



ARAB INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN'S FORUM
المنتدى العربي الدولي للمرأة

Arab International Women's Forum

*Partners for Change: Realizing the Potential of Arab Women in the
Private and Public Sectors*

23 June 2008

Opening Address

Mrs Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani

Chairman, Arab International Women's Forum

Opening Remarks

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour and pleasure for me, personally and as Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum, to welcome you today to our first conference in the United States, *Partners for Change: Realizing the Potential of Arab Women in the Private and Public Sectors* at The World Bank in Washington DC.

I wish at the outset to extend, on behalf of the AIWF Board and Members, our deep thanks and appreciation to the World Bank for hosting our conference today.

First and foremost, allow me to extend our deepest thanks and appreciation to the President of the World Bank, Mr Robert Zoellick, whose leadership and vision have been truly exemplary in strengthening the World Bank Group engagement in the Arab world as one of the six strategic themes for the Bank that he announced in late 2007.

AIWF truly commends the valuable work of the World Bank in fighting poverty and mainstreaming gender issues, taking vital steps beyond economic development and towards the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

We strongly support the World Bank's vision for inclusive, ethical globalization, and we share its objectives of fostering an environment of progress, peace and prosperity for all the world's citizens. We remain committed to supporting The World Bank's unparalleled role as a true catalyst of growth in global infrastructure, gender, ITC, private sector development, health, education, poverty reduction and other key areas, all vital to the growth and prosperity of the Arab region, our main area of focus.

I take this opportunity to acknowledge the invaluable and generous assistance of Ms Nadereh Chamlou, Senior Advisor to the Chief Economist of the World Bank MENA Region, and her distinguished colleagues at The World Bank; we thank you all indeed for your long-standing support of AIWF's global initiatives and programmes.

The Arab International Women's Forum is delighted to welcome to our conference HE Mrs Hala Bseisu Lattouf, the Minister of Social Development in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Minister Lattouf's record of achievement has truly inspired Jordanian women and girls to advance towards their full and true potential. We sincerely look forward to Her Excellency's valuable contribution to the conference.

We are delighted indeed to welcome HE Sharifa bint Khalfan Al Yahya-eyah, Minister of Social Development in the Sultanate of Oman. Her Excellency is one of Oman's most prominent nationals, having taken an active role in the development process of Oman and having made an important impact as a role model to Omani women.

We are also proud to welcome HE Huda Ali Al-Ban, Minister of Human Rights in Yemen. Her Excellency is one of the region's foremost human rights advocates, and AIWF highly applauds her for all her important work in promoting and protecting the rights of women across the Arab world.

Our very special thanks are expressed to all our distinguished Guest Speakers, who have taken time from their very busy schedules to be with us today from all four corners of the world.

Your Excellencies, Honoured Guests; we are most appreciative of your valued presence and participation.

Our conference today serves as a forum for dialogue and collaboration between leading women in business and in public life from the Arab world, the United States, Europe and the international community. It is truly representative of the direction that AIWF is taking, and of our continuing commitment to the promotion of cross-cultural diversity, connectivity and understanding between the Arab world and the international community through women.

Over the coming two days and with your valued participation, we shall be examining opportunities for the entrepreneurial, political, and economic engagement of women in the Middle East, the United States and beyond, whilst continuing to stress the importance of education as the most effective means to overcoming socio-economic challenges and barriers.

We aim to shed better light on the ongoing and widening role of Arab women in the region, addressing at times false perceptions in the global media and focusing on the roles that the region's women may take in making the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals a reality.

We are also proud to incorporate in the Conference Programme the US launch of the book, *Domains of Influence: Arab Women Business Leaders in a New Economy*. Supported by AIWF, the book was produced in partnership with The World Bank as a unique testament to the impact of Arab women in today's global environment of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

Distinguished Guests, our conference today would not have been possible without the valued support of our Conference Partners - our Principal Partner, **PepsiCo International**; Programme Partner **PricewaterhouseCoopers**; and our Supporting Partners **DLA Piper** and **Shell International**.

We extend to you our deep appreciation for your generous support and cooperation.

We also acknowledge with appreciation the valued support of the **National US-Arab Chamber of Commerce** and **The Women's Leadership Board at Harvard** on this occasion.

I am indeed delighted to welcome all our valued members, delegates and guests attending our conference, and thank you warmly for accepting our invitation.

Globalization and the Arab World

Distinguished Guests, globalization has provided the necessary impetus for governments across the region to work alongside civil society organisations, the global private sector, and international business and financial communities towards sustained, genuine investment in the most precious resource of the region – the human resource; women and youth especially.

The transformation of the region's significance in the world economy has been marked by increases in per capita incomes, enhanced integration of Arab economies into the global marketplace, and widespread reform of Arab countries' economic, political and educational systems.

