In the presence of His Highness Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammad Al Qassimi, Supreme Council Member, United Arab Emirates, Ruler of Sharjah and Founder and President of the American University of Sharjah, Dr Nada Mourtada Sabbah, Vice Chancellor for Development & Alumni Affairs, welcomed the Arab International Women’s Forum 2012 Conference entitled Emerging Economies: Emerging Leaderships: Arab Women and Youth as Drivers of Change to the American University of Sharjah.

The Chancellor of the American University of Sharjah, Dr Peter Heath, in cordially receiving the Arab International Women’s Forum and its guests to the University, thanked AIWF for the opportunity to work together to find ways to include women and young workers in the private sector as the way forward.

Dr Heath reported that the Gulf countries had created impressive programmes to create skills and place young workers in the private sector. “Talent is universal, but opportunity is not” said Dr Heath. He went on to say, “Women are still saddled with unfair and untrue assumptions that they are less capable of starting and running businesses. We are prying open the doors of opportunity for more people to walk through. Making women a focus of national policy is not only the right thing to do – it is also the smart thing to do.”

Mrs Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani, Chairman, Arab International Women’s Forum delivered her keynote address in Arabic and English, welcoming all honoured guests to the AIWF Conference, Emerging Economies: Emerging Leaderships: Arab Women and Youth as Drivers of Change to the American University of Sharjah.

Mrs Al Kaylani also extended AIWF’s thanks and appreciation to Chancellor Dr Peter Heath and Dr Nada Mourtada Sabbah, Vice Chancellor for Development and Alumni Affairs.
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Mrs Al Kaylani’s special thanks were expressed to the World Bank and the OECD Investment Programme; to The Sharjah Chamber of Commerce and Trade; and to AIWF Global Corporate Benefactor Partner, PepsiCo, and Manpower Group, Petrofac, Pfizer and DLA Piper. Mrs Al Kaylani extended her deepest appreciation for the generous cooperation from all of AIWF’s valued partners, and to all the landmark Arab and international companies represented in Sharjah.

Mrs Al Kaylani went on to acknowledge the progress made in the Arab world saying that in the last decade and a half, the region has moved in the right direction to remove cultural constraints to gender equality through education, entrepreneurship and political empowerment. Progress made by Arab women in the last fifteen years has resulted in an ever-narrowing gender gap in the MENA, with particular improvements being made in the areas of literacy, women’s entrepreneurship and political participation. Arab women continue to take on prominent roles as decision-makers, participating in their economies and societies as professors, university deans, businesswomen, journalists, judges, lawyers, ministers, media figures, bankers, doctors and financiers. The number of women holding ministerial-level positions and other roles in public life has especially increased in the last decade.

However, Mrs Al Kaylani highlighted the areas that needed to be addressed in order to improve the situation for Arab women and youth still further and deliver much needed economic growth: investment in education, Arab women in the workforce, enabling entrepreneurship, job creation and youth unemployment in the region. Mrs Al Kaylani concluded her keynote address by saying:

“We are all meeting at a very critical time for the Arab region”, said Mrs Al Kaylani, “and also at a time of great economic and financial concern for the world’s economy at large. It is a time of challenges and also many new opportunities. We have the wealth, talent and funds in the region to shift our priorities towards creating our own sustainable development by focusing on women and youth and enhancing collaboration between Arab nations.”

HE Noura Al Noman, Chairperson, Sharjah Supreme Council on Family Affairs referred to the fact that, under the patronage of His Highness, the University has three prominent women on its senior leadership team. Indeed, His Highness, Sheikh Dr Sultan Bin Mohammed Al Qassimi and Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammed Al Qassimi, had always espoused the empowerment of women and youth as a natural process. Ms Al Noman paid tribute to the social development strategic planning of Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher Bint Mohammed Al Qassimi for her initiatives to equip, empower and develop youth and young women, such as The Sharjah Ladies Club, opened in 1982 as the first ladies only club of its kind in the UAE to both nurture women’s talents and provide them the safe haven for leisure, cultural and sporting activities.

