

ICBA celebrates Arab women scientists' graduation from regional fellowship program

Dubai, UAE, 8 March 2020 – In celebration of [International Women's Day](#) the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture ([ICBA](#)) hosted today a graduation ceremony for the first cohort of fellows of the Arab Women Leaders in Agriculture ([AWLA](#)) program.

Funded by the Islamic Development Bank ([IsDB](#)), the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and [CGIAR Research Program on Wheat](#), AWLA supports women scientists from the Middle East and North Africa.

Being the first of its kind, the program is managed by ICBA and is designed to empower women researchers to spearhead positive changes in agriculture and food security while addressing the challenges they face in their careers.

The first cohort included 22 women scientists from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, and Tunisia. They completed a 10-month program from 2019 to 2020, which was delivered through 12 online R&D modules and face-to-face workshops in Tunisia and the UAE.

Speaking at the graduation ceremony, Her Excellency Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi (EAD) and Chairperson of ICBA's Board of Directors, said: "International Women's Day is an important occasion when we celebrate women and girls around the world and showcase their invaluable contributions to different fields, including science. Unfortunately, women are still underrepresented in research and development around the world, but more so in the Middle East and North Africa. This is despite research showing that gender-balanced teams improve innovation and productivity and that women are critical to innovation. That is why it is great to see how programs like AWLA are creating opportunities for women scientists from across the Middle East and North Africa and equipping them with skills and tools to grow in their careers and make greater contributions in their communities and countries."

For her part, Dr. Ismahane Elouafi, Director General of ICBA, said: "We are delighted to see the inaugural cohort of AWLA fellows graduating on such a special occasion – International Women's Day. The AWLA fellowship program was able to open a door of opportunities for 22 Arab women scientists by providing them with soft skills to positively impact their communities and countries."

"I want to thank the Islamic Development Bank, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the CGIAR Research Program on Wheat, and the International Atomic Energy Agency, for their exceptional support for the program. I would also like to thank the Council for Australian-Arab Relations for supporting the study tour of two AWLA fellows," Dr. Ismahane Elouafi added.

Dr. Tarifa Alzaabi, Deputy Director General of ICBA, remarked: "As we are celebrating International Women's Day, it gives me a great pleasure to congratulate all AWLA fellows and commend them for the exceptional dedication they demonstrated during their AWLA journey. AWLA is a unique program that significantly contributed to our efforts to empower women in science and agriculture. AWLA extends the right skills and opportunities to fellows to boost their intellectual collaboration by exchanging ideas, good practices, and stories on how women can make a difference in agriculture. Moreover, the program offers new perspectives on research and leadership to make a positive difference not only in the professional lives of fellows but also towards the prosperity of agriculture across the nations and regions they represent."

Ms. May Ali Babiker Eltahir, Manager at the Women and Youth Empowerment Division, the Islamic Development Bank, commented: "AWLA, through empowering young Arab women working on food, nutrition and water security issues, has contributed to the pillars of the IsDB Women's Empowerment

Policy, namely improving women's access to services and resources and promoting women's agency and participation."

Mr. Hassan Damluji, Deputy Director at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said: "Empowering women to take up leadership positions in all fields, particularly critical sectors like agriculture and science, is an essential lever towards achieving gender equality globally. AWLA is a wonderful example of partners coming together to deliver concrete solutions that help break down barriers for Arab women researchers".

"Women make up an important part of the agricultural labor force in MENA, and any solution to the region's critical food security challenges should ideally be evidence-based and innovative, making use of all talent by being gender-inclusive and by greatly improving cross-border collaboration," said Mr. Victor Kommerell, Program Manager for the CGIAR Research Program on Wheat ([CIMMYT](#), [ICARDA](#), and partners).

"I am confident this cohort of AWLA graduates from 6 countries will have a powerful impact on the future of agriculture in the region," Mr. Victor Kommerell added.

Dr. Farah Baroudy Mikati, an AWLA fellow from Lebanon, who works as an agricultural engineer at the Lebanese Agricultural Research Institute, said: "The spirit of AWLA reminded me about my ambitions and strength, especially after seeing that things like research for impact exist and can succeed. Before AWLA, I used to give less importance to some managerial knowledge, but now I consider it as a priority. In addition, I started learning project proposal writing skills through this program. In general, AWLA made me aim for more even in harsh conditions!"

"During the program, the fellows got the opportunity to learn through interactive online and classroom training, coaching and mentoring, and continuous assessment. The fellows worked on a variety of individual assignments in addition to four team-based capstone projects that connect and translate their learning and impact as the golden thread," Mr. Ghazi Jawad Al-Jabri, Capacity Building Specialist at ICBA and AWLA Coordinator, said.

AWLA's long-term goal is to improve food security and nutrition in the region through empowering women researchers and helping them realize their full potential. The program contributes to the achievement of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals on Gender Equality (SDG 5), Climate Action (SDG 13), Life on Land (SDG 15), and Partnerships for the Goals (SDG 17).

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About ICBA

The International Center for Biosaline Agriculture (ICBA) is a unique applied agricultural research center in the world with a focus on marginal areas where an estimated 1.7 billion people live. It identifies, tests and introduces resource-efficient, climate-smart crops and technologies that are best suited to different regions affected by salinity, water scarcity and drought. Through its work, ICBA helps to improve food security and livelihoods for some of the poorest rural communities around the world.

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