

Reaping The Rewards: The MENA Region's Female Entrepreneurs

This article was written by [Amelia Gundersen-Herman](#).
It originally appeared in [Entrepreneur Middle East](#)

"When we talk about women in business in the Middle East, particularly in Dubai, I always feel being a woman is more advantageous than disadvantageous." Those are the words of Sara Mohammadi, the founder of Tehran-based Eventbox, and they convey the majority perspective of the female entrepreneurs with whom I spoke through the course of the STEP Conference in Dubai in 2016. These 12 women represent 11 companies and range in age from 25 to 39, and the nationalities include American, British, Egyptian, Emirati, Filipino, Iranian, Lebanese, Mauritian, Pakistani, and Palestinian citizens. Their companies have been founded as recently as February 2016 and as far back as 2012, with all but one of the companies having operations in the UAE. They also operate in Egypt, Iran, KSA, Palestine, and the whole of MENA; some even provide services outside of the MENA to Greece and the U.K.

Though the ground on which they stand on may not be completely equal yet, all of the women agreed that increases in equality were visible and happening rapidly. A perfect example of that is Nida Sumar, founder of the Dubai-based Keza. She said that three years ago angel investors told her, "You're a sweet girl, but to do business, you need to have sharp teeth; you just leave the business to us." Fast forward to now, and she's having long meetings with angel investors and VCs who are giving her great advice on how to move forward with her enterprise. One angel has already invested in her company.

The majority of the women felt they hadn't faced female specific barriers in founding and operating their companies. However, Samantha Hamilton-Rushforth, founder of the Dubai-based BEEM, said there are times when she struggles to be taken seriously because she is female. Hamilton-Rushforth explains one of these instances as follows: "Men will come up to me and say, 'What do you do?' I'll start explaining what BEEM is, and they'll cut over me halfway through a sentence to say, 'You know what you should do?' If they would let me finish I could explain what it is we do, and then I'd be more than happy to listen to their advice. I'd love advice, I'd love to know their opinion, but [they] don't even let me finish my pitch."

Kristine Lasam, founder of the Dubai-based Pink Entropy, agrees with Hamilton-Rushforth. "I think we still have a long way to go," she says. "That's the reality we must acknowledge, because it is in the acknowledgement that we can start making changes- really start making things that will lead to genuine long-term change." But Lasam admits that there are also advantages to being a female entrepreneur in MENA: "I think women who say they've never gotten away with good things because they're female are either blind or lying," she says. "It opens doors."

Initiatives to support women in business in Dubai are aplenty. Dubai Business Women Council, for instance, held a year-long program for aspiring female entrepreneurs, and Yamna Naveed Khan, founder of the Dubai-based PerksPlus, was one of the participants. Given the existence of such programs, Khan believes the region is welcoming female entrepreneurs- however, she notes an issue in terms of their perception in the ecosystem. "People associate women entrepreneurs with beauty, healthcare, education," Khan explains. "[My company] is a very B2B business, so it is different from what the normal or stereotypical [companies that] women entrepreneurs start."

Nabbesh founder Loulou Khazen Baz is another entrepreneur who participated in a training program only offered to women. In her case, it was a two-week executive leadership training program in the U.S. run by the State Department and Goldman Sachs, and it was only open to MENA women. Baz also agrees with the sentiment that it's good to be a female entrepreneur in the Middle East. "I think being a woman opens a lot of doors," she says, explaining that since there are more men in the startup ecosystem, especially on the investor side, having a woman's view can thus be refreshing and, well, nice.

I asked Butheina Kazim, founder of Cinema Akil, if she has experienced any disadvantages or advantages as a female entrepreneur in the MENA. "No, absolutely not," she replies. "I never actually am conscious of that. I've grown up in a way that has never made me aware, wary, or conscious of the fact that I am a woman. I have woman can do anything that a man can do. I don't like to frame the conversation about development or the ability to achieve around the fact that I am a woman." But Kazim also notes the importance of conversations on women in business. "Obviously I think it's important, sometimes," she explains. "The great Zaha Hadid, who just passed away, said that she never really liked being a prefix by being a woman architect, but sometimes, she recognized the importance of having a larger conversation around it- just when it helps people be able to break their barriers in whatever barriers they may have... Any kind of challenge that we, or I, can have a role in inspiring or supporting, then that is always a great thing, and that is something I will try to do what I can to support."

