



The Edge Economic Update

Gulf Generations and the Future Economy

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Introduction

The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) – comprising Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman – is in the midst of rapid socio-economic transformation. A youthful demographic structure, with more than half of citizens under 25, combined with high urbanization and world-leading digital connectivity, is reshaping the way Gulf societies work, innovate, consume, and interact. These dynamics are challenging traditional models built on public-sector employment, oil-driven growth, and limited female participation, while creating new pathways for diversification, entrepreneurship, and inclusion.

This report examines five structural trends that will define the Gulf's trajectory in 2026 and beyond: the evolution of work models through remote, hybrid, and gig employment; the surge of youth entrepreneurship and the growth of startup ecosystems; the profound shift in media and entertainment toward digital platforms; the expansion of the health and wellness economy driven by preventive care and telehealth; and the narrowing but persistent gender gap in technology, finance, and leadership roles.

By benchmarking Kuwait's progress within the wider GCC context, the analysis highlights both advances and structural gaps. The findings show a region in transition, where empowered youth, women leaders, and digital adoption are becoming central to economic resilience. The success of these shifts will determine whether Gulf states can transform their demographic advantage and social change into a sustainable and inclusive economy of tomorrow.



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The Future of Work: Remote, Hybrid & Gig Economy

Remote & Hybrid Work: The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a worldwide experiment in remote work, and the GCC was no exception. Although Gulf countries traditionally favored in-office work, about 18% of employees across the GCC now engage in some form of remote or hybrid work. Adoption varies by country – the UAE leads with roughly 21% of professionals having remote/hybrid arrangements, while Kuwait is around 14%, similar to Oman. This indicates that Kuwait’s uptake of flexible work remains modest, with the vast majority still office-based. Government entities and large private firms in the region have been the slowest to embrace remote models (adoption ~12%), whereas multinational companies and tech startups are more likely to allow it (near 30%)¹. The main motivations cited by GCC employers for offering remote work include improved productivity, longer working hours (due to reduced commute), higher talent retention, and real estate cost savings. On the other hand, managers who resist remote work voice concerns about

teamwork, productivity oversight, and data security. In practice, many Gulf organizations compromise with hybrid schedules (e.g. 2 days remote, 3 in-office), which has become the most common pattern for those allowing flexibility. Notably, female professionals in the Gulf report higher remote work participation (24%) than males (15%), suggesting flexible work may especially benefit women juggling other responsibilities. Overall, while remote work is not yet widespread in Kuwait, the trend is gradually gaining traction, especially in sectors like IT and digital marketing that can operate virtually.

Gig Economy Expansion: Alongside remote work, the gig economy is rising rapidly in the Middle East, driven by young, tech-savvy workers and entrepreneurs. By 2024, the region (MENA) accounted for over 7% of the global gig market. Digital platforms for ride-hailing, delivery, freelancing, and online services have proliferated, offering flexible income streams. GCC governments have begun to adapt

regulations – for example, the UAE and Saudi Arabia introduced freelancer visas and permits to legalize and encourage gig work as part of their economic diversification plans. Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 explicitly aims to boost non-traditional employment and has aligned gig opportunities with its transformative economic agenda. However, approaches differ by country: in a notable recent move, Kuwait in 2025 restricted 120 freelance business activities exclusively to Kuwaiti citizens. A ministerial resolution in Kuwait bars expatriates (including other GCC nationals) from working as freelancers in those fields, allowing only Kuwaitis to obtain the new four-year freelance licenses. The policy, enacted in September 2025, aims to “boost local entrepreneurship” and reserve gig opportunities for nationals amid high public sector employment preferences. While this protects Kuwaiti job-seekers, it also limits the pool of gig workers compared to more open markets like the UAE. The tension between encouraging innovation/flexibility and ensuring



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citizen employment is evident in Kuwait's stance.

The future of work in Kuwait and the GCC is expected to become more flexible, but it will likely be a gradual evolution. The pandemic proved that remote work can be productive – regionally, companies have now invested in digital collaboration tools and many employees have experienced the benefits of teleworking (better work-life balance, less commute). Surveys indicate hybrid work is here to stay for a substantial minority of Gulf workers. Additionally, the gig economy will continue growing given the region's young population and high smartphone penetration. Platforms connecting freelancers to clients (like ride-share or food delivery apps, and online marketplaces for services) are seeing surging participation – for instance, one analysis noted Middle East freelance platform sign-ups jumped 142% in 2023, especially in fields like software development and digital marketing. Kuwait's challenge will be to harness these trends for its citizens' benefit while not stifling innovation. The government's protective measures for freelancers

underscore the priority on national workforce development. In the coming years, we can expect Kuwait and its neighbors to refine labor laws to accommodate remote and gig work (e.g. clearer regulations on remote worker rights and freelancer taxation/benefits). The cultural shift toward valuing productivity over physical presence is slowly unfolding. In summary, the concept of a stable “9-to-5” office job is giving way – albeit cautiously – to a more fluid work environment in the Gulf, as both employers and workers adapt to global best practices in the post-pandemic era.



