



# Women, Water & Youth: Perspectives from the MENA Region

*Delivered at the*

**Women, Water & Youth Conference  
Kempinski Hotel, Amman, Jordan**

*on the*

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## **Opening Session (Day One)**

### **Founder and Chairman's Welcome & Keynote Remarks**

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## Opening Acknowledgements

Your Excellencies, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good Morning,

It gives me great pleasure, both personally and as Founder & Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum, to welcome you all this morning to the AIWF Conference on *Women, Water & Youth* held in Amman, in partnership with the Center for Mediterranean Integration.

We are indeed proud and honoured to welcome you to our conference which will be addressing key development challenges as well as opportunities for economic growth and progress benefitting women and young people in the Region.

This initiative is unique in that it takes an intersectional approach to three key development challenges in the MENA region – water scarcity and food security, women's economic participation, and youth unemployment. I am delighted to share that we are set to welcome distinguished speakers, members, guests, and delegates drawn from Jordan, the wider Arab world, the European Union, and the United States.

At the outset, the AIWF Board joins me in extending our warmest thanks and appreciation to the **Center for Mediterranean Integration** for its valued partnership of our conference today. The rich and timely conference programme has been designed by AIWF in collaboration with world leading specialists at the World Bank and the CMI, who have extensive expertise in the MENA region, and beyond, promoting transformative reforms, building economic and social cohesion, cross-border trade, and investment, with focus on scientific and cultural exchange to enhance Mediterranean integration.

Distinguished Guests, first it gives me great pleasure to welcome this morning's Guest of Honour Keynote speaker: **Her Excellency Hala Bseiso Lattouf**, Minister of Social Development in Jordan.

Your Excellency, we are honoured to have your valued presence with us today to help us find inclusive solutions to environmental and empowerment issues that impact the lives of women, young people and refugees. AIWF is proud to have your longstanding support and your invaluable endorsement of our work and mission. We greatly admire your total dedication to addressing critical social and economic challenges in Jordan as Minister of Social Development and are very much looking forward to your inspiring keynote address this morning as our Conference Guest of Honour.

We are also proud to welcome **His Excellency Ali Subah**, Secretary General of the Ministry of Water and Irrigation in Jordan, representing **His Excellency Munir Owais**, Minister of Water and Irrigation. The Ministry leads Jordan's Water for Life Strategy and plays an integral role in implementing the Strategy's action plans as one of the highest national priorities. We are all looking forward to hearing about the Ministry's important work to raise awareness of water challenges among Jordanians and about its key mission to find innovative solutions to these challenges.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome as a partner and Opening Session Keynote Speaker **Blanca Moreno-Dodson**, Manager of the CMI. Blanca, we greatly appreciate your support and partnership, and that of your outstanding team of colleagues at the CMI in the organising of our joint conference today. We look forward to building on this initiative by collaborating together in the future and further developing strategies towards our shared mission to empower and support women and young people in the MENA region towards a peaceful and prosperous future.

Our collaboration with the Center for Mediterranean Integration follows a long history of AIWF partnership with the **World Bank Group** in both Washington DC and across the MENA region on several initiatives to support and empower women's leadership and youth outreach.

We warmly welcome **Professor Fadia Kiwan**, Director General of the Arab Women Organization, an inspirational woman leader at the helm of the AWO. AIWF is proud to have enjoyed a longstanding co-operation with the Arab Women Organization and wholeheartedly commends the AWO for all its invaluable work as one of the region's leading organisations that supports and enhances the role of women in the Arab world working under the auspices of the League of Arab States.

Distinguished guests, allow me to extend our great appreciation and warm welcome to all our most distinguished Guest Speakers, all prominent and accomplished global leaders who have taken time from very busy schedules to address our conference and come from diverse sectors spanning non-profit organisations and private sector corporations.

In addition to our distinguished partners at the CMI and the World Bank, we are proud to welcome guest speakers today representing The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; the International Labour Organisation; the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; the United Nations Development Programme; The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia; the Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari; and the Water Authority of Jordan; all represented here today among many others.

AIWF is proud to welcome the **Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (CIHEAM)**, **PepsiCo** and **PwC Middle East** as Conference Supporting Partners for *Women, Water & Youth*.

PepsiCo, AIWF Benefactor Partner, has long supported and endorsed the AIWF mission and vision and we are proud to have the ongoing commitment of PepsiCo, which leads the way in driving gender diversity and sustainability awareness in the MENA region and around the world.

