

Session II:

Empowerment of Women in Business

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I would first of all like to extend my thanks to Mrs. Donna Al-Turk, the Lebanese Consul, to Mrs. Adalat Nakash, the LAU Dubai Alumni Chapter President, and to Mr. Saad El-Zein, the Chapter's Vice President, for having organized this forum and invited me to it.

As a Trustee of LAU, let me tell you that at almost every board meeting, the questions as well as problems and their possible solutions of our alumni and the various alumni chapters are often at the top of the agenda. Therefore, these types of forums and conferences organized by the various chapters are very much encouraged in order to raise awareness of the Lebanese American University (LAU). I wish you all the best in the continuation in your endeavors in this very important voluntary task. The alumni are vital for the endurance of our Alma Mater.

The subject of my talk today is the role of higher education in the achievements and empowerment of women in the Arab world, and also to say something about myself as a business woman.

Before going into the subject, I would like to give a few statistics relating to women in education and the workplace in the Arab world. These statistics come from the project, Development of National Gender Statistics Program in the Arab Countries, and was prepared by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

(ESCWA). I will just take two countries for the sake of comparison.

- 1) There are 55% girls and 45% boys in high schools in the United Arab Emirates, in Lebanon the ratio is 50:50.
- 2) Enrollment in universities in Kuwait is 60% women to 40% men. In Lebanon it is 50:50.
- 3) The proportion of women in the labor force in the United Arab Emirates rose from 5.1% to 14.8% between 1980 and 2000, in Lebanon, the proportion went from 22.6% to 29.6%.

These are just a few statistics showing how women in the Arab world are doing in schools and universities.

In the field of education there is no doubt that women have become equal to men, and in some cases have exceeded men in absolute numbers, which in itself is a very good indication of the importance that is being given to education. However, male and female students are being attracted to different fields of specialization. Proportionately more women than men are enrolled in education and the humanities, and more men than women in the natural sciences. Women tend to work in different sectors of the economy as compared to men. Over the past decade, a higher percentage of women than men were engaged in the service sectors of virtually all Arab countries according to a survey carried out by ESCWA. Not only are women and men employed in dif-



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Ms. Taline Avakian and Ms. Emily Nasrallah

ferent occupations, but they also hold different positions in the same field. While women are well represented in professional roles in the Arab world, they tend to be employed in an assisting capacity. Men tend to be more concentrated in managerial roles.

One thing is very clear though, education at the higher level, i.e. the university level, is obviously becoming very important for the development of society in every respect. This has been the trend in Europe and America for many years now, and the Arab world is catching up.

The gap in career achievement between men and women after having left university is still there, however, even in Europe and America. And here the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Copenhagen Declaration and Program of Action are important in stressing the importance of women's equal participation in the workplace. At a recent regional conference held in Amman, the Arab countries collectively expressed concern about

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women at work and proposed that national governments take concrete steps to insure equality and equity for women in the labor force. I sincerely hope that such steps are actually being taken and are proving effective. Just for the goal of gaining information, maybe an independent survey should be done to check on this vital issue!

Compared to other developing regions, the economic activity rate of women in Arab countries is on average low, particularly in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

This is partly due to the fact that jobs are relatively scarce as well as due to long-held views about the role of women in society. Attitudes and misconceptions concerning women who work must be tackled, not only to allow women to participate fully in the workplace, but in order for them to achieve economic independence and guarantee a lifetime of equality between men and women.

Culture affects women in Arab societies in other ways as well. There are certain attitudes that have in some ways become a barrier to develop-

ment, particularly the tendency to still treat women as a source of danger and consequently to cut them off from the public space and deny them entry into economic activities. When a culture believes this, it loses a large portion of the potential productivity of the society. Any system that privileges men from birth, simply because they are male, and gives them power over female members of society, is bad for both women and men. In particular, it builds in men a sense of entitlement that discourages them from improving, advancing and achieving. This sort of discrimination does not exist only in the Arab world, but indeed is found to different degrees all around the world, even in so-called advanced industrial societies.

And I must say that it is simply too easily forgotten that when it comes to economic activities, one of the greatest virtues a country or community can have is a culture of tolerance. When tolerance is the norm everyone flourishes economically, because tolerance breeds trust, and trust is the foundation of innovation and entrepreneurship.

There is no doubt that as the world changes, global trends will require Arab societies to change attitudes and Arab governments to enact hard-core policy reforms, at the heart of which are labor regulations. These will need to guarantee a better use of Arab women's potential as workers and guarantee them standards of fairness in labor relations that do not hamper the flexibility of the labor markets and the opportunities available to women. Educational policies will need to be revised to equalize opportunities for men and women and provide them with skills required for the future.

Returning to a discussion of statistics, one can see that female participation in the work force all over the Arab world is increasing steadily, and this is mainly due to education. In the globalized world where business is conducted today women are becoming aware of so many things that otherwise they would be ignorant of. And, they know today, the only way to succeed in this ever faster-paced world is to have a good university education.

When I was at university at LAU (then BCW) at the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s, we had quite a few young women who came from the Gulf states because, at that time, there were hardly any colleges or universities there. But now, things have changed in the Gulf. Universities are being created in the Gulf because these states have come to believe in educating their men and women at home. Consequently, we at LAU have to become a university of excellence, in order to compete with the ever-growing number of colleges

and universities in the Gulf region. Yet, this has not been bad at all; on the contrary, more and more people are being educated and the standards are increasing for all.

The United States and Europe have become very powerful because of the priority they place on education and research. In this day and age, no single person should be left without an education. Equal opportunities must be given to girls otherwise we will be losing a very important sector in our society.

Having said all this, the actual picture of women in the Arab world is not that bleak after all. Women are at the heads of ministries in governments and some companies. For instance, in Lebanon today, the Minister of Social Affairs is none other than Her Excellency Mrs. Nayla Mouawad; the Lebanese Consul General to the Emirates is Mrs. Donna Al-Turk; the United Arab Emirates Minister of Economy and Planning is Her Excellency Sheikha Lubna Al-Qasimi; etc. But this is not enough. Women must be in leadership positions throughout society, and aim to reach positions just like the few that I just named. They should be taken as the examples for other women to follow.

As for my personal experience as a business woman, I have been quite lucky to have had a tolerant husband who never tried to keep me at home and tied to the stove! He wanted me out there with him in the work place because he believed that women can do just as well as men, and given the opportunity, they can perform even better at times. He saw no difference between men and women in the workplace.

Working has provided me with some great and valuable experiences in understanding different societies, and also enabled me to become more tolerant. It has also helped me in my charitable work. Currently, the big conglomerates and international businesses are stepping into the field of charitable work. They have started to give back to the underprivileged what they collect from the rich and wealthy. It has given me the opportunity to come across some incredible people who have helped me in this area. And in the end, as the saying of a famous Armenian poet, Vahan Tekeyan, goes: "The only things that ever remain, strangely enough, are what we give to others."

And last but not least, in conclusion, I would like to share with you one of my favorite quotes from Louis Pasteur: "Fortune favors the prepared mind." I find this quote to be particularly appropriate to today's forum.

Thank you.