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Youth, Entrepreneurship & Startups

Youth Demographics & Aspirations:

With their large youth bulges, Gulf countries are investing heavily in empowering young people economically. As noted, over half of GCC citizens are under 25 – a tremendous potential workforce and talent pool. Recognizing this, governments have rolled out ambitious youth programs. For example, Bahrain’s National Youth Strategy 2023–2028 and Saudi Arabia’s Youth Development Strategy (launched 2024) focus on equipping young citizens with skills and opportunities to participate in the private sector. The UAE’s National Youth Agenda 2031, launched in 2024, similarly aims to nurture Emirati youth to succeed globally. These initiatives typically provide entrepreneurship training, funding, mentorship, and startup incubators for young innovators. There is also a strong education push: GCC states spend a significant share of budgets on education and training – for instance, 81% of Middle East youth prioritize quality education and governments have responded with expanded digital learning platforms and vocational programs. The

overall goal is to prepare the large youth cohort for the job market of tomorrow, especially in knowledge-based industries, and to foster an entrepreneurial mindset as opposed to reliance on public-sector employment.

Kuwait’s Startup Ecosystem: Kuwait has seen a notable rise in startup activity over the past decade, although it still lags regional leaders like the UAE. According to global indices, Kuwait’s startup ecosystem ranks 8th in the Middle East and has remained at that rank for four years through 2024. This places it behind hubs such as the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, but ahead of some peers. In 2025, StartupBlink reported Kuwait’s ecosystem has about 40–42 active startups with total funding around \$16 million (small by global standards, but growing). The government-backed Kuwait National Fund for SME Development (with ~\$7 billion capital) and various accelerators have been instrumental in supporting new ventures. Early-stage entrepreneurial activity is high in Kuwait by regional comparison – in

fact, Kuwait had the *highest* Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity (TEA) rate among GEM-surveyed Middle East countries in a recent benchmark year. About 19.2% of Kuwaiti adults were actively engaged in starting or running a new business, topping Qatar (17.2%) and Saudi Arabia (17.3%). This indicates strong interest and participation in entrepreneurship at the grassroots level. Moreover, over half of Kuwaiti adults (58%) in 2020 said they intended to start a business in the next three years, a rate slightly above nearby Oman. Such optimism was likely bolstered by the pandemic’s shift in economic realities – tellingly, 61% of Kuwaitis involved in startups saw new opportunities arising from the pandemic’s disruptions. However, despite high entrepreneurial zeal, Kuwait’s ecosystem still faces challenges: GEM assessments of Kuwait’s framework conditions showed weaknesses in government entrepreneurship programs and policy support (scoring lowest among GCC in those categories in 2020). Recent reforms (like easier business registration via the



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“one-stop” Kuwait Business Center and amendments to Company Law) aim to improve the climate.

Regional Comparison – GCC Startup Boom:

Across the GCC, there is a startup boom underway as countries diversify from oil. The UAE and Saudi Arabia dominate in venture funding and number of startups – for example, the UAE accounts for roughly 50% of MENA startup investment by value, hosting high-profile success stories in fintech, e-commerce, and transport. Saudi Arabia, powered by Vision 2030 and mega-funds, is quickly catching up with a vibrant fintech and e-commerce scene. Qatar and Bahrain have also grown their startup rankings in recent years, leveraging hubs like Qatar’s Fintech Hub and Bahrain’s FinTech Bay. In this context, Kuwait’s progress has been “steady but gradual”. It advanced slightly in global startup ecosystem indices over 2024–2025, reflecting improvements in infrastructure and a few notable funding rounds. One metric shows Kuwait City’s startup ecosystem grew +137% in 2025 in its global ranking score, though absolute numbers remain small. Key sectors for

Kuwaiti startups include e-commerce, food delivery, fintech, and digital media, often catering to the local market’s high purchasing power. The country’s high internet penetration (99%) and young population are fertile ground for digital enterprises.

Youth Entrepreneurship Culture:

There is a palpable cultural shift among Gulf youth towards entrepreneurship. Surveys show GCC youth increasingly see entrepreneurship as a desirable career and successful entrepreneurs are given high status in society. In Kuwait, for instance, social attitudes are supportive – many young Kuwaitis witnessed new business opportunities emerge during COVID-19 (e.g. home baking, delivery services) and jumped on them. Universities and NGOs in Kuwait host innovation challenges and startup weekends targeting youth, while the government’s Ministry of Youth Affairs (established in 2013) runs programs to channel youth creativity into businesses. Female youth entrepreneurship is particularly noteworthy in Kuwait: women have become highly active in the startup scene (discussed more in the gender section).

