

## **ROULA MOUSSA**

### **AN UNSTOPPABLE FORCE OF TRANSFORMATION AND TECH-DRIVEN PROGRESS**

If you think it's easy for female entrepreneurs to succeed in business in the Middle East (ME), think again. While it is difficult for women everywhere to venture into the world of business, challenges multiply for them in the ME, especially in male-dominated fields. Gender constraints, cultural and social barriers and misogynist mentalities, to name a few, are considerable obstacles hindering women's career prospects in the region. Perceived as inadequate business partners and incapable of leading, their decisions and business judgments are not given due consideration and their accomplishments are often ignored or downplayed. Growing in this discouraging environment, Roula Moussa managed to upend this status quo. Not only did she venture into the business world of technology, but became a renown pan-Arab pioneer in this field. "Starting a career as an entrepreneur in Lebanon in 1996 was, in itself, a challenge; that's even before taking into consideration that my chosen field was technology, and the fact that I am a woman," says Moussa.

Fast forward, Lebanese engineer Roula Moussa was recognized as one of the 200 most powerful Arab women in 2014 by Forbes Middle East. With her cutting-edge innovations, venture investments and rich professional career in Tech, Moussa carved her name among Lebanon's top business leaders and influential entrepreneurs, and continues to push the envelope of business technologies therein, and wherever her companies operate. Roula is the founder of Netways, a forerunner of Internet technologies in the MENA region. Her DiasporaID platform, which Netways developed, was chosen to be on Forbes "Lebanon 100" list of the most inspiring endeavors whose entrepreneurs and business leaders help Lebanon to transform its economy.

In today's digital world, and thanks to entrepreneurial support systems such as incubators, accelerators and investment funds, many women are starting and growing tech businesses. But that wasn't the case in the nineties. Today's entrepreneurs, whose contributions to the tech revolution can't be ignored, are undoubtedly standing on the shoulders of the pioneers who paved the road for them to excel. "All of the entrepreneurial support systems that you see today did not exist back then. Trying to succeed in their absence was hard; and since I had to make do without them, I appreciate more the value they harbor for Lebanese innovation and our economy," says Moussa who tangentially dedicates a lot of time and resources to bolster them, for the benefit of Lebanese youth and young women in tech.

Known as a results-driven person and highly motivated when working in challenging environments, Moussa turned her biggest challenges into what fueled her energy to succeed. "I had no magic formula, but determination – lots of it. I knew that, as a woman, I will have to prove myself twice over my male counterparts... but that didn't stop me."

Among Moussa's biggest successes was establishing development programs, such as Talentways boot-camp – currently running in full force - to recognize young, local talents "in the raw," and help them in the ICT industry.

Such a success does not come on a golden platter. It requires a tribute of sweat, blood and tears; failures and disappointments, to which no person is immune. "You are bound to face a multitude of them in your life, and I've had my fair share like everyone else," she shares. But unlike many, Moussa chose not to dwell on them, "It serves no purpose but to keep you from focusing on the promise of the future. Even in the darkest bouts of my career, when faced with seemingly unsurmountable challenges, like war, lack of funding, political instability and recession, I chose to focus on the future, our potential as a nation and as a people, and thankfully my bets paid off."

Life in Lebanon is challenging, to say the least, but the county is like a Phoenix, defying death by arising renewed from the ashes. The resilience of its people is indeed

unprecedented. A small country with limited natural resources, Lebanon's situation drove its people to seek opportunities elsewhere. The waves of migration that started at the turn of the twentieth century intensified during the civil war that started in the mid-seventies and lasted for fifteen years, ripping the country apart. In fact, there are more Lebanese expatriates today living outside their motherland than Lebanese residents in country. These emigrants became an integral part of the social landscape of host communities around the world. From restaurant owners to CEOs of multinational companies, Lebanese expats succeeded in all fields and industries. They immensely contributed to the development and enrichment of the culture of their adoptive countries. But no matter where they settled, how far they reached or how high they climbed, they maintained both their identities and strong ties with their homeland. The wealth of Lebanon lies today in its people. Bringing home the minds and investments of the expats to help build the country while mentoring and supporting the new generation was an ingenious concept masterminded by Moussa. "If we were so successful abroad as individuals, imagine what is possible if we could use digital transformation to unite Lebanese people everywhere, under one roof and in one collaborative effort for development," Moussa explains the concept of her brainchild, DiasporaID.

