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Through the Looking Glass: Applying a Gender Lens to Unemployment in Ras Al Khaimah

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Executive Summary

The government of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has actively pursued Emiratization in the private sector, exemplified by the 2021 Nafis Program, aiming to connect unemployed Emiratis with private organizations through monetary incentives. While the program has surpassed its national target, approximately 5,000 Emiratis remain unemployed in Ras Al Khaimah.

This paper examines existing gender disparities in employment through adopting a gender lens. By utilizing data obtained from the Ras Al Khaimah Government and drawing on insights from Al Malki and Pretorius (2023), our analysis prompts a reflection on the potential of targeted, gender-specific policies to alleviate the unemployment rates among Emirati men and women.

We begin by outlining the Nafis Program, followed by an exploration of gendered aspects in education and employment within the Gulf and the UAE. Our analysis identifies key challenges, shaping subsequent discussions. This culminates in strategic recommendations designed to enhance labor market participation for Emirati men and women in Ras Al Khaimah.

Introduction

Over the past few decades, the United Arab Emirates' (UAE) Government has intensified its efforts to boost the number of Emiratis employed in the private sector. New laws have been introduced and Emiratization quotas have been established to further achieve this goal. One such key initiative that was introduced in 2021 is the Nafis Program, which is a federal initiative that aims to connect unemployed Emiratis with private sector organizations using monetary incentives (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023). Since its establishment, the program has supported the employment of 80,000 Emiratis in the private sector, exceeding the initial national target of 75,000 individuals (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023).

However, in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, approximately 5,000 Emiratis from Ras Al Khaimah are registered as unemployed. In addition, according to the Ras Al Khaimah Statistics Center, the unemployment rate in the emirate increased by 1.3 percent to 6.9 percent in 2021.[1] While the percentage of unemployed males across the entire working population in Ras Al Khaimah is 3.4%, unemployment rates are significantly higher among women, where the unemployment rate reached 19.2 percent (Ras Al Khaimah Statistics Center, 2021). This gender-based discrepancy points to a sizable number of women who could but are not currently working in the labor market.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a gender lens to analyze the characteristics of those who are registered as

[1] *This is in accordance with the most recently published labor force survey report at the time of writing this policy paper.*

unemployed in Ras Al Khaimah. Based on a report by Al Malki and Pretorius (2023), this policy paper reflects on how targeted, gender-specific policies can reduce the unemployment rate of Emirati men and women. We begin by providing an overview of the Nafis Program, before discussing the gendered features of education and employment in the Gulf and the UAE. Next, we discuss key challenges that emerged from our analysis, before providing recommendations for increasing the participation of Emirati men and women in the labor market in Ras Al Khaimah.

