



# Women of passion

At a women's roundtable in the plush Cigar Lounge of Le Gray Hotel in Beirut, Hospitality News Middle East got a chance to sit with 13 women that have made a difference in the hospitality sector with Nada Alameddine, regional director of sales and marketing, hodema consulting services, moderating

Having devoted much to their fields, many of the women invited to take part in this roundtable have experienced motherhood and agreed that although their careers demand sacrifices, as working mothers they are in a position to act as role models for their children. While the challenges that these women face are many, the key issue for them is to be an equally outstanding mother and career woman.

"Ever since I started working, I found it easier to manage motherhood. The trend in Lebanon for a mother who doesn't work is to raise her kids and fill up her time by socializing. My time is now better spent, it's quality time. My children appreciate me more and my daughter sees me as a role model," said **Mireille Hayek**, owner, **La Parilla**, **Em Sherif** and **Yasmina**. "The mother that works is an example to her kids and they should feel that she is setting

**"It is challenging to be able to juggle the two extremes but sometimes, one thing is sacrificed for another"**

an example," agreed **Michelle Salhab Souhaid**, managing partner, **Al Mandaloun Café**.

### The career woman and mother

Comments from mothers at the roundtable showed how much they hold their motherhood sacred, regardless of their demanding hours. "As a wedding planner, I don't have the luxury to cut and say 'now it's time for my family'. I have clients that don't mind meeting me in the evenings after I put my kids to bed. However, once I am with my kids no one can get close to me or take from this time," explained **Ghada Blanco**, owner, **Weddings 'R Us**.

"That's why I'm in Lebanon and I don't want to go anywhere else. Whether you're an owner or an employee, it is easier in this part of the world. People understand when I say 'Sorry I can't because my daughter has an exam,' and we have easier access to support that can come from families or affordable hired help. In Europe and North America, that meeting cannot be postponed. It is annulled and you have to kill yourself to get your client back," **Lina Mroue**, owner, **Lina Mroue Consultancy**.

On the other hand **Maya Bakhaazi Noun**, owner, **The Beirut Cellar** and CEO, **Bekhazi Group** sees that it is challenging to be able to juggle the two extremes but sometimes, there has to be a sacrifice of one thing for something else.

But while many do feel that help is easier in Lebanon, they also said that maternity leave is quite short at 40 days, while in Europe, mothers get three, six or even 12 months. "You can't help that guilty feeling when you leave your child after 30 or 40 days, which is unfortunately the law. Still, it was much easier to leave them when they were babies than it is now when they are voicing that they miss you. The guilt now digs deeper and you feel torn. When they get older, it becomes easier," explained **Rana El Khoury**, general manager, **Le Gray Hotel Beirut**. She went on to stress that being organized and having an understanding husband is key and that with time, you learn to better impose on your clients the fact that you're a mother. "I have a very supportive husband and mother," concurred **Christine Sfeir**, CEO, **Dunkin Donuts, Semsom and Green Falafel**.

On the other hand, **Hala Achkar**, managing director, **Capital**

**Hospitality**, sees that natural and biological factors do play a significant role in the life of a working mother. "We encountered many problems when women in our staff started getting pregnant; such as coping with how they would manage their hours," she explained.

What of the option of a stay-at-home dad? It was obvious that this was definitely not on the agenda of the roundtable participants. There was absolutely no consensus resulting from the many side conversations; finally the commotion tapered down and the participants returned to the meeting's agenda.

### Added value

And what is the added value that they have given to their companies? "A woman has a unique feminine touch. From a catering business point of view, we pay attention to detail and have a more team-spirited approach than a man-to-man aura. We can be both feminine and tough... it's a nice mix," said **Dina Abboud**, senior operations director, **Cat & Mouth Catering**. "A woman puts her goal before personal gains. She is more interested in success rather than the money. She is more responsible and does what she

does honestly, in order to fulfill her self-esteem rather than her professional ambition only," said **Lina Lteif**, owner and general manager, **La Mie Dorée**.

"For men, ego comes before [their] goal. In women, goal comes before ego. A woman can multitask by running both a house and a business that equally require full time management. We women, we don't rest!" pointed out **Aline Kamakian**, owner, **Mayrig Restaurant, Batchig Armenian Bistro and Insurance and Investment Consultant Company**. Kamakian continued, "We can be both feminine and 'one of the boys' [ikht el rjeil]".

So where does the satisfaction come from? "Emotional satisfaction comes before money, and not the other way around. After I see my project succeeding, the feeling starts to grow to something else," replied Hayek. But Mroue disagreed, "Now let's get real. Money is still important! And our added value is that we are quick to adapt to everything. Let's not forget a woman's body, which undergoes many transformations in its lifetime and yet we are always adapting. This inherently predisposes us to always be ready and on top of things," she explained. Bakhaazi Noun has more of an in-between point of view, "It starts with an emotional satisfaction and then when I see it succeeding I enjoy the material part of it," she said.

