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Challenging Egyptian taboos

Amira Elhamy attended a recent Cairo event that challenged some typical Egyptian taboos about success for women



Late actress Mary Mounib in the comedy *Losaba Laken Zorafa* (Cute Thieves, 1968). Mounib was famous for playing the role of the old lady who loved to interfere in the business of others

“*Hanehrah beeki inta*” (will you get married soon?) and “*mafsh haga gaya fel seka*” (Are you expecting a baby?) could be two of the most common questions that an Egyptian woman might hear. Both are related to hanging the success of a woman on her being a wife or mother.

There is no doubt that being a wife or mother is a great accomplishment. However, women have been gifted by their Creator with multiple other skills and capabilities, which makes them able to succeed in being a wife and a career woman as well. The funny thing is that usually these two questions are posed by women to other women.

What Women Want magazine, along with the Women's Entrepreneurship Day, held a conference at the Steigenberger Hotel in Cairo recently called “*Hanehrah Beeki Inta*”. It hosted 24 female entrepreneurs, various keynote speakers and 200 guests. The aim of the conference was to gather together successful female Egyptian entrepreneurs to raise their voices and challenge some typical Egyptian taboos by sharing their stories.

May Abdel-Assem, founder and managing director of What Women Want, said that the spark of this initiative came two years ago when her team came up with the idea of challenging typical taboos directed towards women with a positive perspective.

“Our aim is to change silly taboos like “*Hanehrah beeki inta*” and celebrate the many female entrepreneurs who have been able to write their own success stories,” Abdel-Assem said.

“Evaluating the success of a woman cannot be tied to her social status, and almost everyone in society has a role to play in combatting inherited ideas that put women down.

The media also has a significant role to play, as does education. This is a key factor, as we need to raise our children in a different way that accords more respect to women and the various roles they play in society,” she added.

May Salama, managing partner of the Wox Event Management Consultancy, an organising partner of the event, said that she believed women could even be more successful than men.

“I believe that women attain success more often than men; they are just underrated and unnoticed within Egyptian society. They have tremendous energy to accomplish and achieve different tasks. Many women have the capability to succeed on the social level, while attaining self-fulfilment on the professional level. Today's event gives us the chance to celebrate the success of many Egyptian women,” Salama said.

She explained that a typical answer to the question “*Hanehrah beeki inta*” should be that happiness is the main concern, and happiness need not be tied to marriage.

Many women in Egypt are under pressure to get married by a certain age, have a baby before a certain age, and complete an endless list of tasks that society sets for them. Much of society and the media seem to think that a woman's success is necessarily tied to her wearing a wedding dress. But there should be more emphasis on the other types of success that women accomplish every day, an important starting point for the conference.

“I believe that change can happen from the individual determination of every woman that is capable of completing her own accomplishments regardless of her social position,” Salama added.

The conference presented many inspiring stories, one of them that of Dina Fadel, founder of Joud and Tamara Fabrics. Fadel started her business in 2010, and her determination to succeed was very clear during her presentation. She started by designing coasters and showing her designs in different bazaars.

She did not have any investors with her when she started, and she acquired a showroom after a year. The 25 January Revolution was a real challenge for her business due to the instability of the market, but Fadel's persistence made her take risks and expand her collection, even starting to hire more employees to help her market her products.

“I faced many challenges at the beginning. First, I had a capital problem, and second my family told me it would be hard to deal with workers used to working in factories and workstations. However, I accepted the challenges. I remember sitting with 10 male workers at the factory to finish the designs, and I was the only woman,” she said.

“I felt there was no difference between men and women when I started my project. I felt that we all had one aim — which was to present Egyptian products in the best possible way inside and outside Egypt.” Today, her company exports its products to six countries.

“It is never too late” might be the slogan of another success story of a young-at-heart Egyptian female entrepreneur at the conference called Sally Bahgat, founder of the Oasis Community Centre. This is a farm, half of which functions with renewable energy and teaches school children to learn about sustainability.

“My biggest challenge was to make the career shift necessary. As a doctor working in the medical field, it took me

three years to take the decision. I took it at the end of my 30s when I started to question what I wanted to do in life. I was working as a doctor, but I always dreamt of having a farm,” Bahgat said.

Her project serves several market needs, including the general lack of green areas in Egypt. She issued a call for volunteers to come to her farm and plant trees. “The second market need that my project fulfills is teaching school students about sustainability and renewable energy in a practical and fun way. The students spend the day at the farm learning and having fun,” she said.

Once you find your passion, you can find your happiness, Bahgat said. “I turned my passion into a project that makes money. My family used to ask me why I was leaving medicine to start a business on my own. However, if there is a will, there is a way, and now I organise school camps at my farms that do various activities as well as for other guests. People believe in you after you succeed,” she added.

It is important to clarify that such initiatives are not a call for not recognising the success implied in being a wife or mother. However, they do show that there are other forms of success a woman can be capable of, some of them encapsulated in the following hashtags:

#“It is never too late”
#“Follow your passion”
#“Never give up”
#“Be prepared for success”
#“Expand your knowledge horizon”
#“Put social pressure off your road”
#“Believe in yourself”