

NAMA leads conversation on shaping gender-responsive business practices in the Gulf at Expo 2020 Dubai



Discussion titled, Promoting Business Sustainability Through Women in Leadership, outlines actionable strategies to enhance gender equality in the workplace

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By: Huda Al-Lawati, Founder and CEO of Aliph Capital

Sharjah - NAMA Women Advancement Establishment (NAMA) has reinforced its call for collective and tangible actions to further support gender-responsive businesses to make significant steps on women's economic participation.

The exclusive panel discussion in partnership with the Pearl Initiative, entitled 'Promoting Business Sustainability Through Women in Leadership' hosted recently at the Women's Pavilion in Expo 2020 Dubai, was attended by over 30 leading CEOs and business leaders in the Gulf who emphasized the need for developing competencies, allocating resources, strengthening accountability, and setting gender equality objectives. Members on the panel included Patrick Chalhoub, Group President, Chalhoub Group; Muna Al Gurg, Director of Retail, Al Gurg Group; Dr. Patrick Allman-Ward, CEO of Dana Gas; and Huda Al Lawati, Founder and CEO, Aliph Capital.

Panel members outlined strategic business opportunities and meaningful and sustainable change that could be unlocked by enhancing gender equality in the workplace. The panel also stressed the importance of monitoring and assessing progress to ensure the sustainable implementation and enforcement of gender mainstreaming strategies.

During the 90-minute discussion, moderated by Ranya Saadawi, Executive Director at the Pearl Initiative, NAMA urged leaders in the private sector to drive value for business and society by boosting gender parity in leadership and decision-making through this discussion which was held at EXPO 2020 Dubai. Business leaders in the Gulf region and other participants were encouraged to shape sustainable pathways to help create an environment where women can achieve their full potential.

UAE's commitment to gender equality

In a keynote address, Reem BinKaram, Director of NAMA, commended the UAE for its strong commitment to gender equality and dedicating an entire pavilion to women for the first time in the history of a World Expo. Stating that change starts from the top, the NAMA Director, applauded the efforts of Her Highness Sheikha Jawaher bint Mohammed Al Qasimi, wife of the Ruler of Sharjah, and Chairperson of NAMA, for her strong conviction that women and men are equal partners and contributors in the nation-building process and that achieving gender equality was essential to boost productivity and growth and support economic resilience.

BinKaram said, "Investments in women have a multiplier effect, as women are more likely to reinvest in education, health, and economic activities at the community level." Referencing market research documenting the impact of women's contributions on the global economy and the sustainable growth of every industry,

Growing awareness of impact of diversity

"A diversity of perspectives is key to decision making, and the qualities that women have enriches the debate and discussion, particularly of risk management," stated Dr. Patrick Allman-Ward, CEO of Dana Gas, welcoming the growing awareness of the impact of diversity in the workplace.

'The perception of the oil and gas industry as being primarily tech-driven and STEM-oriented is a significant barrier impacting women's entry into this sector', he further noted, adding that 'women must be encouraged to take up STEM subjects.

Growing awareness of impact of diversity (continued)

“At Dana Gas, we also offer internship opportunities for six female students every year to gain a first-hand and holistic experience in this industry, and we are beginning to see the talent pool starting to come through in the system. Incidentally, our last two technical directors have been women.”

Huda Al Lawati, Founder and CEO of Aliph Capital, cited the lack of adequate role models as a prominent barrier in women’s advancement in the upper levels of financial services companies. “Women and men begin their careers at parity, but along the way, we find a drop in the number of women advancing to the next level. In private equity, for instance, only 9% of women are in senior leadership positions globally while in venture funding, it is less than 5%.”

Calling for greater diversity in the industry, Lawati added that the financial crisis of 2008 demonstrated the ability of women to think in the long-term as women in high positions in financial institutions fared better globally.

Strong diversity and inclusion policies

Representing the fashion and beauty industry where more than 70% of consumers globally are women, Patrick Chalhoub, Group President of the Chalhoub Group, described how his organisation had strongly anchored diversity and inclusion policies as a guiding principle in all its procedures and practices.

“The Group was founded 65 years ago by my mother Widad Chalhoub in partnership with my father Michel Chalhoub, therefore women in decision making have always been part of our Group’s DNA.”

Emphasising the role of unconscious gender bias as a significant barrier to women’s career advancement, Chalhoub said that ‘solutions to navigating such challenges lay in setting clear diversity goals, administering Group-wide culture surveys to hear from our people, measuring the progress over time and fostering transparency by continuously evaluating actions and reporting.

“I am a firm believer in the incredible value that diversity brings to the table. We are building a servant leadership culture to nurture women and men alike and gender parity is one of our 3 focus areas. Our continuous efforts in breaking down systemic barriers and attracting women to diverse roles have led to a growth of 44% women in middle and senior leadership and 20% in top leadership positions across the organisation.”

Muna Al Gurg, Director of Retail, Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group described her organisation’s successful experience of using a toolkit by the 30% Club – a global campaign that advocates for women to advance to C-level management. “The campaign seeks to get at least 30 percent women represented in the organisation, and the toolkit is an ideal way to develop a customized strategy for your firm.”

She added: “Our goal now is to double the number of women in our organisation, and to get more men invested in the idea of improving gender diversity.”

NAMA’s ongoing efforts towards creating a level playing field for women in the economy, led to the recent launch of a ‘Women’s Inclusion Toolkit’, developed under its Irtiqa platform. The action-oriented and practical toolkit enables businesses in the MENA region (and beyond), to take planned action in applying gender responsive practices to advance women’s equality in the workplace. Through a series of stimulating debates, discussions, and impact-driven workshops at Expo 2020 Dubai, Irtiqa will continue to provide actionable solutions to take forward NAMA’s efforts in fostering gender inclusive societies.