

Aspiring Arab women scientists graduate from ICBA's regional fellowship program

Dubai, UAE, 8 March 2022 – In celebration of [International Women's Day](#), the International Center for Biosaline Agriculture ([ICBA](#)) organized today a special graduation ceremony for the second cohort of fellows of the Arab Women Leaders in Agriculture ([AWLA](#)) program at the Expo 2020 Dubai.

Launched on 8 March 2021 by H.E. Mariam bint Mohammed Almheiri, Minister of Climate Change and Environment of the UAE, the second edition of AWLA brought together 16 women scientists from Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia and the UAE on a seven-month online program.

H.E. Mariam bint Mohammed Almheiri said: “Women have the power to become active contributors to driving agricultural R&D. As they are disproportionately affected by global issues such as climate change and world hunger, empowering women to offer trailblazing solutions is a moral obligation, especially in this region. Inclusion and diversity are crucial for sustainable development and building a brighter future for all. The AWLA program is a shining example of unlocking women's potential through education and training so that they can become changemakers in the face of stubborn challenges.”

Being the first of its kind in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), AWLA is designed to empower women researchers from across the region to spearhead positive changes in agriculture, food production and environmental sustainability while addressing the challenges they face in their careers.

H.E. Razan Khalifa Al Mubarak, Managing Director of the Environment Agency – Abu Dhabi ([EAD](#)), President of the International Union for Conservation of Nature ([IUCN](#)) and Chair of ICBA's Board of Directors, said: “Every year we celebrate International Women's Day to bring into the spotlight the social, cultural and economic barriers that women face around the world. It is also an occasion to showcase women's contributions and achievements in different fields, including science. In this regard, it is great to see how programs like AWLA create opportunities for Arab women scientists to boost their knowledge and confidence so that they can contribute more to scientific progress and socioeconomic development not only in their countries but also the wider region.”

AWLA serves as a platform for early- and mid-career women professionals across agricultural disciplines to exchange ideas and experiences and collaborate on various projects aimed at enhancing food, water and nutrition security in the region.

Dr. Tarifa Alzaabi, Acting Director General of ICBA, said: “Women's role on the farm is crucial for food security globally. But their input in agricultural science and innovation is just as important as they can provide unique perspectives and insights. While women make up over 40 percent of the agricultural labor force and contribute around 18 percent to the overall GDP in the region, the proportion of women in research is very low compared to other parts of the world. Through our program, we aim to encourage more women to play an active role in agricultural science and innovation and support sustainable agricultural development and food security efforts in the region. We are delighted to see this cohort graduate from AWLA today and join our past 22 fellows to become part of a unique forum for women scientists in the region.”

Funded by the [Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation](#) and the [CGIAR Research Program on Wheat](#), the second edition of AWLA included a mix of virtual and e-learning courses tailored to improve the fellows' research, leadership and project management skills, among others.

Mr. James Carty, Interim Deputy Director for the Middle East & East Asia at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, said: “As the world begins to emerge from the pandemic, both governments and the private sector must support women’s employment and women-led scientific innovation as essential levers to food security, sustainability and stronger economic growth. AWLA delivers concrete solutions that help break down barriers for Arab women researchers and we’re proud to have supported it and help empower women in positions of leadership in all fields, particularly critical sectors like agriculture and science.”

“To cut down on hunger and malnutrition by 2030 and beyond, we need all talents – and we need empower and connect them. All dimensions of food staples research will be important, as several scientists have argued in [recent papers](#). I have seen wasting of talent and inequity at the workplace in my life. The AWLA fellows’ enthusiasm for change gives me hope! And I very much hope that the [new CGIAR](#) will continue to engage with ICBA on AWLA,” said Mr. Victor Kommerell, Program Manager for the CGIAR Research Programs on [Maize](#) and [Wheat](#).

Dr. Wafa Al-Yamani, an AWLA fellow from the UAE, said: “Our dreams are big, but so is our willpower to make positive and innovative changes in our workplaces, communities and countries. And the great thing is we know there are so many of us and we all are ready to help each other. One of the best things about AWLA is that it has brought us together and showed what we can achieve when we do things together.”

Empirical evidence indicates that a disproportionately low number of women work in senior research and leadership positions in the region. The average share of women researchers across the region stands at 17 percent - the lowest in the world. This gap is most visible in the staffing of agricultural research and extension organizations. This means that policy and investment measures in agriculture might not be as effective as they could be because they do not fully reflect gender perspectives.

To narrow this gap, ICBA partnered with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Islamic Development Bank ([IsDB](#)) to design AWLA in 2016 and kicked off the program with support from the two organizations and the CGIAR Research Program on Wheat in 2019. The 2019-2020 cohort of fellows included 22 women scientists from six countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia.

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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