

QATAR LAW FORUM
A dialogue between global leaders in law
31 May 2009
Law and Women

A session held in honour of the Arab Women's Legal Network (AWLN)

A session moderated by Professor Roberta Cooper Ramo (President, The American Law Institute, USA) and chaired by Dr Hassan Abdulrahim Al-Sayed (Dean, Faculty of Law, Qatar University) with contributions from Dr Lulwa Al-Misned (Acting Secretary-General, Gulf Organisation for Industrial Consulting, Qatar), Justice Ihssan Barakat (Chief of the Court of First Instance; Vice President, AWLN, Jordan), Claire Hepburn (Justice, Supreme Court, The Bahamas) and Justice Barbara Dohmann QC, Justice, QFC Civil and Commercial Court, England), with the participation of other global leaders in law.

Session overview and conclusions

The focus of the session was on the challenges women face in accessing the legal profession be that as practitioners, academics, judges or activists.

The importance of female participation in the legal world cannot be overstated and AWLN was established in 2001 to empower Arab women in the field. AWLN is working on two main initiatives, the first is increasing access to justice for women and the second is enhancing the capacity of the legislative process to be gender sensitive.

Over the last few decades, the world over, the profession has witnessed a noticeable increase in female participation. *Dr Lulwa Al-Misned* suggested that the challenges that lay ahead in addressing the gender gap needed to be approached in a broader sociological context. *Justice Barbara Dohmann QC* and *Justice Claire Hepburn* stressed the importance of family support for women wishing to pursue a legal career and flexible working patterns were advocated in order to encourage women with young families to continue into practice after law school.

Justice Ihssan Barakat stressed that Shariah law was not the obstacle in advancing female participation in the legal system but rather it advocated these rights and that both men and women should fully realise this. *Dr Hassan Abdulrahim* pointed out that often women in the Arab world do not apply for legal positions even though there is no religious imperative preventing them from doing so.

When asked whether women as judges make a difference to the system, the contributors took the view that female judges were unlikely to differ from their male colleagues in giving sound judgment but had the benefit of insight into certain sensitivities that men cannot appreciate, especially when dealing with women and children matters. The value added by women to the system cannot be disputed because any society aiming to achieve its full potential must have equal participation from both women and men in all spheres.

The contributors did not promote preferential treatment for women over men and were unanimous in their view that selection should always be based on merit alone. However, as one male commentator felt necessary to point out after the session, surely being a woman is merit in itself.

The most valuable outcome of the session is a virtual legal community of male and female lawyers that will be set up to support women accessing the law and achieving the profession's full potential.

Rapporteur: Khadija Ali (*England*)