The Arab International Women’s Forum (AIWF) held a conference on 26 June 2012 to launch an initiative entitled Young Arab Women Leaders: The Voice of the Future in partnership with PwC at the Middle East Public Sector Institute in Amman, Jordan on Tuesday 26 June 2012.

As the first of a series of events planned for the year and beyond, the debut event was attended by nearly 80 participants mainly from Jordan, Palestine and Iraq and witnessed the participation of several prominent figures and guest speakers from the corporate, NGO and Government sectors.

The first-of-its-kind conference in the region aimed to assist a wide spectrum of young women leaders in Jordan and across the region to further optimise and strengthen their personal business skills and overall contribution to the business world and community at large.

In her welcome remarks, acknowledging with great appreciation the presence of the Guest of Honour, Her Excellency Mrs Nadia Aloul, Minister of State for Women’s Affairs, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan; Mrs Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani, Founder Chairman, Arab International Women’s Forum, UK; Mr Warwick Hunt, Middle East Managing Partner, PwC, United Arab Emirates
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Mrs Al Kaylani reiterated the commitment of AIWF to achieving sustainable empowerment for women in the region by concluding, “These are times of great challenges for the region but also a time of great opportunities. We look forward to collaborating with all our distinguished guests, speakers and participants to ensure that our young Arab women leaders are given every opportunity to develop and enhance their skills towards better integration with the global economy, to become really effective leaders in building the future of their countries.”

In her keynote address, HE Nadia Hashem Aloul, Minister of State for Women’s Affairs emphasised what changes there had been in legal human rights in general and specifically for women according to Jordanian law. She said since 1974, women have had equal opportunity to campaign and serve in political office and the introduction of the quota system in 2003 has added importance to women’s representation in parliament – from 6 out of 110 seats assigned for women in 2003 to now having 12 seats assigned. The quota system has, Her Excellency explained, proved to be a key tool for taking decisions that will change and influence women’s position in Arab society.

PwC’s Vision on Young Women Leaders Programme was put forward by Ms Norma Taki, Partner PwC, who stressed the importance of self-confidence whilst explaining that Arab women generally lack confidence in their abilities. It is, she said, important to have a role model in their life and not specifically women and went on to suggest “sometimes we should ignore roles, take risks and be more adventurous.” Norma also talked about the focus groups within PwC as a way to empower women in their positions.

HE Suhair Al Ali, Former Minister of Planning & International Cooperation, Jordan, gave advice from both her ministerial perspective and her business experience when she spoke on Beyond The Glass Ceiling, Transforming Barriers Into Opportunities. Mrs Suhair Al Ali quoted the 2011 World Economic Forum gender gap report, which stated that the MENA region was ranked as occupying last place among the world’s regions and pointed out that there is not enough political presence for women.

HE Hala Bsaiso Lattouf, Director & Partner, AYA for Consultancy & Development, Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, opened the Opportunities & Challenges for Young Women Leaders session by talking about leadership and the importance of human rights, emphasising that the two are interlinked, stating that “the importance of human rights approach is no less important than the leadership approach”. Emphasising the fact that “men are not the enemy”, Her Excellency urged cooperation with men and reminded women that they do not have to change their principles to achieve their goals, but to nurture a strong, smart attitude towards the people they work with.

Also speaking in the Opportunities & Challenges for Young Women Leaders session, Ms Salwa Katkhuda, Investment Manager, Oasis500, Jordan, shared her belief that mentors are absolutely essential to creating and enhancing more initiatives to promote women’s empowerment in the region.

Speaking in the Mentorship & Coaching: Be A Better
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Leader session, Ms Amal Abusrour, Programmes Development Manager, Islamic Relief Worldwide, Palestine, explained that there is a big difference between “bosses” and “leaders”, and that we generally have more “bosses”. Ms Abusrour emphasised the importance of training organisations to open more opportunities up to women.

In the discussion that followed, Ms Nimati Aleman talked about women in the media sector, stating that there is high number of women present in this sector but rarely in senior positions. Ms Abber Abu Ghaith advocated for increased awareness of the media as a tool to spread women’s beliefs and ideas, and stressed the importance of using media as a means of networking.

Other participants mentioned that women should work hard not only to be economically strong but also to strengthen their social and educational status. Ms Nuha Ma'ayta expressed her firm belief that women should be present and active participants in law making and politics, and that women throughout the region need to believe more in their own capabilities, invest in their education and in becoming financially independent, and assert themselves as equal decision makers together with men, starting in the home and family. Our young women leaders also agreed that women should enhance their skill sets and experience with ongoing training and that, above all, women should know their rights.