Echoing Kazim's words was Tanaz Dizadji, founder of the Dubai-based Insydo. "I was treated completely fairly- which I like," Dizadji says, adding that she felt that Dubai is very advanced as far as giving roles to women was concerned, and has been very happy with the state of the ecosystem. The only obstacle she could think of was specific to the technology industry. "People do associate technology here with male leadership," she says. But that is not to say female founders in the tech space are not to be found in the MENA region. Ambareen Musa, founder of Souqalmal.com, notes how the reception to tech-oriented entrepreneurs like her has been quite welcoming. "When I talk to my investors, one thing they tell me is their founders who are female perform a lot better than the male founders," she reveals.

The co-founders of the Palestine-based Kenz, Nicola Cuoco and Christina Ganim, says their experience working in this region has also been without gender barriers. "There is actually a pretty big entrepreneurship community in Palestine and a lot of them are women," Cuoco says. "It is kind of disproportionate to entrepreneurship scenes outside of Palestine." Ganim adds, "I think people are interested in supporting women led companies. I think positive. I think they want to see more women running companies, being the CEO... I think, from a positive perspective, everyone has just been really supportive."

But as supportive as the region might be towards these women's roles as entrepreneurs, it turns out that they have faced greater discrimination during their times in the corporate world. "In the corporate world, at some point in my career there, there were times when being a woman, I just wasn't taken seriously," Musa remembers. "Have I ever felt that outside the region? No... [However], as an entrepreneur, I've had zero hurdles... I've actually been very well received. But in the corporate world here, I have felt the difference of being a woman." Musa isn't the only one that felt this way- Kazim adds her experience to the fray. "I did work in the UAE before, and I worked in a very misogynistic environment- in the television world," she says. "I had situations where I was in strategy, programming and development, and whoever I would talk to (or somebody high up) would say, 'Oh, you know, that's really nice, but you should think about being a presenter on the screen.'"

Mohammadi used to be a management consultant with clients in East Asian countries including Indonesia, Hong Kong, Singapore and Vietnam. Speaking about her experience working in the region, she says, "I actually think it's better to work in MENA as a woman. Contrary to what everyone might think. I felt that I got more comments about appearances as a woman in East Asia than I did here in the Middle East. Maybe it is a purely cultural thing. But you know male colleagues commenting on my dress, on the way I look, or making comments like 'Oh, Middle Eastern women are really beautiful,' in the middle of a meeting- to me, it has never happened in Dubai, Tehran, or Kuwait, where I've worked."

On the topic of men in the ecosystem, Musa notes the difference in tones when speaking about them. "The concept of being a woman is talked about a lot, and it's [done] by the world: do we need to give [women entrepreneurs] support, etc... [But] we've never addressed a male entrepreneur with, 'Oh, but you're male, how is that going?' But I can tell you my husband has the same amount of stress to be home on time, to spend time with the kids, and make sure the kids are okay. But we never ask them. There is not a single panel I've been on where we actually posed the question to a male founder, 'How are you handling personal life balance?' Never."

As for being treated differently because of her gender, Dizadji says, "I want to be treated exactly like a man would. I would get offended if anyone treated me, or even made a reference to me being a female. I don't really take it. I just want to be treated exactly the same. No special favors, no negative or barriers- just exactly the same." Lasam however

felt that men need to practice more empathy, as that's something that comes more naturally to women. She talked about men being more transactional by nature. In her own recruitment process, she has seen men negotiate more naturally, and then she has to use her own empathy to fairly select the appropriate candidate. In terms of gender parity at the workplace, Baz noted the importance of a diverse team. "Having diversity on teams, especially founding teams, is very healthy," she says. "Don't be scared of working with us, we add value."