According to recent reports, around 41% of startups in Kuwait are now led or founded by women – one of the highest rates in the Middle East. This is a remarkable shift redefining traditional gender roles in business, and it underscores how empowered the young female generation in Kuwait has become in pursuing ventures. Regionally, other GCC countries are also pushing youth startups – the UAE has multiple free zones and funds dedicated to youth-led enterprises, and Saudi Arabia’s PIF has launched an “Ignite” program to fund digital content startups often led by young Saudis.

Challenges and Opportunities:

Despite momentum, Gulf youth and startups face challenges such as access to capital (beyond government funding), navigating regulations, and market smallness (in some of the countries). Youth unemployment remains an issue – in some GCC states, unemployment is highest among under-25s, making entrepreneurship not just an opportunity but almost a necessity for job creation. Governments are responding with more inclusive policies. For example, Saudi



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Arabia nearly doubled women's labor force participation from ~19% in 2016 to 34% in 2023 in part by enabling more roles for women and encouraging female entrepreneurs. Kuwait, which historically had a large public-sector-employed citizenry, is trying to spur private SME growth so that more youth create jobs rather than wait for government jobs. The outlook is optimistic: with continuous support, the GCC could see a new generation of homegrown companies addressing regional needs in fintech, e-commerce, renewable energy, creative industries, and more. The World Economic Forum noted that giving young people a central role – as innovators and decision-makers – will “positively impact the wider region” by harnessing their energy and ideas. In Kuwait and its neighbors, today's youth entrepreneurs may well become tomorrow's industry leaders, driving diversification and knowledge economies beyond oil.



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Digital Media, Content & Entertainment Consumption Trends

Digital Penetration and Usage: The Gulf region boasts some of the highest internet and social media usage rates in the world. Internet access is effectively universal – for example, Kuwait has 99% internet penetration as of early 2024, and the UAE similarly reports 99% of its population online. Mobile phone subscriptions far exceed population totals (e.g. Kuwait has 7.89 million mobile connections for 4.33 million people, indicating many carry multiple devices or SIMs). Social media is deeply ingrained in daily life: Kuwait had about 4.15 million active social media users in 2024 (96% of its population), and in the UAE the number of social accounts even exceeds the population (112% penetration). *Time spent* online is strikingly high. UAE residents, for instance, spend on average 8 hours 11 minutes per day using the internet, with nearly 3 hours on social media alone each day. This far surpasses the global average (around 6h40m online, 2h30m on social media). Other GCC countries show similar patterns of heavy digital consumption – a recent study noted GCC residents average over 3.5

hours daily on social platforms, well above world norms. The most popular social networks in the Gulf include WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, YouTube, Snapchat, and TikTok, with messaging and visual apps particularly dominant. The always-connected lifestyle is facilitated by excellent network infrastructure (Gulf countries rank among the top for mobile internet speeds globally, e.g. median 189 Mbps mobile speed in Kuwait) and by cultural/social preferences for online communication. In fact, keeping in touch with friends and family is the number one reason people cite for social media use in the GCC, but entertainment is a close second.

Streaming and On-Demand Entertainment: A major trend in recent years is the shift from traditional TV to on-demand digital entertainment. Streaming video services (Subscription Video On Demand or SVOD) have seen rapid uptake in the GCC, fueled by young audiences and broad smartphone/tablet use. According to industry reports, over 57% of UAE residents now subscribe to

at least one paid streaming service, and in Saudi Arabia about 48% do. These figures reflect a dramatic change – a decade ago, such services were nascent in the region. Today, the GCC's streaming market is fiercely competitive: global players like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ compete with regional platforms such as Shahid VIP (the Arabic content leader run by MBC Group) and StarzPlay Arabia (popular for Bollywood, cricket, and Hollywood content). Shahid VIP and StarzPlay together command millions of subscribers; as of 2025 Shahid VIP had over 3 million subscribers (thanks to its exclusive Gulf-produced series and sports content), while UAE-based StarzPlay had around 2.1 million. Content preferences in the GCC reflect the region's diversity: expatriates (a large segment of the Gulf population) demand international content (Indian, Western, Filipino, etc.), whereas locals gravitate to Arabic shows and sports. This has led to platform specialization – e.g. Shahid VIP dominates Arabic series and Gulf reality shows, StarzPlay bundles South Asian content for expats, and Netflix offers a



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broad mix and is investing in more Arabic originals. *Notably, Netflix reported a 40% year-on-year increase in viewership of Arabic-language content in the Gulf (especially in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait).* This suggests that Gulf audiences are increasingly streaming local stories when available, not just imported content. It aligns with Saudi Arabia's push under Vision 2030 to boost its media sector – local production of movies/series has ramped up, and companies like Netflix are partnering with GCC producers for authentic content.