Speaking on Women’s Contribution to Public Life, Ms Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Italian Senate, said that women in the Arab region lacked a success story from the west, since percentages of women in parliament have no real significance; also that women see themselves as competitors instead of complementing each other.

Her Excellency Birgitta Holst Alani, Director, The Swedish Institute, Alexandria, Egypt spoke from experience of Egypt and gave a definition of
dignity for women as participating fully in public life by standing side by side with men to work for public education, women's rights, social justice, against corruption, to fight for the same privileges and logistic support for women politicians as accorded to their male counterparts and to take responsibility in public life, overcoming their status as victims.

Ms Nasra Al Adawi, CEO Tawasul, Oman affirmed that women's empowerment was an issue over the entire Arab region and gave details of a project conducted in the Sultanate of Oman to assist women candidates to run for parliament.

On the topic of Empowering SMEs: Economic Development and the New Arab World, Dr Nasser Saidi, Chief Economist of the DIFC & Executive Director of the Hawkamah - Institute for Corporate Governance stated that in order to empower women, there should be a focus on getting them into the labour force since economically empowered women develop future human capital, as they usually re-invest their money in their children’s health and education.

Mrs Nadereh Chamlou, Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Economist MENA, The World Bank said that the solution to the problem of a weak private sector in the MENA region and the lack of female employment is to improve incentives for hiring women and for women to look for work and to promote female entrepreneurship.

Dr Shaikha Al Maskari, Chairperson, Al Maskari Holding, Chairperson, Tricon Group said that through public-private partnerships it is possible to implement sustainable job creation initiatives that align the interests of nationalisation programmes with corporate incentives. She recommended capacity building programmes that reward multinational companies for hiring, mtraining, and retaining nationals in strategic industries, thereby reducing the burden on governments by encouraging youth to favour private sector careers.

Mrs Nicola Ehlermann-Cache, Senior Policy Adviser, MENA OECD Investment Programme, Private Sector Development Division, OECD presented findings from the MENA-OECD Draft Issues Paper entitled Empowering Women-led SMEs: Economic Development and the New Arab World prepared for the Conference. Among the findings, it was established that entrepreneurship is a potential means to address the region’s urgent need for more and better jobs. Entrepreneurial activity in the MENA region is far from reaching its potential and according to a forthcoming OECD-IDRC study, a key reason for the region’s limited entrepreneurial activity is the low participation of women in the economy.

Speaking on Linking Education & Stable, Sustainable Socio-Economic Development, Mr Ron Bruder, Founder Chairman, Education for Employment Foundation, USA said that 87% of CEOs in the Middle East believe that the limited supply of candidates with the right skills will present their biggest business challenge over the next three years. The Arab world also has one of the lowest labour productivity growth rates, a serious concern as the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) move towards greater participation in the global economy. More than 90% of Arab CEOs believe that increasing female education will have a positive effect on the Arab world by enhancing the human capital value of women in the region.

AUS Chancellor, Dr Peter Heath, said that education itself is a global endeavour now, with the requirement to produce graduates with skills that are not just locally relevant but must also be pertinent in a global context.
Speaking on the theme of *Innovators & Entrepreneurs in Emerging Economies: Reaching a New Level of Entrepreneurial Excellence*, Dr Afnan Al-Shuaiby, Secretary General & CEO, The Arab-British Chamber of Commerce quoted the OECD: “innovation is a continuous process”; innovation can be applied to any sector of the economy, including the service sector, and is vital for driving up living standards. The future wellbeing and continuing prosperity of the Arab economies thus in varying ways depends on the successful adaptation of innovation.

**HE Khuloud Al Nuwais**, Chief Sustainability Officer, Emirates Foundation explained how the Emirates Foundation engages, inspires, empowers and guides the youth of the UAE to secure the nation’s sustainable future and **HE Ameera Bin Karam**, Chairperson, Executive Committee, Sharjah Business Women Council demonstrated the ethos of the Women Business Council which aimed, by carrying out various initiatives, to contribute to the UAE’s overall economic and social development by supporting women’s full integration in the economy.