1. Background Section

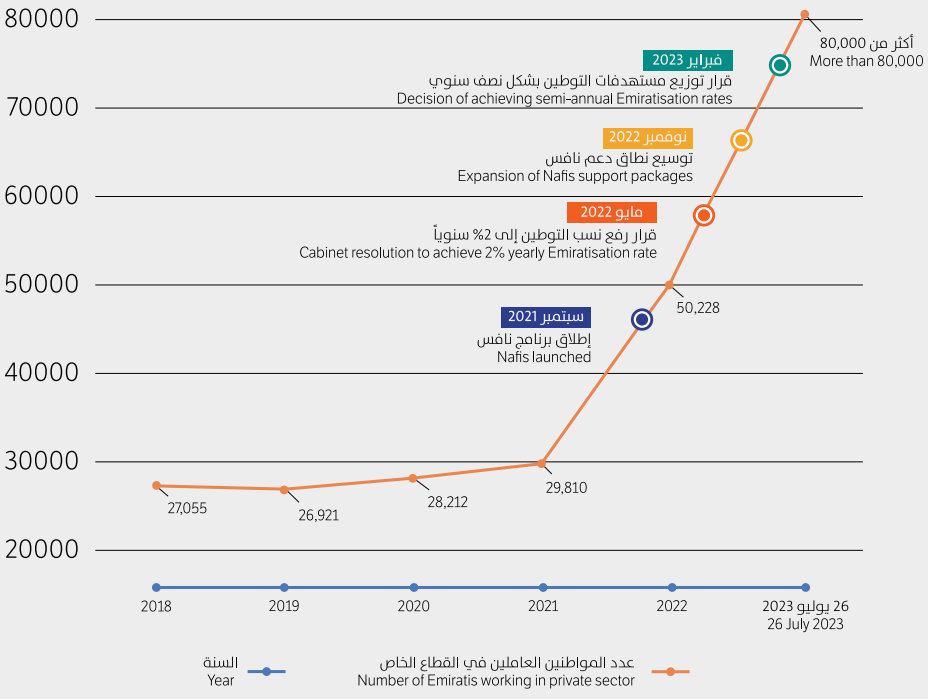
The policy landscape in the Gulf has increasingly focused on labor nationalization and economic diversification (Ulrichsen, 2012; Hvidt, 2014). This is particularly evident in the UAE, where new initiatives have accelerated the drive toward Emiratization over the past few years. Reflecting on this, the following sub-sections provide (1) an overview of the Nafis Program, and (2) a discussion of the gendered features of unemployment in the Gulf and the UAE.

1.1 An Overview of the Nafis Program

In recent decades, the provision of meaningful and gainful employment to nationals in the GCC has been hindered by the saturation of the public sector, which is the preferred employment sector for many locals (Daleure & Al Shareef, 2015). Many labor nationalization policies have been introduced over the past few decades to increase the number of nationals employed in the private sector, with mixed success rates (Buttorff et al., 2019; Koyame-Marsh, 2017; Zerovec & Bontenbal, 2011; Ennis, 2020).

In the UAE, the policy of Emiratization was introduced to increase the labor market participation of Emirati nationals. To achieve this policy, the Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratisation (MoHRE) established the Nafis Program, a federal initiative administered by the Emirati Human Resources Competitiveness Council. The program aims to boost the competitiveness of Emiratis and prepare them for employment in the private sector, facilitating the integration of local talent into the national workforce. Introduced in 2021, the primary objective of Nafis was to secure jobs for 75,000 Emirati citizens in the private sector over five years (Nafis, n.d.).

Figure 1. Number of Emiratis Working in the Private Sector From 2018–2023.



Source: Reproduced from MoHRE, 2023, as cited in Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023.

In 2023, the MoHRE reported a significant rise in the number of Emirati workers in the private sector, with over 50,000 additional Emiratis entering the private sector since 2021 (see Figure 1). In fact, surpassing the initial target of 75,000, a total of 80,000 Emiratis were employed in the private sector as of July 2023 (see Figure 1). Among these 80,000 individuals, the majority fall into three educational categories comprising secondary school graduates (46%), university degree holders or those with postgraduate qualifications (41%), and those with education levels below high school (13%) (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023).

As noted earlier, nearly 5,000 Emiratis are registered as unemployed in Ras Al Khaimah and approximately three fourths of these are Emirati women (discussed further in later sections). Accordingly, the following sub-section describes factors affecting the gendered features of unemployment in the Gulf, before taking a closer look at the UAE.

1.2 Gendered Features of Education and Employment in the Gulf

Across the Gulf states, the labor force participation rate is significantly higher among males compared to females, as shown in Table 1. The labor force participation rate for males is highest in Qatar (95%), followed by the UAE (90%), Kuwait (88%), Bahrain (87%), Oman (84%), and Saudi Arabia (80%). The range of male participation rates is 15%.[2] Similarly, the country with the highest labor force participation rate for women is Qatar (60%), followed by the UAE (55%), Kuwait (48%), Bahrain (44%), Oman (32%), and Saudi Arabia (28%). However, the range of female participation rates is 32%, which is nearly twice as high as the male range. This points to the variance in female participation in the labor force across the Gulf states, which differs widely based on the state in question. However, it is interesting to note that the labor force participation rate for males and females in each Gulf country is significantly higher than the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region average, as shown below.

