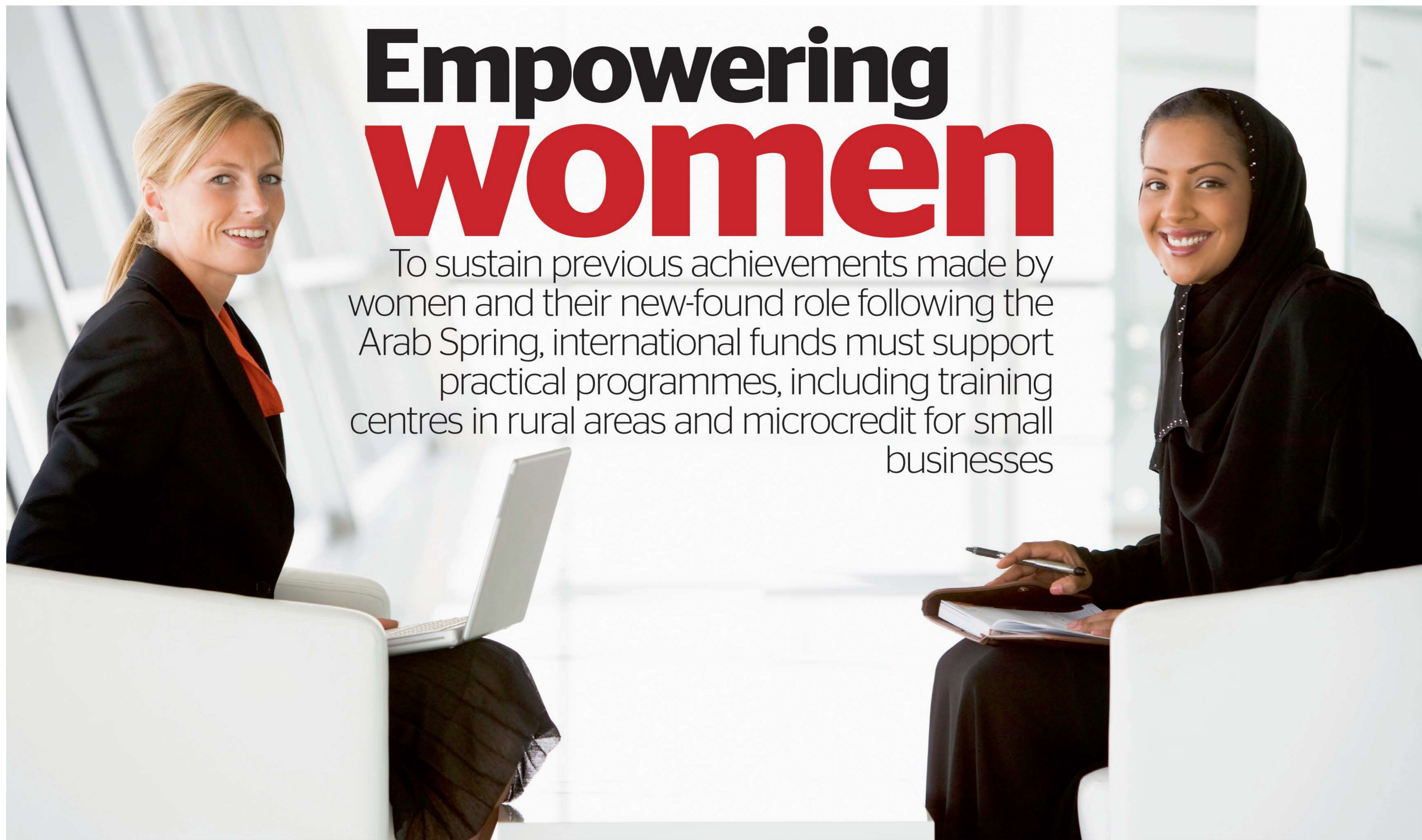


Empowering Women

To sustain previous achievements made by women and their new-found role following the Arab Spring, international funds must support practical programmes, including training centres in rural areas and microcredit for small businesses



Denise Marray

“WE MUST ENSURE that the gains Arab women made before the Arab Spring, in education and in appointments as government ministers in many areas, are not erased,” says Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani, founder and chairman of the Arab International Women’s Forum (AIWF).

