

The Arab International Women's Forum: A Development Organisation Leading the Way Forward

By Haifa Al Kaylani, Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum

The Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF) has a clear aim to support and enhance the role of women in the social and economic development of their countries and across the Middle East region.

The Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), established in 2001 as an independent not for profit, non-governmental organisation, has grown into a truly unique global network dedicated to giving Arab women leaders a voice and a platform to prosper, linking Arab businesswomen not only with each other but also with their counterparts in the international community to exchange knowledge and develop their leadership potential and create greater global awareness of women's success and prospects in the Arab world and always within an international context.

Now in its second decade of fulfilling its mission of Building Bridges, Building Business, the Arab International Women's Forum is an agent of change for women in the Arab region, encouraging their potential to take greater leadership roles and to reach higher levels of responsibility in all sectors of business, public life and in civil society while at the same time contributing to the progress and prosperity of their families and communities.

Working across the board with civil society, the private sector, academia and governments, AIWF's key priority has always been to promote and enhance the role and opportunities for women in education, job creation, entrepreneurship and public life – always working at the heart of the Arab world and internationally, bringing partners in all spheres together to build bridges and build business, effect progress, correct negative stereotyping and build the capacity of Arab women at every level and in every sector.

AIWF Programmes have been tremendously successful not only in forging lucrative business links and relationships between women entrepreneurs and innovators, but also in developing concrete skills, capacity and confidence of Arab women in business, law, parliament, the sciences, technology, aviation, academia and media. With individual and corporate members serving in senior positions in government, business and the non-profit sector from more than 45 countries, AIWF members enjoy unparalleled opportunities

to network and develop global partnerships at our conferences, roundtables and seminars held in Arab and international business and financial cities around the world. Each of our members brings unique experiences and perspectives to the work of AIWF, and all are committed to advancing the potential of women in their communities and countries, in a truly international context.

In a remarkably short period of time after inception, AIWF has achieved recognition in the Arab world and internationally as a powerful advocate for the advancement of women. Under the leadership of Founder Chairman Haifa Al Kaylani, the work of AIWF to reform restrictive legal and regulatory frameworks in the region towards gender neutrality and inclusivity has been distinguished by collaborations with, among others, the League of Arab States, the European Commission and European Parliament, United Nations organisations and agencies, the World Bank, the MENA-OECD Investment Programme, women's business councils in the Arab States, the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Arab and International Chambers of Commerce and many globally recognised institutes of higher and further education.

AIWF's track record of significant promotion and advancement of economic rights for Arab women has also been distinguished by our significant co-operation with leading Arab and international organisations, among them, the City of London Corporation, the Greater Paris Investment Authority, the Dubai International Financial Centre, the Women's Leadership Board at Harvard, UN agencies, NGOs, academic, economic and trade institutions.

Also of great importance to the work of AIWF are our collaboration with Chambers of Commerce, UK, US and Arab business networks, entrepreneurs, SME owners and some of the world's largest multinationals and corporations to promote initiatives and build the relationships that will help create the private sector jobs that are so desperately needed in the region. AIWF

Benefactor Corporate Partner PepsiCo and all AIWF Global Partners are deeply engaged in the region and are committed to recruiting, training and retaining the best Arab talent, to facilitate links and engagement between young professionals in the region and the Arab private sector. AIWF could not have made the impact it has over the last decade and a half without the support of PepsiCo, and all AIWF Global Partners that include Pfizer, Shell, Willis Towers Watson, the Sharjah Business Women Council, Dubai Land Department, PwC, the Sung-joo Foundation and Jumeirah, who are committed to strong diversity policies and developing, training and progressing young professional women in the region.

Also of great importance to the work of AIWF are its Institutional Partnerships with the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, the Hawkamah Institute for Corporate Governance, the Mudara Institute of Directors, the Pearl Initiative, and the Dubai Business Women Council. With Hawkamah and the Mudara Institute of Directors, both headquartered at the Dubai International Financial Centre, and with The Pearl Initiative, AIWF shares the mutual objective of strengthening corporate governance standards to encourage professional directorship and to support a bigger role for women on Arab boards. With the Arab-British Chamber of Commerce, AIWF has created a powerful coalition to jointly promote trade and enhance business co-operation between women business owners in the Arab world and their counterparts in the United Kingdom.

The focus of AIWF has always been on empowering progress and change for women, and creating partnerships that will facilitate and promote viable alliances between women leaders in all sectors in the Arab world but always within an international context. AIWF has collaborated with some of the world's leading universities and regional institutes of learning, including the London Middle East Institute at The School of Oriental and African Studies at London University; the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World at the Lebanese American

University in Beirut; and the Harvard Women's Leadership Board at Harvard University in Boston. In the past AIWF has hosted major conferences at the Lebanese American University in Beirut, the American University of Sharjah and Birzeit University in Palestine, working together with Academic Partners to promote the empowerment of women as an economic imperative and advocate for entrepreneurship training to become a core part of the business and management syllabus in the region. AIWF is very proud to offer internships to talented female students and routinely assists universities with research projects.