Although the female labor force participation rate is lower than that for males, it has climbed steadily over the past few decades, alongside women's level of educational attainment (Lansford et al., 2021). In fact, various studies have documented the reverse gender gap, where boys and young men lag behind their female counterparts in both educational attainment and enrollment (Ridge, 2014; Jackson & Jackson, 2020; Alhawsawi & Jawhar, 2023). For example, the latest PISA results of 2022 demonstrate that girls have outperformed boys in reading by 40, 33, and 45 score points in Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, respectively.[3] Similarly, girls also outperformed boys

Table 1. Labor Force Participation Rates in the Gulf and MENA Region

Country/Region	Labor force participation rate, male (% of male population aged 15+) *	Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population aged 15+) **
Bahrain	86.9	44
Kuwait	87.8	48
Oman	83.8	32
Qatar	95.4	60
Saudi Arabia	79.2	28
UAE	90.3	55
MENA Region	71.3	19

Source: International Labour Organization ILOSTAT Database (*n.d.-a; **n.d.-b)

*Data from the most recent year: 2015 for Bahrain, 2016 for Kuwait, 2021 for Oman, UAE, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the MENA Region.

**Data from 2022.

[2] *In statistics, the range is defined as the difference between the highest and lowest values in a data set.*

[3] *Data is not available for the Gulf countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, and Oman.*

in mathematics by 8 and 7 score points in Qatar and the UAE, while attaining similar scores in Saudi Arabia (OECD, 2023). In addition, women are more likely to pursue and enroll in higher education in the Gulf, as well as across the entire MENA region (see Table 2).

Women are also more likely to complete their education, making up the majority or half of all graduates in the UAE (70%), Qatar (67%), Bahrain (63%), Oman (60%), Saudi Arabia (58%), and Kuwait (47%) (UAE Ministry of Foreign Affairs, n.d; Gulf Times, 2019; Adwan, 2023; Times of Oman, 2023; King Abdullah Petroleum Studies and Research Center, 2019; Kuwait Times, 2023). As such, the widening gulf in educational performance, enrollment, and completion of education across the secondary and tertiary levels, in addition to the variance in employment rates across the genders, points to different challenges affecting male and female youth in the Gulf. The following section examines the UAE context more closely, attempting to shed light on these gendered differences.

1.3 Gendered Challenges to Education and Employment in the UAE

As noted above, while girls and women's educational attainment has increased significantly in the Gulf, their labor force participation has not proceeded at a similar pace (Koyame-Marsh, 2017). This can be observed in the UAE, where women are more than twice as likely than men to enter higher education, but almost half as likely to enter the labor market. This may be due to various factors, including sociocultural constraints such as the social taboo of wealthy women working, working in fields involving menial labor, and the inappropriateness of working in certain sectors, including the private sector (Al-Jenaibi, 2015).

However, Sim (2020) argues that, in the UAE, this is caused not by cultural and societal gender norms, but because many Emirati women view education primarily as a means to achieve personal growth, and secondly for the purpose of developing their career paths. According to Sim, many young Emirati women enter university without a particular career path in mind. In such cases, university is perceived as a constructive way for young women to spend their time and enhance their social status. As such, the disconnect between some women's educational qualifications and career aspirations weakens their ability to facilitate their participation in the Emirati labor market should they choose to do so.