Traditional television is still watched, but its share is shrinking among youth. Many GCC consumers now “cord-cut” or supplement satellite TV with streaming apps. A PwC survey found younger Middle East viewers see live TV as “a thing of the past” in large numbers. Instead, short-form videos (e.g. on YouTube, TikTok, Instagram Reels) and streaming series dominate their media consumption. Indeed, Saudi Arabia and the UAE rank among the top globally in YouTube and TikTok usage per capita (with Saudi YouTube watch-time per user historically one of the highest in the world). The Middle East's love of social

media also blurs with entertainment: influencers and content creators are hugely popular, effectively becoming a new form of media channel. Gulf influencers on Instagram, Snapchat and YouTube (many of them young nationals) command massive followings and often produce lifestyle and comedy content that garners millions of views. Recognizing this, governments have started regulating the space – e.g. Kuwait's new media law requires social media influencers to obtain licenses for advertising, aiming to professionalize digital content creation.

Entertainment Market Growth: Overall, the media and entertainment industry in MENA is on a strong growth trajectory. One forecast projects the Middle East media market (which includes streaming, gaming, cinema, etc.) will reach \$18 billion by 2028, growing ~9–10% annually. Saudi Arabia, having opened cinemas in 2018 and invested in events, is the largest national market – it comprised about 33% of Middle East entertainment revenues in 2024. Live entertainment and cinemas are rebounding (Saudi and UAE have hosted major concerts, film festivals, and e-

sports tournaments recently), but the fastest growth is in digital segments: streaming video, digital music, and gaming. The Gulf has also emerged as a global e-sports hub – for example, Saudi Arabia hosted an eSports World Cup and is investing in gaming companies as part of a \$38 billion strategy to become a gaming powerhouse. Gaming consumption in GCC, especially mobile gaming, is among the highest globally per capita. Young Saudis and Emiratis commonly spend hours on games like Fortnite, FIFA, and PUBG, and governments view gaming as both a lucrative industry and a way to connect with youth.

Another notable trend is **information consumption shifting online**. More than two-thirds of GCC residents now get news from social media or news websites rather than print newspapers or even TV news. WhatsApp and Twitter (now X) are particularly influential for news sharing in the Gulf. However, this raises concerns about misinformation, leading governments to double down on media literacy campaigns and tighter cyber regulations.



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Challenges: Despite the digital boom, the GCC's media landscape must navigate certain challenges. Censorship and cultural sensitivities continue to shape content – streaming platforms often edit or remove content that violates local norms (e.g. scenes with nudity or LGBTQ+ themes may be censored on GCC versions of Netflix/Amazon). While most consumers tolerate these edits, it does sometimes drive tech-savvy users to VPNs for uncensored content. Another challenge is monetization and language: Arabic content creation is growing but still lags demand, and local producers face competition from big-budget foreign productions. However, the gap is closing as Gulf states fund more local studios and encourage Arabic content on YouTube and streaming platforms (e.g. through grants and awards). Bandwidth and cost are less of an issue in the wealthy GCC (data is affordable and networks are robust), but fragmentation of services can frustrate users (needing multiple subscriptions to access all desired content). We also see advertising shifting online – by 2025, digital ad spend in the GCC is set to overtake TV ad spend, as brands follow

eyeballs to Facebook, Google, and regional digital channels.

Outlook: The GCC's digital media consumption will only intensify. The region's young, high-income population is extremely online and hungry for content. We can expect continued growth in streaming subscriptions – Omdia projects MENA SVOD subs will exceed 27 million by 2025. Providers will likely increase local productions; for example, MBC's Shahid is investing \$100+ million in new originals by 2025, and global players like Disney+ are expanding their Arabic libraries. Short-form video and social media will remain central – platforms like TikTok have become cultural phenomena among Gulf youth. Regulators will try to keep pace by updating media laws (as seen with influencer regulations and cybercrime laws for online content). The GCC's unique mix of local and expatriate audiences means multi-lingual content offerings will thrive – English, Arabic, Hindi/Urdu, Tagalog content all have significant user bases. In sum, the Gulf is a hyper-connected, content-hungry market. Kuwait and its neighbors will

continue to be at the forefront of global digital media trends, with consumers seamlessly toggling between local Arab soap operas, Bollywood films, American Netflix series, YouTube vlogs, and Snapchat news – often all in the same day.



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Health & Wellness Economy: Lifestyle, Telehealth & Preventive Care

Lifestyle Diseases and Health Challenges: Health and wellness have taken center stage in the GCC policy agenda, largely due to alarmingly high rates of lifestyle-related diseases. The Gulf countries have some of the highest obesity and diabetes prevalence in the world. Five of the top 10 countries for adult diabetes prevalence are GCC members. For example, roughly 18% of adults in Saudi Arabia have diabetes (and 15% in the UAE), far above the global adult diabetes rate (~9%). Kuwait in particular faces a severe obesity problem – an estimated 42–49% of Kuwaiti adults are obese, placing Kuwait among the top ten most obese countries globally. Across Kuwait, UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar, over 35% of adults are classified as obese according to the World Obesity Federation. These high rates of obesity, along with sedentary lifestyles and high sugar diets, have led to corresponding epidemics of hypertension and heart disease. The causes are multifold: historically, low physical activity levels (Gulf societies relied on cars and domestic help), calorie-rich diets, and

genetic predispositions. This health burden has economic costs too, straining healthcare systems with chronic disease management.

