



Top and above: some photos from the event.

Photos by Mohammad Morsi

'Women's empowerment issue was crucial subject in Kuwait's dev plan'

Canadian Embassy, BWIT mark Int'l Women's Day

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KUWAIT CITY, March 4: The Embassy of Canada in Kuwait, in collaboration with Canada's Business Women in International Trade (BWIT) program, marked International Women's Day by organizing a special event that included presentations on the topic of 'Women Empowerment' at the Radisson Blu hotel, on Monday morning.

Canadian Ambassador to Kuwait, Louis-Pierre Emond, affirmed that gender equality, the empowerment of women and girls, and the realization of their human rights, are key Canadian priorities, both in Canada and abroad. He shared that this event was important to the embassy and one that stood out amongst its calendar of events.

Canada is proud to proclaim its government feminist and to advance these values throughout its diplomatic, trade and international development initiatives. The country has intensified its long-standing commitment to the human rights of women and girls with the affirmation of feminist values as core to its foreign policy efforts and launch of its Feminist International Assistance Policy in June 2017. The policy places achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at the heart of its efforts.

Dr Khaled Mahdi, Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Planning and Development, shared that the issue of women's empowerment was a crucial subject in Kuwait's National Development Plan, and an issue he personally champions as a father of five daughters. He pointed out that when he came into office in 2016, he found few public policies in place towards empowering women. "Only 12% of decision-makers in the government and 15% of decision-makers in the private sector are women. Our target is 35% and this is an ambitious target but it is doable", he stated, acknowledging that it falls short of the United Nations prescribed goal of 50%.

"We don't need to go from a masculine empowered society to a feminine empowered society. We need balance", he noted, raising the issue of competencies as an agent for change rather than gender. From his personal experience, he attested the best university students were female and the best decision makers and managers in the private and public sector were women. "I can proudly state that female Arabs should be the leaders of today and tomorrow."

Productivity

He affirmed that the presence of women in decision making positions contribute greatly to productivity, some claim a 35% increase, others even higher. Owing to their distinct perspective, they provide insight different from men, and are good at multitasking. He pointed out that female academics often provided better feedback in the complicated processes involved in public policy.

He shared that Kuwait has been a member of the Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women since 1994, and has continued to sign treaties in that sphere. He also stated that the Kuwaiti government was itself empowered by its Constitution in 1961. In 2015, Kuwait



Canadian ambassador speaks at the event.

signed the SDG agenda 2030 which states as one of its major role, gender equality and women empowerment.

He urged attendees to focus on self-empowerment, "It is crucial for our young girls and to all women of all ages. From my personal experience of raising five daughters, I know that if you just give them room to grow and flourish they will empower themselves. Our women are our future achievers."

Diane Craig, President and Founder of Corporate Class Inc, gave the keynote address. She is internationally recognized for her Executive and Leadership Presence Training System. In her talk, "Advancing a global key initiative to prosper politically, economically and socially", she focussed on how today's leaders can help advance empowering women to help all citizens prosper politically, economically and socially.

At the outset, she pointed out that when countries invest in women they improve their economy and the wellbeing of everyone and cautioned against men-bashing. "In our pursuit in women empowerment, we need to approach men with empathy and compassion. It is not always easy for men to speak up and support women. We must support them in supporting us."

Equality

"Every woman is an expert on the topic of gender equality. We have all experienced and witnessed gender inequality in one form or another. We need to be able to speak without fear", she declared.

She began with a personal revelation of why women's empowerment is close to her heart. The tragic Montreal Massacre in which 14 female university students were murdered, jolted her into action for the feminist cause. She left her teaching job followed her dream of becoming an entrepreneur with the support of her husband, a decision that brought significant changes in the family and challenges in the workplace. She spoke candidly about the guilt women in business face as they juggle responsibilities at work and home, and the unique set of challenges women face as entrepreneurs in a male-dominated arena.

She cautioned against giving women 'empowerment' without training them with the required skills, which would just set them up for failure. "Women empowerment is a journey, not an event", she remarked, adding that many women of her generation had thought that they'd be much further along by now. "We are tested with stress before we are trusted with success," she noted and urged women to develop resilience.

In speaking of the efforts Canada is making on the issue, she drew attention to the first Gender-Responsive Budget formulated to address barriers to gender equality that include equal opportunities and diversified paths in education and skills development; equal and full participation in the economy; gender equality in leadership roles and at all levels of decision-making; eliminating gender-based violence and harassment, and promoting security of the person

and access to justice; poverty reduction, health and well-being; and promoting gender equality to build a more peaceful, inclusive, rules-based and prosperous world.

In order to achieve real results towards empowering women, she recommended collaboration with like-minded partners, fighting one's own unconscious biases that lead well-intentioned men and women to gender biases and make them unheeding accomplices in gender inequity. She encouraged for moving away from shifting blame towards taking action, call for higher engagement, and urged for the setting of goals to achieve the vision, developed and executed with good strategies in place.

Alia Al Khaled, Development Affairs Researcher and General Manager of two Kuwaiti companies- Edarut for Management Consulting and Wartung Building Contracting Co, in her presentation shared her experiences from her recent participation in a FemParl event organized by the government of Canada which took place in Cairo and Beirut in February, this year. She shared that the discussions revolved around four aspects of governance, communication and inclusive economic growth, gender equality and women's empowerment, and peace and security.

In terms of governance, she shared that while the most of the policies in the MENA region were being framed by men, in order to have the right policies for women in place, we need to first define the role of women on a social, economic and political basis. In the absence of these, the call for greater rights wouldn't be understandable. She proposed different suggestions that included forming coalitions inside and outside the parliament in support of women and each other, increasing the presence of women as policymakers, use of soft powers, overcoming the inter-generational gap, and communicating in the right way.

Al Khaled pointed out that civil society, even as they cooperate with women parliamentarians, must adopt a circular approach by promoting support for the candidates for the parliament who believe in furthering women's issues and then after co-operating at the issue level and in policy placement.

Participation

She shared that it is widely known that increasing women's participation in the economy can lead to increases in the GDP, some estimate the increase to be by 34%. While the MENA region tackles its issue of increasing gross debt on account of obsolete economic systems, government expenditures, and regional conflicts, the solution of increasing the participation of women in the economy seems obvious. The way forward requires building economically independent individuals and the use of marketplace solutions i.e. evidence-based legislation as a result of transparency, access to information, correct analysis, and data movement from the bottom to the top.

The third speaker of the event was Amy Johnson, an award-winning executive with over 15 years of experience who has managed established and start-up sales and project offices for multi-million dollar client accounts in the event, branding and retail industries in Canada and the GCC. She currently works as Director of Community Engagement at Qatar Foundation and shared her experience of working in a leading women-empowering organization in the region, while focusing her talk on the importance of 'women empowering women'. The talks were followed by a panel discussion bringing out different gender equality perspectives and concluded with a networking lunch.