

Section:	Women in business
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New Arab Women seek freedom to choose

Gulf women represent 35 per cent of the national workforce today, with 45,000 working in businesses. At the education level, 70 per cent of the 2006-2007 graduates were women and while this number predicts a bright future, the New Arab Women Forum, held in Dubai, highlighted a number of obstacles that they still have to overcome.

Public absence

A number of women working in the public sector participated in the forum trying to highlight the importance of being part of the decision-making process and its reflection on women's role in their communities.

Yet, it seems that Arab women still fall behind in this respect, mainly due to cultural issues and the absence of legislations that can support their participation in the political and diplomatic fields.

The European Union has been focusing on alleviating poverty in the developing countries and according to Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne, Vice President - Foreign Affairs Committee - European Parliament in the UK, the basic tool being used in that process is women empowerment.

Baroness Nicholson told AME Info that most of the developing countries don't push women forward and as a result, they live in poor conditions. So when the EU speaks about supporting women's role, it doesn't refer to a fight between genders but rather as a way to promote economic empowerment, which needs social and political empowerment as well. Women in the workforce, and specifically in the public sector, can support women at home, mothers, children, and families because they are part of this.

What the experience says?

Tunisia is said to have been leading the way in opening the political field to women. According to HE Sara El Jariya Minister of Women Affairs, Family, Children and Eldry, women in Tunisia counts for 15 per cent of the government, 15 per cent of the counsellors' board and 27 per cent of the municipality boards.

In Saudi Arabia, women have their own municipalities that they run themselves and their responsibilities in any public field is similar to those of men, said Nawal Saleh Chalhoub, President of the Diplomatic Ladies Association Dubai and wife of the Consult General of Saudi Arabia in UAE. And while she tried to draw an optimistic picture for Saudi women, other Saudi participants felt women in the country are still not included in decision making processes.

Although women in Kuwait have good access to the various business and economic sectors, still they lack ambition when it comes to the public field.

Nabila Al Anjari, CEO Advisor of Kuwait Grand Real Estate Projects, said that a Kuwaiti woman has ever run for the membership of the Chambers of Commerce and Industry. Women also

don't run for the cooperatives boards membership, despite the fact that these have the biggest sales in the consumer goods market, something that is directly related to women.

Needless to say that the United Arab Emirates has achieved a milestone in allowing women participation in decision making, having a female running the ministry of economy, H.E. Sheikha Loubna Al Kasimi, Minister of Economy. In addition, 22.5 per cent of the Federal National Council of the UAE are women, while they make up 10 per cent of the diplomatic field, two-thirds of the overall public sector, and 30 per cent of leading positions that entitle decision making.

Empowering women

In business, the emirates have some 11,000 business women representing a quarter of the total workforce, compared to 14 per cent in Saudi Arabia, 84 per cent of which work only in the education field.

Dr. Lama Abdul Aziz Suleiman, Board Member of Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry, said that women don't have a variety of choices when it comes to education and most of the available specialist fields don't answer the actual market needs.

She added that women in Saudi Arabia are not allowed to establish companies that have dealings with men, unless they hire a male manager to run the company and its external relations. Perhaps this explains why 15 per cent of Saudi women's wealth is still not invested in businesses.

The situation in the UAE remains ahead, with 30 per cent running small and medium businesses. Tunisian women are doing well too, as they represent 40 per cent of doctors and 70 per cent of pharmacists.

However, this doesn't mean that all challenges have been overcome. Rajaa Easa Al Gurg, President, Dubai Business Women Council (DBWC) and the Managing Director of Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group, speaking on behalf of Her Highness Princess Haya Bint Al Hussein, summed up the challenges that women still have to face in three points.

'Gulf women have to deal with three aspects. First they have to keep up with the human sustainable development process, then they need to deal with the globalisation and its effects on social values and behaviour, and finally they got to be part in their own empowerment process.'

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