

## Session II:

### Empowerment of Women in Business

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Good afternoon, Your Excellency, Mr. President, Members of the Board of LAU and Members of the LAU Chapter in Dubai. I really thank you for inviting me to be here to talk to you today about a subject that is very close to my heart — and that is business. I actually started my own business at a very young age — at the age of four. Yes, my mother discovered one day that I had a lot of coins and she asked me where I had gotten them from. I asked her, "If I tell you the truth will you spank me?" and she said, "No, please let me know." So I told her that I was very clumsy in art class and I used to take the labels from the bottles of juice and sell them in the school and that's how I made my money. She encouraged me and she really backed me up and that's how I started in business.

Today I would like to start my speech by referring to the famous Moroccan sociologist, Fatima Al-Mernissi. In her book, *Islam and Democracy*, she says: "If democracy did not exist in the world, Arab women would have invented it." We see that in the last 50 years Arab governments have been focusing on state building and neglecting to address the needs of one of the most important assets in society — and that is women. Women make up half of the human resources of this region. Today's government and private sectors, and whoever else is interested in the development of this region, should support women in all areas of society. How could we achieve this economic and social development? It is possible and only possible by systems of good governance, which means that the rules are the same for all participants — men or women. Furthermore, the participa-



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tion of and feedback from the private sector, civil society, labor and political sectors is important. Greater participation of women in state, social and economic institutions would help to introduce new ideas and innovations that would lead to overall better governance.

In each Arab country, the approach to women's participation in the public sphere has taken a different path. Tunisia, which is an exception to all the other Arab countries due to the leadership and guidance of the late President Bourghiba, was able to enact a series of reforms in favor of women's participation in the economic and political spheres. Some Gulf governments have tried to improve the status of women through education, thus, today we can see that the rate of literacy among women has risen to 52.5%. Yet education is still a problem in rural areas in the Arab region. Education on its own is not enough. We see that in both Kuwait and Jordan high literacy has not led to great participation in politics.

Women are also facing a gender bias that works against them: They fall short in allowances, pensions, and social security, which discourages them, and so they stay out of the labor market. So, the answer to all these challenges is to focus on women's education, training, participation in the economy, participation in decision making, legislation pertinent to women, and the involvement of the media to raise awareness to improve women's status. When we talk about legislation — and I'll refer back to my colleagues who spoke earlier — women are not on the legislative committees. For



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example, today in Kuwait the Kuwaiti woman has the right to become a candidate and to enter parliament, but unfortunately she does not sit on the legislative committees and that too often means she's not aware of her political rights. "What are her political rights?" "What is her political agenda?" So, to solve this we need a lot of training for women in politics; we have to also train them in economics.

To address both issues, we have created a Council for Arab Business Women, which I will talk about today. The Council is comprised of women from the 22 Arab countries and is under the auspices of the Arab League. The idea for such an organization came from Arab business women themselves. We met in Cairo and established this Council. I am one of the founders and two other members are here: Hassa Al-Osaily, Head of the Committee and on the Board of Directors as well, and Head of the Committee for Conferences and Head of the Media, Dr. Aisha Albusmait. Each of us created a society of business women in our own countries and then we joined this Council.

The Council is only six years old but it has managed to take giant steps. The first thing we did was to invite 70 business women to Kuwait and get to know each other. We followed this up by creating a website that, according to Dr. Albusmait, we are upgrading whenever she has the time to upgrade it. We have already held our second economic forum, which we just finished in Cairo, and it was a success. The Council has managed to gain the support of Prince Al-Walid Ben Talal. He is our mentor and strategic partner. We are creating a company for Arab women which will be based in Riyadh, and where we will be promoting their work. We will hold an exhibition, an annual exhibition, that we hope to later also hold in other Arab countries, at which the work of Arab business women will be displayed. We will study the quality and upgrade it so that it meets international standards. We have also signed a protocol with the Commercial International Bank of Egypt, for small- and medium-sized enterprises. The Council — for the first time with Hassa Al-Osaily — held the first Arab Small- and Medium-Sized Enterprises Conference in Dubai last year, and this year, 2006, we will be holding our second such conference. One of the aims of the Council is to promote Arabic handicrafts. We will organize a big festival in Paris in spring 2006 to highlight Arab handicrafts with the support of a number of first ladies in the Arab world.

After Beijing, the leading ladies of the Arab world came together in a summit in 2000. Out of that there came the creation, in each of the Arab countries, of a committee for the advancement of women. For example, the committee in Kuwait is led by H.H. Sheikha Latifa Al-Fahd Al-Sabah and I am the vice president. In Bahrain they have a similar committee and in Egypt they have another one. These are meant to promote Arab Women. With the Council we do

a lot of training for Arab women in business and empowerment. We are also doing similar training in Dubai for the leaders of small- and medium-sized enterprises as well as working with LAU on training in this area for young entrepreneurs. We are in the process of doing these things that I am talking about — it's not just ideas.

In [the area of] real estate, we are training women to enter into this important business. We have found that Saudi women are among the richest in the world in real estate and we are trying to get them to change their use of that real estate into an asset. We have also talked about the empowerment of women in the political arena. I think the problem is that it is difficult for one woman to vote for another woman. So what we say is even relevant in 2007, while we're hoping Kuwaiti women will enter the parliament, there should be a quota for them otherwise they will not be able to succeed. The other thing that I would like to say is that three years ago in Oman when we had our meeting, we came up with the idea that women should be entering chambers of commerce. Today, we have two Saudi women who have been able to join the Chamber of Commerce in their country for the first time, as well as having witnessed the nominations of other women candidates. One of the other things that the Council wants to do is to create a company in which all Arab business women have shares and a board of trustees in each country with Prince Al-Walid Ben Talal acting in Riyadh. This company will offer training among other things and will market itself in order to encourage more women to join. We'd like to see more and more Arab women joining this Council because at the end of the day it is for them and this is why it was created. Also, we want the Arab countries that do not yet participate to join us. We are still missing Libya, unfortunately we're missing Palestine, and we're missing Iraq. But slowly, slowly we're trying to pull them to come and join us. We're looking forward to our third economic forum for which we have yet to find a host country. We have two offers but we're still deliberating.

To conclude what I am saying: The empowerment of women will come through increasing the number of women serving in important decision-making [capacities]. Today, luckily for us, we have a female minister in Kuwait and she's the Minister of Planning and is doing a lot to help us prepare Kuwaiti women to enter parliament. As I said, in the Gulf we have been able to get women into chambers of commerce. Today we're also seeing that our governments are supporting us by helping us with small- and medium-sized enterprises, and in that sense we're working to support grassroots development in Egypt and the region. In addition, we are getting money in the Gulf to support further small- and medium-sized enterprises.

I thank you for listening to me and for inviting me to speak.