



AIWF – IBA Joint Conference in Beirut, Lebanon

Women in Commercial Law in Lebanon

IN COLLABORATION WITH

The Beirut Bar Association

3 March 2016

1st Floor, La Maison de l'Avocat
Beirut, Lebanon

Opening Session Welcome Address

Mrs Haifa Al Kaylani
Chairman, Arab International Women's Forum

Opening Remarks & Acknowledgements

Your Excellency Monsieur le Bâtonnier, Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed a great honour and a pleasure for me, both personally and as Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), to welcome you this morning to our conference ***Women in Commercial Law in Lebanon*** jointly hosted by AIWF, the Beirut Bar Association and the International Bar Association, here at the prestigious La Maison de l'Avocat in Beirut.

At the outset I wish to express how truly delighted I am to be in Lebanon for this very special occasion marking the launch of an important and timely partnership between The AIWF ,The BBA and the IBA.

Our joint collaboration is aimed at promoting Lebanese women in the Law and providing Lebanese and Arab women lawyers with a unique platform for collaboration, dialogue and partnership, building on key themes, issues and trends in the legal profession and highlighting the specific challenges and unprecedented opportunities for women in law in Lebanon and the wider MENA region.

This is the second conference in the *Women in Law* series, following on from the very successful launch of the AIWF-IBA initiative in Jordan last September .

AIWF greatly acknowledges our Conference Co-Hosts, the Beirut Bar Association and the International Bar Association and we extend First our deepest thanks and appreciation to HE **Monsieur le Bâtonnier Antonio El Hachem**, for his invaluable partnership and generosity in hosting us at La Maison de l'Avocat. We greatly appreciate the support, sound commitment and full collaboration of the Beirut Bar Association towards the realisation of our conference today.

We are indeed inspired by the Association's commitment to developing world-class training through the Beirut Bar Institute and are pleased to be working with the BBA to bring into focus the role of Lebanese women lawyers in advancing the economic, political, social and legal status of women in Lebanon.

I also wish to take this opportunity to thank our Conference Co-Chair Ms **Ashleigh Buckett** and all of our valued partners at the IBA. AIWF acknowledges the IBA as the global voice of the legal profession, the world's leading organisation of international legal practitioners, bar associations and law societies, and commends all its valuable work in influencing the development of international law reform, shaping the future of the legal profession throughout the world, and enabling an interchange of information as to laws, best practices and professional responsibilities relating to the practice of business law worldwide.

I extend a very special welcome to HE **Judge Mayssam Noueiri**, Director General of the Ministry of Justice, and thank her for her valued participation ; indeed, my appreciation is extended to all our distinguished guest speakers, representing some of the country's and the region's leading corporations and law firms, as well as to all of our distinguished guests and delegates who have taken valuable time from their busy schedules to participate in today's conference.

AIWF is proud to be working with such esteemed partners in the region and we assure the IBA and the BBA of our long-term commitment to making the development of Arab women lawyers a priority.

Women Lawyers in Lebanon and the wider MENA

Distinguished Guests,

Allow me to say a few words about The AIWF on this occasion especially as this year marks the 15th Anniversary of our Forum.

AIWF was founded in London in 2001 as a development organisation with the clear aim of supporting and enhancing the role of women in the social and economic development of the Middle East region.

AIWF has always believed that the empowerment of women and youth lies at the heart of sustainable development. We work across the board with governments, educators, NGOs and the private sector to advance gender equality and we place special emphasis on the role of women as engines of economic growth with our founding motto 'Building Bridges, Building Business' because we believe that women hold the key to economic prosperity and social development in the region and with it crucially its stability.

Our focus has always been on powering progress and change for women, and creating partnerships that will facilitate and promote viable alliances between women leaders in all sectors in the Arab world but always within an international context.

Having campaigned tirelessly from inception to promote enhanced participation for women in both the private and public sectors, and in all professions, AIWF believes that with more women entering into legal careers in the region, the MENA's legal and institutional frameworks will become more robust, progressive and gender neutral.

Our aim is to see more Arab women lawyers, more women in government, more women policy makers, judges and legal academics, because only then will we see gender justice, and a lasting and profound impact on women's legal status.

We are all aware that globally, there is a persistent and universal gender gap in the legal profession, and that gender constraints are by no means unique to the MENA legal community. Throughout the legal world, women are still less likely than men to reach the highest levels of the legal profession and when they do they are still paid less than their male peers because hourly rates are often tied in to the lawyer's status at the firm and not necessarily to the lawyer's skill level.

