



**Speech by
Her Excellency
Sheikha Lubna Al Qassimi,
Minister of Economy,
delivered to the
Women as Global Leaders Conference,
Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates,
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Good morning your highnesses, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for extending the opportunity, for me, to talk about ‘communities in transition,’ and the role that women are playing in that social change. These are topics that are very pertinent and special to me.

I can honestly say that my entire lifetime as a UAE national has been lived as part of a community in transition. Some of the more obvious external factors have been seeing the UAE itself develop beyond a petroleum-based economy, and transition from a regionally-focused nation to the true global player that the UAE is today.

But what has been truly engaging for me is to see how women, Arab women, have played a role in that transition. There have been some amazing accomplishments made by Arab women just in the last 30 years – and another drastic progress in last 5 years, but I believe that the pace of women’s empowerment is set to unfold even more quickly.

In my current role as Minister of Economy, the concept of GDP, or Gross Domestic Product; the total value of goods and services produced by the UAE, is a something under constant scrutiny. Currently, our per capita GDP is on par with those of leading West European nations, which is a major accomplishment. This is not merely a result of oil, but is also a result of a successful diversification trend where non-conventional economic sectors are playing an increasing role in the UAE economy.

What I believe is that by creating an environment in the UAE that enables women to be flexible in their approach to work – to choose a career path, to balance the demands of home and the office, to contribute to the development of this nation, we are unquestionably contributing to the growth of the UAE’s GDP. As a wise man (and I say man, not woman!) once said, "you cannot ostracize 50% of a country's population and then expect it to perform at optimal levels."

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen:

Research in other emerging economies such as Taiwan has illustrated that increasing the market labour force participation of women, especially women with high levels of human capital, which is measured in terms of education and health, has contributed measurably to economic growth.

But the benefits of having women as agents for social change through taking a more visible role in society is not limited to paid employment.

Analysts in markets such as the US have found that unpaid work – and this can be anything from staying at home to raising children or doing volunteer work, creates an invisible economy that can lead to higher standards of living. Women play a vital economic role in every country in the world, including the UAE, that keeps nations like ours moving forward.

Interestingly, when we have conferences like the one today, the Arab women who we see participating are Ministers or Queens or other very high-profile speakers because we want to share our experiences with the next generation of women.

However, in my previous lines of work from technology to my current role, and in my volunteer activities, I have the opportunity to meet women who are the real, unsung agents of change. These are the women who are studying to get their university degrees, who may be the first in their family to work outside the home, who may be committed to raising the next generation of Arab decision-makers.

These women, whether they are doctors or home-makers, are on the front lines of our community in transition. They are demonstrating that women have a voice, as well as a unique perspective, and a key role to play in the social and economic development of the Arab world. As Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum once put it, "Arab women are half our community. Sometimes better than men. Perhaps in the past we lagged behind, but today she is growing to better heights in our society and is able to achieve goals within our communities. She will only grow¹"

In closing, I would say that one of the challenges that all of us must undertake is to change the misperception that Arab women are down-trodden, that we don't have choices or rights. We can change this wrong impression through mere words, like those that we are sharing with you today. But the real way to convince people who don't know about the positive role of Arab women is through our actions. By exercising our freedoms and responsibilities, we confirm that they exist.

Thank you again, and I wish you all very successful deliberations.



¹ http://www.sheikhmohammed.co.ae/english/history/history_women.asp