In contrast, the factors affecting the decline in male educational attainment are different. According to Ridge et al., (2022), Emirati boys are more likely than girls to perform poorly in school and in standardized assessments. Moreover, they are also more susceptible to dropping out of school and less likely to enroll in university. This could potentially be due to the fact that boys are perceived as having sufficient access to the labor market and greater opportunities than girls, even without a university education (Murray & Zhang-Zhang, 2018). However, Emirati boys' disengagement

Table 1. Labor Force Participation Rates in the Gulf and MENA Region

Country/Region	School enrollment, tertiary, male (% gross)*	School enrollment, tertiary, female (% gross)*
Bahrain	62	93
Kuwait	49	76
Oman	36	53
Qatar	16	77
Saudi Arabia	69	70
UAE	38	96
MENA Region	39	43

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.-a; n.d.-b)

*Data from the most recent year: 2017 for Saudi Arabia, 2020 for UAE, 2021 for Kuwait and Oman, and 2022 for Bahrain, Qatar, and the MENA Region.

from education is affected by numerous factors at the micro-, meso-, and macrolevels, beginning with "individual, peer, and family factors in the microsystem; community in the mesosystem, and school, state, and society in the macrosystem" (Ridge et al., 2022).

At the micro-level, boys are heavily affected by their peers and families, with the absence of male role models negatively contributing to their decisions about their education and careers. Interpersonal and structural factors further influence boys' relationship to education at the meso-level, with a disciplinary approach to learning and a top-down, teacher-centered approach disincentivizing boys from taking their education seriously. At the macro-level, existing policies and programs do not currently prioritize the needs of boys, with the exception of military service, thereby reinforcing boys' disengagement from education.

Accordingly, men and women in the UAE face different challenges pertaining to education and employment. Although girls and women are more likely to be educated, they are less likely to be employed, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, than their male counterparts. However, the factors behind women's unemployment differ and need to be further explored, especially in specific emirates such as Ras Al Khaimah. By contrast, boys and young men's educational attainment is significantly lower than that of females, with few state interventions or programs attempting to bridge this gap between the sexes. Moreover, few studies have attempted to investigate reasons behind male unemployment, especially given the perception that males have sufficient work opportunities regardless of educational level. Accordingly, this paper seeks to explore the factors that affect male and female unemployment in Ras Al Khaimah.

2. Data and Limitations

For this policy paper, we examined three different sets of data to better understand unemployment in Ras Al Khaimah. We also examined our previous research, including a report focusing on unemployment among Emiratis in the UAE (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023). The findings presented below are based on information from the original report, which includes (1) demographic data gathered from the Ras Al Khaimah Government on nearly 5,000 Emiratis registered as unemployed; (2) a survey answered by approximately 1,500 respondents of the 5,000 registrants; and (3) information gleaned from three focus groups held with 12 unemployed Emirati men and women.

To better understand the characteristics of the unemployed, we identified demographic information from our database, including gender, age, and educational attainment. Following up on the information obtained from the database, the distributed survey delved into various aspects of recent job application activity, current employment status, and preferred industry. Lastly, the focus groups attempted to shed light on the participants' perspectives and experiences regarding unemployment (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023).

3. Challenges to Employment: A Gender-Based Overview

In accordance with our analysis of the existing literature and data sets, we have observed three key challenges that have affected the employment of Emirati men and women in Ras Al Khaimah.

1. Six times more women than men are actively seeking employment opportunities.

One of the key observations observed among jobseekers was the overrepresentation of women. In fact, women comprise over 70% of the nearly 5,000 individuals registered as unemployed. In our follow-up survey, answered by approximately 1,500 respondents from among those registered, a further subset of over 360 women were identified as active job seekers, defined here as applying for 10 or more jobs per month. This was significantly higher than the number of males who are active job seekers, comprising roughly 60 individuals. Moreover, two thirds of all active job seekers are individuals younger than 28 years of age. Accordingly, in Ras Al Khaimah, nearly six times more Emirati women than men are actively seeking job opportunities.