AIWF greatly appreciates the ongoing support of **PwC Middle East**, which as a valued AIWF Global Partner has worked in longstanding partnership with AIWF on initiatives to promote and nurture Arab and international women in

business and the professions focussing on young women leaders. I extend our warmest thanks and appreciation to Mr **Michael Orfaly**, Country Senior Partner at PwC Jordan, and to all his colleagues in both Jordan and the UAE for all their support in delivering our conference today.

I also take this opportunity to warmly welcome AIWF Board Members and Guest Delegates, and all AIWF Global Partners. Our very special thanks also goes to AIWF Media Partner **Memac Ogilvy** for their invaluable support in the communications and media relations, and to the **Kempinski Hotel Amman** for their generous hospitality and for hosting AIWF in Jordan once again.

## *Women, Water & Youth: Perspectives from the MENA Region*

Distinguished Guests,

Before I elaborate on the key topics and critical significance of today's conference themes, allow me first to say a few words about the Arab International Women's Forum.

AIWF was founded in London in 2001 as a non-profit, non-governmental organisation with the clear aim of supporting and enhancing the role of women in the social and economic development of the Middle East region but always within an international context.

Seventeen years on, and following no less than 40 conferences and activities in more than 20 countries in the world, AIWF is recognised as a key actor in the Arab and international development communities for our successful achievement of groundbreaking, timely, and results-driven initiatives that have brought civil society, the corporate sector, governments, media and academia together and have produced informed, action-driven recommendations and action that has direct benefit for women and youth across the Arab world.

AIWF has created a serious and credible forum and a powerbase of strong advocacy for women in the MENA region inspiring them to lead as engines of economic and social growth, with education, entrepreneurship and gender parity as our priority areas for action. AIWF creates viable partnerships such as our partnership today with CMI, that impact change and foster advanced collaboration between the Arab and international communities to foster growth, development, peace and prosperity for all.

The themes of today's conference lie at the heart of our mission as a development organisation invested in creating a better future for women and youth in the MENA region and internationally through economic development, diversity and inclusion.

The *Women, Water & Youth* Conference comes at a pivotal time in which regional and international attention is turning to the key challenges that our conference programme will bring to light today and tomorrow here in Amman – namely:

- 1) water scarcity and food security challenges which have been compounded by the unprecedented refugee and displacement crisis;
- 2) women's economic participation in the region which remains low despite the significant advancements made in education, entrepreneurship and gender diversity across most of the Arab world over the last decade;
- 3) the ongoing challenge of youth unemployment in the MENA States.

Allow me to say a few words on each:

### **Water scarcity and food security**

The realities of water scarcity and its alarming implications for economic growth, regional stability, health and quality of life for people in the MENA region are critical to its future prosperity and stability. Nowhere in the world is the challenge of water scarcity more pertinent than it is in MENA region.

The MENA is a “hotspot of unsustainable water use”, with more than half of current water withdrawals in some MENA countries well exceeding the water resources available by up to 75% on average. Over 60% of the MENA population lives in high or very high water stressed areas (compared to 35% for the rest of the world).

In Jordan alone, according to the Ministry of Water and Irrigation, climate change and the refugee crisis have reduced water availability per person to

140 cubic meters, far below the globally recognized threshold of 500 cubic meters for severe water scarcity.

According to the World Bank Report *Beyond Scarcity Water Security in The Middle East*, many countries in the region are already eroding their water resource base, and “a fundamental development challenge for the region is to take the actions necessary to navigate sustainable pathways toward water security.”

According to the same report:

“Achieving water security means acting together from the household level to the regional level. From a household water perspective, this means engaging women, who often have the main responsibility for using and conserving water. Women’s rights, representation, and resources need to be acknowledged and addressed, both for social inclusion and for sustainable development. Youths should also be engaged in developing the next generation’s water expectations and practices.”

We need broader strategies to reduce gender disparities in water access. We need to understand more about women’s water burden and how it specifically affects their health, their households and their economic inclusion.

This leads me to the second developmental challenge that forms the core theme of today's conference – women's economic participation.

### **Women’s low rates of economic participation**

As the ILO notes in its World Employment and Social Outlook Trends 2017 report, despite significant improvements in educational attainment across the region, women in North Africa are still twice as likely to be unemployed as their male counterparts, unemployment for women in the Arab States is still 13 percentage points higher than that for men, and female participation in the

labour market remains the lowest globally at just 21.2%, against a world average of 49.5%.

