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AUB a partner in international conference
on Arab Women in Computing

The Fifth International Arab Women in Computing (ArabWIC) Conference was hosted at the American University of Beirut (AUB) as a partner in the support of women in technology and a key promoter of quality research in the region. Hosted for the first time in Lebanon, the conference attracted more than 400 participants from 30 countries and was opened in the presence of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform Inaya Ezzeddine, AUB President Dr. Fadlo R. Khuri, students, professionals, and academics in the global tech ecosystem.

The annual conference is the largest gathering of women in technology in the Arab world. It aims to inspire, retain, and encourage collaboration among Arab women in computing, while increasing their visibility and elevating their status within the field.

President Fadlo Khuri shared at the opening session the University's vision and the various faculties' initiatives to increase women's interest and involvement in the technology field and to combat any disparity in contribution rates. "It is my firm belief that in the Arab world we have the capacity to show the rest of the human race how things can be done more equitably and more fairly, I do think this is our time," said President Khuri. "Your vision in ArabWIC is paired with our vision and our ability to empower and launch all those young people of talent into the world who want to make it a better place, for all of us, whether women or men."

Minister Inaya Ezzeddine called AUB "a cultural and intellectual beacon that has greatly impacted the region and Lebanon," and thanked it for its support of the conference. Dr. Ezzeddine called for an examination during the conference of four fundamental and related issues: education as a sustainable development goal; the role of technology in human development; democracy and e-governance (transparency, accountability and the participation of civil society); and the engagement of women in technology for greater economic growth.

The conference is organized by ArabWIC, an association that connects Arab women in technology and tackles the entire ecosystem – the various computing/technology sectors (academia, industry and entrepreneurship) – to create linkages with international women in computer science organizations, facilitate women's reach of their career goals, and bring applied tech skills to the region. Through 18 chapters, the organization encompasses more than 2,500 members worldwide.

Dr. Sana Odeh, chairperson and founder of ArabWIC, spoke to us about "AUB's crucial role and suitability" as a partner and host for this international event. Seen as a leader in research and a key element in the tech ecosystem in the Arab World, AUB was one of the partners who facilitated the conference and brought in academics, students, alumna, and speakers who helped in the planning and execution of the conference. Both founders of the Lebanese Chapter of ArabWIC are AUB affiliated: Nisreen Deeb is currently a master's student at AUB, and Mona Itani is an AUB alumna.

"The support we received is a testimony that the ecosystem is eager and ready to support women's integration," said Dr. Odeh in her speech. "We are giving a message that in the Arab world we are ready to make things different and women here are demanding that they be hired based on their talent, not their gender."

Over the past year, the department of Computer Science at AUB coordinated with ArabWIC in preparation for the conference. The mission of the department revolves around teaching computer science to students at all levels and benefitting the community. Over one year, 35 schools from all over Lebanon were trained by the department on computer science topics. The computer science department also runs "Future Developer" summer camps to teach recent technologies to students between the ages of 11 and 17. It partnered with the Center of Civic Engagement and Community Service at AUB and the World Food Program to teach basic and advanced IT skills to Syrian refugees and under-served Lebanese people; benefitting one thousand participants.

"The conference goals match those of the AUB upper administration regarding the support of women and their contribution to research and the workforce," Dr. Wassim El Hajj told us. "AUB's endorsement of this event is in fact an endorsement of how important this is for AUB, putting women's integration in the forefront and investing in them through many initiatives."
The three-day conference program includes more than 100 sessions of keynotes, panel discussions, research talks, applied technology lectures, as well as coaching and networking sessions showcasing top tier research in data science and machine learning. A hackathon will be held on the third day to teach 50 girls from refugee camps to create apps that help them solve problems within their communities. Career booths are set up on site for on-the-spot interviews for short and long-term hiring of aspiring women.

Although the rate of enrollment of women in computer science is higher in the Arab world (an estimated 50%) compared to that in the US (15%), their rate of employment in the field, compared to their male counterparts, is very low. Diversity in the workforce has been proven to increase productivity and the production of a balanced society, yet collaboration to increase this diversity in the region is minimal. The conference aims to involve entrepreneurs, policy-makers, and universities in a conversation on the future of technology, the challenges faced, and a better integration of women in education and work in the field.

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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 700 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,500 students. AUB currently offers more than 130 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 420-bed hospital.

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