

Qatar Today Magazine

I interviewed several Qatar-based women for a series on pioneering women in their fields.

Interview with Dr. Amal Al-Malki

Dr. Amal Al-Malki is an author, international public speaker, university professor, a pioneer for educational change and an ambitious Qatari woman. After graduating from Qatar University she continued her studies in the UK and completed her PhD in Comparative Literature at the University of London: “it was frowned upon at that early age for me to go and study abroad. Being a Qatari woman wasn’t easy back then, there were no opportunities for women except to teach at a school and I didn’t want to be a teacher. I was expected to get married and have children really early on, so for me to choose to do something different was a huge thing.” This determination was something Dr. Al-Malki had to balance with the traditional culture in which she lived: “Even men find it difficult to manoeuvre within a conservative culture, but I think it’s more difficult for us women because we are supposed to be the carrier of the culture to the next generation...back then it was a battle.”

After nearly seven years in London, Dr. Al-Malki decided to return to Qatar, “I chose to come back to Qatar to make a difference, to forge a new path.” But, the conservative boundaries of her culture were not easily pushed, as she discovered when trying to find a job: “I looked at several options and apparently I was over-qualified for them, I guess having a PhD at that age wasn’t a positive thing.” Forced to find something different, Dr. Al-Malki saw an opportunity at Carnegie Mellon University-Qatar (CMU-Q). It was an educational role and Dr. Al-Malki was certainly qualified but it was still a challenge to get employed there: “they said as a Qatari, we are not supposed to hire you. They thought they were supposed to deliver American education via American faculty.” Not easily discouraged though, Dr. Al-Malki persisted until finally CMU-Q agreed to send her to train in America: “I taught in Pittsburgh for a whole semester, my first teaching experience ever. Then I came back as a visiting professor in my own country, something that my father didn’t really like, but I was appointed as assistant professor.” Dr. Al-Malki became the first, and to this day only, Qatari faculty member in Education City.

Since joining CMU-Q, Dr. Al-Malki’s list of accolades has continued to grow, from being a keynote speaker at international events, to being recognised as a Qatar Foundation Achiever, to publishing two books: “it was very important to me to assert myself as a writer, given that I chose academia. Now I’ve got two books, the second one I believe is still a bestseller here in Qatar, I feel I have built a name.” And that name is of great importance to Dr. Al-Malki, as a confirmation of her achievements as a woman: “I was very aware from a young age of the inequalities that exist in society towards women, so for me to build an identity and people to refer to me and acknowledge me, being looked at and evaluated as an academic, it’s the biggest success that I have achieved and I hope it will be a lesson for other women.”

Three years ago Dr. Al-Malki founded the Translation and Interpreting Institute (TII) at Hamad Bin Khalifa University, a centre for translation and interpreting studies. TII was established

in recognition of the growing importance of communication between different cultures and societies, which Dr. Al-Malki strongly advocates: “I see myself as a global citizen, I’m a local, I’m a Qatari and I’m very proud of my roots definitely, but at the same time I aspire to be a global citizen. I believe in equality, tolerance and multiculturalism.” TII’s growing recognition locally and internationally stands as one of her proudest accomplishments: “I’m the founder of TII, I’ve been running it for 3 years and even if I leave at some point, this is my legacy.”

Dr. Al-Malki has an undeniable, natural readiness to make gutsy choices: “I love the challenge. I think by nature I’m a bit rebellious.” But forging a brand new path is not easy, and she acknowledges the crucial role her family has played: “One of the things my generation lacked drastically was role models, but we are products of culture, parents. I would not have achieved what I have if I did not have an open-minded, progressive father, and now a lovely husband who supports me.” As a role model for women everywhere, Dr. Al-Malki embodies a capacity for change that she truly believes is possible: “Having a critical mass to effect change is very important, but we know that change can start with one person. First of all we need to educate women, we need to empower women, and they need to know their rights.” And she encourages women to take chances: “I would say follow your dreams. I wouldn’t take ‘no’ for an answer. The challenges that I had to face and the *way* I faced them is what made me who I am; it is what shaped my personality.”

Dr. Al-Malki has traversed a rocky route to success, but even after receiving tenure at CMU-Q, she has no intention of slowing down: “I still want to write and publish books and I want to make sure that TII is recognised and acknowledged internationally as a centre of excellence in translation and interpreting. I just want to continue doing what I’m doing.” After all of her hard-won battles Dr. Al-Malki has found contentment: “I could have done this better, I could have done that better, but I’ve learnt from every mistake. If you changed something, you would change as a person and I think I’m at peace with who I am right now.”

