

*Viewpoints*  
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*Fostering the Next Generation:  
Evolving Models of Women's  
Leadership in the Middle East*

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I feel very proud to be in the company of such a distinguished group of empowered Arab women. Every one of you carries a success story with her. It gives me great pleasure to join you on this panel at this particular time and on this particular topic. The timing is interesting as it is a time when our region is at a historic crossroads, one that could either catapult or set back women's rights hundreds of years. The objective of your presence here is to leverage your wisdom and experience by mentoring the young generation into becoming leaders.

The topic of "Fostering the Next Generation" is particularly dear to my heart as I've spent the past decade or so working with the youth to make sure that their voices are heard. Our main goal has been to improve the quality of life for future generations.

Every society needs the full participation of each and every citizen, men and women equally. No society, without exception, has advanced while its women are abused or marginalized. The status of women has become the indicator of the level of development and welfare of any society. Therefore, women's empowerment has become a necessity and not a luxury.

Let's look at the problem in the Arab world. If all Arab women were as accomplished as you are, we would not need to be here. Unfortunately, it is not the case. Our region is full of contradictions and disparities.

It is a region in which women have made advances in certain realms, placing them on par with the developing world. Yet, we lag behind in some of the most basic social rights. In Egypt, women make up more than half of university students, while in the UAE, the proportion of women in the public sector increased from just 12 percent in 1995 to 66 percent in 2007. In many Arab countries, women have become ministers, ambassadors, and judges. That is why it is flabbergasting to see that women stand on unequal footing in terms of something like divorce in the Arab world. Similarly, a country like Saudi Arabia, which has produced world class businesswomen such as Lubna Al-Olayan, still does not allow women to drive.

Women need to be treated as human beings entitled to equal rights, to quality education, good health services, and protection from any form of discrimination and violence. Women must participate in making decisions that affect their lives. The lawyers among you will appreciate that. Our countries are parties to UN human rights agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, known as CEDAW, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They are under legal obligation to honor their commitments under such treaties. Our countries have accepted that and present regular reports on the implementation of such conventions. This commitment includes harmonizing legislation to remove any form of discrimination against any citizen, be it on the basis of sex, religion, age, or any other factor. They must put action plans in place to ensure that no discrimination occurs. They must raise awareness of the rights of each and every citizen, including women. Our countries must allocate adequate resources to insure the implementation of such policies. They must have in place a complaint mechanism for victims of discrimination and violence. They must establish disaggregated data to guide the formulation of policies. These are our countries' obligations, and they must be honored. We must be weary of attacks on human rights documents as they are our safeguards as women and as potential victims of discrimination. These conventions are not against our religion. They do not violate any religious laws. Instead, these conventions respect religion and do not interfere with it. Remember, it is not religion; it is those who interpret religion who create obstacles.

The Arab uprising has left many countries at a crossroads, one that will set the path for these countries' development over the next few decades. If I may use Egypt as an example, 2011 was the year in which Egyptian men and women learned that their voices can move mountains. I must stress that women played a crucial role in the events. Whereas Egyptians learned that they have rights – and that where there is a will there is a way – there exists a looming threat to take away many of the gains that women have made over the past few decades. In fact, the only march that was thrown out of Tahrir Square was that of women celebrating the 2011 International Women's Day. One year after the revolution, Egyptians are realizing that the success of the religiously conservative groups has come with motions to reverse women's rights such as that to unilateral divorce and child custody. Child marriage was prohibited by Egyptian law 126/2008. Sadly, the Egyptian parliament is currently busy discussing lowering the age of marriage once again. The prohibition of the brutal practice of female genital mutilation might be removed yet again. I am confident that voices of wisdom will prevail and Egyptian women will preserve their gains and build upon them. I am

very optimistic at the recent events in Egypt, which reveal that a true democracy is in action.

Having been critical in achieving political change in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen, women's rights activists should seize this moment to demand broader political, economic, and social rights. Women in these countries are up against conservative forces, which have surfaced and are driving the push-back against the promotion of women's participation. If women's rights regress in Egypt or Tunisia, it will have a detrimental impact on the rest of the Arab world.

I am sure most of you will agree that no one can fight for women's rights better than women. So, what are the magical ingredients we need to foster this kind of woman warrior? There are no leaders better than you. You are the example for many women and young girls in our part of the world and beyond. The minimum women ask for is equal opportunity. Neither religion nor culture denies women such rights.

We are all witnessing the growing use of social media by Arab men and women. Social media can contribute greatly to furthering women's rights and changing the face of education (which is a major source of discrimination) in our region. According to the Arab Social Media Report, the number of Facebook users in the Arab World as of April 2011 was 27 million (70 percent of which are youth aged 15 to 29 years). With such an audience, it only makes sense that social media be viewed as one of the most important educational resources of our time. Some argue that social media are already sponsoring an educational revolution by ensuring a quick transfer of ideas that are not necessarily in curricula and by facilitating teach meets, which allow teachers from different countries and disciplines to exchange ideas online and bring together teachers who share a common passion to see students fully engaged in their learning, among other things. Going forward, women activists should capitalize on this revolution within education to help correct or remove biases in the curriculum and in the education systems that target females. Activists and educators like you should use social media, which has skyrocketed in popularity to allow women equal access to information and, by extension, education, and demonstrate to women that anything short of that is discrimination and may curtail their opportunities or put them at a disadvantage with males, making them less competitive. Using social media to undo cultural biases embedded in education might have seemed like an arduous task in the 1980s and 1990s, but I firmly believe that today's youth are faster learners, their perceptions are different, and the way they learn is different. In short, it is a totally different, and faster, ball game.

Finally, and on a related note, I want to talk about mentoring as a means towards emancipation. Mentoring connects emerging women leaders with female role models in a given field and helps women develop their leadership potential and build specific skill sets necessary to thrive as leaders within that field and within their communities in general. I call upon women leaders such as yourselves to sign up to start a mentoring program in your respective communities. Mentoring is based on the premise that leadership is a process that requires learning and establishment of a specific set of skills. Sponsoring an emerging woman leader will allow her to watch and learn from you as a means towards establishing her own leadership abilities. In Egypt, we worked with a group of emerging women leaders who wanted to replicate a vital voices mentoring program in which they had participated in the United States in order to sponsor Egypt's first mentoring walk. Sponsored by the Ministry of Family and Population and ExxonMobil in 2010, the walk paired emerging women professionals with established women leaders to discuss career challenges and opportunities. The walk was attended by 120 mentors and mentees and was a huge success. Many of the mentor-mentee pairs have stayed in touch and developed mentoring relationships.

In closing, I want to thank you, the emancipated women of our region, for your presence and to encourage each of you to work on furthering women's rights from within your respective fields. I want to particularly encourage those of you who work in media to break the boundaries that curtail women's potential, to make media supportive of women's rights, and to fight against stigmatization and stereotyping. In so doing you have to start with education. If you succeed in that, you guarantee a quantum leap in education of women and advancement of their rights. The events of the past 16 months have demonstrated that the media is a force to be reckoned with and is a powerful educational resource.

Finally, the information and communications technology revolution has resulted in a new breed of information hungry youth. I encourage all of you to work with this breed of youth, a breed which would be more than happy to—actually one that would demand—to be involved in the structuring of educational and mentoring programs designed to further their leadership skills. I suggest you use them and pick their brains on what best suits them.



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