**Mrs Nadereh Chamlou**, Senior Advisor, Office of the Chief Economist MENA, The World Bank, on the topic of *Developing Youth: The Role of Governments & the Private Sector*, presented an assessment of Women’s Educational Gains. From surveys carried out by the World Bank, it appears quite clearly how the difficulties faced by women in the workplace are not dependent on women themselves, but on society.

**Mr David Arkless**, President, Corporate & Government Affairs, ManpowerGroup confirmed that the MENA region had established itself as an important international pool for talent but went on to say that no country in the world has developed a national labour market, and the Arab countries have the most dysfunctional labour market in the world because of lack of planning and an over-dependency on poor, enforced, underpaid foreign labour. However, the advantages of the Arab labour market are high fertility rates (risk of increased dependency on single income), high levels of literacy and an increased need for skilled labour in the EU owing to the projected loss of 50 million workers in Europe.

Delegates learned from **Ms Charlotte Morris**, Social Development Adviser, Middle East Team, Department for International Development, of the work being carried out by the UK Foreign Office, in particular The British Arab Partnership Programme is working with Governments, NGOs, Banks and Businesses on programmes that support inclusive economic and social change, particularly focusing on young people.

**Professor Yомн El Hamaky**, Head of the Economics Department in the Faculty of Commerce at Ain Shams University, Cairo put forward a number of recommendations for preventing women from being trapped in low-paying jobs and low-productivity businesses starting with the elimination of illiteracy and provision of universal access to education and the encouragement of initiatives by governments and civil society for women’s economic independent and political engagement.

**Hidden Potential: New Perspectives on the Role of Women & Youth** was a highly interactive session presented by Moderator and Guest Speaker **Ms Conny Czymoch**, International Journalist and German TV Anchor. **Ms Darein Hassan**, Africa Middle East Diversity Lead & Senior Regulatory Leader, Pfizer Inc., UAE spoke about the Pfizer Regional Women’s Council, Africa Middle East which was initiated by Regional Leadership to provide a strategic approach to shape a strong global workplace culture that embraces inclusion and creates an environment in which every colleague has the opportunity to realise his/her potential, regardless of age, education, sexual orientation, marital/family status, disability, religion, race, geographical location, perspective and culture. **Ms Conny Czymoch** opened the debate to the floor of the auditorium and discussion took place about the problems women encounter in the workplace and in self-employment and in society generally.
The question of how students and young entrepreneurs leverage technology and social media to promote a sustainable future was responded to by Mr Abdullatif Al Sayegh, CEO Al Sayegh Media, in a lively interactive session by detailing the progress made in the UAE in the integration of women and youth into the workforce and entrepreneurship in the United Arab Emirates assisted by technology and social media. He advised delegates that the future for technology is set to be even brighter with better broadband, higher internet penetration, higher mobile penetration, the potential for every person in the world to be connected.

Ms Noha Hefny, External Communication & CSR Manager for Asia, Middle East & Africa, PepsiCo, UAE said that youth and technology are an extremely powerful force that can change the world. Youth are extremely powerful agents of change but beyond the fact that they are the leaders of tomorrow, we have to ask ourselves why they are so powerful.

Ms Tala Al-Hejailan, Legal Consultant, DLA Piper Middle East LLP, KSA addressed the subject by explaining the advantages of social networking for A Good Life: access to education (virtual learning), easier access to opportunities, networking and making contacts, sharing information to raise awareness and publicising opportunities. She then outlined a case study of how Saudi Women are using technology & social media to find job opportunities to be able to work from home and they are taking courses and earning degrees online.

Concluding Remarks
AIWF looks forward to cooperating with all guest speakers, delegates and partners present at this ground-breaking Conference to push forward the agenda for women and youth in the Arab world, promoting investment in education, training and the development of leadership skills towards new levels of competency and confidence in young Arab leaders and job creators so that they can aspire to higher levels of responsibility in all sectors of business, public life and in civil society while at the same time contributing to the social and economic recovery in their communities and the region.