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When a boardroom diversity push runs into norms

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Good morning, Broadsheet readers! Child tax credit checks will hit parents' bank accounts in July, General Catalyst bets big on 'civic tech,' and the UAE's boardroom diversity push is off to a slow start. Have a great Tuesday.

– Slow start. Countries across the globe are trying to increase the share of women on their public company boards—with good reason. Nations like the U.S. and U.K. are starting from points of modest representation: women account for 29% of S&P 500 boards and 34% of FTSE 350 directors.

And then there is the United Arab Emirates, where women account for 4% of board members at firms on the country's two major stock exchanges.

That's quite a hole to dig out of, but the UAE is giving it a go. In March, Securities and Commodities Authority announced that all listed companies must have at least one female director.

Two months in, there's been no rush of female director appointments. In fact, women have made up just four of the 23 new board appointments since the new rule was announced, according to Bloomberg.

One reason for the sluggish progress may be cultural expectations that didn't vanish overnight. Fatma Hussain, the only woman on the board of Dubai-based logistics firm Aramex PJSC, told Bloomberg that some women are hesitant to take roles that require late nights or lots of interaction with men. Hussain says some of the women she's interviewed have asked their parents for permission before accepting an offer because "there are many males."

Even with such hurdles, the UAE seems serious about enforcing its new rule. Penalties for non-compliance may range from warnings to a fine to referral for public prosecution.

We know from places like India that gender quotas are not a perfect solution. And the case of the UAE is a good reminder that any boardroom diversity push must consider societal contexts that might stymie progress and figure out how to accommodate such norms—or push back against them.

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