Wellness and Fitness Initiatives: In response, GCC governments have launched a wave of initiatives to encourage healthier lifestyles and preventive care. A prime example is Saudi Arabia’s “Quality of Life” program under Vision 2030, which set targets to increase physical activity among citizens. The results have been dramatic: the share of Saudis exercising at least once a week jumped from only 13% in 2015 to nearly 50% by 2022. This was achieved through nationwide campaigns, building hundreds of new gyms and sports facilities, organizing community sports events, and even changing social norms (e.g. allowing and encouraging women’s sports). Female participation in sports in Saudi saw a 149% increase since 2015 after barriers were removed. Other countries mirror this trend – the UAE has annual events like the Dubai Fitness Challenge (30 minutes of exercise for 30 days) that

draws huge participation, and Qatar promotes sports with its National Sport Day public holiday. Kuwait has also put emphasis on fitness for youth, integrating sports in schools and public awareness about exercise, though it still has work to do to catch up in participation rates. These efforts align with a broader “wellness economy” boom: more people are joining gyms, buying fitness trackers, practicing yoga, and seeking nutrition advice than a decade ago. The private sector has responded with boutique fitness studios, healthy restaurant options, and wellness tourism offerings (such as spa retreats, which GCC tourists increasingly partake in abroad).

Telehealth Revolution: Another major development in the health sector is the rapid adoption of telehealth and digital health services, a trend greatly accelerated by the pandemic. During COVID-19, remote consultations became a necessity and proved effective. In Saudi Arabia, over 2 million telemedicine consultations were provided in 2020 via the national “Seha” virtual care app, an *eight-fold increase*



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from pre-pandemic usage. The Saudi Ministry of Health's allowed residents to video-call doctors, get prescriptions, and even schedule lab tests, all online. User satisfaction was high and it helped relieve pressure on hospitals. The momentum continued post-pandemic: Saudi Arabia's telehealth market revenue hit about \$1.06 billion in 2024 and is projected to nearly quadruple by 2030, indicating sustained demand. Other GCC countries similarly integrated telehealth: the UAE's Dubai Health Authority launched "Doctor for Every Citizen" offering free 24/7 teleconsultations for Emiratis, and private providers (like Okadoc, Vezeeta) now offer telehealth across the region. Regulators fast-tracked telemedicine guidelines – for instance, Bahrain and Qatar officially authorized telepharmacy and teleconsultation services post-2020. Telehealth has been particularly beneficial for follow-up visits, mental health counseling, and reaching patients in remote areas (or those hesitant to visit clinics). It also dovetails with the GCC's high smartphone usage; healthcare has become another on-demand service available through an app. While in-person visits remain essential for many

conditions, telehealth is now a permanent fixture of Gulf healthcare delivery.

Preventive Care and Public Health Measures: A significant pivot in GCC health policy is toward preventive care – keeping people healthy to begin with, rather than just treating illness. Governments have implemented “sin taxes” and regulations to curb unhealthy behaviors. In 2017, all GCC states agreed to introduce excise taxes on sugary drinks and tobacco. A 50% tax on sugar-sweetened sodas and 100% tax on energy drinks was enacted, with Saudi Arabia pioneering enforcement. This made sugary drinks notably more expensive; studies in Saudi showed soft drink consumption dropped ~19% after the tax, with the biggest reduction among obese individuals. Similarly, tobacco products are heavily taxed, and anti-smoking campaigns (including bans on indoor smoking in many places) have expanded. Kuwait, for example, has run “Quit Now” smoking cessation programs and is expected to follow through on the unified GCC tobacco tax policy. Immunization and screening programs have also grown. The UAE and Saudi

Arabia have introduced free nationwide screening for diseases like breast and colon cancer at certain ages, aiming to catch cases early. The UAE boasts one of the world's highest COVID-19 vaccination rates, reflecting its public health mobilization capacity.

As a result of preventive measures and better healthcare, life expectancy is inching upward in the Gulf. Saudi Arabia's Ministry of Health announced that average life expectancy rose from about 74 years in 2016 to 78.8 years by 2024 – approaching levels in advanced economies. The Kingdom's goal is to hit 80 years by 2030 through continued health system improvements. Other GCC states have similar life expectancy (Kuwait and UAE are in the late 70s). These improvements reflect not only medical care but also better prevention of health risks and lifestyle changes. For instance, some countries have started to combat sedentariness by redesigning cities for more walking and cycling (e.g. developing parks, jogging tracks, and bike lanes as part of urban plans in Riyadh, Doha, Dubai). Nutritional awareness is rising too – schools are teaching healthy eating, and more Gulf residents are



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mindful of diet (though traditional heavy cuisines and fast food remain popular, moderation is being emphasized). The “wellness economy” – spanning healthy foods, fitness, personal care, and preventive health services – is now a multibillion-dollar sector in the GCC.