Since its inception in 2001, the AIWF has championed the rights of women across the Arab world; and at this time of critical change, the organisation is highlighting the importance of ensuring that women play a full role in shaping their societies.

Al Kaylani recognises that there are many positive developments to be celebrated. In Tunisia’s recent elections, women won approximately 25 per cent of the new seats in the constituent assembly. Of the 49 women elected to the 217-member Assembly, 42 were from the moderately Islamist Ennahda party. Other positives include the announcement of the right for women to vote in municipal elections in Saudi Arabia; the election of three women to the parliamentary assembly in Bahrain, and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to pro-democracy campaigner Tawakkol Karman of Yemen.

However, in Egypt, where the people have again taken to the streets to express their dissatisfaction with the pace of democratic reform, the position of women looks more precarious. The role of women in the transitional government has been minimal and no women sat on the committee



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Haifa Fahoum Al Kaylani

that drafted Egypt’s transitional constitutional declaration.

Reflecting on the participation of women in the recent uprisings, Al Kaylani said: “There is no doubt that joblessness was a key reason why so many women protested in large numbers throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Female unemployment in the region is very high and rising. In Tunisia, for example, 70 per cent of the unemployed youth are female college graduates.”

So what can the international community do to support women at this time of momentous change? Al Kaylani has a clear message. “International funds must support practical programmes, including training centres in rural areas and microcredit for small businesses.”

Citing a recent policy summit held at the UAE Central Bank in Abu Dhabi, she said that a key finding was the need to create “many more jobs and

small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs).”

In the field of education and training, for Egypt she advocates establishing re-training centres suitable for rural areas. In the remote areas of Tunisia, she calls for the provision of transport to enable children to attend school beyond the primary level.

With regard to microcredit, her suggestion for Tunisia is to extend loans to women who make handicrafts, “who have been hard hit by the downturn in tourism”. In Egypt, she would like to see microcredit “offered to women who work in the fields, who receive little to no compensation for their labour”.

She also places great importance on campaigns to raise awareness of women’s issues and create platforms for discussion. “Alliances must be built with men in conservative societies through dialogue with religious institutions about the central role

women play, based on the correct interpretation of Islam regarding social justice”, she said.

The AIWF has over the past decade forged high-level links with leading governmental and financial organisations globally. The aim is to promote positive change for women at the grassroots level through influence at the policy making level. There is close co-operation, for example, with the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation Development on women’s entrepreneurship in the MENA region. Major conferences have been held in London, Brussels, Paris, Washington D.C, Cairo, Dubai, Damascus and Amman.

The AIWF’s 10th anniversary conference held in London earlier this year, was sponsored by PepsiCo, Manpower Group, the World Bank, Deutsche Bank and PriceWaterHouseCoopers.

Maryam bint Mohamed Khalfan Al Roumi, UAE Minister of Social Affairs, was one of the distinguished guest speakers at the conference, whose theme was ‘Women in the Arab World, Africa and Asia: Emerging Economies, Emerging Leaderships, Shaping the Future Together’.

Al Kaylani is seen as a powerful advocate of women’s rights. In 2009, she was named one of the 20 leading Muslim women in the UK by the Equality & Human Rights Commission. This year, Arabian Business Monitor named her as one of the hundred most powerful women in the Arab World.

She continues to fight to better the lives of women in the region. “The entire Arab world is facing a renaissance. It must mobilise all its resources – women and youth included – to achieve its full potential,” she says.



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AP AND REUTERS PHOTOS

25%

seats won by Egyptian women in the constituent assembly

70%
of the total jobless youth in Tunisia are female graduates



“The awarding of Peace Nobel to Yemeni activist Tawakkol Karman is one of the positive developments

