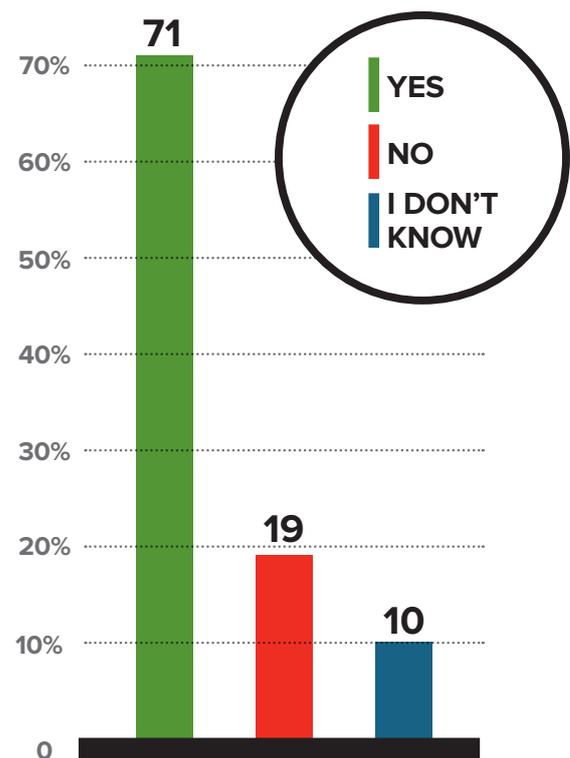
# UAE Nationals in the Workplace

D&I has been identified by the UAE government as key to the country’s long-term business continuity, in both the public and private sectors. It is worth noting that UAE Nationals were the most positive respondents on the question of the diversity of their organisations, with 72% seeing their workplace as at least ‘relatively diverse’. As a group, 71% thought their organisation communicated well about D&I, a clear 21 percentage points higher than the next nearest nationality group.

How diverse do you feel your organisation is?



My organisation regularly communicates about diversity.





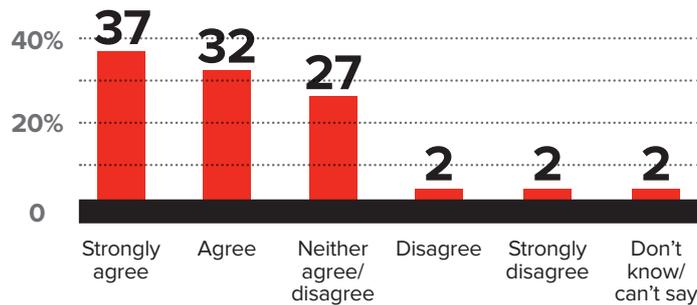
UAE Nationals in the Workplace continued

In your organisation, do you think women have more, fewer, or the same opportunities to advance as men?

UAE Nationals were also more inclined to believe there were more opportunities for women to advance (41%), or at least the same opportunities for both genders (38%), in their workplace.

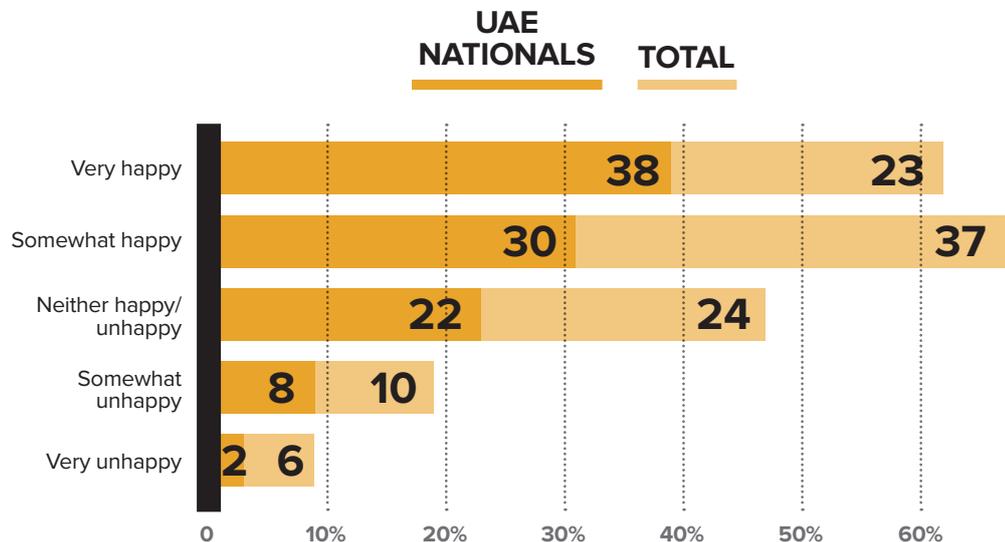


Do you agree with the following statement: Women are well represented within management at my organisation.



UAE National respondents were more likely to agree or strongly agree that women were well represented in management positions at their organisations (69%). Also, they were more likely to work somewhere where women and men were equally represented in leadership roles (41%), again the highest of any nationality group.

