



Prosperity through partnership

Education provided an ‘initial window of opportunity’ for women, says Haifa Al Kaylani, the founder and chairman of the Arab International Women’s Forum (AIWF).



ARAB INTERNATIONAL
WOMEN’S FORUM
المنتدى العربي الدولي للمرأة

Speaking to INSEAD Knowledge on the sidelines of the AIWF’s recent conference in Damascus, Syria, she said governments have been investing in education for many years. “We now see that initial effort come into its own, with higher education, more specialised education, skills training, all of which take us to the next level.”

The Minister for Social Development in Jordan, **Hala Bsaiso Lattouf**, also spoke about the need and importance of education. “Education is the basis. And education is not just about knowledge or skills, but also about good citizenship, equal rights, changing mindsets, challenging stereotypes, debating and volunteering ... The challenge is for us to get our priorities right, concentrate on quality education for all -- especially for girls -- to give them the ability to think critically for themselves, and to develop the concept of civic education and citizenship.”

Education in the family

Education, or lifelong learning, needs to start in the

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very early years of a child’s life, and families have a big part to play in setting this foundation. **Anna Maria Corazza Bildt**, a Swedish member of the European Parliament, says: “Education is important -- education in school, higher education and lifelong education. It’s also important to have education in the family; teach your kids to pick up after themselves, for example, so they will learn shared responsibility.”

Creating the mindset early on that responsibilities -- and opportunities -- are shared by men and women creates an environment where both can flourish. One example of this in her own life is **Fatma Al-Bader**, founder and managing director of venture capital firm Khatif which specialises in small and medium-sized enterprises in the Gulf region. When asked about what contributed to her singular success, she says without hesitation: “I come from a very supportive family. My father and brothers are very supportive of me getting into a career position ... I have a very educated mother (and father) who helped me with my studies. (Education) is a two-way street; a student needs to want to be educated, and he needs support from his family and teachers to help him reach that goal.”

Higher education

At the other end of the spectrum is the crucial need

for higher education and training. Unanimously, the women participants who spoke to INSEAD Knowledge, felt that having locally-based international institutions would help raise the level of higher education in the Gulf and make this coveted education more accessible. Leading schools like INSEAD that have decided to set up campuses in the Middle East to provide leadership training and executive management courses are likely to make a huge contribution to the growth and development of women and business in the region.

The value that these international institutions bring to the region is clearly acknowledged. Al Kaylani states: "It is absolutely essential to have institutes of higher education like INSEAD teaching leadership skills come to the region. We want advanced education through learning about leadership and how to run new business models in the modern economy ... and we're not talking about microcredit, we are talking about SMEs. We want to see women engaged in that, so we need the best skills, training and information."

Bildt also points out that these locally-based schools will help stem the brain drain and build leadership from within Arab society. "We meet women who are originally from the Arab region," she says, "who would be able to contribute greatly to their own society. So building leadership from the grassroots is important because that has a multiplying effect."

Both Al Kaylani and Al-Bader applaud the efficacy of having these schools in the Gulf. "It is extremely important in terms of finding opportunities and it helps that we don't have to travel," says Al-Bader of Khatif, adding: "For women -- and men -- whose families won't let them go abroad because they are scared or they can't support them financially, this is a chance to get the education they want in a top 50 school or a specialised school."

Entrepreneurship opportunities

Many women in Arab society are looking to turn their education and training into business and career opportunities. SMEs are a major driving force in the region and there's an acute awareness of the need to promote entrepreneurial opportunities among Arab women and men.

Dialah Al-Hajj Aref, Minister for Social Affairs and Labour in Syria, told INSEAD Knowledge how entrepreneurship and leadership go hand in hand. "We are investing and promoting how to be an entrepreneur, a leader -- an effective entrepreneur, a professional that has her own projects and employs people." Indeed a woman entrepreneur is more likely to hire other women and take on a mentorship role.

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A study published by the World Bank a couple of years ago, Al Kaylani says, showed that when Arab women set up their own businesses, they employ, mentor and support other women -- "but not because they are biased against men."

Khatif founder Al-Bader has been personally mentoring young entrepreneurs and helping to find funding for them. "The Gulf region thrives with young entrepreneurs," she says. "I am so proud of a lot of men and women that have come with good ideas that not even the West have. I have started an entrepreneurs' club on my website, where I post a logo and link of websites of young entrepreneurs to show some of the ideas that they have come up with from scratch. There are a lot of them -- in the UAE, Oman, Al Qatar -- I try and spend my personal time with these entrepreneurs to help them with their ideas, challenge their ideas, build feasibility studies and find funding."

Obstacles



In spite of the progress, obstacles remain. There is still fairly widespread poverty, along with low literacy rates in the region and time-hardened sensitivities. The biggest obstacle, however, as articulated by the women who spoke to INSEAD Knowledge, may be the individual.

Al-Hajj Aref, for instance, sees women needing greater motivation and inspiration. The big challenge, she says, lies with women themselves. "They don't believe in themselves, that they can play two roles at the same time. They don't believe they can do more than men and do it better. They need to see more success stories, so the challenges will not feel as great as they do now."

The future

Nevertheless the women we spoke to at the AIWF conference remain optimistic. And, as they see it, the way forward is clear -- women need to be empowered and fully integrated into the economy, education, politics and civil society.

Bildt puts this succinctly when she says: "It's important we talk about participation of women in the mainstream, not helping women," a view shared

by Al-Hajj Aref, who says: “We will help them and, at the same time, we must promote more to them -- more empowering programmes, more infrastructure.”

Indeed gender equality will be essential to the success of the Arab region, they say. “The movement forward for women is irreversible,” asserts Al Kaylani of the AIWF, “and our Arab leaders and communities realise that the only future for the region is a future based on equal opportunities for men and women, for both to play their rightful part in the family and in wider society, and to be real stakeholders in our communities, building a better future together.”

The Arab International Women’s Forum held its conference, ‘Prosperity through Partnership: Women Leaders in Modern Syria, the Arab World and the International Community,’ in Damascus, Syria on May 14-17. Men and women from all walks of life and from more than 30 countries took part. They included high-profile ministers, parliamentarians, bankers, international business people and academics. The conference looked at education, training, entrepreneurship and opportunities for women in Arab society.

This article was written by Elaine Ee-Meyers based on interviews for INSEAD Knowledge in Damascus by Eithne Treanor.

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