Healthcare System Transformation:

On the healthcare delivery side, GCC countries are transforming their systems with heavy investment. Saudi Arabia, for example, is implementing a large-scale Health Sector Transformation Program to privatize and improve hospital services, introduce mandatory insurance, and promote value-based care. Part of this transformation involves expanding primary care and prevention. Polyclinics and “medical home” models are being set up to manage chronic conditions proactively (e.g. diabetes clinics to prevent complications). Digital health records and AI are also being used to identify at-risk patients and prompt preventive interventions. The private healthcare market is growing, with many new hospitals, labs, and clinics, often in partnership with international institutions – these often include wellness centers and

preventative cardiology or diabetes centers. Telehealth companies and health-tech startups have attracted investment; for example, UAE’s Altibbi and Oman’s eMushrif are regional startups focusing on telemedicine and health monitoring.

Outlook: The health and wellness outlook for the GCC is mixed with challenges and optimism. The challenges are significant: reducing obesity and diabetes rates that are already high will require a generational shift in habits. Cultural factors (such as heavy traditional cuisines and low female physical activity in some conservative communities) cannot be changed overnight. However, the trajectory is positive – younger Gulf citizens appear more health-conscious than their parents, and governments are sustaining momentum in health reforms. We can expect further steps such as food labelling laws (some GCC states have introduced traffic-light nutrition labels), stricter marketing regulations on junk food (especially to children), and incentives for employers to promote employee wellness. The telehealth and digital health sector will continue to flourish, integrating with wearable devices

and home health monitoring, which is well-suited to tech-friendly Gulf populations. Policymakers are also looking at healthcare workforce localization – training more local doctors, nurses, sports trainers, and nutritionists – to build capacity for preventive care and wellness coaching internally.

Ultimately, the GCC’s health vision is to shift from sick-care to true “well-being” societies. As Dubai’s ruler once stated, “The government’s job is to ensure a healthy happy life for its people.” This ethos is driving multi-sectoral collaboration: urban planners, educators, and healthcare providers working together to enable active living and early intervention. In Kuwait, for example, there have been calls to integrate the concept of “wellness” into Vision 2035 goals, given the toll of lifestyle diseases on the economy. If current trends hold, the coming decade should see stabilization or slight declines in obesity/diabetes rates, improved health outcomes, and a burgeoning domestic industry around fitness and preventive health services.



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Gender Gap in Tech, Banking, and Leadership: Benchmarking the Gulf

Gender equality in the workforce and leadership is a critical component of the GCC's social development. Historically, the Gulf states exhibited wide gender gaps – low female workforce participation, few women in executive roles, and male-dominated tech and finance sectors. In recent years, however, significant progress has been made to empower women economically, even though much work remains. This section compares the status of women in tech, banking, and leadership across Kuwait and neighboring countries, highlighting both the advancements and the persisting gaps.

Female Workforce Participation:

Overall female labor force participation in the GCC has been rising from a low base. Saudi Arabia in particular has seen a remarkable jump – female participation surged by 84% between 2017 and 2023, increasing from around 19% of women in the labor force to roughly 34–35% by 2024. This leap is directly tied to Saudi's Vision 2030 reforms that removed bans (e.g. women can now drive and travel,

enabling work) and proactively encouraged hiring women in all sectors. Saudi aims for women to make up 30% of the workforce in the near future (as of 2022 it was about 22%, now already mid-30s). The UAE has long had higher female participation (around 42% of women are in the workforce as of 2023, one of the highest in the Arab world), thanks to more liberal social norms and government initiatives (the UAE has a Gender Balance Council guiding policy). Kuwait stands out in the Gulf for relatively high female education and public sector employment – Kuwaiti women have high literacy and often outnumber men in university, and many work in government jobs (education, healthcare, civil service). However, women's participation in Kuwait's private sector is lower, and challenges like a lack of childcare or cultural expectations can impede careers. Still, Kuwaiti women's labor force participation rate is estimated around 50% (far higher for Kuwaiti citizens than expatriate women, many of whom are non-working dependents).

