

EMPOWERING WOMEN THROUGH EDUCATION

TOPIC: Arab governments have officially recognized the urgent need to equip future generations with the leadership, managerial and technological skills that will propel their economies towards future global competitiveness. With women accounting for 70% of graduates in some parts of the Middle East in 2007, how is this pool of talent going to be utilized for future economic and social prosperity in the region?

ADDRESS

I am very pleased to be with you today, and to represent PricewaterhouseCoopers territories from around the globe at today's conference. Our participation in this week's conference is a joint effort of our Middle East region firms, our US firm and our global organization. Represented in the audience today is Chris Simmons, managing partner of our Washington DC metro region and former chief diversity officer for the US PriceaterhouseCoopers firm.

PricewaterhouseCoopers has a strong tradition of utilizing the talents of women for business growth and to support the dreams of women. We have received top awards around the globe, including here in the United States, for our commitment to and success with developing women leaders. The most notable award received here in the US, the site of this year's conference, was the catalyst award for advancing women in leadership. In my region of the world, PWC is similarly making great strides in utilising the talents of women. In Lebanon, for example, over half our staff is female. In Egypt, nearly 20% of our partners are female. In my country of Bahrain, the senior partner- me- is a woman. So we are making strides around the world. However, we like all other companies around the world, have much progress to make. Our progress is not universal, and continues to vary country by country, heavily impacted by societal climates and forces.

Even the companies and firms that receive prestigious awards for supporting women in their careers have many significant challenges still to overcome. Our diligent efforts around the globe have not made us perfect, but they have given us many insights into better approaches. So, as I thought about the topic and the context that was posed- how will we actually utilise the talents of this large and growing pool of female graduates in the middle east- I thought about the lessons we have been taught by what has already happened.

As I collaborate with my female colleagues from around the world and within the Middle East, some points to address and consider come to mind.

NUMBER ONE: we must take a close look at the subjects that our women students are pursuing while obtaining their degrees to ensure that our women students are not being disproportionately channeled into areas of study that do not provide equal access to the best jobs and full participation in the economy. We must work with students before and during their university years to shape their approach to the selection of areas of study.

NUMBER TWO: we must provide the women graduates with equal opportunities to participate in crucial work internships in new areas not typically pursued by women historically. Otherwise, our women graduates will not have the visibility, the comfort or the relationships needed to pursue and excel in many areas historically reserved for men. A starting point for more awareness of certain fields and occupations is on campus briefings and presentations.

THIRD: we must, as employers, continue to remain diligent that hiring decisions are implemented without bias- subtle, accidental or more active. Later, in promotion and advancement settings, we must remain equally diligent, as employers, to safeguard our institutions from subtle forms of lingering bias. Some of our PriceWaterhouseCoopers territories have courses aimed at the male leaders to ensure that the type of subtle bias towards women that is often found in the world society does not play a role in the decisions of our leaders.

FOURTH: we must provide specialized guidance to our women professionals to assist them in meeting the unique challenges that often await women. Women often have different approaches to personal interaction in business settings, and successful women must develop a style that is both personally comfortable and responsive to the particular (usually male-dominated) environment in which they work.

Women also often must balance the demands of work and family obligations to an extent that most men do not have to confront. The challenge of demonstrating commitment at both work and home is particularly challenging to women. In many societies, men are able to demonstrate their commitment to home by simply doing a great job at work! Few women have this single-focus liberty. It is the inability to find an acceptable balance between these conflicting demands that causes many of our most talented women to totally opt out of the workforce. Large employers, such as PricewaterhouseCoopers and others, must continue to challenge work habits and patterns to ensure that the way work is structured represents a real effort to balance the demands of the business and the needs of all employees. In many cases, the way work is organized around the globe is a holdover from many years ago when only men were working in many jobs.

So, in summary, if we are to truly utilise the investment in huge numbers of women graduates, we must do several things. We must ensure that they are being encouraged and trained to enter the same fields as men if they have the interest. We must ensure that they have the same access to information - formal and informal information- regarding the nature and content of various professional paths. We must ensure that subtle bias is continually erased and challenged- and it still does exist today around the world, and certainly the Arab countries are no exception to this. And we must equip the women themselves to develop personal solutions to the unique challenges that are more of an issue for women- such as work/life balance and family demands, and female versus male interaction/ management styles.

Graduating more and more women, without addressing these real issues on both the male and female side of the issues, will not unleash the power of the female population. If we do address these issues forcefully in the Arab world, economic growth and societal improvement will be greatly enhanced. The impact will be seen not only in the business sector, but also in the supporting agencies within our communities. Women who have had the benefit of challenging experiences across a broad range of issues will significantly impact the quality of solutions generated in the public and community sectors as well.

These are a few thoughts regarding matters, which must be addressed to fully utilise the talents of the large number of female graduates. I look forward to our discussions today and in the future.

Elham Hassan
Country Senior Partner, Bahrain, PricewaterhouseCoopers