The region has wholeheartedly embraced diversification away from traditional dependence on oil and aid towards an export-oriented, investment-friendly, private sector-driven economy. Arab governments have shown remarkable prudence in re-investing windfall oil revenues, with a healthier emphasis on intra-regional trade and foreign direct investment than was seen in the past.

Meanwhile, the oil-rich Gulf States are acquiring foreign interests at phenomenal speed, in preparation for a post-oil era where competition for jobs in the Middle East will intensify.

Significantly, the Arab region has moved from relative economic isolation towards fuller economic integration on a global scale. Indeed, growth in the Arab world is projected to rise to over 6% in both 2008 and 2009, according to a recent report by the International Monetary Fund.

The efforts of individual governments throughout the Middle East, the League of Arab States, the World Bank, non-governmental organisations and the corporate sector have created windows of opportunity for Arab women that are widening all the time.

Women in the Arab World

Arab investment in education since the 1970s has produced a generation of women who are successfully assuming leadership positions in Arab governments, Arab economies, and Arab societies. Women are participating in their economies as CEOs, professors, engineers, and bankers, running e-businesses, multi-national corporations and global financial institutions. Furthermore, women in the Gulf are estimated to have \$40 billion of personal wealth which they are channelling into specialist investment funds managed for and by women.

Across the region, business and financial practices are evolving at a phenomenal rate. Gender bias and a lack of access are no longer the main impediments to the success of women in the business and financial spheres. In fact, a recent World Bank study concluded that in the areas of business and investment in the Arab world, people are more defined by what they bring to the table rather than by gender.

Women in Government

Women are members of government at ministerial levels in most Arab countries today, from Morocco to the Yemen. Governments in the region are advancing gender equality in the public sector through education and legislation, and working with others in the business community and civil society to push for women's greater participation in parliament, overcoming real obstacles in the process.

However, the International Parliamentary Union in 2007 reckoned that Arab female parliamentary participation still stands at 6.5% against a global average of 17%. Arab leaders acknowledge that efforts to facilitate the development of women in mainstream politics must be stepped up significantly if commitments to international women's conventions and the UN Millennium Development Goals are to be realized.

AIWF firmly believes that the participation of women in public and political life is fundamental to achieving true democracy in the Arab world, and an important property of sustainable development in the region.

In this light, we have structured our 2008 Programme to explore the barriers and challenges to women's involvement in politics, and examine how these obstacles can be realistically overcome. We are committed to empowering women to seek and secure roles in public life whilst stressing the need to align reform with the pace and needs of Arab societies.

The Private Sector

The private sector is widely credited with enhancing entrepreneurship and employment opportunities for Arab citizens, especially women, driving local innovation, knowledge creation and competitiveness for the betterment of Arab families and communities, and ultimately, Arab societies.

Combined with a strong surge in sustainable development policies and global diversity programmes, private sector growth is greatly influencing the diversity policies and recruitment practices of Arab businesses, bringing these more in line with global standards and thus opening up opportunities for young women graduates in previously male-dominated industries and sectors, such as maritime, engineering, and science.

Multinationals are now looking beyond Western talent pools and courting senior management, financial, media and engineering talent from elite universities across the Arab world. This demand, in turn, is creating added impetus for Arab universities to produce global-ready professionals who are multifaceted, multi-skilled and business-savvy enough to successfully compete for jobs in a global talent pool.

The World Bank

Private sector development, access to education, and the mainstreaming of gender issues are key areas in which the World Bank conducts most of its valuable and vastly important work.

The World Bank has championed the development of women's entrepreneurship, identifying key investment climate constraints for women and developing roadmaps for economic reform. Recognising also that social norms may restrict women from interacting freely with men, the World Bank has implemented gender-specific action plans that focus upon the issue of women's access to business networks and associations that promote cross-border connectivity, enhance business prospects, and provide support mechanisms for female entrepreneurs who may otherwise be isolated economically.

Supported by corporate partners, governments and the world's leading development organisations and institutes, the World Bank's commitment to promoting gender equity, growth and the acceleration of women's economic empowerment serves as inspiration to the international community towards meeting a unified set of very time-specific objectives, The UN Millennium Development Goals; the achievement of which lies at the very heart of the mission and vision of the Arab International Women's Forum.

The eight Millennium Development Goals are a blueprint for positive social change; a truly global partnership formed to respond to the world's development challenges and the "calls of civil society". Goal Three, the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women, guides us as an organisation, in all that we do.

Promoting Sustainable Empowerment: The Work of AIWF

Distinguished Guests, since its inception in 2001, AIWF has served as a voice for Arab women in business and in government, showcasing women's contribution to economic growth and development in the Arab region and globally.