### On gender equality

To El Khoury, a woman in the workplace is both a matter of necessity and self-satisfaction. "I remember my mother always saying that 'times are changing and you need to be self-sufficient'. By working and making our own money, this gives us a sense of satisfaction. It changes relationships where you are on an equal level with your husband". Hayek seconded, "There are definitely less fights in the house!

But Kamakian is more egalitarian in her approach. "I don't like this division of man and woman, because both of us together can do a lot. My grandma, who survived the Armenian Genocide used to tell me 'The man in the Middle Eastern community is the head of the family, but the woman is the neck'. It means that although the man can be the brain, you can guide the direction that he takes," she said. "And women do have more patience in the long run," added **Corine**



Dina Abboud



Hala Achkar



Nada Alameddine



Ghada Blanco



Maya Bakhaazi Noun



Mireille Hayek



Aline Kamakian



Rana El Khoury



Lina Lteif



Hala Massaad



Lina Mroue



Corine Nader

**Nader**, operations manager, **Magnolia Bakery**.

But what is the percentage of women versus men that run the show at companies? "In the office we are mainly half-half but on the ground the heavy lifting of our job requires more men," says Blanco. Across the roundtable, **Hala Massaad**, general manager, **Raouche Arjaan by Rotana** sees more of a discrepancy in



Michelle Salhab Souhaid



Christine Sfeir

**“People in this part of the world still live at home with their parents after graduating, so they don't feel the need to sustain themselves”**

numbers. “We are mainly 2% or 3% only as general managers. It's more and more difficult to find women chefs and staff for the kitchen. We are offering women jobs but they often don't want to work so hard. I started as a trainee, but I was flexible enough to try many departments. I was open to travel and try several job descriptions until I found myself,” she said.

Meanwhile, Kamakian sees that on the contrary, 70% of her staff are women and that there is always an opportunity if you grab it. Having started over 10 years ago, Kamakian started off not knowing much about this business. Today, her team is still made up of the same people. “I added employees. I didn't lose any. Whoever came as a trainee is now a manager. One lady is now my partner in Dubai,” she said fondly.

## Future generations

And where is the potential of tomorrow's manpower - or should we say - womanpower? “The new generation [in general] has become very spoiled and shallow... and parents do spoil their kids. People in this part of the world still live at home with their parents after graduating, so they don't feel the need to sustain themselves. They simply work for extra pocket money,” said Achkar. On the other hand, Lteif believes that Achkar's phenomenon is only the case with a certain niche rather than a stereotype. “This is our grand role as mothers to know how to raise our kids,” she affirmed. “We are over protecting our kids. At 15 years of age everyone has an iPhone. What's left?” exclaimed Kamakian.

“Housekeepers are there to help us as the parents and not the children, who need to learn how to be independent,” explained Salhab Souhaid. “I believe that people with less money know



how to raise their kids better than those that are wealthy,” points out Hayek.

In essence, many agreed that the young generation wants things to happen much more readily rather than working their way up progressively. “We do have a problem. I'm seeing shocking behavior in the new generation's protocol. For instance a simple good morning doesn't exist,” explained Blanco who goes on to say that what we have nowadays is a generation of mothers who need to work, in order to raise their kids and some don't know how they should raise their kids.

“I teach at USJ - IGE and always ask my first-year students what they want to do after they graduate. They all reply GM, owner, manager... never considering entry levels at the start of their career,” joked **Nada Alameddine**, regional director of sales and marketing, **hodema consulting services**, the moderator of the women's roundtable. Le Gray's El Khoury replied that “There's nothing wrong with wanting to get there but you need to work for it.”

“Where there is a will there is a way but one should start at the bottom. You cannot be [a] fresh university graduate, enter a company and become the boss. Start lower and climb,” pointed out Lteif.

## ANECDOTES

Getting to the top is not always an easy path. Five women share their thoughts and experiences for others to learn from and follow

### Dina Abboud

“I went to an event catered by Cat & Mouth as soon as I had arrived to Lebanon from the States. After which I told myself that if I were to work with anybody in Beirut, it would have to be Nicolas Cattan. For three months I begged Cattan to employ me. He was reticent because he didn't know how I would fair amongst the so-called ‘Achrafieh ladies’ as I didn't speak French. I told him, ‘I will wait and keep persisting until you agree’. When he did hire me, on my first day at work I fell off a chair but I've been there for 23 years.”

### Hala Achkar

“I had a waiter once, who was very good with clients, but the only uniform available was a size too big. He left and went to work for a lower salary rather than wear a shirt that didn't make him look appealing.”

### Ghada Blanco

“I had to work hard to research my projects, whereas

nowadays everything available at the click of a button on the Internet. The new generation is more selfish and opportunities are narrower. Parents don't have the luxury of being at home to raise their kids. This needs to be addressed so that they can be more available as disciplinarians.”

### Rana El Khoury

“At my first ever job was as a trainee, I was handed a room attendant's uniform. I looked at my boss and said, ‘You must be kidding? I hold a university degree and speak four languages’. He said ‘Go clean rooms for a month and then come and talk to me’. This was my wake up call.”

### Aline Kamakian

“You need to experience all aspects of a business. My nephews had to wash dishes in the kitchen before they could start in the restaurant proper.”



