



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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Fellow, Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative 2017
Commissioner, ILO Global Commission on the Future of Work

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 / CMI Joint High-Level Conference on *Women, Water & Youth* conference in Amman, held in partnership with the Center for Mediterranean Integration.

We are really proud and honoured to welcome you all and to share with you today this conference which will be addressing key development challenges as well as opportunities for economic growth and progress benefitting women and young people in the Arab world.

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 from over 30 countries drawn from Jordan, the wider Arab world, the European Union, and the US.

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 for our conference today. Our conference objectives and our rich and timely programme

have been designed in collaboration with world leading specialists at the World Bank and the CMI, who have extensive and unparalleled expertise in the MENA region and beyond, promoting transformative reforms and labour mobility, advancing refugee inclusion, building economic and social cohesion, cross-border trade, investment, and scientific and cultural exchange to enhance Mediterranean integration.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome this morning's Guest of Honour Keynote speakers:

Her Excellency Hala Bseiso Lattouf, Minister of Social Development, Jordan. Your Excellency, we are honoured to have your presence with us today for this important initiative to 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 longstanding dedication to addressing critical challenges in Jordan and the wider Arab region, and as Minister of Social Development, and are very much looking forward to your distinguished keynote address this morning as our Guest of Honour.

We are 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 work across all levels to find innovative solutions to the most critical challenges of our time.

We are also exceptionally proud to welcome as our Guest of Honour Keynote Speaker this morning **HE Nael Al Kabariti**, Chairman of the Union of Arab Chambers, one of our valued Supporting Partners for today's conference. The Union was indeed the first Arab economic institution to work at the non-governmental level in order to promote the idea of economic cooperation and integration among the Arab Countries, and we are honoured to have their valued partnership and endorsement of the *Women, Water & Youth* initiative.

We welcome **Professor Fadia Kiwan**, Director General of the Arab Women's 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 world's leading organisations that supports and enhances the role of women in the Arab world.

I am also honoured 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 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 partnership with the **World Bank Group** in both Washington DC and across the MENA region on high-level international initiatives to support and empower women's leadership and youth outreach.

Our great appreciation and warm welcome is extended to all our 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 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; 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 exceptionally proud to welcome the **Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Bari (CIHEAM)**, **PepsiCo** and **PwC**

Middle East as Conference Supporting Partners for *Women, Water & Youth*.

PepsiCo, as AIWF Benefactor Partner, has long supported and endorsed the AIWF mission and has helped AIWF to activate its agenda for enhanced economic participation and opportunities for women and young people in the MENA region and beyond. AIWF is proud to have the continued confidence of PepsiCo, which leads the way in driving gender diversity and sustainability awareness in the MENA region and around the world.

AIWF is also proud to have the continued confidence and 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 so that they may share in the economic growth and development of the MENA region. I extend our warmest thanks and appreciation to **Michael Orfaly**, Country Senior Partner for PwC in Jordan, and to all PwC colleagues in both Jordan and the UAE.

I also take this important opportunity to 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 for today's important initiative, 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 discussions, allow me first to say a few words about the Arab International Women's Forum.

AIWF was founded in London in 2001 with the clear aim of supporting and enhancing the role of women in the social and economic development of the Middle East region. Seventeen years on, 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 an unrivalled 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 that impact change and foster advanced collaboration between the Arab, British and international business communities. In all AIWF's initiatives and outreach, we are continually building momentum for sustainable empowerment

for women and young people, moving this forward by working closely with multi-stakeholder partners on a broad range of collaborative, impact-driven initiatives.

The themes of this conference are at the heart of what AIWF has been doing at the Arab and international level for over 17 years as a development agency invested in creating a better future for women and youth in the MENA region and internationally through economic development, diversity and inclusion. Since inception AIWF has been at the forefront of action in the region on many other critical development and sustainability challenges, and *Women, Water & Youth* 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) and the ongoing challenge of youth unemployment in the MENA States.

Existing development issues in the Arab world have in recent years been compounded by the urgent and unprecedented refugee crisis resulting from wars and conflicts from the region which have created further strain on land and water resources in many Arab States, as well as on the infrastructure and resources of receiving countries such as Jordan, the second largest refugee-hosting country in the world when compared to the size of its population, according to UNHCR.