Such large gender disparities in labour market performance undoubtedly highlight the fact that although women have achieved high levels of education in many parts of the Arab world, this has not translated into enhanced participation in the world of work and many women in the rural and informal economies have been left behind.

Gender barriers to women's inclusion are also reflected in the low rates of female-led entrepreneurship in the MENA region. The Global Entrepreneurship Monitor's (GEM) MENA 2017 Report identifies these barriers as women having higher levels of domestic responsibility, lower levels of education, a lack of female role models in business and public service, fewer business-orientated networks in Arab communities, and a lack of capital and assets.

The ILO has stressed that getting more women into work globally is essential to achieving a global goal of gender equality by 2030 and has called for policymakers to recognize the "unequal demands" on women at home and in caring for others.

### **Youth unemployment in the MENA region**

At the same time, according to the Arab Youth Survey 2017, youth unemployment in the region still stands at between 25% - 30%, even exceeding 30 percent in nine countries, and the Arab world's youth population is among the fastest growing in the world, with the number of young people aged 15 to 30 in the Middle East and North Africa make up 60% of the region's entire population, according to the IMF.

Youth unemployment rates in the Arab States and North Africa regions have been the highest in the world for the past 25 years and continue to rise. According to the ILO, the struggle of young people in the Arab States to find

decent work is exacerbated by "ongoing armed conflicts, migration waves and low levels of economic growth.

The preference for public sector jobs is also still prevalent in many countries in the region; in some Gulf states, up to 70% of people are still employed in the public sector, which clearly cannot sustainably provide jobs for the growing youth population into the future.

These factors make private sector job creation a key regional priority with startups and social enterprises being key drivers of job growth in the region. Promoting growth, jobs, and inclusiveness in the Arab World is critical to developing a future Arab working world and economy that – as IMF Managing Director Christine Lagarde has said – “includes all, works for all, and provides opportunities for all”.

It has long been the position of AIWF, reflected in all our key initiatives and outreach over the years, that enhanced support and structured financing for youth-led, scalable startups and initiatives that create jobs for young people, especially those that rise up to critical development and sustainability challenges, can foster innovation and serve as a much-needed lifeline for unemployed Arab youth.

The consequences of failing to support opportunities for all, and failing to promote growth, jobs and inclusion for women and young people in the Arab world, will ultimately be reflected in the stability and prosperity of the Arab region overall. If the aspirations of our young people remain unfulfilled, this will inevitably lead to endemic dissatisfaction, a marked rise in social tensions and civil unrest, and a complete collapse in social trust.

## **Finding innovative solutions through collaboration and partnership**

Distinguished Guests,

Every one of these challenges presents us today with a choice – to decide to take personal ownership of the challenges that our beloved Arab region faces; to lead the way forward in identifying, creating, and promoting viable, sustainable, long-term solutions; to inspire each other in our research, our philanthropy and our working lives; to collaborate and innovate across borders and across cultures, and importantly, to ensure that the women and young people affected have the most prominent seat at the table so that their voices may be heard.

AIWF has long been committed to raising awareness of critical development issues that impact women and youth in the Arab world, and we are exceptionally proud to be working with all our valued conference partners today to bring key sustainability issues to the top of the Arab development agenda. We *must* do more to bring women and young people who are most affected by water challenges, food insecurity, armed conflict and displacement, and reduced economic opportunity, into the conversation.

We are *all* part of the solution.

For this reason, our conference today aims to provide fertile ground for us all to collectively examine potential solutions to environmental and sustainability challenges whilst simultaneously promoting women's economic participation and leadership, and addressing our most serious concerns for youth empowerment, social mobility and job creation across the region.

Over the course of today and tomorrow, we aim to arrive at actionable insights and results oriented recommendations to address these key challenges.

AIWF looks to all of you present with us today to help bring our conference objectives to life, by sharing your valuable insight and perspectives into critical

issues around women, youth, water scarcity, food insecurity, and the ongoing refugee crisis. Together, we can innovate new solutions and importantly, mitigate the impact of these challenges on the region's most vulnerable stakeholders, challenges that threaten future peace and prosperity in the MENA region if we fail to address them now.

## Concluding Remarks

Distinguished Guests,

To conclude,

We welcome you all and trust that today's conference, with your valued participation and contribution, will be a deeply enriching, informative, and truly productive experience where we can all benefit from our shared exchange of ideas, culture, and insight, and make a greater contribution to a better future for our region and beyond.

Thank you for your kind attention.