Ms Nimati Aleman encouraged young women leaders to get a job and never stop there, to have a vision and move toward it. Ms Hanadi Salman stressed the importance of being proactive in media, rather than reactive, and to focus on building their reputations, using media to show strength and build trust, as well as share information that benefits the community.

Young women leaders also contributed to discussions to encourage their peers to look at everything as an opportunity to lead, rather than an obstacle; and to realise that tradition and culture, above all other things, are the reasons that educated women are being left behind. All our participants were unanimous in their agreement with regard to the importance of family support in achieving their best potential in education and in entrepreneurship / employment, stressing the importance of having positive role models. Participants also upheld Corporate Social Responsibility practices as a method that has proved very effective in the region for securing more jobs for women and enhanced opportunities for leadership training within the region.

Speaking in the Reflections on Leadership session, Guest Speaker Ms Sandra Hiari, Urbanist, Writer & Founder, Tareeq, Jordan, shared an excellent and very inspiring presentation on her work and motivation, describing how her work in her early years as a city planner gave way to a popular online presence as an authority on city planning and design intermixed with gender and politics. She gave this advice to young entrepreneurs in the region: “Get the job done, then move on. Have one vision, with multiple manifestations. Wear one hat, then pick up another. Perfectly align your expectations, then realign every two years.”

Dr Halaema Al Sabbah, Post Doctorate Nutrition Research Fellow, Fulbright Visiting Scholar at Jean Mayer Human Nutrition Center, Tufts University Medical Center, USA, also shared her experiences of leadership, offering our young women leaders the following words of encouragement: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed, people can change the world.”

Speaking on Young Women Leaders and Why They Matter, Mr Warwick Hunt, Middle East Managing Partner, PwC in the UAE, said, “The most important determinant of a country’s competitiveness is its human talent, which, when enhanced through education affects the productivity of that society. As we know, women represent and account for half of humanity. In other words, half of the potential talent base. Therefore, if we want to perform and compete for our future we should integrate and engage both men and women to create our future and that of our children.”

Mr Hunt reiterated PwC’s commitment to enhancing the role of women in the region. He explained, “The outcome of PwC’s work this year will cover the following priorities: ensuring macro-economic stability for the region; addressing the challenge of youth employment and closing the gender gap; building of trust in public life; accountability; understanding new paradigms and
accountability; understanding new paradigms and opportunities for enhancing regional cooperation; public finance management; securing a strong middle class; and supporting economies in transition.”

Mr Hunt concluded by saying, “Women have emerged as key civic leaders in the uprising that launched the Arab Spring. The role and powerful impact women have created must be appreciated especially through increasing gender equality in the political and economic arenas in the region. “

In the same session, Guest Speaker Ms Muna Sukhtian, Managing Director of Microfund for Women, Jordan’s first microfinance programme with over 80,000 active clients (and nearly 55,000 of these being youth-led enterprises), elaborated on Microfund for Women’s important mission to provide sustainable financial and non-financial services to the entrepreneurial poor, especially women, in order to empower them socially and economically and to help them achieve a better quality of life. In her presentation, Ms Sukhtian explained, “Microfund for Women envisions a more equal and just society in which women in particular are empowered to break the cycle of poverty, achieve prosperity and live inclusive lives.”

Speaking on Social Responsibility: More Women Leaders, Better Corporate Social Responsibility, Ms Rana Abu Samaha, Legal Consultant, DLA Piper Middle East LLP in the UAE, described her role at the law firm and explained that much of the pro-bono work that she undertakes is gender-related, for example, assisting victims of child marriage in the Yemen and assisting women in Zimbabwe. She said, “Women are important as deliverers and recipients of our community projects.” Speaking in terms of gender diversity in the law sector in the Arab region, Ms Samaha said, “The key challenge for us in the Middle East is increasing the number of Arabic speaking lawyers.”

Ms Mali Qasem, Founding Member, Jordanian Chapter for Transparency International, Jordan, gave an excellent presentation on corporate social responsibility, equating more women leaders with better corporate social responsibility.

Concluding the day's events in a powerful and very inspiring Keynote Address, HE Eng Maysoon Zoubi, Secretary General, Ministry of Water & Irrigation, Jordan, encouraged young women leaders to educate themselves and their families in order to change their futures, and stressed that women are not in competition with men but should be united in shaping a positive economic situation and opportunities for both men and women.

AIWF, together with PwC, was honoured and delighted to have enjoyed the participation of so much of Amman's brightest talent – future women leaders who are changing the business landscape in the region. Both AIWF and PwC look forward to carrying the momentum to future conferences in the series, planned for Beirut and Dubai throughout the remainder of 2012.