

Panel discussion on
The role of women leadership in advancing the climate agenda
15th June 2023 – Abu Dhabi

| | |
|--|--|
|  <p>H.E. Nikolay Mladenov, Director General, AGDA</p> |  <p>H.E. Liselott Andersson, Ambassador of Sweden to the UAE</p> |
|  <p>H.E. Andrea Matteo Fontana, EU Ambassador to the UAE</p> |  <p>Dr Dena Assaf, UN Resident Coordinator in the UAE</p> |
|  <p>Ms Laila Mostafa Abdullatif, Director General, Emirates Nature-WWF</p> |  <p>Dr Sara Chehab, Senior Research Fellow, AGDA</p> |
|  <p>Ms Hafsa Halawa, Independent Consultant</p> |  <p>Mr Chafic Traboulsi, Regional Vice-President, Head of Networks Operations and Sales in the Middle East and Africa region, Ericsson</p> |
|  <p>Ms Malak Abdullah, UAE Youth Climate Delegate, COP28</p> | <p>Moderated by:</p>  <p>H.E. Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa.</p> |

Summary

On 15th June the European Union Delegation to the UAE, the Embassy of Sweden in Abu Dhabi, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa and the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA) organized a panel discussion on the theme '*The role of women leadership in advancing the climate agenda*'.

The panel discussion brought together speakers and participants from the UAE, the MENA region and Europe representing international organisations, non-governmental organisations, the private sector, youth organisations and the research community, all actively engaged in climate action and women empowerment. It highlighted the vital role of women leadership in advancing the climate agenda and accelerating the green transition but also the challenges and opportunities in the MENA region and beyond ahead of the upcoming COP28 conference in Dubai.

The interventions and discussion pointed towards several recommendations for the future:

- 1) For the climate agenda to move forward it is fundamental to have both men and women sitting at the table and actively engage in discussions and negotiations;
- 2) COP28 in Dubai represents an invaluable opportunity to advance the climate agenda in an inclusive manner and the COP28 Presidency's strides to make the process fully inclusive of women and youth should be capitalised on;
- 3) It is paramount to keep the momentum also after COP28 – especially in the MENA region. Given the pace of climate change and the devastating impacts that it can have on vulnerable communities and women, regional efforts towards a meaningful transition need to be scaled up and sped up;
- 4) Efforts to reach out to communities beyond the circle of those who are already engaged and committed should be intensified while using new and innovative tools;
- 5) A multi-layered approach that works at all levels (global, regional, national and grassroots) is needed, with different groups of people engaged, including the private sector;
- 6) Building networks and fostering mutual exchanges need to be encouraged;
- 7) It is important to do more on communication and storytelling and highlight the positive (often not-so-well-known) initiatives happening in the MENA region;
- 8) While women's representation in climate talks and the inclusion of a gender lens in national adaptation plans has started, more needs to be done for progress to be truly impactful.



Detailed report:

On 15th June the European Union Delegation to the UAE, the Embassy of Sweden in Abu Dhabi, the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa and the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy organized a panel discussion on the theme '*The role of women leadership in advancing the climate agenda*'.

The panel included the following speakers: Ms Laila Mostafa Abdullatif, Director General of Emirates Nature-WWF, Dr. Dena Assaf, UN Resident Coordinator in the UAE, Dr Sara Chehab, Senior Research Fellow at AGDA, Ms Hafsa Halawa, Independent analyst and researcher, Mr Chafic Traboulsi, Regional Vice-President, Head of Networks Operations and Sales in the Middle East and Africa region, Ericsson, and Ms Malak Abdulla, UAE Youth Climate Delegate, COP28. Ambassador Charlotta Sparre, the Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the MENA, moderated the discussion.

The audience consisted of around 100 people, representing students, researchers and academics, private sector and media representatives, the diplomatic community in the UAE, international organisations as well as government officials.



Opening remarks by HE Nikolay Mladenov, Director General of the Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy (AGDA)

H.E. Nickolay Mladenov, Director General of Anwar Gargash Diplomatic Academy opened the event stressing the relevance of the topic both for the Academy – which is running research programmes on Women in Diplomacy and on Climate Change - but also the UAE that is hosting COP28 later this year. He stressed that whilst the climate crisis is affecting everyone, its impacts are not gender neutral. He recalled evidence showing that women are the worst affected by climate change and in the water-scarce MENA region the impact on women is particularly dramatic. Yet women remain underrepresented in all climate debates.

