

## ARAB INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM

With the valued co-operation of  
THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES

The Third Annual AIWF Conference  
6-9 June 2004

Women in the Arab World  
Partners in the Community and on the World Stage

### CONFERENCE SESSIONS SUMMARY REPORT

Participants at the Third Annual AIWF Conference, ***Women in the Arab World: Partners in the Community and on the World Stage***, were warmly welcomed by Mrs Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani, Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum, who acknowledged in her opening remarks the valued support of the League of Arab States. Mrs Al Kaylani introduced Her Excellency Mrs Suzanne Mubarak, the First Lady of the Arab Republic of Egypt as an Honoured Guest Speaker and introduced the vision and objectives of the Third Annual Conference.

The conference was honoured to be addressed by Her Excellency Mrs Suzanne Mubarak who spoke of the need to unite our efforts to create one vision which will turn hopes and aspirations into effective partnerships and well laid plans. Mrs Mubarak was confident that the Conference would be a successful step on the path for women in the region.

His Excellency Mr Amre Moussa, Secretary General, The League of Arab States then addressed the delegates. Mr Moussa spoke of the need to promote the role of women in Arab society. Mr Moussa emphasized that the strong backing of the League of Arab States for the Conference showed their concern with this issue.

The official opening session was followed by two special addresses by HE Zahira Kamal, Minister of Women's Affairs, Palestine, and Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, Member of the European Parliament, EU. The advancement of women was seen by all speakers as absolutely vital to future success and progress in the region. Partnership and cooperation were the priority.

#### PLENARY SESSION 1

##### Partnerships in Public Life

Dame Rennie Fritchie OBE, Commissioner for Public Appointments, UK, opened the session by stressing the need for women to be in positions of influence in order to bring a female perspective

to policy making. The next speaker, Dr Rowaida Al Maaitah, Vice President, Secretary General, National Council of Family Affairs and Senator, The Upper House of Parliament, Jordan, stressed that society needs to provide the legal basis for the empowerment of women. The last speaker, Dr Raja Khuzai, Member of the Governing Council of Iraq spoke movingly about the participation of women in the building of the new Iraq and ended with the words 'The future of Iraqi women is the future of Iraq'.

There was a general call for Arab society to encourage women's involvement in policy making. The consensus was that no society can develop with only half of its population involved. The three speakers all emphasized the need for women to play a full part in civic society. The session was summed up with quote,

*We are not yet where we are going but we are not now where we were.*

## PLENARY SESSION 2

### Partnerships in the Private Sector

Mrs Julie Mellor, Chair, Equal Opportunities Commission, UK opened the session by exploring women's role in the business world not only as an employee but also as a consumer. Mrs Mellor concluded that there had been progress but not transformation. The three speakers from business, Mr Andrew Vaughan, Regional Technical Director, Shell Middle East, Egypt, Ms Zeena Tamini, Brand Manager Arabian Peninsula, Procter & Gamble, Saudi Arabia, and Mr Saad Toma, Vice President for Integrated Technology Services, IBM, France clearly stated that business needs the skills that women have to offer. Encouraging skills development, recruitment and retention were essential. Corporations saw diversity as a business necessity. The speakers covered various reasons for business wishing to attract and then retain female employees. They told conference participants that business faced a shortage of skills. Recruitment and training costs were high and business needed to retain talent. Companies were offering women policies that recognize strength comes through diversity and change promotes growth. In addition they supported policies that address childcare and work life balance concerns as well as the need to develop talent at all levels. Ms Zeena Tamini of Procter & Gamble highlighted many important issues particular to Saudi Arabia.

Mrs Nadereh Chamlou, Senior Advisor, Middle East and North Africa Region, The World Bank, Washington DC, discussed how women can contribute to the economy of the region. Mrs Chamlou drew attention to the strong potential for female entrepreneurship as Islamic laws give women the right to inherit and own property. Dr Linda Yueh, Department of Economics, London

School of Economics, UK focused on three main areas, labour market participation, investment in education and development of the private sector. Dr Yueh stated that lessons for economic growth showed that men and women are needed equally for prosperity.

### PLENARY SESSION 3

#### Building Local Communities: Partnerships in Civil Society

Dr Heba Handoussa, Advisor to the Economic Research Forum for Arab Countries, Egypt, started the session with the surprising fact that 80% of activity in the private sector in the Arab world is composed of small firms and enterprises with less than 10 workers. Dr Handoussa then emphasized the importance of creating strong and supportive local communities. For partnerships in civil society to succeed there had to be willingness to take risks. Partnerships should actively promote the free flow of knowledge and make full use of new technology. NGOs should provide support for business and, in return, business should actively engage with civil society.

