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Empowering Women in the Informal Sector: AUB Celebrates QUDWA Graduates and Holds Panel Discussion on Women's Work in Lebanon

The Center for Women in Business at the Suliman S. Olayan School of Business (OSB) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted a graduation ceremony marking the completion of QUDWA—an initiative supporting women in Lebanon's informal sector.

The event honored twenty women from across Lebanon who successfully completed the QUDWA program. Over the past five years, these women have launched and grown their own businesses in regions including Tripoli, South Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and Baalbeck-Hermel.

QUDWA is designed to empower women working informally by equipping them with the skills, knowledge, and confidence to transition into the formal economy. Through targeted training delivered by experts from the OSB faculty, the program fosters inclusive, sustainable, and dignified economic opportunities for women entrepreneurs.

Opening the ceremony, Dr. Nada Khaddage-Soboh, director of the Center for Women in Business, highlighted the challenges women face in the informal sector and reaffirmed the center's commitment to creating meaningful impact. She noted, "We believe that investing in women is an investment in the prosperity of entire communities and the promise of generational transformation—contributing directly to AUB's mission of changing the world."

OSB Dean Yusuf Sidani praised the QUDWA program and shared reflections on the broader journey of women in business education. He emphasized the importance of trust, support, and inclusive leadership, stating, "It was in 1923 that the first female student joined the School of Commerce at AUB, as it was called back then. This reflects broader patterns seen across disciplines—engineering, medicine, and more. We must continue to create space for women to thrive."

In her keynote address, Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs Haneen El Sayed called for systemic reforms to enable real economic equity. She stressed the importance of legal and structural support for women, noting, "Our laws must serve everyone. That means gender-responsive labor

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regulations, flexible work options, and paternity leave that's more than a token—it's a right. It also means building affordable childcare so women can participate in the economy fully and fairly."

Certificates of completion were awarded to the graduates, as well as to OSB faculty members who contributed to the program: Leila Khauli, Dr. Hania Hammoud, Dr. Jessy Kfoury, Dr. Marwan Wahbi, and Dr. Neveen Ahmed.

The event also featured a panel discussion titled "Women's Work in Lebanon: Status, Challenges, and the Path Forward" that brought together thought leaders from academia, business, and the public sector, including Dr. Najat Aoun Saliba, member of the Lebanese Parliament; Professor Ali Fakih, chair of the Department of Economics at the Lebanese American University; Asmahan Zein, CEO of Ardi Ardak SAL; and Rima Freiji, chairwoman of Tanmia Lebanon and president of the Lebanese Private Sector Network.

The panel opened with remarks by Professor Lama Moussawi, associate dean for research at OSB, who presented key statistics on male and female participation in both the formal and informal labor markets in Lebanon, the MENA region, and globally. "This indicates the importance of giving informal employment specific attention and underscores the relevance of the project's goals and the Center for Women in Business' mission," she remarked.

Panelists reflected on the vital roles women play in sustaining their families and communities amid Lebanon's ongoing socioeconomic crisis. The conversation explored the challenges of visibility, recognition, and policy integration for women working informally.

Dr. Najat Aoun Saliba articulated the need for action, stating: "We have a long way to go, but we must start by acknowledging the women working informally—like the 20 QUDWA participants and many others—who are doing their best from home with limited resources. They serve our communities yet remain unseen. Academia, the public sector, and the private sector must come together to recognize and formalize their presence."

From an academic lens, Professor Ali Fakih provided regional context, noting: "When comparing Lebanon to other MENA countries, we are below the regional average. Female participation in the informal sector across the MENA region averages around 68 percent, placing us below countries like Jordan."

Rima Freiji emphasized the importance of formalizing microbusinesses to protect Lebanon's formal economy. "At the Lebanese Private Sector Network, our mission includes protecting the formal economy. We see widespread unfair and illegal practices—labor, business, and even criminal—fueled by a growing cash economy. Our challenge is to bridge the gap between informal and formal and explore actionable solutions," she said.

Closing the panel, Asmahan Zein expressed her belief in the strength of women as a catalyst for Lebanon's recovery: "With the presence and support of women, Lebanon will overcome its struggles and rise to fulfill its potential."

The celebration concluded with the QUDWA Market at OSB, where graduates showcased their products, applying the branding, marketing, and customer engagement skills developed during the program.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 790 full-time faculty members and a student body of over 9000 students. AUB currently offers more than 140 programs leading to bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full-service 365-bed hospital.

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