



ARAB INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S FORUM  
المنتدى العربي الدولي للمرأة

**Prosperity through Partnership:**

**Women Leaders in Modern Syria, the Arab World  
and the International Community**

**شراكة في النجاح**

**قيادات نسائية في سوريا الحديثة والعالم العربي  
والمجتمع الدولي**

Damascus, Syria

14 - 17 May 2010

The Arab International Women's Forum is proud and honoured to hold  
its first Conference in Damascus, Syria

**Under The Patronage of HE Dr Diala Al Hajj Aref  
Minister of Social Affairs and Labour  
The Syrian Arab Republic**



وزارة الشؤون الاجتماعية والعمل

*The Ministry of Social Affairs & Labour*

*With the valued support of  
Business Women Committee at Damascus  
Chamber of Commerce, Syria*



## Overview

The Arab International Women's Forum is proud and delighted to be hosting its first conference in Syria in May 2010.

In November 2009, *Newsweek* heralded Syria as the next economic miracle, citing 'oil; a young, rapidly growing population of 24 million people; an expanding, entrepreneurial economy; minuscule external debt; a stable currency; and only a small budget deficit' as the most serious indicators of Syria's imminent growth.

Real, non-oil GDP has been growing 6-7% a year, and the conditions for socio-economic growth and discovery are already in place - foreign direct investment, infrastructure development and a functioning stock -market.

Syria's most impressive recent development is, undoubtedly, in the economic sector. The government has drawn an extensive plan to turn Syria's once centrally-planned economy into one based on open market principles, and has already taken major steps to address economic reform by privatizing the financial sector. In March of 2009, trading on Syria's stock exchange officially began, marking a crucial step towards liberalizing the country's growing economy and attracting foreign investment.

Syria's largely untapped human and economic potential is fast attracting investors into the finance sector and has resulted in the opening of several private banks, insurance companies and other financial institutions. Foreign direct investment in Syria totaled \$885 million in 2007, almost twice that of 2006, according to a World Bank report issued in 2008.

The government has also redirected its economic development priorities from industrial expansion to the agricultural sectors in order to achieve food self-sufficiency, enhance export earnings and stem rural migration. This is particularly significant because over 40% of Syrian women own or generate revenue from land and agriculture, and 84% of women have some involvement on a day to day basis in farming and irrigation.

Thanks to sustained capital investment, infrastructural development, subsidies of inputs and price supports, Syria has become a viable exporter of cotton, fruits and vegetables and other foodstuffs - a direct result of the government's investment in huge irrigation systems in northern and north-eastern Syria, part of a plan to increase irrigated farmland by 38% over this decade. Currently, the agriculture sector generates nearly 30% of the national income and employs about 30% of the labour force.

Commerce has always been important to the Syrian economy, which benefits from the country's strategic location along major East-West trade routes. Syrian cities boast traditional industries such as weaving, dried fruit packing and modern heavy industry. The industrial sector, which includes mining, manufacturing, construction, and petroleum, accounts for over 30% of GDP and employs about 30% of the labour force.

Although Syria is not a major oil exporter by Middle Eastern standards, oil is a major pillar of the economy. The service sector accounts for nearly 45% of GDP and employs over 40% of the labour force (including government). The past few years have seen a significant increase in investments by companies from the Gulf States operating in the

Syrian real estate market. The demand for real estate has skyrocketed, and has begun to trickle from Damascus to other Syrian districts. Because of the fact that most real estate is privately owned, property values and prices have not deteriorated in line with other cities as a result of the global crisis, and most sectors of the Syrian economy remain largely untouched.

Some of the major sectors enjoying success are the education, tourism, and financial sectors. Private schools and universities, such as the Syrian-German University, University of Kalamoon, Choueifat School, and Montessori School, are opening up in abundance across Syria, presenting the Syrian public – women and girls especially – with a diverse choice of internationally-acclaimed academic institutions.

