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Women Leaders of the Middle East: Leena Al Olaimy, Helping MENA Find Its Green Side

A few days ago I flew to Bahrain to meet [Leena Al Olaimy](#), co-founder and managing director of [3BL Associates](#). Her firm works with a range of clients in the Middle East helping them incorporate a 'triple bottom line' strategy focusing on social equity, environmental sustainability, and economic growth. Over the past several months, I have been interviewing women from across the Middle East while working on a book project focusing on female leaders in the region for [Arabic Knowledge@Wharton](#). Women like Leena are helping shape the future of the region. In addition to her consulting work, she plays a key role in working with youth. For example last year she worked with a group of young people in Bahrain to organize the country's first TEDx event. Leena studied at Dartmouth University as a Fulbright Scholar and is a true role model in helping shape the future of the Middle East.

I recently had a chance to interview her. An edited transcript follows:

In the context of the GCC (the Cooperation Council of the Arab States of the Gulf) with oil prices being so cheap, do you find it challenging to get people to think about sustainability when they aren't in a crisis situation?

Leena Al Olaimy: It is challenging -- particularly since energy costs are heavily subsidized in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region, whether you are a major hydrocarbon exporter like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or an energy importer like Egypt and Jordan. In the Gulf, this postpones the post-oil economy and detracts from necessary R&D and investments in renewable energy. Also, cheap energy encourages over-consumption by individuals and companies.

Paradoxically, while Arab governments fear political backlash if they don't subsidize energy costs, the billions spent on energy subsidies could be re-allocated to address pressing social issues such as education reform, job creation, health, and housing.

According to a 2012 [UNDP report](#), subsidized energy costs Saudi Arabia \$43 billion per year, and it costs Egypt more than \$9.3 billion -- which is almost 10 percent of its GDP.

It's difficult to get people thinking more than one or two generations ahead and instead, aiming for

true sustainability, which is essentially: how do we survive, sustain and prosper over hundreds, thousands, or even millions of years through a regenerative process?

Entrepreneurship and innovation have become buzz words in much of the Middle East. What are some examples of work you've done where you felt that you truly had an impact in this realm?

Leena Al Olaimy: Entrepreneurship and innovation have certainly swept the region by storm, and it's time social entrepreneurship and social innovation were in the spotlight! Last year we developed and ran a pilot of our [Leadership Bridge Program](#) (LBP), in partnership with [Baraka Ventures](#). Most of the Middle East's youth population lacks access to social entrepreneurship education and a foundation in ethics and social responsibility -- which goes hand in hand with creating leaders who can accelerate social change.

We created the LBP, a three-day intensive program that promotes youth empowerment, and inspires young leaders to play an active role in constructively shaping their communities and countries for the better. Essentially, it is about molding and empowering the region's future responsible business, government, religious and community leaders. We're currently trying to roll the LBP out across the region, and provide a platform for Arab youth to connect and collaborate on regional issues from a young age.

As much as I value the work we have done with the private and public sectors, the last day of the LBP was definitely one of the most moving moments for me since co-founding 3BL.

With over half of the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region being under 20, do you think there is enough emphasis on teaching youth leadership?

Leena Al Olaimy: I think the attention towards teaching leadership is growing, but you can't 'learn' leadership theoretically without actually putting those leadership skills into practice. I don't think there are enough opportunities that allow students to hone their leadership skills. I also don't think there is enough of an emphasis on responsible leadership.

Moreover, often times, leadership programs will only focus on students who are in the highest percentile in terms of academic achievement -- which is not necessarily an accurate indicator of an individual's capacity to become a leader.

You've been part of the bringing TEDx to Bahrain and really wanting the youth to play a key role in organizing it, what was that experience like?

Leena Al Olaimy: During the LBP, we showed a few TED videos, including one by then 12-year old [Adora Svitak](#), entitled What Adults Can Learn from Kids. The participants loved it and wanted more TED! As it turned out, TEDxYouth was a month away, and many of the participants had been pressing us to give them their 'next challenge', so we let them organize the [TEDxManama](#) event for TEDxYouth.

They arranged everything, including the speakers -- 10 of whom were LBP participants. They had an event management and media committees, ran the registration process, held an art exhibition on the sidelines ... it was the biggest and most successful TED event ever held in Bahrain. I felt like a proud mother sitting in the audience!

Who are your role models?

Leena Al Olaimy: [Muhammad Yunus](#), 2006 Noble Peace Prize Winner and father of the microfinance movement; John Elkington, a British academic and sustainability and social responsibility pioneer who coined the term '[triple bottom line](#)'; and Bill Drayton, CEO and founder of [Ashoka](#), who is responsible for the rise of social entrepreneurship. I also feel incredibly blessed and fortunate to have met each one of them.

There is also a woman named [Janine Benyus](#) who is one of the most genius and inspirational people in the world. She is the founder of the [Biomimicry Institute](#), which looks to the 3.8 billion years of wisdom and experience that nature has had, to solve engineering and design challenges. If you've never heard of her, look up one of her TED talks. She will completely transform the way you think!

What type of clients are you working with currently and who are you trying to target?

Leena Al Olaimy: I would say that our target is visionary corporations that want to create more strategic impact and value through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) -- far beyond the traditional boundaries of philanthropy and volunteerism. Game-changers. This includes companies trying to find ways to leverage their core capabilities and existing innovations; or creating new innovations, which simultaneously generate business and social value.

We're also trying to target MNCs with strong global CSR practices, and work with them to localize and apply their social responsibility and sustainability initiatives in the MENA region.

In addition to working with cross-industry corporations, we also work with government and semi-government organizations, NGOs, and intergovernmental organizations. No matter the client, we very seldom work in silo and favor a more holistic approach. So, for example, if we were working with an insurance company on a health-related Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiative, we would involve and collaborate with relevant government bodies, NGOs, inter-governmental organizations, academia, those affected by the health issue, and other private sector organizations during the process.