The status of women in Lebanon and in the law

Distinguished Guests

Coming to the Arab region we are proud to note that a key UNESCO report, *Women, Law and Judicial Decision-Making in the Middle East and North Africa: Toward Gender Justice*, finds that Lebanon is a true success story for women lawyers in the Arab world. The number of female lawyers in Lebanon has increased significantly in the last decade and women now actively represent nearly half of all legal practitioners in the country.

The number of Lebanese women in the judiciary has also increased significantly over the years since the first female judge was appointed in the 1960s. Today, women represent 38% of civil, commercial and criminal court judges, and 28% of judges in the administrative court. However, there is yet to be a female appointee to the Constitutional Council, the Higher Council of the Judiciary or the Justice Council, and women at this time are not permitted to serve as judges in religious courts.

To put this into perspective in regards to other countries in the region, such as Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Morocco, the UAE and others, we find that record high numbers of women are graduating from law schools yet they are not proceeding to enter legal practice after graduation. To give just two examples - according to research published by the University of Jordan, around 60-65% of law students in the Hashemite Kingdom in 2012 were women, but

only around a quarter of practicing lawyers in Jordan are women. And while the number of women lawyers in Qatar is growing, women represent just 14% of lawyers, which is an extremely low representation in view of reports that women have in recent years represented up to 75% of law students enrolled at Qatari universities.

Coming back to Lebanon, and looking at some of the challenges faced by Lebanese women, in comparison with women in other Arab states the Lebanese legal system is progressive with respect to women's rights, but the implementation of laws that assert or protect gender equality has been inconsistent.

Although women enjoy nearly equal civil rights and excellent higher education opportunities, and despite Lebanon's ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1997, nationality, family and divorce laws continue to discriminate against and marginalise women. In November 2013, a Thomson Reuters Foundation study ranked Lebanon 16th out of the 22 Arab States for women's rights.

Lebanese women are currently underrepresented in the workforce, with just 30% of women participating in the economy for lower pay than their male counterparts. This is despite the fact that since 1994, Lebanon's commercial law has empowered married women to engage in commerce without the permission of a husband or male relative, and women in Lebanon enjoy full rights to engage in entrepreneurship and commercial enterprises, with assets held separately by each spouse.

Although professions that have been historically reserved for men are rapidly opening up to Lebanese women now, especially in the STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics sectors (in line with trends we are seeing across the knowledge-driven MENA economy), too many women still experience deep-rooted social and cultural constraints, despite the tremendous efforts and progress that women’s advocates have made to advance their legal status.

Women are also underrepresented in Lebanese politics, despite the fact that Lebanon was the first Arab country to recognise women’s political rights (in 1953).

Significantly, Lebanon has a strong and thriving culture of civil society, with 3000 NGOs operating in the country and 200 of these are devoted to women’s issues, working tirelessly to effect reform and alleviate some discrimination and they have succeeded in repealing many of the discriminatory laws that have historically held Lebanese women back. According to UNESCO, many members of the NGOs impacting the desired change and progress for Lebanese women are actually women lawyers and judges.

Concluding Remarks

Distinguished Guests, To Conclude

Today is an excellent opportunity to work constructively together towards empowering and developing this and the next generation of Arab legal talent, helping Lebanese and Arab women in the law to reach their full potential and strengthen mutual relations, opportunities, skills and knowledge.

We need to give women lawyers every chance of succeeding so we can pave a new and lasting reality for the next generation of Arab women, one based on equality, opportunity and prosperity. What we do with our potential now will have a critical impact on future generations.

Allow me to share here a relevant finding of a major study by Harvard Business School published last year, which backs this up. The study found that the daughters of working mothers enjoy better careers, higher pay and more equal relationships than those raised by stay-at-home mothers.

It also states that “Working both inside and outside the home gives your children a signal that contributions at home and at work are equally valuable, for both men and women.”

And found that female attorneys are more likely to rise through the ranks of a firm (and less likely to leave) when they have female partners as mentors and role models.

Distinguished Guests

The legal sector in the our region is ripe for expansion and the talent and contribution of qualified Arab women lawyers is integral to this growth, supported by more women on the bench and more women legislators present in our Parliaments.

We look forward to working with you all and with our valued partners The Beirut Bar Association and The International Bar Association to press on with our message of equality, inclusion and advancement for women.

I thank you for your kind attention and wish you a productive and stimulating day.