

# Women Economic Forum in the Spotlight



Business Today Egypt sat down with Founder and Global Chairperson of Women Economic Forum (WEF), highlighting more aspects about the hosting of the forum's 35th meeting in Egypt and offering advice to female entrepreneurs.

By Jehad El-Sayed

**F**ulfilling her promise to President Sisi to host the Women Economic Forum (WEF) in Egypt, Indian entrepreneur Harbeen Arora announced that the forum's 35th meeting is slated to take place March 4-9, 2020.

The event is expected to bring together over 1,000 women leaders and businesswomen from Egypt and around the world to discuss issues like employment, international trade, women in technology and finance, and much more. For the past 25 years, this annual forum has brought together over 100,000 inspiring women from 150 countries.

*Business Today Egypt* sat down with Arora as she prepared for the upcoming conference in Cairo, as she shared her views and insights on this year's forum. Arora spoke about her advice to women for economic empowerment.

**As Founder & Global Chairperson of the Women Economic Forum, to what extent do you think that these forums contribute to women's economic empowerment?**

I think these forums are absolutely essential for women to learn business. We need these ecosystems and forums you can tap into for energy, inspiration, continuous learning, and also to find networks and opportunities for your ideas, projects, and businesses.

These forums will help you grow as a person, and when you grow as a person, everything you create is enhanced. We are happy to play a small role in filling this gap.

**Why did you choose Egypt to host the Women Economic Forum this year?**

It's the first time that we have brought the annual edition of the Women Economic Forum to a country outside of India. We held many regional events worldwide, in Canada, UK, Mexico, US, and many others. But the annual event been held in India since 2015 when we first started. This is really thanks to the Egyptian president Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi

and President of Egypt's National Council for Women Maya Morsi. We have really worked hard on this for the past two years.

**What are your expectations and fears regarding WEF in Egypt, this year?**

I'm excited. We decided to move the entire annual event to Egypt this year, so I expect that the international participants from over 70 countries are going to experience the beautiful hospitality, culture, and tourism of Egypt.

I don't have any fears here. I'm at home, but the only fear that I feel every time I organize any event is regarding travel formalities and regulations. So more than fears, there are prayers. I pray that everybody is able to come and get through the travel formalities of getting visas, permissions and so on.

**What is different this year about the WEF held in Egypt?**

There is a tourism component added to WEF this year. We are making sure to take people coming from different countries around Egypt to explore historic places, particularly in Cairo, Alexandria, Luxor, and Aswan.

**If I am a woman who has a startup in Egypt, how can I attend? On which criteria are speakers selected?**

We have a global Secretariat in India that selects speakers. We have many inspiring Indian people who will come to speak at this upcoming event, like the Indian film actor Amitabh Bachchan, as well as prominent business people travelling all the way from India as well.

The criteria for Egyptian speakers is a mutual selection occurs by WEF and our local organizing partners. The selection process is very difficult; however, attendance is open everyone, and we welcome women to come and attend.

Registering to attend the forum is very simple, as there's a website where you can pick the ticket with low cost. So for attending, you



should only want to be part of a network and bring in positive energy.

**What's your opinion on the media coverage of such women's forums?**

I think that the media could do a better job in covering women's events and issues. But, now we have digital media and almost anyone can publish today. Women as women, have to become the media.

I have a little acronym for media, "my energy drives ideas and endeavors." So it is my energy, which is the media. And today, with

social media and digital media, I can put my energy and thoughts out there. While traditional and institutional media should do a little more, we can also do a little more.

**What are the opportunities that WEF and other forums offer to women? Is it just networking?**

I think the greatest opportunity is the opportunity itself. So how do you grow your business? Let's say I run a shop. I have 10 customers and I sell things to them, then how do I grow? I have to step up. I have to find oppor-

tunities, and I have to go and make people aware about what I'm doing.

Networking is not just networking—networking is a lot of work. Because networking can lead you to innovative opportunities which you would have never thought of. Yes, you have to engage with the marketplace. You have to get out there to engage with people, and you have to build support networks that will guide you and perhaps even help you collect funds. You never know where your next investment is coming from.

**How do you evaluate women's contribution in economy worldwide?**

As women, we are striving everywhere in the world to increase our participation in economic work, make our endeavors more visible to society, be taken more seriously, get more funding flow to our ventures, and find more markets. I think these are the universal challenges that face women entrepreneurs and ambitious women at large.

These are challenges, and this is the journey we are on going on in order to diminish those challenges.

**In your opinion, what features that Egyptian and Indian women have in common?**

We, as Egyptian and Indian women, have faith and this faith is a very broad concept to us. We are connected to the invisible all the time, in different ways, but also in similar ways. So, we have the Indian philosophy and Indian cultural tradition that we see God in everyone. Here, in Egypt, women have a great understanding of faith, with what happens in the afterlife and this creates a great mystical connection to life.

We know, in India and Egypt, that we are waves in an ocean and there is an ocean of life and energy that we may be able to see. We have a lot in common, and I think the biggest thing in common is our sense of faith.

**How could women overcome the obstacles of traditional customs?**

I think we have to talk about our traditions, because if you throw away your traditions, you're also throwing away a lot of continuity of civilization. But you have to engage and talk about the tradition, so that the traditions don't just speak with a patriarchal voice.

If we start talking to our tradition, the tradition will also start reflecting the voice of women. So instead of fearing the tradition, we have to openly and start talking to the tradition.

**You were awarded by President Sisi at the World Youth Forum, for your inspiring work in women's empowerment. As the first Indian recipient of the Presidential honor, can you tell me about your experience at WYF?**

I participated as a speaker at the World Youth Forum in 2018, where I had the great opportunity to be honored by the Egyptian President. This is the time I truly learned how much Egypt's political leadership is committed to empowerment and the discourse of development, and how serious they are about development.

The president was there in the sessions, sitting, listening, and talking to the youth. I think that is a very important message of political leadership to civil society, saying that "work together and getting the young people involved who have the energy and the ideas, and involve them in creating a new Egypt". WYF is a project of great vision, and I congratulate the Egyptian people for it.

**At last, what is your advice to women entrepreneurs?**

I think my message is more in terms of the energy of all women worldwide. We should step up into the world with knowledge and wisdom, knowing that what we bring is something strong and powerful, and the world needs it. We should step up with that confidence and faith in ourselves. Women have to get out there with self-belief, find the support systems, support each other and the opportunities will follow.

