

## A Conversation With Haifa Al Kaylani

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Having been internationally-recognized for her work in NGOs, charities, and cultural institutions, as well as outstanding leadership of the non-profit organization, Arab International Women's Forum, in addition to being named one of the 20-leading Muslim women in the UK, Haifa Al Kaylani is one of the most prominent Arab women of our generation. As such, *Living Well* snatched up the rare opportunity to sit down with her.

### **What inspired you to establish the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF)?**

While living in London, I found that there was a lot of stereotyping of Arab women. And, so, after becoming the president of the Federation of International Women's Associations in London, I began inviting Arab women leaders to speak. Eventually, I fully realized the richness of the women that we have in the Arab region and how more of them needed to appear on an international scale. So, with a few of the Arab women that came to London and with some others whom I was currently working with, we decided to start a non-profit, non-governmental, non-political organization based in London that links Arab women both with each other and with the international community. We believed in two things when we established the forum: One, there is no economic and social development without women playing a role. Two, we are living in a world without borders, and the Arab world is a part of that global community.

### **What are the most common challenges that current-day Arab women face? How can these obstacles be eliminated?**

There are a number of challenges, but thanks to the great investment in education by our governments, we see women in every sector in the Arab region. But, we need to see more women in parliament. I am a believer in the quota system; if your society is not ready to elect you, there should be no hesitation in supporting women to enter the parliament. We also need more political education and funding, as campaigns cost money.

Many women in the Arab region are setting up their own business; we have many female entrepreneurs that are very successful and are employing women. Women-owned businesses account for 50 percent of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the region. Unfortunately, only 30 percent of the workforce in the Arab world is made up of women, which is greatly below the world average. Rural women are amazing; they are the ones that are working the hardest, they are the ones providing food security for the region, but often their hard work is not acknowledged. We need to support and help them, as well as open markets for them. Sometimes people forget that business is not only in business. Actually, most of the Arab region depends on agriculture, and we should not forget the outstanding role of rural women in this sector.

**How do traditional, religious, and cultural customs and perceptions – specific to the Arab World – contribute to the disempowerment of Arab women?**

We often say that, in our region, in spite of the education, the knowledge, the know-how, and the openness of the region, there are cultural, religious, and social constraints that push women back, even the educated women. However, we need to keep working through education, which is what the region needs more of and the most of. At the end of the day, it is a step-by-step approach. Women's issues are a sensitive matter everywhere in the world, and we don't want to rush forward and lose track. It is important to ensure a strong position and solidify support from the immediate community. Furthermore, women and their male counterparts need to be partners in building a better Arab future.

**In your opinion, has the Arab Spring so far played a positive or negative role in Arab women's lives?**

The Arab spring has brought many, many challenges to the whole region, economically and other wise. It has also brought many, many opportunities and has created a space for young women and men to share a voice as stakeholders in the building of their nation. It is a period of change, you can't expect it to settle over night, but I am optimistic. I believe that the new leaders and governments in the region realize the enormous responsibility that they have in order to create a better future and avoid further unrest. We need to recreate the middle class in the Arab region, as we have lost it in most of the Arab countries – AIWF believes that this will come through supporting entrepreneurship and SMEs. Furthermore, we want to see young women empowered and for women, in general, to set up small and medium-sized businesses, which were engines of growth in the U.S. and other European countries. In addition to working together, we need to work with international partners.

**How have the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as well as the conflict induced by the Israeli occupation of Palestine affected the local women in those countries? What steps can be taken to re-empower these women once the dust of war settles?**

In all areas of conflict all over the world – and we have sadly seen many in our region – women suffer the most in their own livelihood, with the loss of a spouse and children, as well as with re-locating. Even so, they still try from scratch to pull their family together and create a home. You capture the minds and hearts of the people through economic opportunities and empowerment through supporting SMEs, funding, micro-credit, etc. At the end of the day, when you are empowered financially, you will be able to do the minimum that can be done in recovering from a war situation. We have many funds in the Arab region – huge government and sovereign funds that have been supporting development in the region and other parts of the world – these can perhaps target the women who are coming from war-zone areas.

Also, we need to learn from others what has been done to help women in such situations in Africa and other countries. Why should we re-invent the wheel when there is no time to waste? In our conferences, throughout AWIF's history, we invite and fund women from Palestine and Iraq to attend; we have tried to do our bit and give them a forum to speak.

### **What is the situation for women here in Jordan?**

Jordan is a country that has invested a lot in education from the time of his late majesty King Hussein, and of course King Abdullah II and Queen Rania are also great believers in education. They are both young themselves and have focused on creating opportunities for Jordanians in every way possible – by bringing the World Economic Forum for meetings, trying to activate the economy, bringing in IT companies – so there has been a lot done to invest in Jordan's women, men, and youth. Of course more needs to be done. Jordan doesn't have the oil, but it does have the human resources, and the people are a really great asset for the country. I would like to see a smaller, leaner government and a more vibrant private sector; not only in Jordan, but all over the Arab region. The private sector is what will create the middle class and ensure stability in the region.

### **What country in the Middle East is the most progressive in terms of women's rights? Which one is the least progressive for women?**

The one that has been the most progressive for women, historically, – in terms of rights enshrined in the constitution – has been Tunisia. After their independence from France, President Bourguiba put women's rights in the constitution because he realized that it's a poor country that doesn't have oil like its neighbors; so he empowered the country's human resource. As the regime changed in Tunisia, women never lost sight of their rights. Now, of course, there is concern – so we hear from our members there. But, so far, they have maintained their rights; they are in the parliament and the government, and they were activists in the street during the recent revolution. You find women in Tunisia working in every sector, even women in the villages work.

UAE is another progressive country for women; when I go there, the women say they are empowered – with education and opportunities. The women there work in all sectors and they talk with confidence.

The country with the least rights for women is, perhaps, Yemen, because it is a very traditional society. However, the Yemeni women were amazing on the streets in Sana'a and other areas during the revolution. But, my goodness, they have many challenges.

### **Can you please shed some light on the Young Arab Women Leaders conference that AIWF – in collaboration with Pricewaterhouse Coopers – recently held in Jordan?**

AIWF is proud to have launched an important initiative this year focusing on young Arab women leaders. We wanted to take this initiative to the Arab region, starting with Jordan, where we brought together young women leaders between 25 to 35 years old – mainly from Jordan, but also from Palestine, Iraq, Oman, UAE, and the U.S. The conference highlighted the importance of young women and men in pushing forth the Arab agenda in order to play a clear role in the future of the region. The event also shared success stories from Jordanian and Palestinian women, as well as noted the importance of capacity building. The role of social media – specifically in terms of the youth's role in it, especially during the Arab Spring, as

well as how it can be used to contribute to business, society, and the community at large – was also a main topic at the conference. The need for women-specific networking was also highlighted.

Right now, there are many changes taking place in the region and many new political parties coming into play. We want to make sure that the rights and role of women remains respected and acknowledged, being treated as essential for the future development of the region. It is time for the region to optimize its most important resource – the human capital – with a strong focus on women and youth.

**What are some of AIWF's future plans?**

We will have two more conferences: one in Lebanon, at the Lebanese American University (LAU), on September 20, and one in Dubai in December. We then plan on taking this initiative to other Arab capitals.