Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi
Barnard Dubai Symposium

Soha Nashaat
I know I speak for all of us today when I say we are most honored to hear your words, Your Excellency.

Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi
Excellencies, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for the kind introduction, Miss Nashaat. Good afternoon to all of you.

I would like to extend a special welcome to those of you who are visiting the United Arab Emirates for the first time. I do hope that your stay here will be both pleasant and fruitful.

A few weeks ago, I received an invitation from my good friend, Miss Anna Quindlen, to speak before you today. I gladly welcomed the chance to share my experiences and show that Arab women are indeed coming from their own and making a difference in their respective fields.

As our country’s minister of foreign trade, I am proud to affirm that women are indeed playing greater roles in the regional development. And I thank you, Debora, for being here today and bringing Barnard College, as well.

But before anything else, I would like to commend Barnard College for conceptualizing this wonderful symposium. Last year’s inaugural edition planted the seeds of better understanding and support for women throughout the world, starting with our sisters in China. It is thus truly a privilege and an honor to be here and to help this initiative flourish and bear fruit.

Ladies and gentlemen, I consider myself very fortunate to live in a country where our leaders themselves strongly encourage women to realize their full potential. Our late president, His Highness Sheikh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan, the father of the Emirates, often emphasized the important role of women in society. He once said that women should not be deprived of their rights which God has instructed us to respect and observe. Women should be respected and encouraged in whatever work they might do.

A day before his death in 2004, he opened the doors for women of our nation to take their rightful place in the governance by appointing me as the UAE’s first...
female minister. Today, I serve our country with three other female cabinet members who are making His Highness Sheikh Zayed’s dream for our women a reality.

I am proud to say that the UAE is looked up to as a model Arab state in terms of affording more opportunities for its female citizens. Today, women occupy around 30% of all management positions and outnumber men in the government sector. Women handle around 50% of the UAE’s small to medium enterprise sector and manage investments of over U.S. $4 billion. We have in fact helped elevate business levels in the country by around [15] percent over the past few years.

The women of the Emirates have also made great strides in the educational realm. The literacy rates of the UAE national women is currently at over 90%, with women accounting for more than 70% of higher education students. Moreover, we have a female judge, women fighter pilots and female police who are performing excellently in roles traditionally reserved for men.

In 2006, the women of the Emirates obtained full rights to vote and stand as candidates in our country’s first parliamentary elections. This historic event set a regional precedent by declaring Dr. Amal Al Qubaisi the first female member of the UAE National Council. There are now nine women who form 22% of the Council’s membership, the highest representation in the region and surpassing that of many other parts of the world.

Although to varying degrees women throughout other parts of the region are similarly making substantial gains in the social, political, economic and educational sphere. Proof of this is today’s admirable line-up of Arab women speakers who represent diverse fields ranging from literature and filmmaking to healthcare and corporate finance. I commend these achievers for showcasing the exceptional leadership, creativity, adaptability, passion and people skills of women.

However, there are still many challenges that we as Arab women have to address and overcome. Many parts of the Middle East, family, cultural, business and political structure still limit the full development of women’s potential. We need forums such as these to erase the popular stereotype of women as the weaker sex with limited social roles. We need to encourage young Arab girls to believe more in themselves and have confidence in their ability to achieve and excel.
I remember how, as a child, I often wondered if I could make a difference in the world. Many years later, when I decided to leave the private sector to work for the government, I often asked myself if I would be able to fulfill responsibilities that are normally assigned to men. Standing before you all, I emphatically say that yes, Arab women can do all these things as long as they desire to. The key is to work hard, persist and believe.

Ladies and gentlemen, as the Americans say, it’s now time to get the show on the road. I am just as eager as all of you to hear the inspiring stories of our speakers and learn the secrets of their success. I hope that their testimonies and insights will provide you with a better understanding of what Arab women have gone through, what they have achieve and what they aspire to do in the future as they gain greater legitimacy as important agents for regional growth.

I would like to thank Barnard College for inviting me to share my thoughts with you today. And to my sisters in the Middle East and throughout the world, I wish you courage, strength and vision in your present and future endeavor. Good afternoon and please enjoy the rest of the symposium.

**Debora Spar**
Thank you so much, Your Excellency, for those very inspiring words. I’m going to take advantage of the microphone for the moment to ask you one question, if I might. And then I think we probably have time for perhaps one or two questions from the audience. So if you put your hands up, we have microphones circulating.

But while you do that, let me if I can just ask you a question that goes back to some of the numbers that you mentioned in your remarks. It’s incredibly encouraging news that young women and girls represent, I believe you said it was 70%?

**Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi**
At university.

**Debora Spar**
Of university students. That’s higher numbers than we have in the States or Europe. And very impressive. When you and I were speaking earlier, though, you also mentioned that, if you look at the levels of leadership in this country, women represent roughly 18%. Which is interesting, the same in the United States, we’re between 16 and 18 percent when you look at women in the highest levels of power.
What do you think we should be aiming for? Are we heading towards a future where women—where the 70% continues up the ranks so women are represented at 70 or even 50% of leadership positions. Or are we somehow destined to be stuck at this bizarre 18% cutoff point?

**Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi**

Thank you for the very important question. I want to recite a statement that came from His Highness Sheikh Zayed about women and their importance in the society. The target, since establishment of the United Arab Emirates as a federation, that most important part is for women to seek their education and to attain that.

And the statement meant that, as long as they have their education, whether they want to be mothers or they want to work, it’s an equal choice and it’s really at the end of the day up to them to decide what they want. And I always say, you can always fire a CEO, but you can’t fire a mother or replace a mother at home.

So, in reality, when I look at 18% or I look at 20% or 90%, what really matters at the end of the day is looking jointly with men is what is it that we can achieve for the betterment of the society in terms of economic growth, in terms of social development? Who actually is there outnumbering the other, in my personal belief, is irrelevant. There are great women who took a choice at some points in their career at a senior level to actually give up their jobs to spend more time at home with their families. Children are important. Bringing new generation is important, as well.

So, to me, I really look at it more as a matter of choice for the women to decide where they can do their best performance.

**Deborah Spar**

Questions from the audience? Please put your hand up if you would like to ask a question and we will try and get …Please, yes. Please stand up and there’s a microphone coming towards you. Thank you.

**Question**

Good afternoon, everyone. I have one question only for Sheikha Lubna. You mentioned in your speech that there is—I mean, the women [have] already reached the top level. However, there are challenges. So, for us as UAE nationals, let’s say, for example—I mean, I’m not [unintelligible] for any of their nationalities—we need to know which are the challenges which you have faced during your career and how you overcame these challenges? Thank you.
Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi
Thank you. Whatever challenges I would mention as an Emirati I think goes the same for any society. When I travel, I meet a lot of aspiring women, senior women in major positions, in government as well, in the public sector or private. And the challenges remain pretty much common across the board.

To me, the biggest challenge, and it was actually hilarious, that someone who actually was a computer science engineer, worked as a techie for over 20 years, when I got appointed in 2004, November of 2004, in December, I went to Hong Kong for the WTO meeting, that’s the World Trade Organization. And I remember it was my turn to actually deliver the country speech. And the women who I approached asked me where my minister was. She thought I was his secretary or his office manager. So I turned around, I said, “I am the minister.” Being actually 5’1” tall and small built, don’t probably give that gusto feeling about being an empowered minister of economy.

And as I sat next to a couple of ministers from other countries, they asked me the same question, where the minister was. And they thought that I was there waiting, holding his seat. And I said, “No, I am the minister.”

But it got worse, because as I gave the speech, my team was sitting right behind, I think it was the U.S. delegation. And they asked them, saying, “Why is she speaking? Where is your minister?” And they turned around, they said, “She’s our minister.”

So, stereotyping. But look at it, my survival mechanism is, look at it from the humorous point of view. A lot of times in the U.S. and other places, people would ask me about the cover and my point of view is, you know, it doesn’t block my thinking, this is not made out of steel. My brain still can breathe and my hair can breathe, it won’t fall.

So, if you bring humor, people would remember you, would remember you actually are overcoming a stereotype at some points. So, this is basically an anecdote to share—and I’m sure a lot of women senior positions have very similar stories.

But the most common challenge all women face, I think the fact balancing your personal life and your career. Whether you are a young woman who’s just starting your family or you actually have a couple of children and, depending on the age of
the children—the biggest challenge is really being able to manage home and to manage work. And the typical question from organization corporations would say, find ways of doing this. The problem is, I think women have a guilt of their own. It’s not the society itself. It’s your own consciousness, feeling that their priority should be for the children.

So, even if someone says, “We’re going to find this, we’ll do that, or why would you think that way or it’s your choice,” it really is—there are a lot of great men now who help and support their wives and working with them at home and helping out. But at the end of the day, I think it’s really more of a typical nature of women, nurturing nature that, regardless who looks after the children, there will always be that feeling inside.

There are women who are committed at a senior top level of, traveling extensively and, at some points, they will give up their job, because that would be on the expense of spending more time at home with their kids, with their husbands.

So in my belief, it’s not something very exclusive to the women here. This is pretty common everywhere. And I would say it really is, it’s [the call 14:53], at the end of the day, it really depends on the individual, the wife or the husband, the woman or the culture or the family. Here, we have extended family that helped a great deal with raising children. In some societies, you don’t have that. But it really is something that women have to work out and they have to balance.