Mroue is more a devil's advocate on the matter, "Let's get real. This isn't a challenging environment for the young generation. There isn't much of a ladder to climb. And there isn't much to aspire towards unless you want to own your business. Our entire region was more stable both politically and economically before the Arab Spring. Today the opportunities have been affected and the possibilities have declined," she said. True to form, many agreed on the vast amount of brainpower and education in the midst of a region steeped in turbulence, war, and chaos.

### Women that inspire

And which woman inspires them? "Every woman who works long hours, has a family and makes an effort is a woman that inspires me. It's not a woman in media or show business or anything else that would make her more special than a mother with a family who is working hard. For sure some women have achieved more, but in terms of effort, they are all inspirational to me," said Bakhaazi Noun.

**"We are facing many challenges due to the situation of the country. This is on both man and woman."**

Kamakian agrees with Bakhaazi, "It's the generosity that the women that I work with have. These are the women that push me most," she stressed. But when it comes to specifics, Mroue dubbed Margaret Thatcher her inspiration, whereas Lteif is more for the spirit of Mother Theresa, which is about spreading love and peace.

### Obstacles

So when all is said and done, are there barriers to female leadership and is it still a man's world? "To me there is no barrier. My husband and brother give me so much encouragement," said Hayek. "Who said it's a man's world?" exclaimed Sfeir. "I put lots of men in the picture but I run the show behind the scenes and I make sure to manage it with a woman's touch," said Salhab Souhaid.

To Kamakian, the main challenge is to be a good leader who motivates people to reach their goals. "A leader shouldn't be a boss, but rather, push the employee or partners to reach their dreams," she said. Meanwhile, Massaad, at an assessment in Abu Dhabi, was the only woman among five male general managers in a negotiation group exercise and she felt challenged to prove her point.

"Even though I had a strong case, they were against me. In family businesses a woman

can still have a say but in large companies it is much more difficult to have your say amongst men," she explained. Bakhaazi Noun disagreed, "I never felt the barriers. The problems are the same, the challenges are the same."

El Khoury cited an example of how a man in a meeting could shout and get his way sometimes whereas a woman has to get her way by pushing for what she wants while remaining a lady. If she shouts, she will be construed as aggressive. "So it's stronger of us to show our point and slowly gain credibility. But most importantly, we as women, have to get over the fact that we are women when we are negotiating," she stressed. "We are facing many challenges due to the situation of the country. This is on both [the] man and woman. I don't look at gender, for me it is about the person," agreed Sfeir.

Achkar sees that as she learned to be more assertive in her career path, she also needed to let go of some of her femininity. "I can't help but feel that as women, once we work and strive, we become harder and tougher. You have to know how to negotiate and when you're in a meeting you have to impose yourself, especially if you start at a younger age," she said. Having started work as a 23-year-old owner's daughter, who was badly treated because of this status, she had to learn how to impose herself in a man's world.

### A man's world

To Mroue, it is not a man's world per se, but the political and economic laws and regulations that show a system that is still very patriarchal. Lteif also believes that we live in a patriarchal society. "Women haven't been working for long, so in the head of the people, especially men, the man is the head of the pyramid," she says.

"Has anyone gone to a bank to take a loan?" asked Mroue. "Economically, in Lebanon, a woman is not powerful. When I arrived I couldn't even open a bank account. I had to have a guarantor. In the GCC, women have more power economically and legally when it comes to money, inheritance and passing on their citizenship to their children than women in Lebanon do! Kamakian agreed, "When I was 17 years old, I lost my father, and had to work in door-to-door insurance sales. When I wanted

## WHAT MAKES A WOMAN SUCCESSFUL?

We asked our roundtable participants the one thing they felt was most important to their success and they would encourage others to follow.

**Dina Abboud** Passion and perseverance.

**Hala Achkar** Perseverance and dedication. Live up to your point of challenge. It's really about loving what you do because you need to work very hard, be consistent, be tough and know exactly what you want.

**Nada Alameddine** Passion and hard work.

**Ghada Blanco** Passion.

**Rana El Khoury** Do things for yourself and not for others.

**Mireille Hayek** Conciliate between business and emotion.

**Aline Kamakian** Perseverance.

**Lina Lteif** Assume your responsibilities.

**Hala Massaad** Understand who you are in order to give back to others.

**Lina Mroue** Very simply, follow a good business plan!

**Corine Nader** Hard work, patience and love of what you are doing.

**Maya Bakhaazi Noun** See yourself from a bird's eye view and from an onlooker's perspective.

**Randa Dammous Pharaon** Perseverance.

**Joumana Dammous Salame** Hard work.

**Michelle Salhab Souhaid** Passion and only passion.

**Christine Sfeir** Make your choice and stick by it. Support from your nearest and dearest is always a boost.

to open my own company, I had to have someone to back me up for a loan."

The roundtable conceded that once the "backward" legal obstacles are successfully passed, the challenges within the business bubble are equal for both men and women. But what motivates all these women every morning? Without exception and in a total buzz of agreement for once, as Salhab Souhaid put it so beautifully, "Passion and only passion is my motivator."