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Opening Speeches

Welcome address of Dr. Abdallah Sfeir, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Lebanese American University

Ladies and gentlemen, dear friends and colleagues,

A couple of years ago the decoding of the human genome was completed. The number of human genes turned out to be one third of what was anticipated and it was also found that an infinitesimal part of this code differs between one person and another, irrespective of gender, race, ethnicity, and geographical location.¹ This rather surprising discovery led many scientists to recognize that humans are much less coded than we initially thought, and that in itself may well be the secret behind intelligence and the development of mankind.

In other words: We are far more the result of our enculturation and development, in both the positive and negative senses; we are not prisoners of the natural genetic capital we are born with. Obviously racism, as well as gender bias, are pretty much cultural and not natural.

Gender bias remains well-established and not easily questionable in many societies. It is in this atmosphere of obscurantism that the founders of the Lebanese American University (LAU) established the first institution dedicated to the education of women. "The university's early days in 1835 find a reminder on an engraved stone in Beirut's city center: Site of the first edifice built as a school for girls in the Turkish Empire."² The engraving refers to the American School for Girls, established in Beirut by American Presbyterian missionaries. This high school progressively



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added college programs and moved to the current site of the Beirut campus in Ras Beirut under the name of the American Junior College for Women (AJCW) in the early 1930s.

In 1948-1949 the AJCW program was expanded into a university-level institution under the name of Beirut College for Women (BCW). It was then chartered by the regents of the State University of New York, delivering AA [Associate in Arts], AAS [Associate in Applied Science], BA, and BS degrees in several majors. As a recognized university-level liberal arts college, it played a key role in serving the educational, social, and economic needs of the Middle East.

In 1973 the institution changed its name to Beirut University College (BUC) and men were admitted to some of the programs. In 1978, BUC opened an off-campus program in the north and a year later another one was operational in the south. In October 1991 classes started in the newly-built campus at Blat overlooking Byblos. It was officially inaugurated on July 16, 1992. In October 1992, BUC became a university and in 1994, the Board of Regents of the State University of New York approved BUC's request to change into the Lebanese American University (LAU), reflecting further growth and the addition of several professional schools. In the current Fall 2005 semester, more than 6,000 students are enrolled at LAU at its two campuses.

Today, and despite being co-educational, we can affirm

again that the institution was, and still is, a force for the education of women in Lebanon and the Middle East. This commitment was started long before most of the world recognized the need and moral obligation to educate women in a collegiate setting.

When LAU became a co-educational institution it did not renege on its origins nor on the priority it places on women's education. Indeed, this change may have even strengthened this role. The times had changed: The local prevailing culture was no longer concerned about mixing female and male students in the same classrooms and accepted the co-educational mix. Growing the college with the enrollment of men permitted it to develop, add more majors, and provide a more natural setting for women and men to live and work together on equal grounds and prepare for the modern-day workplace where gender is not supposed to play an important role.

The new mission, values, and vision of LAU — that only recently were developed by the Strategic Planning Team and approved by the Board of Trustees in its September 2005 meeting — still emphasize the aim of the founders: "To always seek the truth, respect human dignity, and promote gender equality."

In the same year the BUC name was adopted, 1973, the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World (IWSAW) was founded. This was another signal reaffirming the University's continued commitment to women's education. This Institute further complemented the educational role by providing a research arm — the first resource center of this kind in the Arab Middle East.

In a way, IWSAW was also a natural growth as it was founded under the impulse and leadership of educated and empowered women of the AJCW and BCW days. The so called "pipeline theory" which holds that educating women will inevitably bring more women into education has held its promise. In a male-dominated environment it usually takes very enlightened fathers to send their daughters to universities; the following generation has the advantage of being born into households of educated mothers who presumably, we have to assume, would have chosen to marry educated and enlightened spouses.

Unfortunately, this so-called "pipeline theory" does not always work so well. The pipeline often has leaks - educated women going back to traditional environments where they cannot exercise much influence on their surroundings.

Or the pipeline "clogs" when women are not welcomed in professional environments where they can be fully engaged in and practice their professions as well as become role models for the following generation.

Education opens up the individual to the wonderful world of knowledge, a non-negligible accomplishment by itself, but this alone does not suffice nor fulfill the ultimate aims or objectives of women's empowerment and gender equality. Women's education is recognized as the best investment for societal growth due to the impact it has on infant mortality and public health.

Education is certainly a noble aim, but not an end by itself, and it is in this area that IWSAW has focused most of its recent activities: complementing women's education with the necessary support of research to provide our societies and decision makers with the means to "unclog the pipeline," and open up the huge untapped potential and added value that women can bring to their societies.

I think you would agree with me that greater women's empowerment would inevitably produce:

- More compassionate businesses;
- More caring governments; and
- A more just and peaceful world.

As the world has progressively transformed from material to immaterial and a world economy driven by knowledge, the "traditionally held female attributes" of gentleness, love, caring, and humility have recovered their merit of being great leadership virtues.

Ladies and gentlemen, I would like to say that today's event is a celebration and recognition of what several generations of students, staff, and faculty of LAU have accomplished in this area.

Today's event is planned by, executed by, and dedicated to, the women who have come to embody the dream of LAU's founding fathers and mothers.

It is an honor for your humble male servant to address you today and celebrate with you the success of great women of the Middle East.

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Endnotes

1. http://www.ornl.gov/sci/techresources/Human_Genom/publicat/primer2001/4.shtml
2. <http://www.lau.edu.lb/general-info/historicalbackg.html>