But I want to remind women, if you choose to stay home and look after kids, that’s the greatest job. It is not a job that tells you that you are less than another woman who is in a corporate level and an organization. So I don’t want women to feel that they are less than others. It’s a choice—you do what you want. And that choices, it means a belief of yourself, a belief in your family.

And women who actually have taken up careers and pushed hard to change a lot of things in life and the world, as well, I salute them equally. Because I think to do that job takes a lot of bravery from you, takes a lot of courage. And you do give up a lot sometimes and some aspects.

So the most important part is self-belief.

Debora Spar
I’m always very nervous of making universal generalizations. But I will make two, nevertheless.
In all of the conversations I’ve been lucky enough to participate in, I think I hear women across the board and literally across the world saying the biggest challenge they face is not what happens in the office. It’s balancing their personal demands with their professional ones. And those issues come as much from inside themselves as they do from the organizations they’re in. And the biggest technique I’ve heard or the most important thing that women seem to have developed to cope with these issues is a sense of humor. It’s very hard to do this unless you can laugh. So, thank you.

**Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi**
It’s survival.

**Debora Spar**
It’s a survival mechanism.

We have time for one last question. Yes? The microphone is back there, so Joanne, if you can just give it to anyone back there.

**Question**
Thank you, ladies. I guess this question follows on both of your comments. On saluting these women who may not necessarily be occupying these positions of power, but from home do wield some power of their own.

And I’m wondering, is there any studies or documentation about these women who do have access to the men in power and whisper in their ears, as mothers, as wives, as daughters, as close confidantes? And how can we tap into that?

**Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi**
I wish I had somebody like that whispering in my ear, as well, telling me all the gossip that goes around. I’m clueless, actually, [unintelligible]. I’ll get it to the colleges to answer that question. But there’s eavesdropping and hearing influence—it sounds like a great idea, I wish I had somebody. I only have my …you?

**Debora Spar**
I think it’s a brilliant question you’ve asked. And there are so many studies these days on women in the workplace and women in the educational system. I don’t think we’ve done nearly as much research as we should on the role women play behind the scenes. And in the support structure that women may need to balance
the personal life and the professional life, when they don’t have wives at home. One of the greatest assets that men have historically had are wives. And how many women do you all know who have joked, “Gee, I wish I had a wife at home”?

And so figuring out that role and what—it is, clearly, more than a joke. Because if you want to have a very high-powered career, you need that help in the home. And how you can replicate that through other channels is critical.

I know we could go on forever, but unfortunately we need to get our—Oh, one more. Maria. You get the last word.

**Question**
I’ll just have to speak loudly. Sheikh Lubna, very interesting what you said. I’m curious about your views on the ongoing debate that’s happening in the United States and Europe about the government’s role of providing day care centers for women who choose to go to work. And, in the United States, we’re kind of gearing towards the side of, well, corporations should be taking care of that, the government should not be participating. In Europe, it’s the opposite. What is the UAE’s position?

**Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi**
Well, to answer that question, I really would commend my colleague, my sister, Her Excellency Maryam Al Roumi, who is the Minister of Social Affairs. Maryam had always been an advocate of setting up day care centers around offices and facilities. And we’re seeing more and more of that.

Sometimes, instead of legalizing it or structuring to enforce it through a law or a regulation, is to incentivize programs like that. Because sometimes just looking at it positively actually works quite well.

But in here, women are given access to go home, breastfeed their kids if they want. So the structure here, I don’t know if there’s any woman here, I don’t know, [Nora] maybe can help, if you know what are the support systems that actually are there for women who just had a baby or…? No? Can you stand up?

Noura Al Noman is from Sharjah, from the Women Council in Sharjah and works for Her Highness [unintelligible].

**Speaker**
Thank you, Sheikha Lubna, you make us proud. I don’t know about the rest of the UAE, but I can only speak for Sharjah. In Sharjah, His Highness, Dr. [unintelligible] has already started this big campaign on providing day care centers in most of the departments in Sharjah. Because it’s very important for women to have their children close by.

We started doing it everywhere. You know, [unintelligible] and the social care department has also started doing that. And we hope that, because it begins small and then they make bigger ones or departments make other day care centers. So that’s something that’s being promoted and sponsored by the government.

Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi
But, in general, the priority is always for family here. So finding ways and means of actually supporting that is the priority, culturally. And that in itself helps a great deal.

Question
Thank you.

Sheikha Lubna Al Qasimi
Thank you so much. Please enjoy your lunch. It’s been wonderful to be here today.

End of talk