Interview with Carolin Zeitler

As founder and CEO of How Women Work, and a successful businesswoman, coach and author, Carolin Zeitler is on a mission to empower all women. After arriving in Qatar just over seven years ago, she found herself amongst a group of ambitious women who had no real platform for their ideas: “I first started with a small group called *These Ladies Mean Business*, and about 15 of us would critique each other’s business ideas, or do presentations to each other – to help each other out.” The impact that this small group had on those involved led to the inception of How Women Work (HWW) in 2009, and the annual conference the following year. Arguably, what is most distinctive about the HWW enterprise is its longevity, “it’s not only a conference anymore, it is a community and it’s a community that has survived over many years, and in that I think it’s special, I think it is different from the other initiatives in Doha.”

The unique set of challenges that Doha presents for business owners and professionals is something that Carolin became aware of the hard way when starting HWW: “...every year something completely unexpected happened. One year our venue was cancelled about five weeks before the conference, the hotel called and said they had to cancel all events that were booked for the next three months!” The often transient nature of Qatar in particular made starting a business here tricky, and Carolin admits that continuity is difficult to maintain: “it is difficult to improve the standard every year, which is obviously our goal. If you have more long term employees it is much easier to grow.” Yet in 2008 when Carolin started her own corporate coaching business, Arcata Interactive Communication Coaching, this atmosphere of change turned into a blessing in disguise as she pioneered the field: “When I first went out to companies I actually had to educate them about what coaching is, which I think enables you to kind of bias the market a little bit in your favour. Being the first person to talk to people about coaching has enabled me to give them a certain idea about what coaching means.”

The challenge of being a woman in business was also something Carolin was able to turn to her advantage: “I have actually often felt that it’s an advantage to be a woman, I’ve often felt that people would be more inclined to give me five minutes of their time, to at least give me a chance to talk to them.” In the end, for Carolin, those hard won battles were the toughest lessons but the most rewarding: “You definitely grow a lot of resilience but when you are a pioneer you have to find these early adopters, you have to find people who are willing to take the risk.”

Resilience was, and continues to be, a vital skill for Carolin as an entrepreneur and businesswoman, and she emphasises the particular importance of having that core of strength when starting out: “I would sit awake at 3 o’clock in the morning and think all sorts of horrible thoughts because there was a huge challenge and at that moment, I couldn’t see how I could fix it. During the daytime it was ‘go go go’, but in the night is the time when you need something you can connect to. For me it’s always been my spiritual belief, but it’s whatever carries you through those moments, you need something that helps you see that light at the end of the tunnel.” The support of her family from a far was also a source of strength, and notwithstanding the challenges of balancing work and family life, her daughter has always been a huge help: “...despite the fact that this it is changing in today’s society, I do think it’s still more of a challenge for a woman than a man to maintain the

balance between the work and the family life. My daughter has been very supportive, for the last 3 years she has actually been our official photographer at the conference.”

When asked if she would change anything she has done since coming to Qatar, Carolin is resolute: “there are a lot of things that I have learned along the way and if I was back there with the knowledge I have now, there are things that I could do better, but everything has had its purpose. It all makes sense when you look back, how I had to go through this journey of growth and development and how everything along the way taught me something. So really I wouldn’t have it any other way.” This certainty is arguably rooted in a belief that situations are what you make of them – something which this year’s HWW conference theme ‘Be the Change’ focuses on: “For me it’s all about being the change that you want to see in the world. If you think of what isn’t happening in society that you would like to see, try and take a step towards that, towards filling that gap.”

That is exactly what Carolin intends to do with her next project on the benefits of coaching for female executives, something she hopes will fill a gap in current research on coaching: “our goal is to make coaching more tailored to the real needs of female executives here in Qatar. It’s always difficult to explain the benefits of something that is fairly new, so having that research will also help and contribute to actually verifying that there is a benefit to it.” It is this inclination towards being a trailblazer that makes Carolin a pioneering woman.

Alex Langston

Interview with Fatima Sultan Al-Kuwari

As Director of Public and Community Relations at Ooredoo since 2012, Fatima Sultan Al-Kuwari has been the proud spokesperson of a company that she believes “foster the right environment for women to grow as leaders.” She began her career as the head of Ooredoo’s social media in Qatar, where she helped launch the first community-driven customer help site: “Ooredoo was a pioneer in using social media to speak to customers in Qatar, and I’m proud to have been involved in this initiative from the beginning.” Women in leadership roles were a rarity when Fatima at this time, and the nature of a technology driven business was an added challenge: “proving that I could keep-up in a predominantly male orientated sector was a big challenge, but it also pushed me to work harder and be better than I thought I could be.” Inspired by her company’s belief and the support of her family, Fatima came to believe that it was possible to be whatever she wanted to be: “I knew that I had the backing of my company and those close to me, so in that sense I couldn’t fail.”