Syria's diverse topography, Mediterranean beaches, and plethora of archaeological and historical sites (such as castles from the crusaders and relics from the ancient Mesopotamian civilization) have also attracted an influx of foreign investment into the tourism sector. The country's rich history is a major driver for Syrian tourism; Aleppo and Damascus have been declared World Heritage Sites by the UNESCO.

The value of the Syrian tourism industry was expected to double in 2009, creating huge employment opportunities and adding about 17%, or US\$ 9.6 billion, to its GDP in that year. Furthermore, the British newspaper, *The Sunday Mail*, recently selected Syria as one of the top ten tourist destinations in the world, while the *Daily Telegraph* chose Damascus as the best tourist destination for 2009.

The government's administrative rules, national law, and the education system have long been gender neutral. In 2003, Syria accepted the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted by the UN as a "bill of rights" for women. In doing so, Syria agreed to "incorporate the principle of equality of men and women in their legal system, abolish all discriminatory laws and adopt appropriate ones prohibiting discrimination against women." Following the adoption of CEDAW, Syrian women's non-governmental organizations identified discriminatory laws that have since been successfully amended.

Syria's First Lady, Her Excellency, Asma Al Assad, has become a strong role model for women, not just in Syria but across the Arab world. She has been internationally commended for working alongside the President to promote an agenda of reform and social development. Mrs Assad trained in Computer Science at Kings College in London, going on to work on Wall Street in New York and as a banker with J.P. Morgan in London and Paris.

Syrian women currently occupy 12% of the total seats in parliament, and in 2006, Her Excellency Najah Al Attar (former Minister of Culture) was named Syria's Vice President, the first woman in the Arab world to rise to this position. Syrian women have had the right to vote since 1949. In the parliamentary elections in April 2007, 158 women ran for office and won 30 seats. Over 400 women serve in the Syrian security and police apparatus.

The conditions for economic growth are already being set in place. A distinct advantage for Syria is its population of well-educated, bi- and often tri-lingual women. Syrian women's literacy rate is well over 60% (having doubled from 1980 to 2000). In Syria's national universities, women comprise 40% of the teachers and students. They

represent a third of the national workforce, and although the official statistic for women-owned business is just 4%, this is a vastly inaccurate representation given that many family businesses are run by women yet are not registered as 'women-owned'.

Overall, as private investment and a changing market economy emerge in Syria, opportunities for women-owned businesses are increasing. These opportunities can be largely credited to the commendable efforts of the First Lady and the women ministers who serve in the Syrian government, as well as to the Business Women's Committee at the Damascus Chamber of Commerce and the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs.

In this light, and building upon the spirit of AIWF's recent groundbreaking conferences in Paris, Washington DC, London and Dubai, the Arab International Women's Forum is proud and delighted to bring delegations of Arab, European and International business leaders together to meet with their counterparts in Syria for this unique and important event.

The Patron and Guest of Honour, HE Dr Diala Al Hajj Aref, Minister of Social Affairs and Labour, The Syrian Arab Republic, will deliver the Opening Address. Eminent speakers – ministers, officials and leading women in business from Syria and across the Arab world, Europe and the international community – will share their experiences and best practices with high-level delegates; attend business to business networking receptions to explore alliance opportunities; and enjoy a series of conference sessions that will deliver cutting-edge business intelligence.

Through this important event, AIWF hopes to strengthen existing channels of partnership between women in Syria, the Arab world and the International Community; to create new avenues for investment and create viable business opportunities; to provide windows of insight into the motivations and challenges of women business leaders from across the globe; and to promote intercultural collaboration between prolific and accomplished women representing the world's most dynamic economies in the Arab region and internationally.

## Conference Objectives

- To identify opportunities for business partnership and innovative collaboration between women in Syria, the Arab world, Europe and the International Community
- To explore opportunities for entrepreneurial, academic and economic collaboration among women in Syria, the Arab region, the European Union and the International Community
- To provide a window of insight into the motivations, successes and challenges of the women who are driving business growth and who are occupying the top positions in public life in Syria, the Arab world and the International Community

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1430 –1615

## Plenary Session II

### ***Empowerment through Education: Realising The Potential of Arab Women in the Private and Public Sectors***

Syria's population is among the fastest growing in the world, and the need for a more comprehensive education system has never been more pertinent. However, there are shortfalls between the number of women educated and those obtaining work or starting their own businesses, specifically in the services, tourism, technology and agricultural sectors.