How happy or unhappy are you with your opportunities for advancement at your organisation?



As well as viewing their organisations as more meritocratic than other nationality groups, UAE Nationals are also notably happier with their own opportunities for advancement.

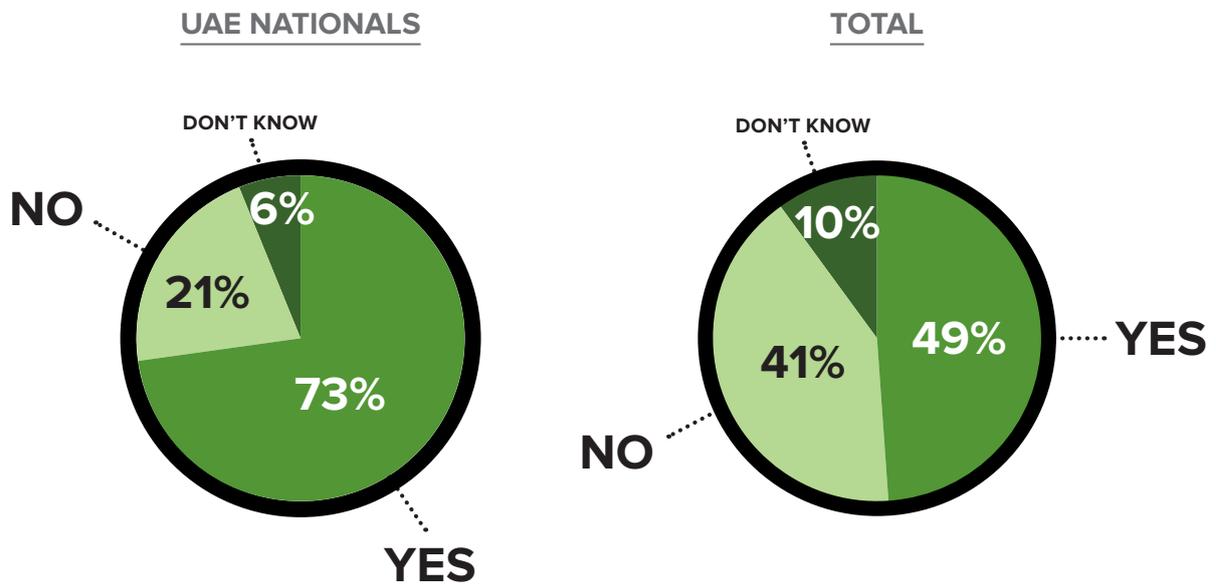


UAE Nationals in the Workplace continued

A component of this perceived improvement in prospects may be the prominence of mentoring. UAE National survey respondents, more than any other nationality group, have had a career mentor (70%) and are the least likely to have had no senior-level staff members actively assist them in getting ahead (11%).

UAE National respondents were also far more likely to work somewhere that supports flexible working – 73% responded they do compared to 49% of the overall survey respondents – an idea that aligns with traditional values around hard work and pushes back against measures of productivity via office presence and office hours.

Does your organisation offer support/flexibility programmes (e.g., reduced hours, extended maternity leave, and ability to work from home)?





# Conclusion: Optimism and Opportunity

The results of this survey can be viewed as a cause for optimism. D&I is present in many workplaces, both as an ideal that organisations strive toward and also as a practical reality.

Data demonstrates workplace D&I in the UAE is stronger than many might assume and clearly points to the positive impact of the government's leadership. The appointment of female leaders to high-profile roles has helped to highlight workplace diversity in the public consciousness and contributed to a working environment that is becoming more welcoming and more engaging for more people.

Workplace diversity is a strength, but it is clear from the survey results it does not stand alone. Based on this survey, it appears that workplace D&I correlates with other strengths too, whether that be through the availability of flexible working arrangements, the presence of mentors among senior staff, or equal opportunities for people to advance their careers.

The clustering of positive workplace traits is likely to both fuel diversity and feed off it, creating a feedback loop of positive reinforcement for employers who strike the right combination. For organisations that have yet to get that mix right, the survey results offer a clear insight into the abundant opportunities to improve D&I in the workplace.

For example, while the results show women have some representation in organisational leadership, it is clear that there is a need for more. Environments that encourage female leadership have some elements in common. They offer flexibility to help women balance professional and personal commitments and there is mentoring from females in senior roles. Both will help cement the gains already made and provide a more diverse workforce ready to meet the UAE's future growth ambitions.

The dearth of female mentors could be readily associated with the decline in numbers seen among the female workforce at senior levels. Too few women progress into senior roles, creating a shortage of mentors with the right experience. It is clear more needs to be done to address this.

Tackling the challenges of gender diversity is proven to deliver additional benefits. An array of studies show that a diverse workforce helps to foster a more dynamic, innovative, high-performing working environment. Organisations that have embraced D&I tend to have higher engagement levels, leading to greater competitive advantage in the long-term. Doing so will enhance the economic prospects of organisations and the UAE, creating more positive outcomes for the country as a whole.