H.E Mladenov highlighted that there are good examples at the global and local levels of women participation in climate action. At the global level noteworthy examples are initiatives like the Global Gender and Climate Alliance and the advocacy work done by the World Environment & Development Organisation (WEDO). At the national level, the Climate Change and Gender Equality initiative launched in the UAE and several other successful grassroots initiatives in MENA countries are facilitating women participation in community programmes and addressing important climate-related challenges. Women are also increasingly present and visible in the renewable energy space including in the Gulf. He reminded the audience that it is paramount to highlight all these good practices and build on them to further advance the climate agenda.



Keynote address by HE Liselott Andersson, Ambassador of Sweden to the UAE

H.E. Liselott Andersson, Ambassador of Sweden to the UAE in her opening remarks recalled the priorities of the Swedish Presidency of the Council of the European Union including green and energy transition and Sweden's role in pushing to establish a Gender Action Plan for the UN Climate Convention (UNFCCC) at COP23 in Bonn. She pointed out that women and girls are usually most affected when they live and work in more vulnerable areas and occupations, and stressed the need to work for the inclusion of an increased diversity of women, of different ages, from different groups, communities and countries. Ambassador Andersson recognised the efforts made by the COP28 Presidency to ensure meaningful inclusion of women and youth in the upcoming negotiations and called for all leaders and actors to continue to push the climate agenda forward.

The panel discussion that followed was moderated by **Ambassador Charlotta Sparre, Director of the Swedish Dialogue Institute for the Middle East and North Africa**. In her opening remarks Ambassador Sparre stressed the need for inclusivity, meaning women and men from different generations working together to enhance and advance the climate agenda. Women leaders can influence policy changes and they should find better ways to leverage their positions to further advance women's participation at all levels.

During her interventions **Ms Laila Mostafa Abdullatif, Director General of Emirates Nature-WWF**, focused on the case of the UAE as a country that has made massive strides to promote women empowerment across all sectors. She pointed out that research has shown that women in leadership roles tend to lead in a progressive way. In climate discussions, however, it is paramount to also involve local communities, as those are most impacted by climate changes. Emirates Nature-WWF is trying to support the convergence of women engagement and local communities' engagement by, for example, supporting the establishment of SMEs that promote nature-based solutions led by women.

Ms Abdullatif also stressed the need to engage with people who are not convinced about the need to act quickly and in an inclusive manner. Civil society is very important to advance the inclusivity agenda and young people are pivotal in climate action. She also stressed on the importance of well-tailored and innovative tools that can be used to make sure the youth contributes to push the agenda forward. Previous initiatives included the Emirate Nature-WWF Leaders of Change Programme and the nature-themed escape room that was launched as part of World Environmental Day in the UAE.

She further stressed the importance of creating an important post-COP28 legacy in the UAE and beyond and the need to 'export' the UAE's commitment to women empowerment internationally and especially in the MENA region. She advocated for cross collaboration as a fundamental strategy to move the climate agenda forward.

Ms Hafsa Halawa, Independent analyst and researcher, addressed the issue from a gender-justice and social equity perspective. She pointed out that the MENA region has so far provided very poor responses to gender considerations also due to traditional governance systems. However, there are increasingly cross-generational women's movements advancing the gender justice agenda that are active in the climate space. The fact that two COPs are taking place in the MENA region was certainly a propelling factor. At present the main challenge will be to ensure that these emerging efforts make a meaningful impact in the long term and especially after COP28 in the UAE. On the need for inclusivity, Ms Halawa stressed that most of the people in the MENA region are not convinced about the necessity to 'act'; the poorest community are the least aware. She advised leaders and people already driving the climate agenda to make more efforts to listen to the arguments of those who are not 'convinced' and to develop communication methods and language that is relevant for local communities.



Intervention by Ms Malak Abdulla, UAE Youth Climate Delegate to COP28

Ms. Malak Abdulla, Sustainability Associate at IBM and UAE Youth Climate Delegate to COP 28, highlighted the genuine concerns of young generations for the future. Despite the underrepresentation of youth, the UAE and COP28 Presidency have taken commendable steps to engage them, including the appointment of a dedicated Youth Champion, H.E. Shamma Al Mazrui, as COP28 Youth Climate Champion and Minister of Community Development. Ms. Abdulla emphasized the positive impact of including women in climate discussions and expressed hope for the development of more gender-responsive policies. She also stressed the importance of avoiding tokenism. Looking ahead, she expressed optimism that upcoming events, such as the 12th World Environmental Education Congress, will further advance an inclusive climate agenda. The UAE's commitment to inclusivity sets a positive direction for COP28 and empowers women and youth in taking action on climate change.