How can the education system assist in strengthening women's opportunities in employment and self-employment and in accessing public life?

1615 – 1800

## Plenary Session III

### ***Supporting the Role of Women in Business & Women as Investors***

The number of women in the Arab world who are currently being highly educated is not reflected in the statistics relating to business-ownership and private sector employment of women. Yet it is proved throughout the Arab world that women-owned businesses employ more women.

What are the factors contributing to these shortfalls and how can the private sector help to achieve a much-needed critical mass of women entering the fields of self-employment, entrepreneurship and investment?

2000

### ***Reception and Gala Dinner***

The Levant Ballroom, Four Seasons Hotel, Damascus

**16 May 2010**  
**CONFERENCE DAY TWO**

**0900 – 1045                      Business to Business Information Exchange - Session I**

***The Role of Women in Rural Economies***

Syrian women in rural economies play a significant role in one of Syria's most prominent industries – agriculture. In a recent report, the IFAD found that rural women do the majority of farm work yet have the most difficulty in accessing productive resources, training, capital and credit.

In this session, we explore the socio-cultural and gender barriers that are restricting women in rural economies from growing their businesses, and explore how these challenges can be overcome through partnership and best practice exchange with other Arab nations and the International Community as a whole.

**1045 – 1115                      Refreshments and Networking**

**1115 – 1300                      Business to Business Information Exchange - Session II**

***Promoting Partnership & Experience Exchange***

In today's global economy, there is international recognition of the importance of partnership, innovation and creativity in fostering international trade, economic growth and the cross-cultural dialogue that is so vital to the construction of peaceful, prosperous societies.

How can we best identify opportunities for partnership, for collaboration and cooperation and for exchange of best practices in order to achieve private sector growth and women's leadership in all spheres, for women in Syria, across the Arab region and in the International Community?

**1315 – 1800                      *Networking Luncheon followed by Business to Business Visits***

**Evening                              *Traditional Syrian Cultural Evening and Dinner Time and Venue to be confirmed. End of Conference***

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**17 May 2010                      *Optional Visit to Palmyra - magnificently-preserved site of ancient metropolis and oasis dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century BC in the heart of the Syrian desert***

## Keynote Guest Speakers Invited

**Dr Bouthaina Shaaban**, Advisor at Syrian Presidency for Media & Political Affairs, Syria

**HE Ms Emma Bonino**, Vice President, The Senate, Italy

**HE Dora Bakoyannis**, Former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Greece and Chairperson-in-Office of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

**Ms Melanne Vermeer**, Ambassador-at-Large for International Women's Issues, USA

**Ms Indra Nooyi**, Chairman & Chief Executive Officer, PepsiCo

**Baroness Catherine Ashton**, High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President, The European Commission

**HE Nora bint Abdullah Al Fayed**, Deputy Minister of Education, Saudi Arabia

**HE Dr Maitha Al Shamsi**, Minister of State, United Arab Emirates

**Ms Sonia Khandji Cachecho**, Board Member of Damascus Chamber of Commerce; President of the DCC Businesswomen Committee; President of Syrian Group Francophone