While workforce D&I is a clear strategic priority for many organisations in the UAE looking to dip into the local talent pool, it is not the case for all. The survey results offer an insight as to where organisations can start and hint at the changes that may offer the most effective results. A more widespread emphasis on D&I will help to create work environments that attract, retain, and develop the best talent available locally, regardless of their gender, beliefs, or origin.



## Get in Touch



### **CAMPBELL STEEDMAN**

Managing Partner, Middle East  
Winston & Strawn LLP  
+971 4 424 2329  
csteadman@winston.com

---

Campbell is Managing Partner of Winston & Strawn LLP's Middle East practice. He represents major clients from a wide range of business sectors with international mergers and acquisitions, joint ventures, privatisations, and ECM transactions in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. His knowledge of these markets and his 30 years of legal experience have made him a valued asset for clients around the world, who look to him for his noted deal-making skill, and his ability to navigate the complexities of intricately structured, multijurisdictional transactions. Having been involved in advising on investments and transactional matters in regions of political and economic change throughout his career in emerging markets, Campbell has always been aware of the impact which such transactional matters can have on the wider community, and he has been involved in CSR and pro bono matters, including in relation to matters of diversity and human rights, throughout his practice in such markets.



### **CHRISTOPHER SKIPPER**

Partner, Dubai  
Winston & Strawn LLP  
+971 4 424 2336  
cskipper@winston.com

---

Chris is a partner in Winston's Dubai office. He focuses on complex cross-border M&A and private equity transactions, joint ventures, and corporate structuring. Chris has substantial experience advising private, government and quasi-government institutions in the Middle East, Africa, Europe, and the U.S., across a variety of sectors. Having spent the majority of his career advising upon and transacting in emerging markets and regions, Chris is acutely aware of the ability to positively affect communities by providing CSR and pro-bono advice across a range of important initiatives.



**SYLVIA JAMES**

Director of Diversity & Inclusion  
Winston & Strawn LLP  
+1 (202) 282-5856  
syjames@winston.com

As Winston’s Director of Diversity & Inclusion, Sylvia develops and implements an integrated, metrics-driven diversity and inclusion strategy to enhance the firm’s diversity and inclusion programs, performance, and profile. In her role, Sylvia collaborates with key stakeholders to develop and implement the firm’s diversity and inclusion strategy and initiatives; works with the talent management team to enhance the hiring, advancement, retention, and promotion of diverse lawyers; serves as a liaison to clients and external organizations dedicated to fostering diversity in the legal profession; conducts diversity training; and advises on internal and external diversity-related communications. She is a member of the Association of Law Firm Diversity Professionals (ALFDP) and currently serves as the co-chair for the Training and Development Committee. She is also a member of the Advisory Board for the Institute for Inclusion in the Legal Profession (IILP).



**SOPHIE LE RAY**

CEO, Naseba  
(WIL Economic Forum Founder)  
+971 4 581 4300  
slr@naseba.com

Sophie is an entrepreneur, author, and experienced business facilitator. In 2002, she co-founded Naseba, a business facilitation company specialising in emerging markets. She was appointed CEO in 2009 and is responsible for overseeing the operations of the company across its offices in the Middle East, India, Pakistan, China, the U.S., and Europe.

Sophie has more than 20 years of experience in producing and organising business platforms and has been based in the Middle East for over a decade. She began a career in public relations before finding her niche in B2B conference production.

She is the founder and spokesperson of the Global WIL Economic Forum, a platform that promotes women’s economic empowerment and celebrates diversity and inclusion worldwide. She is also the co-author of ‘Game Changers: How Women in the Arab World Are Changing the Rules and Shaping the Future’, published by Motivate Publishing in May 2016 and winner of ‘The Best International Non-Fiction’ award at Sharjah International Book Fair, 2017.

## **ABOUT WINSTON & STRAWN**

Winston & Strawn LLP is an international law firm with 1,000 attorneys across 16 offices in Brussels, Charlotte, Chicago, Dallas, Dubai, Hong Kong, Houston, London, Los Angeles, Moscow, New York, Paris, San Francisco, Shanghai, Silicon Valley, and Washington, D.C. The exceptional depth and geographic reach of our resources enable Winston & Strawn to manage virtually every type of business-related legal issue. We serve the needs of enterprises of all types and sizes, in both the private and the public sector. We understand that clients are looking for value beyond just legal talent. With this in mind, we work hard to understand the level of involvement our clients want from us. We take time to learn about our clients' organisations and their business objectives. And, we place significant emphasis on technology and teamwork in an effort to respond quickly and effectively to our clients' needs.

Visit [winston.com](http://winston.com) if you would like more information about our legal services, our experience, or the industries we serve.

Winston & Strawn LLP  
Burj Daman, Level 10  
Al Sa'ada Street  
Dubai International Financial Centre  
P.O. Box 507024  
Dubai, United Arab Emirates  
Phone: +971 4 424 2300  
Fax: +971 4 424 2350

winston.com