Dr. Dena Assaf, UN Resident Coordinator in the UAE explained how the impact of climate change will be more dramatic in the MENA region due to water scarcity and high temperatures than the rest of the world. Over 70% of arable land in the region is at risk of desertification. With agriculture being one of the sectors with the highest level of women participation it is obvious that climate change will have a disproportionate impact on women.

Dr Assaf clarified that gender equality is not about women only but refers to both women and men. She reaffirmed that having two consequent COPs in the region is an opportunity to drive the agenda forward and emphasised

that having women around the table is not enough if they do not have the authority to take meaningful decisions. She further stressed that when only part of the population is represented, decisions cannot be optimal. There is clear evidence that when women have leadership roles, countries as well as companies are more resilient. However, each context is different, and it is fundamental to adapt advocacy messages to specific situations.



Intervention by Dr Sara Chehab, Senior Research Fellow at AGDA

Dr Sara Chehab, Senior Research Fellow at AGDA, noted that women representation at COP has in fact declined over the years. However, there are positive changes. For example, until 2018 gender/women were not mentioned at all in national adaptation plans. Today 1/3 of them includes reference to women. There is also increased awareness on the women - climate- peace nexus and to-date, 19 Women Peace and Security (WPS) Action Plans consider climate (out of the 85 total). Nevertheless, the world of diplomacy is slow, and we cannot expect big changes overnight. Furthermore, changes in the diplomatic sphere need to be reflected in all sectors of society to be really meaningful. It is also too early to assess the impact of women leaders because they are still too few of them in leadership positions.

Dr Chehab also highlighted the importance of bringing in new generations who learn in very different ways. She stressed that we all have the collective responsibility of translating the information and data we have on climate and women's representation into messages that can be better understood by and are relevant to the younger, wider public.



Intervention by Chafic Traboulsi, Regional Vice-President, Ericsson

Mr Chafic Traboulsi, Regional Vice-President, Head of Networks Operations and Sales in the Middle East and Africa region, Ericsson explained that for private sector companies having more women on board makes business sense. The private sector wants smarter and better solutions and those cannot be found when less than 50% of the population is excluded. Mr Traboulsi highlighted that companies like Ericsson are therefore actively trying to be more inclusive. An issue, however, is a relatively limited 'supply' as today less than 30% of women graduate in STEM which is not enough for the industry. He also recognised that ICT can play an important role in advocating for greater inclusivity and also for breaking barriers. Nevertheless, today the sector does not have gender parity at decision-making levels.

The panel was followed by a **Q&A**. Questions and comments raised addressed a wide range of issues including how to do more and act faster; the importance of countries and leaders to 'lead by example' but also the importance of individual responsibility, the need to follow an holistic approach to effectively address climate change, establish networks and include everyone in the discussions – especially those sitting on the fences or unconvinced, and the necessity to build a long lasting legacy after COP28.



A diverse audience from private sector, academia, diplomacy etc. participated and asked insightful questions.

In her final reflections, **Ambassador Charlotta Sparre** summarised key takeaways and main recommendation for the future:

- 1) For the climate agenda to move forward it is fundamental to have both men and women sitting at the table and actively engage in discussions and negotiations;
- 2) COP28 in Dubai represents an invaluable opportunity to advance the climate agenda in an inclusive manner; COP28 Presidency's strides to make the process fully inclusive should be capitalised on;
- 3) It is paramount to keep the momentum also after COP – especially in the MENA region. Given the pace of climate change, global efforts towards a meaningful transition need to be scaled up and sped up;
- 4) Efforts to reach out beyond the circle of those already engaged and committed should be intensified. Key is to work at all levels; global, regional, national and grassroots;
- 5) Building networks and fostering mutual exchanges need to be encouraged;
- 6) It is important to do more on communication and storytelling and highlight more the positive (often not-so-well-known) initiatives.

In his closing remarks the **EU Ambassador to the UAE Andrea Matteo Fontana** highlighted how the panel discussions aligned with the EU objectives of achieving a Union of Equality and of delivering on the commitments of the Paris Agreement and achieve climate neutrality by 2050. He stressed that despite positive developments, persisting and systemic barriers continue to hinder women's ability to effectively participate in the climate agenda and women remain currently under-represented in climate forums, including at the COP. He also reaffirmed the need to recognised collective responsibilities to break down persisting barriers and creating new opportunities and echoed the speakers' and participants call to keep the momentum in the region and beyond after COP28.



Panellists and speakers gathering for a group photo after the event.