There are many factors that could explain this difference, including sociocultural factors or familial constraints that limit or influence women's work preferences, leaving them with fewer viable options,

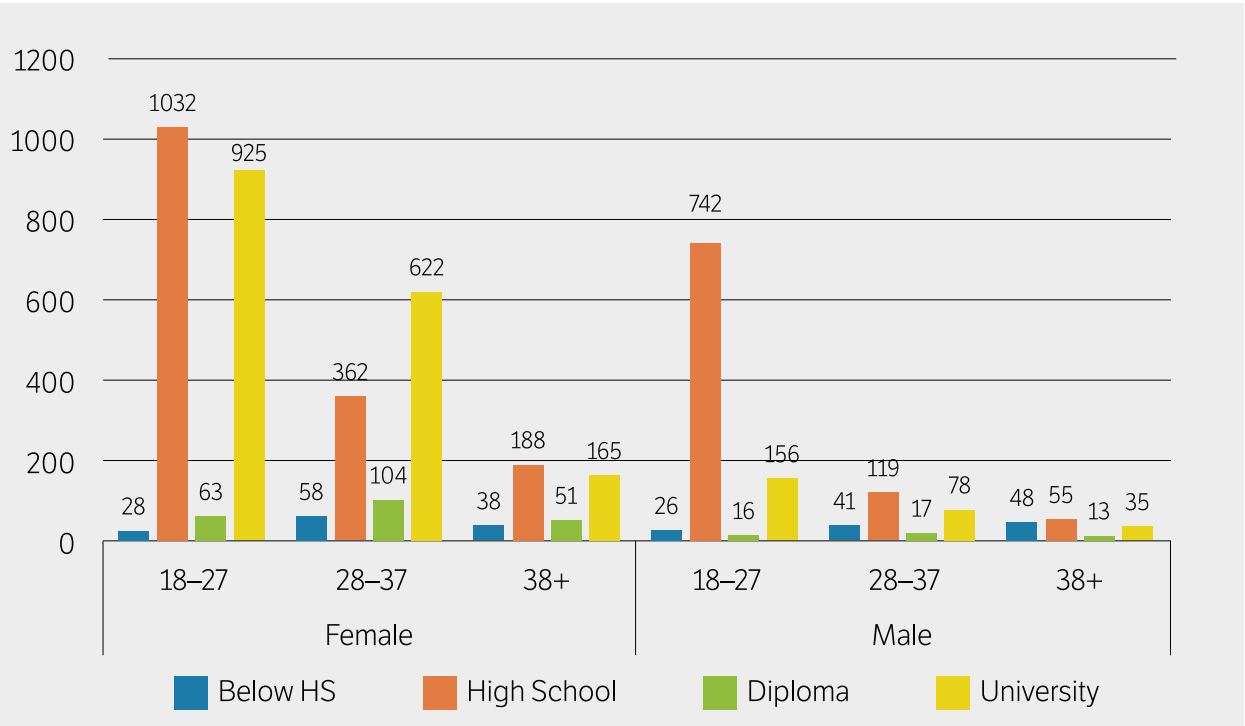
as articulated by some women in our focus groups (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023). This can include the ability or preference to wait for the "right opportunity" to arise, especially in cases where a woman has a support system or there is another breadwinner in the family (Barsoum, 2018). Thus, even as active job seekers, women may choose to remain voluntarily unemployed and turn down existing job opportunities with undesirable work conditions, benefits, working hours, or locations. This is especially pertinent in light of prevalent social perspectives which view education for young women as a means to develop oneself and improve social status, as opposed to an integral step to embarking on a career path (Sim, 2020).

In addition, among the women actively seeking employment, nearly one fourth had not obtained a single job interview in the past six months. This could point to the dearth of available job opportunities, where more applicants than anticipated may be vying for a particular role. However, it may also point to a lack of knowledge on the job application process or to inexperience, effectively excluding younger women from being perceived as qualified to enter positions that may require a certain number of years of experience. The latter is a significant possibility, considering that the remaining three fourths of women actively seeking employment have participated in job interviews in the past six months. In any case, among Emiratis in Ras Al Khaimah, a higher number of women are unemployed and actively seeking work compared to men.