**HE Nouria Al Sbieh**, Minister of Education Kuwait

**HE Lubna Al Qasimi**, Minister for Foreign Trade, United Arab Emirates

**Ms Buthaina Al-Ansari**, Chairman and Founder of Qatariyat Co

**HE Sheikha Ahmed El Mahmoud**, Minister for Education, Qatar

**HE Rawiya Al Busaidi**, Minister for Higher Education, Oman

**HE Hala Bseiso Lattouf**, Minister for Social Development, Jordan

**HE Amina Benkhadra**, Minister of Energy, Mines, Water and Environment, Morocco

**HE Mrs Christine Marek**, State Secretary, Federal Ministry Economy, Family and Youth, Austria

**Dr Suleiman Al Jassim**, Vice President, Zayed University

**Mr Ahmed Luqman**, Head of the Arab Labour Organisation

**Dr Afnan Al Shuaiby**, CEO Arab-British Chamber of Commerce

**Ms Hind Bahwan**, Chairperson and Founder, Bahwan Cybertek

**Mrs Nadereh Chamlou**, Senior Adviser, Office of the Chief Economist MENA, The World Bank

## ***Arab International Women's Forum Board of Trustees***

(in alphabetical order)

**Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani** - *Founder and Chairman of the Arab International Women's Forum, London, UK.*

**Saida Agrebi** - *Member of the Tunisian Parliament, Chairman of the Tunisian Mother's Association, Tunisia.*

**Assilah Zaher Al Harthy** - *Founder-President & Managing Director of the InterLynx L.L.C., Oman and Head of Corporate Affairs at The Oman Oil Company, Oman.*

**HH Sheikha Hind Salman Al-Khalifa** – *President of the Children and Mothers Welfare Society, Kingdom of Bahrain*

**HH Shaikha Lubna Al Qasimi** - *Minister for Foreign Trade, Government, United Arab Emirates.*

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**Peta Payne** - *Managing Director, International Women of Excellence (IWE) London, UK.*

**Sylvia G. Perry** - *Finance Director, AIWF, Past President and Trustee, BPW International, UK.*

**Inge Relph** - *Managing Director, Buy To Benefit, UK*

**Dr Deisi Noeli Weber Kusztra** - *President of the World Family Organisation, Brazil*

## ***ARAB INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM***

The subjects of economic competitiveness, sustainable human development and the empowerment of women through partnership, increased connectivity, innovation and collaboration, lie at the very heart of the mission and vision of the Arab International Women's Forum.

The Arab International Women's Forum was founded in 2001, as an independent non – profit organisation, to serve as a voice for Arab women; showcasing their development promoting cross cultural diversity and creating greater public awareness of women's success and prospects in the Arab world.

AIWF has members and contacts in more than 45 countries and links Arab business and professional women with each other and their counterparts in the international community to exchange knowledge, experience and develop their business potential. It is through 'Building Bridges, Building Business' that AIWF contributes to peace, progress and prosperity in the communities of its members.

Through its work and global initiatives, AIWF has explored timely themes to promote the role of women in the economy and in public life providing a focus on capacity-building, training and information exchange, stressing the need for synergies between governments, corporations and civil society as the only way to achieve educational, economic and political empowerment for women in the Arab world.

As a powerful advocate for the political and economic inclusion of women in the Arab world, AIWF mobilises action at the highest level and on the ground to promote and advance legislative rights for and the political participation of Arab women. Its growing role has been distinguished by many collaborations with, among others, the League of Arab States, the European Commission and European Parliament, United Nations organisations and agencies, the World Bank, the OECD, women's business councils in the Arab States and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office – to which AIWF presented two landmark Reports and Recommendations in 2005 and 2007, on *Women as Engines of Economic Growth in the Arab World*.

AIWF places great strategic importance on the development of its global networks and the establishment of key alliances with multinational corporations across all sectors.

AIWF Global Partners are deeply engaged in the Arab region and uphold strong diversity policies that enhance the recruitment, training and development of women as key contributors to the Arab human capital pool, in raising awareness and strengthening its connections with global media AIWF is proud to have a special partnership with the Financial Times (FT) cooperating from June 2007 through to 2010) on the FT special reports, which recognise the Arab world's emerging women business leaders. AIWF has supported the publication of Domains of Influence:

Arab Women Business Leaders in a New Economy, the first book of its kind and a unique testament to the impact of Arab women in today's global environment of entrepreneurship and economic empowerment.

The Board of Trustees of the Arab International Women's Forum consists of women successful in all fields of public life, business, and civil society giving their support and advice voluntarily to AIWF.

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