Women in Entrepreneurship and

Tech: One bright spot is female entrepreneurship, where the Gulf is making headlines. As mentioned, Kuwait leads the Gulf in women-led startups – about 41% of Kuwaiti startups have at least one female founder. This is a striking figure, considering globally the proportion of startups founded by women is much lower. Kuwait's case shows that given access to education and digital tools, Arab women are seizing business opportunities in fields like e-commerce, fashion, food tech, and online services. Success stories include Kuwait's Boutiqaat (a beauty e-commerce platform driven significantly by female social media influencers) and “Lei Wa Lakom” (a platform founded by Taiba Al-Humaidhi to recycle clothes – a female-led green startup). The UAE also has many women entrepreneurs, with government grants (e.g. “She's Next” by Visa and NBK in Kuwait, and similar programs in Dubai) specifically supporting female-owned small businesses. Region-wide, it's reported that 57% of STEM graduates in the Middle East are female – women are



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excelling in science and technology education – yet only 34% of the region’s tech startups have a female founder or co-founder. This suggests an opportunity to better translate educational success into entrepreneurial ventures.

In the tech workforce, the gulf between education and employment is evident. For instance, 38% of Saudi STEM college graduates are women, but women represent only about 17% of the STEM workforce in Saudi Arabia. A similar pattern holds in other GCC countries: women attain STEM degrees at equal or higher rates than men (the UAE notes 56–61% of its government university STEM graduates are female), yet relatively few work in technical roles in industry. Cultural factors (gender biases in hiring, women choosing public or education jobs over private tech firms, etc.) contribute to this gap. However, there are concerted efforts to change it. Tech companies and governments are running coding bootcamps and “women in tech” initiatives. For example, Saudi Arabia’s MiSK foundation offers tech training for young women, and Bahrain’s Girls in Tech chapter encourages females in ICT.

Kuwait’s KWEEN (Kuwait Women’s Economic Empowerment Platform) provides mentorship and leadership bootcamps to women in business and tech^[81]. Additionally, the rise of remote work (noted earlier) could help more women enter tech fields, as flexible arrangements often appeal to those balancing family duties.

Women in Banking and Finance: The banking/finance sector in the Gulf has traditionally been male-led, but glass ceilings are being cracked. Kuwait was actually a pioneer decades ago – NBK (National Bank of Kuwait) had a female CEO (Sheikha Al Bahar as Deputy Group CEO) and numerous women executives relatively early. In the broader GCC, notable milestones include Rania Nashar becoming the first female CEO of a listed Saudi commercial bank (Samba Financial) in 2017. At the same time, Sarah Al-Suhaimi was appointed the first female chair of Saudi’s stock exchange (Tadawul) and earlier was CEO of NCB Capital. These appointments were groundbreaking in Saudi Arabia, where only a few years prior women held almost no top finance positions. By 2023, Saudi

had a handful of women in bank C-suites (e.g. Alawwal Bank had a female CFO, and Banque Saudi Fransi appointed a woman as deputy managing director). The UAE and Bahrain have also seen women rise in banking – the UAE’s Emirates NBD and Abu Dhabi Commercial Bank have women in senior roles, and Bahrain’s Central Bank has had female executive directors. Qatar appointed its first female bank CEO in 2017 (at QNB Capital). Despite these individual successes, women remain underrepresented in finance leadership overall. A Reuters piece in 2017 noted *“women hold few top posts in the financial sector”* in Saudi, though reforms aim to boost their role. This largely holds true across the Gulf, aside from a few high-profile trailblazers.

Women in Corporate Leadership: One quantifiable area to benchmark is representation on corporate boards. The GCC traditionally had very low female board representation, but it is improving from a low base. A 2025 Gulf board diversity report found women now hold 6.8% of corporate board seats on average across the GCC. The UAE leads with



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14.8% of board seats held by women (thanks in part to a 2021 mandate that all listed companies must have at least one female board member). Bahrain follows with 8.5%, then Oman ~6.6%. Kuwait sits around 5.5% female board representation (as of Jan 2025), slightly below the Gulf average, and Saudi Arabia and Qatar are around 2.8–2.9%, the lowest in the GCC. While these numbers are still low by global standards, the growth is noteworthy – every GCC country saw a double-digit percentage increase in women on boards from 2024 to 2025. Initiatives like Heriot-Watt University and Aurora50’s GCC Board Gender Index are tracking this progress and pushing for more. The UAE’s jump (from ~3.5% in 2019 to 14.8% in 2025) shows that policy mandates + advocacy can yield fast change. Saudi Arabia, which has no quota, is moving slower, but even there the conversation has started and a few women (such as Lubna Olayan) have been appointed to high-profile board positions in recent years.

In the public sector and politics, Gulf women have also made strides – the UAE has 50% of its Federal National Council

seats occupied by women (by leadership decision), and Saudi now has women in its Shura Council (consultative assembly) and even in roles like Vice Minister or Ambassador (e.g. Princess Reema bint Bandar is the Saudi ambassador to the US). Kuwait was the first Gulf state to have an elected female parliamentarian (in 2005) and has had a few women ministers, though female representation in Kuwait’s parliament is currently low after recent elections. These political gains, while outside tech/banking, contribute to leadership role models and can influence corporate culture.