2. Among active jobseekers, women are equally as likely to have a high school diploma or university degree, whereas men with fewer educational qualifications (high school degree or less) are more likely to be unemployed.

A second key observation that was noted, specifically in relation to the nearly 5,000 individuals registered as unemployed, demonstrated the discrepancy in educational attainment across genders. In fact, nearly 40% of women had university degrees, with the remaining 60% having a high school education or less. However, only 20% of the men had a university degree, with the remaining 80% having a high school diploma or lower qualifications (see Figure 2). This demonstrates that, in accordance with the academic literature, male

Figure 2. Highest Educational Attainment by Gender Across Sample



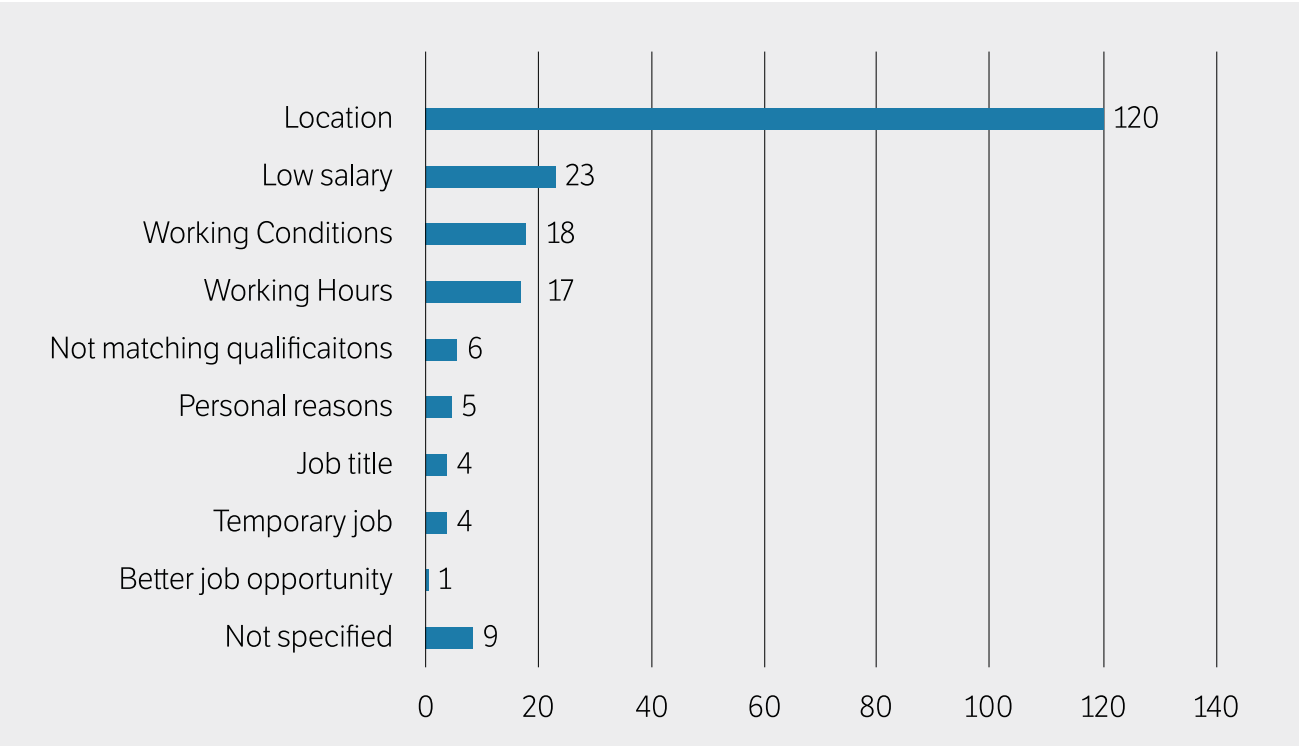
Source: Reproduced from Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023.

educational attainment continues to be lower than that of females in the UAE (Ridge et al., 2022). Moreover, this confirms earlier research by Ridge and other scholars on returns to education for men, which illustrates that men's pursuit of post-secondary education has a tangible impact on their employment.