Mrs Amani Kandil, Executive Director, Arab Network for NGOs, Egypt spoke about the concept and then the reality of civil society in the Arab world. Mrs Kandil urged the strengthening of the position of women in the decision making process, she encouraged reform of legislation and the building of constructive partnership (sharaka) between government and the private sector. Ms Fatin Bundagji, Director, Women Empowerment & Research Unit, Jeddah Chamber of Commerce, Saudi Arabia then spoke about encouraging advances for women and civil society in Saudi Arabia. The provision of health care had increased enormously, but there are still a very low number of women in paid employment. Mrs Soumaya Belhabib, Vice President, CHAML Association, Morocco then drew the attention of the conference participants to the recent very important changes in Moroccan laws which improve the position of women in society. However, the high rate of female illiteracy in Morocco, particularly in rural areas, is still a major problem and a huge barrier to female employment. Dr Elizabeth Plum, Programme Director, Danish School of Public Administration, contrasted the situation in Saudi Arabia and Morocco with Denmark where 90% of women are in paid employment. Mrs Plum noted that the problems women face are different to those faced by men and stressed that women could and should learn from the experiences of other women.

#### PLENARY SESSION 4

##### Reaching out to the International Community – Partnerships Extended

Dr Wadouda Badran, Secretary General, Arab Women Organisation, Cairo told the conference that the Arab Women Organisation had been set up to empower women and to encourage mutual support between women in the Arab world. Dr Badran said that globalization not only posed challenges but could also help to bring women's problems on to the international agenda. Ms Charlotte Ponticelli, Senior Co-Ordinator, International Women's Issues, US Department of State, USA stressed that international partnerships needed to recognize and respect cultural differences if they were to be successful. The participants were encouraged to learn from the collective experience of the international community. It is by working together that great strides can be made. Ms Fifi Benaboud, Senior Advisor to the Executive Director, North-South Centre of the Council of Europe, Portugal, reiterated the concern that lasting reform has to come from within – it cannot be imposed from outside.

Ms Deborah Gomes, Canadian International Development Agency, Canada, spoke about the gender equality policy in Canada and the need to recognize and support women's achievements. Hon Carolina Mayeur, Deputy Director, Co-Operation with Mediterranean Countries and East Europe, Spain, told the participants that international partnerships could help to promote peace, freedom, social development and human rights.

All the speakers agreed that different age groups of women must be considered and recognized when developing public policy aimed at women's programs that encourage greater participation of women. Women could be the agent of development and the agent of change by sharing common problems and challenges. The session concluded that prospects for change were vast – all was possible – provided that everyone recognized that sharing and building takes time.

#### PLENARY SESSION 5

##### International Organizations – A world with experience

The final session was introduced by Ms Hanifa Mezoui, Chief Non-governmental Organizations Section, UN, USA. Ms Mezoui spoke about the UN role in Africa which involved cooperating with local partners. Ms Mezoui stressed the need for Arab NGOs to contribute to international civil society as well as regional networking. International organizations can assist women in Arab countries by supporting and managing opportunities so that key stakeholders can learn from the experiences of others. "Listen" was the watch word. Dr Abla Ibrahim, Head, Department of Family Affairs, Women And Children, League of Arab States, Cairo called on Arab countries to

increase their efforts to tackle illiteracy – a problem that disproportionately affected women. National plans can be guided by international experience but still respect local needs and culture. Ms Alexandra Hall-Hall, Special Advisor to the Assistant Secretary and Manager, Women's Pillar of the Middle East Partnership Initiative, US State Department, USA emphasized how much the region had to gain from various organizations as long as the international partners listened to the voice of the region. The region best understands local problems and conditions. Programs had to be established and change had to be done within the context of the community. Dr Salma Galal, Gender Mainstreaming Technical Officer, World Health Organisation (WHO), Switzerland saw health and education as the most important problems and described the current WHO work on gender programmes. Dr Rafia Obaid Ghubash, President, Arabian Gulf University, Bahrain urged Arab countries to exercise self criticism and create their own agenda for reform in order to avoid an external agenda. The final speaker, Ms Bineta Diop, Executive Director, Femmes Africa Solidarité, Switzerland, spoke of her ambition to empower African women by the creation of new social systems.

*Help women and you help the society in which they live.*

*Together we can achieve.*

## CONFERENCE CONCLUSION

In the Conference Closing Session, participants heard from Mrs Peta Payne who delivered the conference summary highlighting the many points raised during conference sessions and outlined in this document. This was followed by the Closing Address by Mrs Haifa Al Kaylani, Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum.

In her address, Mrs Al Kaylani remarked that the purpose of the conference and its theme were very well served and that the conference created and built partnerships. The conference was an excellent and enriching opportunity to exchange information, network with other participants, connect and share experiences.

The Chairman indicated that the work of AIWF continues and that this Third Annual Conference has been a historical and landmark occasion for the Arab International Women's Forum. AIWF looks forward to working together to implement the final recommendations of this important conference.

Mrs. Al Kaylani concluded "The motto of the Arab International Women's Forum is: Building bridges, building business, achieving results. AIWF is committed to enhancing and optimizing the role and potential of Arab women in the region within an international framework, in order to effect positive change and foster growth and development."