

TheNational

Forum speaker urges women to do more

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Ayesha Sultan, the head of political programmes for Dubai TV, said women should strengthen themselves beside men, not behind them. [Pawan Singh / The National](#)

ABU DHABI // Topics considered too controversial to discuss in public just a few years ago – such as sexuality and gender roles in the Arab world – top the agenda at the second New Arab Woman Forum that will open in Beirut today.

A delegation from the UAE including Ayesha Sultan, an Emirati journalist and head of political programmes for Dubai TV, will address the conference, which will cover issues including self-image and beauty, leadership, and women in business and politics.

With her at the two-day conference will be Mazen Hayek, marketing and PR director for the Dubai-based broadcaster MBC, and several UAE-based figures from the media, politics and business.

Mrs Sultan, who stood during the first Federal National Council (FNC) elections, speaking before the conference said Emirati women had been given every opportunity by the Government but were not doing enough to consolidate their power, especially in the political field.

“The challenge is coming from women themselves. [Today’s woman] has to look for change and take risks and has to take a chance; the Government can only give so much,” Mrs Sultan said. “If I sit and wait, no one will give me power, they might give me the chance, but not the power.”

Mrs Sultan will acknowledge the progress Emirati women have made over a comparatively short time but warn that nothing should be taken for granted.

“The role of women is stronger than it was 10 years ago and it seems that there is no job that women cannot do and the mentality of the society is changing.”

Despite the progress made and the opportunities on offer, Mrs Sultan said women should not surrender their political aspirations.

“The society here is like a train moving forward that cannot go back,” she said.

After the inaugural forum was held in Dubai in 2007, this year’s event is taking place under the patronage of Wafaa Michel Sleiman, the First Lady of Lebanon. It has been organised by Al Hasnaa Magazine, in co-operation with the League of Arab States and the UN’s Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia.

Both men and women from across the Middle East and beyond will address the conference, including government officials, business, media and civil society leaders, academics, actresses and writers.

Today will focus on women in leadership roles in politics, education and business. Tomorrow, a broader discussion on the changing perceptions of women and gender issues will be held.

During the event, Carmen Lebbos, the Lebanese actress and Stephanie Bataille, from France, will perform an excerpt from The Good Body, a play by Eve Ensler, the American playwright.

Nadine Hani, a Dubai-based anchor for Al Arabiya and another participant, said it was particularly significant the forum was being held in Lebanon, which had a rich history of women’s activism.

“A woman has to take her role and can look at the West, while not giving up our own values and culture,” she said. “I think you can strike a balance and you don’t have to sacrifice major parts of your life. But, if you do want to sacrifice, say your career for your family, you should also have the right to do that.”

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