3. Women have a strong preference to work in Ras Al Khaimah and are more likely to turn down job offers outside of the emirate.

As noted earlier, a significant number of women are actively seeking employment opportunities in Ras Al Khaimah, with some indicating that they have recently turned down a job offer (see Figure 3). It is particularly notable that approximately one third of all active job-seeking women (120) have rejected job offers due to location, followed by rejections of job offers due to a low salary (23), working conditions (18), and working hours (17). The preference for work in Ras Al Khaimah is especially significant, as only five males indicated that they had turned down job offers due to location. As noted earlier, this likely points to fewer job opportunities in the emirate of Ras Al Khaimah, especially for women seeking work in their vicinity (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023). The focus groups conducted with women also found that several women prefer to work remotely, if the work is not in Ras Al Khaimah, due to existing challenges with transportation. Other factors that discourage them from seeking work outside of the emirate or relocating include familial obligations and social or cultural norms that affect their mobility. Although some men indicated a preference to work in Ras Al Khaimah, the data points to the need to provide sufficient job opportunities for skilled women in the emirate.

Figure 3. Women's Reasons for Turning Down Job Offers



Source: Reproduced from Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023.

Recommendations

In light of the key gender-based challenges noted above, we recommend the adoption of the following policy provisions to facilitate the employment of men and women in Ras Al Khaimah.

1. Prioritize the creation of flexible job opportunities—whether part-time, remote or hybrid—to utilize a skilled labor force of unemployed women.

In order to cater to the preferences and needs of women in Ras Al Khaimah, both full-time and flexible work opportunities in the private and public sectors should be established. In the case of the latter, this could include creating part-time positions that can be filled, for example, by students or working mothers, that align with their preferences and familial or social roles and obligations. In addition, the provision of remote or hybrid work opportunities can reduce the burden imposed by the need to commute on a daily basis between emirates (Gibson et al., 2023). Accordingly, such measures can improve work-life balance (Sharma & Yadav, 2023), while further helping to reduce the number of skilled women who are turning down work opportunities due to location (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023).

2. Strengthen the capacity building of unemployed individuals with high school or lower qualifications to bridge the existing skills gap, especially for unemployed male youth.

To further the integration of unemployed individuals into the labor market, it is important to build the capacity of youth through training programs, professional certification programs, and building English language skills (Al Malki & Pretorius, 2023; Erling, 2015). This is particularly important for unemployed male youth, whose lower qualifications may leave them at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts with university degrees. Accordingly, these initiatives can serve as bridge programs that facilitate the employment of young men, in particular, by equipping them with necessary skills to succeed in securing jobs in the labor market.

3. Prioritize the implementation of long-term education policies targeting disadvantaged male youth at risk of dropping out of high school or discontinuing their education.

To support the job and career prospects of male youth, it is important to adopt long-term educational policies targeting boys at risk of dropping out of school. These policies must identify boys who are at risk of dropping out, especially in boys' schools, while further supporting their enrollment in supportive programs that can aid development of practical life skills. One such program adopted by the Al Qasimi Foundation is the Hands-on Learning Program, which was originally established in Australia to help boys who struggle to focus and excel in school to remedy their behavior, complete projects, and improve their self-confidence and esteem through peer-to-peer interaction and collaboration (Sheikh Saud bin Saqr Al Qasimi Foundation for Policy Research, n.d.). Other initiatives should focus on supporting the integration of Emirati boys into education following their completion of the mandatory National Service, which can aid their future career and life prospects.

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- to enrich the local public sector, especially education, by providing educators and civil servants in Ras Al Khaimah with tools to make a positive impact on their own society; and
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