Through a series of conferences and initiatives that have built upon timely themes, we have placed women at the heart of the sustainable development process, working to build bridges of knowledge and understanding whilst enhancing the leadership capacity of Arab women in all aspects of society.

Within that context, AIWF is championing a concerted drive at the highest levels to advance gender equality and sustainable development in the Arab world through various strategies, and I outline here five of our key areas for action.

1) *AIWF Annual Programmes*

AIWF Annual Programmes have explored the role of women in the economy and in public life, focusing on capacity-building, training and information exchange whilst stressing the need for synergies between governments, corporations and civil society as the only way to achieve educational, economic and political empowerment for women in the Arab world.

One of our most significant achievements to date is the ongoing 2005 Programme, *Women as Engines of Economic Growth in the Arab World*, launched in close collaboration with the EU to mark the 10th Anniversary of the Barcelona Process. Our Programme, for which we hosted conferences at the European Parliament and at the League of Arab States, with the support of the World Bank, honoured the Euro-Mediterranean Agreement as an important instrument for the promotion of women's participation in economic and social affairs. It highlighted the economic empowerment of Arab women as crucial to its ultimate success.

Our work on this important issue continues, and is highlighted in all our Annual Programmes and initiatives.

2) *Gathering Political Support*

As a powerful advocate for the political and economic inclusion of women in the Arab World, AIWF mobilises action at the highest level and on the ground to promote and advance legislative rights for and political participation of Arab women. Our growing role has been distinguished by our many collaborations with, among others, the League of Arab States, the European Commission and European Parliament, United Nations organisations and agencies, the World Bank, the OECD, women's business councils in the Arab States, and the UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office - to which we presented two landmark Reports and Recommendations, in 2005 and 2007, on *Women as Engines of Economic Growth in the Arab World*.

3) A Global Network of Partners

AIWF places great strategic importance on the development of our global networks and the establishment of key alliances with multinational corporations across all sectors, many of whom are represented here with us in Washington today. All of our Global Partners are deeply engaged in the Arab region and uphold strong diversity policies that enhance the recruitment, training and development of women as key contributors to the Arab human capital pool.

We are also proud to have partnered with many leading business councils, development agencies, grassroots organisations and NGOs in the Arab world and the international community. Our partnerships have led to highly successful mentorship and skills development programmes, aimed at enhancing the role of women in the economic development process and promoting the contribution of women to Arab economic competitiveness.

4) Education and Training for Women and Girls

Across the region, increased access to education for girls at both primary and secondary levels has accompanied a remarkable reduction in the literacy gap across the region. However, these gains in education have not yet translated into higher participation rates of women in the Arab workforce.

AIWF firmly believes that the need for further and broader educational reform in the Middle East and North Africa is inextricably linked to continued economic and political reform, and that students today must be fully equipped with the knowledge, skills and capabilities that will enable them to effectively participate – and successfully compete – in future Arab economies.

To this end AIWF has collaborated with leading universities in the Arab World, Europe, and the United States to promote the education of women as an economic imperative.

5) Raising Awareness through Global Media & Publications

Our relationship with responsible media is being strengthened all the time. In 2007, we were very proud to have supported the Financial Times on a Special Report, *Leading Businesswomen*, which recognised the Arab world's emerging women business leaders.

This year's report is being launched by the FT to coincide with the opening of our conference today, and we are very proud to have once again collaborated with the Financial Times on this important initiative to celebrate the empowerment of Arab women.

Concluding Remarks

Distinguished Guests,

To conclude, AIWF is poised to experience a dynamic year in 2008; a year which commenced with a very special acknowledgement for AIWF's work in raising public awareness on women's role in Arab economies by the wife of the British Prime Minister at 10 Downing Street by in London.

Our conference today at the World Bank is a milestone for our Programme, through which AIWF aims to widen its debate to include the development of Arab women in public and political life, engendering intercultural connectivity and dialogue between Arab and international policymakers and entrepreneurs to remove roadblocks to women's gainful participation in Arab politics, Arab economies, and Arab societies.

We look forward to collaborating with all our distinguished guests – speakers and delegates, organisations and institutions present to ensure that the agenda for women's advancement in the Arab World moves forward.

We also hope that this conference will function as a gateway for realising women's full potential throughout the Arab world, through the new and valuable links that we hope to establish in the USA, adding to our already present network of contacts in Europe, Asia and Africa.

We believe that a better future for the region beckons; a future marked by economic growth and stability, where we see the region effectively harnessing its wealth and prosperity and investing it forward for the benefit of future generations, where importantly women and girls embrace their rightful place in society.

Distinguished Guests,

We thank you all for your valued presence and look forward to your contribution towards the successful outcome of this conference.

I thank you for your kind attention.