Allow me please to elaborate on the challenges of water scarcity and food security; women's economic participation; and the ongoing crisis of youth unemployment before turning to our key objectives today, the opportunities that lie ahead to create a better future for women and young people, and how we can all work together to protect the Arab world's most precious resources – its land, its water and its people.

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). Roughly 70% of the region's economic activities are produced in areas of high or very high water stress, more than three times the global average of 22%.

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. These recent developments compound the impact of decades of rapid population growth, urbanization and agricultural intensification.

In many other MENA countries and economies, access to water is critically low. The World Bank finds in its *Water Scarcity* report that: "In Yemen, Libya, and the West Bank and Gaza, less than 80% of the population has access to safe drinking water. In Djibouti, Yemen, Morocco, Libya, and Iraq, up to 50% of the population still lacks access to adequate sanitation. While some countries such as Morocco have made some progress, they remain several steps away from achieving universal access. Algeria is the only country in the Middle East and North Africa that has made no progress toward universal access."

Water security matters because scarcity threatens global prosperity and frustrates growth that could cost the global economy \$500 billion per year. This strain is most keenly felt in

countries already experiencing high levels of water insecurity and those with high dependence on agriculture, and has the potential to impair economic activities in the region, causing reductions in GDP of between 6 percent and 14 percent of GDP by 2050.

Water scarcity greatly impacts food production, agriculture being the largest consumer of freshwater resources in the MENA and a “vital and volatile” economic sector which generates 15% of Morocco’s GDP, to give just one example – representing nearly a quarter of the country’s exports and creating jobs for nearly half its labour force. Arab countries are the “largest net importers of cereal in the world and therefore highly vulnerable to variability and shocks in global commodity prices” and as such, highly vulnerable to food insecurity – yet another critical challenge in the MENA region that disproportionately impacts women and youth.

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. Women, far from being ornamentally included in water management committees and initiatives, must be involved from the outset in creating and managing programmes to address risks related to water access.

If women are fully empowered to lead in the water and agricultural sectors, they can play a significant role in mitigating the effects of water scarcity and food insecurity on their households and their wider communities, but also take a greater role in the rural

economy through entrepreneurship, social enterprise and women-led job creation.

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

Water scarcity in the Arab world, especially in the region's rural economies, can be directly linked with the low economic participation of women where women bear most of the burden of unpaid household and care work and are more inclined towards the informal economy than formal employment or entrepreneurship.

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%. The male participation rate, however, was slightly above the world average (76.5% in 2016, against a global rate of 76.1%).

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, especially in those parts of the world where restrictive legislation and practices still prevent women from reaching their potential.

About 16% of women in Arab states are unemployed, compared to a global average of 6%, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has found. The World Bank estimates that legal and business barriers are still preventing women from joining the labour force across the MENA, causing a loss of 27% in income for the region overall.

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 said 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. Across the board,

MENA countries are among the worst in the world for unequal pay between men and women, according to the World Economic Forum.

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. Women and rural populations face many similar challenges including decent work deficits, low labour force participation and a difficult transition from school to work." Labour force participation rates among women in the region are especially low; only 15% among young women, as compared to 37% worldwide.

The Middle East and North Africa's gender gap is triple the size of other developing economies in the world; women are three times less likely to be working than men. The preference for public sector

jobs is also still prevalent; 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 young Arabs. At the same time, empowering women and young people in entrepreneurship and social enterprise can create the necessary environment to identify water scarcity solutions and innovative approaches to addressing these and other developmental challenges, through entrepreneurship, social enterprise and advocacy

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

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 world class 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.

We look forward to connecting established global leaders in water and the international development sectors with the rising stars who are breaking new ground to address the challenges of food, water and energy in the MENA region head on through the use of transformative technology and innovative, out-of-the-box projects and initiatives.

We are all committed to giving women leaders, entrepreneurs, executives and educators a powerful platform to voice and examine critical issues of global and regional concern that deeply impact women's lives, their livelihoods and their security and prosperity.

Over the course of today and tomorrow, we aim to arrive at actionable insights and results-oriented recommendations, hearing from thought leaders, change agents and key actors whose expertise spans the most critical issues facing the MENA region.

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 for the food and water crises in the MENA region and better understand how these challenges impact the lives of women and young people – and importantly, what we can do to 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 contributions, will be a deeply enriching, informative, and truly productive experience for you, where we can all benefit from our shared exchange of ideas, culture, and insight.

Thank you for your kind attention.