We have championed women's progress often achieved in the face of significant challenges. In the last five years we have galvanised all efforts to protect the progress made by women in recent decades, to ensure that gender equality, women's empowerment and women's human rights do not regress in the region.

In raising awareness and strengthening its connections with global media, AIWF has enjoyed a continuing relationship with the Financial Times (FT) since June 2007, which has culminated in four FT special reports on Arab women in business. AIWF also supported the publication of *Domains of Influence: Arab Women Business Leaders in a New Economy*, which is a unique testament to the impact of Arab Women in today's global environment of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment and which was shortlisted for the fourth prestigious Prix Pictet.

AIWF has held over 40 Programmes, conferences and initiatives, hosted over the past 15 years in Paris, London, Brussels, Madrid, Cairo, Amman, Washington DC, Sharjah, Beirut, Damascus, Palestine, Dubai, Doha, Italy, and Kuwait. Each programme and initiative has brought an average of 200 distinguished participants together from no less than 35 countries from around the world, to build upon timely themes and examine key issues, progress and challenges. By alternating between Arab capitals and European or international cities, we deliver region-specific Programmes that are highly valuable and directly relevant to women, building upon timely themes and examining key issues. AIWF then puts key findings, recommendations and reports to government partners and works with both the public and private sectors to facilitate action that benefits women, their businesses, their families and their communities.

A prominent and global example of AIWF's work is The Young Arab Women Leaders – The Voice of the Future initiative which was launched in 2011 in partnership with AIWF Global Diamond Partner PwC, AIWF Benefactor Partner, PepsiCo, and all AIWF Global Partners. Through this initiative, AIWF is equipping young women leaders with the skills to start, grow and lead successful businesses, increasing access to technical and professional education and strengthening links between women in the UK and the MENA. Focusing on the emerging young talent in the region, AIWF through its 'Young Arab Women Leaders' conference series held to date in Amman, Beirut, Dubai and Palestine, and Qatar assembles high level participants from government, business and NGOs to guide young professional women embarking on their careers.

In 2016 and beyond, supported fully by its powerful network of global partners, AIWF looks forward to bringing its key message of Building Bridges, Building Business even more closely into focus, with new partnerships and initiatives AIWF embarked upon in previous years now primed to deliver even further impact in the year ahead.

AIWF is deeply committed to the International Bar Association (IBA) Initiative for Women Business Lawyers in the Middle East programme, a partnership between the IBA, AIWF and the Arab Women's Legal Network (AWLN). This timely partnership, which commenced with a highly successful joint event in Amman in September 2015, aims to empower Arab women lawyers, build skills and awareness of global standards and encourage women to aspire to positions of leadership in the legal profession.

Indeed, AIWF's growing reach and role as a leading advocate for women follows on from over a decade of advocacy on our part to promote empowerment and enhanced opportunities for women not only in the legal profession but in public life, in parliament, in the judiciary and at the highest levels of the legislature in the Arab world.

We believe that a better future for the Arab world can be achieved; a future marked by economic growth, stability and prosperity. It is only by working together within the region and across borders, building lucrative business links and strong cultural connections, that we can lay the foundations that are essential to lasting peace and progress in the Middle East.

Furthermore, a prominent example of AIWF's initiative is the first AIWF networking and business delegation's visit to Italy in March 2016. This ground breaking initiative brought together Arab businesswomen leaders with their Italian and European counterparts. The trip featured a number of exciting business visits, unique cultural experiences and a one-day, high-level seminar on Women's Talent for Innovation, which explored opportunities for closer collaboration and partnerships between AIWF Members and European businesswomen.

The developments in the region the last five years have made AIWF mission, vision and work more relevant than ever before as we seek to overcome the rising challenges and embrace the many opportunities in the years to come.

AIWF's 15th Anniversary year is an excellent opportunity to celebrate the many achievements of our organisation over the last decade and a half, and to look with great optimism towards the next fifteen years as we move forward to advance the call for women and youth to drive real, sustainable change in the Arab world. Honouring AIWF's key mission of Building Bridges, Building Business, AIWF remains committed to helping women in the Arab region take on greater leadership roles; to developing, mentoring and advancing the next generation of Arab women leaders; to ensuring that women are well placed to maximise opportunities for job creation, entrepreneurship and sustainable development.

AIWF's future direction in our second decade will strengthen its focus on the importance of education, leadership training, capacity building and self-development for women and youth and urging governments and the private sector to work together to achieve much needed job creation.

We truly believe that a better future for the Arab world beckons; a future marked by economic growth and stability. It is only by working together within the region and with global partners that we can ensure sustainable growth and development for all Arab citizens, laying the foundations that are so essential to lasting peace and progress in the Middle East.

Full details of The Arab International Women's Forum programmes can be viewed on www.aiwfonline.com