But in case they are treated to belittling comments from men, how should female entrepreneurs respond? "If they look at you in a certain way, then they're not the right partner for you in any case," Musa says. "My advice is to make a joke out of it and move on. Don't take things too seriously, or it will bring you down and affect your confidence." Baz adds, "If it's insulting, then say 'I don't appreciate you saying that. Look, let's keep it professional, and not personal. So if you have a comment about my work, please go ahead. If you want to make a comment about me, this is not the setup to do it.' You should call them out on it. Don't be emotional, because there is always this thing that women are too emotional, and I think sometimes men do it on purpose just to push your buttons and see how you break. Don't break, don't be emotional, it's business at the end of the day. You need to have thick skin."

"When you start trying to build a business, it is always seen as 'her little project', and sometimes people don't take you seriously," Baz continues. "And then when it becomes something, obviously, people change their minds... So don't take it personally. If people bother you too much, just cut them out. If people don't add value to you, just cut them off and move on. Surround yourself with people that encourage you and that you want to be like." However, there are days that will just be bad- those days when you wake up questioning why you are doing any of this. Musa's advice on handling this was to make it a point to communicate. "Talk a lot," she says. "I have two people on my team that I trust very heavily. I talk to them about what is concerning me. There are people in your life that are your rock, and you need to have that. When I wake up and I am like, 'Crap, why am I doing this?' my husband will remind me of everything that has happened over the last two years. He'll say 'Are you kidding me? Look at what you've done. It's okay; move on.' And he'll remind me of the great things that have happened and also make me see perspective. The problem with entrepreneurs is we just don't celebrate success enough."

When talking about challenges of being a female entrepreneur, work-life balance is one term that gets thrown about a lot in this region, and Shereen Salah Ahmed, founder of the Cairo-based Akla-Baity, agrees that it is a major pain point here. "They [my family] don't like it if someone calls me at midnight to ask me about [the business]," she explains. "I think for many females, if you are building a company and you start to be successful, this means a lot of responsibilities [added to the ones you already have]. That's when the family interferes and says, 'Oh, but you're the mom, and you're the wife, and we love to have you

here.' If it was the man who started to be successful, everyone would say, 'Go get it, it's your job.' But it's totally different for [women], and I don't think it's unique to the Middle East."

But Musa is insistent on women in business not allowing their work to come up on top in their lives. "Your career should never tamper with your personal life matters," she says. "Having a baby is the best thing I've ever done and the best thing I have. My kids are everything to me... If I had let [Souqalmaal.com] come in the way, I would probably not have kids today, and sooner or later, I would have regretted that." Musa adds that having a family has also helped her in figuring out a work-life balance. "Having a family around me has made me so much more efficient- because I have to be. When I know I have to be home by 6:30, every meeting has to be done by 6:30, and you just get it done- you make it happen. Do not ever change your personal life plans because of your job. If you want to have a kid, just have a kid. If you're smart enough to start a business, you're smart enough to juggle both. Having a child is for life. Having a business is not for life."

In Kazim's opinion, work-life balance is a utopian state that everyone is constantly trying to find, and one should simply "accept it. Accept the fact that you're always going to have that challenge. Be open with your partner or your family in terms of what you can expect. You'll have really busy times where you're going to be apart from each other, and you have to have a very solid understanding of each other and each others' worlds and respect that, to allow each other to flourish... That is what keeps you as individuals, flourishing together, and [remaining] the interesting person that you are. So don't give that up just because you feel guilty. Always try to find a way to make it work."

Based on the experiences of these 12 women from around the world, the MENA region's startup community is impressively gender neutral. In its effort to balance representation of the genders, the ecosystem has become welcoming and nurturing toward females. To the women with business ideas, it appears that the MENA is the place to be, and the time is now to turn that idea into a company.