

**WOMEN AND BUSINESS LEADERSHIP IN THE ARAB WORLD
– INSIGHTS FROM EGYPT**

On Tuesday, April 6, 2004 the US Egypt Friendship Society (USEF) Speaker Series was launched with a presentation, entitled *Women and Business Leadership in the Arab World – Insights from Egypt*, featuring Loula Zaklama, member of the AmCham Egypt Board and President and Managing Director of Rada Research & Public Relations Co. Co-sponsored by the Kenan Institute of Private Enterprise (KIPE) and the Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE), the discussion was moderated by Dr. Jennifer Bremer, Director of KIPE's Washington Center and contributed to by Jean Rogers, Deputy Director of CIPE.

Bremer started by thanking Zaklama for accepting the invitation to speak and by welcoming the event participants as well as the web viewers who will get access to the presentation at the end of April. After acknowledging the co-sponsors, Bremer presented the new USEF initiative by noting its mission to increase understanding and awareness of Egypt in the U.S. and to promote appreciation of U.S.-Egypt relations. Bremer's concise introduction, highlighting Zaklama's impressive accomplishments as a business leader in general and as a businesswoman in Egypt gave way to Zaklama's Power Point presentation.

Zaklama opened with an historic account of the nature of Egyptian women in leadership, starting with the Pharaohs, the Monarchy and the Revolution, ending with contemporary businesswomen. In the context of the different eras, Zaklama described how women were treated in society in relation to their male counterparts. She also selected a few notable women to illustrate specific accomplishments and particular character traits, including; Queen Hatshepsut, Queen Nefertiti, Hoda Shaarawi, Safia Zaghloul, Tahia Abdel Nasser, Jehan El Sadat and Suzanne Mubarak.

When describing the business environment for businesswomen in Egypt, Zaklama noted that it is simultaneously exciting, dangerous, frustrating and exhilarating. She stressed that women have increasingly excelled in business by proving their leadership capabilities and reaching CEO positions in various sectors. Personally, Zaklama has overcome tremendous challenges to reach her current level of success. Born in Assuit and raised in a rather conservative family, Zaklama did not receive immediate approval when she started her own research and public relations company in 1962. In addition to familial resistance, she also faced a rigid system, dominated by state-owned entities.

Reflecting on the challenging circumstances, Zaklama concluded her prepared remarks by emphasizing that she would in fact repeat her experience because of the ensuing rewards. In addition to having defied the system and created the leading public relations firm in Egypt, Zaklama perceives her daughters' professional success as a reward for her personal efforts. She has received significant international recognition and has been listed as one of the 50 Leading Women Entrepreneurs.

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Jean Rogers opened up the question and answer period of the discussion by thanking Zaklama for sharing personal reflections that offer broader lessons and are emblematic of greater structural economic development issues. Rogers noted that CIPE offers entrepreneurial training that allows women to get a stronghold to succeed in business. The question of how to translate these professional skills into other arenas (such as the public sphere and community relations) is one that CIPE is currently addressing.

Bremer framed the first question in the context of the greater implications of foreign investment. When asked to assess the advantages and disadvantages of foreign companies, Zaklama supported Bremer's notion that foreign companies has allowed for changes other than in the immediate private sector. In addition to improving some of Egypt's human capital through transfer of knowledge, Zaklama mentioned that foreign companies have introduced a culture of corporate social responsibility and community engagement.

Zaklama was then asked to comment on women leadership in the context of AmCham Egypt. She explained that the national AmCham has a "Women in Business" committee that meets monthly, which advocate for women issues at the top levels of government. Zaklama continued by noting that women on the board of AmCham Egypt are listened to and perceived positively.

To broaden the discussion, Bremer asked Zaklama to comment on the challenges presented by corruption in the Egyptian business environment. Bremer posited the idea that corruption is increasingly recognized as a barrier to business and women have been proven more likely to resist bribes. Zaklama admitted that corruption is a delicate issue and noted that significant measures are being employed to promote issues such as media transparency. She mentioned that the media is taking on a positive role by launching public awareness campaigns.

When the questions turned to the effectiveness of dialogues and conferences, Zaklama made it clear that conferences ought to focus on networking and business-to-business opportunities. Moreover, she recommended that conferences be designed to be highly participatory and affordable. In the context of professional match-making she acknowledged the risk of ghettoization of women in business and stressed that match-making is generally beneficial irrespective of gender.

In closing, Bremer thanked Zaklama for her insightful comments and asked her to assess the future for her daughters. While recognizing that the business environment in Egypt is becoming fiercely competitive, Zaklama noted that the future looks significantly brighter for younger generations.