DiasporaID platform, is a first-of-its kind global digital network; It aims to connect Lebanese people in communities around the world together, and with their hometowns. As explained during its launch ceremony in August 2017, the DiasporaID platform provides the opportunity for [Lebanese] diaspora around the globe to mobilize their expertise and resources, and digitally engage in development projects in Lebanese communities and villages. These opportunities include investment opportunities, fundraising for various local projects, on-line mentoring of young people, and most importantly exchanging products and services with potential Lebanese partners all over the world.

In the short time since its inception, the ambitious and worthy project has far exceeded Moussa's expectations. "We are at the point where embassies, municipalities and Lebanese organizations worldwide are contacting us on a daily basis for walkthroughs, suggestions and collaboration ideas. We have so much in store, and I can barely wait for

what's next," explains Moussa. "More than that, we have already received inquiries and expression of interest from multiple sources, including countries, who are considering implementing their own brand of DiasporaID to engage their national diaspora." With the success of DiasporaID, Moussa has yet many frontiers to conquer, amongst which is a new project that "takes societal impact to the next level through the amazing potential of A.I. and machine learning," she explains.

Recognized among Lebanon's top business leaders and most influential entrepreneurs supporting the growth of the country's economy, Moussa is "completely absorbed these days" working on and exploring various approaches to tackle Lebanon's challenges through digital technology. She feels "reinvigorated by the current president's commitment to women empowerment, and fighting corruption through technology," she adds.

In a world where roles are stereotyped by gender, it is crucial for young girls at an early age to have female role models, not just to inspire them, but also to prove to them that they can in fact excel in whatever profession they choose to venture into. Moussa is not just a role model to her three daughters, but also to young women in Lebanon and the region. "If there's any message that could provide some guidance to my daughters and youth in general to succeed in an increasingly complex world, it's this: Adopt a mindset of lifelong learning. This is indispensable. The world is now an open playground. Geographical boundaries have been abolished in the professional and technological contexts, and you are now competing with the best of the best, on a global scale. If you rely just on what you've learnt in university, or in the onset of your career, your prospects are dim. You must be extremely adaptive and resilient, just as today's startups are expected to morph and pivot to fit their target market. Don't be afraid to make radical course adjustments. For the entrepreneurial spirits, look for a need you can solve better than anyone else at the moment, roll up your sleeves, and have a go at it. You should be out there trying and failing. Nothing teaches you like failure, and the earlier you fail, the better. If you do not succeed, aim to fail fast, do an assessment of your experience, and move to another problem."

Moussa worked hard to achieve her goals. Her competitive character, resilience and perseverance have all contributed to her success. “Grit” is the world she attaches too much value to, and hopes she had passed on some of her perseverance to her daughters, “through genetics, role-modeling, or both,” she adds. Moussa’s daughters understand the role she plays in women empowerment. “I know for a fact that they appreciate what my work represents for the cause of women empowerment, and for that I’m thankful.” Moussa can’t assess yet how is that affecting their perspective on life, “I think it’s too early to tell for sure. But my eldest daughter, who’s the first to go to college, chose a STEM learning career, and her college application letter did mention learnings she attributed to my experience, and that fills me with pride and joy.” Moussa concludes. Roula Moussa, an unstoppable force embarking on new adventures and dreaming of the future determined to transform everything she dreams about and everything she touches. Stay tuned for the next chapter in her inspiring journey.