

***Excerpt from the Book “Morocco: The Islamist Awakening and Other Challenges” (Pages 158-160) by Marvine Howe, Oxford University Press, USA (2005)***

An exciting measure of how far Moroccan women have come was the Global Summit of Women held in Marrakech at the end of June 2003. This forum was important for two basic reasons: because so many bright, dynamic Moroccan women were there from business and civil society and because a record number of more than 600 women from eighty countries — with large contingents from the Arab and Muslim worlds — attended the conference, barely six weeks after the terrible suicide bombings in Casablanca.

Irene Natividad, the impassioned summit director, admitted that there were a hundred cancellations following the terrorist attacks and some sponsors had backed out. “But what kind of message would that be if we had pulled out!” exclaimed Natividad, the Filipino-born former head of the U.S. National Commission on Working Women. She told me that Morocco had been chosen as the site for the Thirteenth Global Summit of Women, the first such event in the Arab world, because of “the encouraging momentum in the advance of women.”

Labeled as “the Women’s Davos” by the Casablanca press, the forum’s main achievements were women’s networking, contacts with delegates from countries like Yemen and Algeria, attending the meeting for the first time, and a delegation from the New Iraq. Korean women talked to Bangladeshis about microcredits, and Egyptians spoke of the newly established International Business Center set up by Arab women’s organizations. Some forty women cabinet ministers took part in an informal discussion on economic development for women from Arab states — another first.

Opening the summit, Her Highness Princess Lalla Hasna, the king’s sister, read a message from King Mohammed, emphasizing that since his accession to the throne, he had worked relentlessly “to enhance the status of Moroccan women and to preserve the rights which our holy religion granted them, thus putting them on an equal footing with me.” The monarch noted that substantial headway has been made in this domain but acknowledged that a large number of women continue to “live on the fringes of society, suffer from exclusion or are denied their rights.”

Yasmina Baddou, the youthful secretary of state for the Moroccan family and social affairs and a summit host, declared that while Moroccan women “still suffer from disparities” with their male counterparts, they now occupy high positions like counselor to His Majesty the king, cabinet minister, and director of government offices in key sectors like tourism, mines, and energy. She also noted that there are now 35 women in the 325-seat parliament. (Baddou herself was elected as an M.P. on the Istiqlal ticket from Casablanca in 2002.) And she stressed that Moroccan women had made significant progress in the economic field, where they are

now chief executive officers and managerial cadres in public, semipublic, and private enterprises.

Morocco's new women executives were the stars of the forum, people like Nezha Hayat, who has barely turned forty, a former head of the Casablanca Stock Exchange and current director of investments for a leading private bank; Souad Benbachir, board director of the CFG Group, a Casablanca think tank; Miriem Ben-Salah Chaqroun, managing director of Oulmes Mineral Water; Farida Bennani, director of development and marketing for DHL Morocco; Leila Sbiti, chief of a division in the state Department of Investments; Meriem Kabbaj, director of communication and development for Sochepresse, the main newspaper distributor, and many others.

They are not token women or even pioneers — but success stories that are beginning to be the norm.