Challenges and Cultural Shifts:

Despite improvement, gender gaps persist in pay, leadership, and certain industries. Women in GCC STEM jobs often report barriers in career advancement and sometimes conservative workplace cultures. In some sectors like oil & gas or construction, female presence remains very small. Furthermore, the burden of family care still falls mostly on women, and the availability of childcare or flexible hours can dictate whether highly-educated women stay in the workforce or drop out.

For example, in Kuwait and Qatar many women exit the labor force after marriage/children due to lack of work-life balance policies in private companies. Governments are responding – for instance, Saudi Arabia instituted longer maternity leave and is encouraging employers to offer daycare services. The cultural perception of women working is also changing among the population. An encouraging sign: a PwC Middle East survey found 66% of young Arab women are optimistic about their career chances and believe they can attain leadership positions (a marked shift from older generations).

Outlook: The trajectory for gender inclusion in the Gulf is positive but requires sustained effort. We will likely see more women entering tech fields as coders, engineers, and startup founders, given the strong interest and educational pipeline. Governments and big employers are setting targets: for instance, Saudi ARAMCO wants to substantially increase its female engineers, and UAE’s government aims for 30% of leadership roles to be held by women by 2025. The banking sector may gradually normalize



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female leadership as the precedent has been set – we can expect more women CEOs or CFOs in regional banks in the coming years, especially as the financial sector expands (FinTech is one area where many women-led startups are emerging). On corporate boards, if the current growth continues, the GCC might reach ~20% female board representation within a decade, which would be a major change in boardroom dynamics.

Crucially, younger generations (both men and women) in the GCC appear more supportive of gender equality at work. The narrative has shifted from “if” women should work to “how to empower them further”. As an example of the changing mindset, Kuwait’s startup scene now sees women not only participating but thriving, backed by policy reform and a new culture of economic participation. This momentum is reinforced by top-down encouragement (royal and government support) and bottom-up societal change. Education remains the cornerstone – with women in the GCC now often more educated than men, the logical next step is to fully leverage that human capital in the economy.

In summary, while the Gulf’s gender gap – particularly in tech, banking, and leadership – is far from closed, the gap is steadily narrowing. Kuwait and its neighbors are benchmarking progress year by year. The Gulf countries know that achieving their ambitious economic visions depends on unlocking the full potential of their women. As more women break into executive roles, lead startups, and sit on boards, they become role models who inspire others and help normalize women’s leadership. The road ahead will have challenges (cultural resistance in some quarters, need for policy enforcement, etc.), but the direction is set: the Gulf is moving towards a more inclusive economy where both women and men can contribute equally to innovation, growth, and leadership.



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Conclusion

Across these varied domains – the nature of work, youth enterprise, digital media habits, health paradigms, and gender roles – Kuwait and the GCC are experiencing profound shifts. Several common threads emerge. Demographics (a young, urban, connected population) and technology are powerful forces driving change, from how people work and play to how they access services. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated many trends (remote work, telehealth, streaming) and proved the viability of new models in the Gulf context. Governments are playing an active role in steering these trends: launching initiatives for youth and women, enacting policies to encourage entrepreneurship and healthier lifestyles, and investing in digital infrastructure. There is also a clear momentum towards aligning with global standards – whether in workplace flexibility, startup ecosystems, preventive healthcare, or women’s empowerment – as the GCC states strive to be competitive, “future-ready” societies.

Kuwait finds itself in a unique position. It benefits from being part of a dynamic region and often looks to neighbors for successful examples (such as the UAE in digital sectors or Saudi Arabia in social reforms), yet it also faces its own internal dynamics like a strong public sector ethos. The key for Kuwait and the wider GCC will be balance: embracing innovation and global trends while tailoring them to local values and ensuring inclusivity for citizens and residents alike. The trends outlined in this report suggest that the Gulf’s social and consumer landscape in 2030 will likely be significantly different from that of 2010 – more digital, more entrepreneurial, more health-conscious, and more inclusive.

That said, transitions come with challenges. Policymakers must manage issues like gig worker rights, startup funding gaps, digital misinformation risks, healthcare capacity, and persistent gender biases. The encouraging news is that the region has shown the ability to adapt quickly when the mandate is clear (for example, the rapid expansion of remote services during the pandemic, or the swift improvements in women’s representation once quotas were introduced). If the current trajectory continues, the GCC will reap a sizeable demographic dividend (through empowered youth and women), diversify its economies via innovation, and improve quality of life for its people through preventive health and digital conveniences.

In conclusion, Kuwait and its Gulf neighbors are navigating a period of social transformation. The future of work is more flexible, the youth are carving new paths in business, media consumption is overwhelmingly digital, a culture of wellness is taking root, and women are steadily gaining ground in leadership. These trends, underpinned by data and recent developments, paint an optimistic picture of a region in renewal. With prudent policies and an openness to change, the GCC’s social and consumer evolution will bolster its economic resilience and societal well-being in the years ahead, ensuring the Gulf remains at the leading edge of progress in the Middle East.



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