A supportive work and home environment were important in enabling Fatima to climb the career ladder, and she doesn’t view her gender as something which made her any different at work: “What type of person you are defines how you approach a challenge and in my experience I don’t work differently from any other colleague, male or female, when it comes to every-day work challenges.” Instead, reaching her career goals and working hard in her profession is what distinguishes Fatima and what enables her to be an advocate for women: “I want to be a role model for all women in Qatar, especially young people, and being able to show women that they can get to where they want to be is a great feeling.” Her position at Ooredoo is providing Fatima with the knowledge and skills in corporate social responsibility (CSR) with which she can expand her influence to a wider community: “Leading the community relations side of Ooredoo has helped me make an impact in the CSR sector in Qatar and champion women across my field, and this is something that I feel very proud of.” This is also a role that Fatima takes very seriously: “I do believe that it comes with great responsibility, such a role provides me with platform to reach a wider audience and give back to communities of women.”

With a personal goal to: “have a positive impact in the lives of anyone that I interact with on personal and professional levels,” Fatima is ambitious in her desire to develop Qatar and the world around her. At the same time, she also acknowledges the effect the journey to success has had on her own life: “it did have a positive impact on me with regards to honing my interpersonal skills overall, as well as learning to balance business and community needs to benefit everyone in Qatar.” For Fatima the subtle shift her career has taken away from the technological side of the business has meant a shift in her ambitions too: “Everyone has things that they would have done differently, and years ago I might have said that I wanted to focus more the social media and technological side of my job, but now, looking at all the initiatives and community events we have achieved I wouldn’t change a thing.” And a positive outlook on life means that Fatima has no regrets: “I believe life is always full of opportunities and new challenges, there is always a way to improve things and make them better one way or another.”

It is this belief in the possibility for change that has continued to drive Fatima: “believing in yourself first is key to any success, if you put enough effort in with the right knowledge you can achieve whatever you want.” For Fatima knowledge is the key to success, whether just beginning a career or aiming to move forward in a profession: “I am a big believer in continuous development and training. I do recommend reading at least one good book every month, because ‘leaders are readers’.”

This strong belief stems from her religion, but whilst she cites Islam as her original encouragement to read, she also acknowledges the power of self-belief when trying to develop oneself: “To be the change is to take ownership of our lives and change within ourselves first to be able to change anything around us. Stop the negative attitude and criticism, and substitute it with actions.” It is this view which gives Fatima the ability to be a pioneer - in her profession, for the community around her, for her country as a whole, and within herself.

Alex Langston

Interview with Lauren Fryer

Lauren Fryer is a marketing and communications expert whose successful media career has seen her work with a range of prestigious companies in both television and publishing, from the BBC and CNN to TIME Magazine and Harpers Bazaar. After working in Melbourne, London and Dubai, Lauren was appointed Director of PR & Marketing for The Ritz-Carlton Doha, and moved to Qatar in 2008. Less than three years later she spotted an opportunity to channel her experience and industry knowledge into a new project, and in 2011 Lauren founded her own marketing agency, Qanect: “In an industry that is already significantly male dominated, not only was it ‘a first’ in Doha, but it’s also not very common in the world of media in general.”

The male dominated marketing world that Lauren was used was somewhat amplified in Qatar, though she never let it slow her down: “I was very much aware I was a women ‘working in a man’s world’, but in Qatar it was more prevalent across my clients, setting up the business with government entities, my partners etc. I never thought, oh I’m a women, this is going to be harder for me, I always thought, I’m a women, so let this work just right for me!” And it was this positivity that helped Lauren when things became challenging: “Walking into the ministry of business and trade as a white, blonde and single female, or attending your first pitch, where the panel is entirely men, and all talking in another language was very daunting – but you very quickly realize that persistence is key; so is a nice smile, a professional candor and knowing your information. And not taking no for an answer!”

Lauren soon recognized that she could use her skills and, what may be typically female, traits, to her advantage: “As women we over think, over analyze. This can sometimes work in our favour - we have back up plans for back up plans, we have options 1, 2 and 3 for every scenario and we have different tactics for different people based on the thorough analysis. You are one step ahead.” She also knew that Doha presented a unique set of issues for business owners, but that being a woman did not have to be a further hindrance: “In Doha everyone faces the same challenges; it’s just how you approach them, and this is the same in business. It doesn’t matter if you are male or female, knowledge is power and in the end this will be more important in whatever situation you find yourself in.”

Some of the business lessons Lauren has learned came from difficult scenarios, and she maintains that team work was vital: “One thing you need to learn is you just can’t do it all! Hire strong people, people who are experts and it will make the business stronger.” And Lauren admits now that it is not only the business that is made stronger by a great team: “I am more resilient than I ever thought possible. It has taught me the value of relationships, the value of the people around you, working and supporting you is far greater than the impact you would ever be able to make on your own, and is so much more rewarding as well.”

Lauren was primarily motivated to start her business by the passion she has for the work she does: “It was never a goal of mine to start an agency. It was the demand for the work I was doing. And loved doing. I was working across many projects in Doha and I had to decide whether to cut back or expand and open a company that would then enable me to be able to deliver. I chose the latter!” The strong work ethic Lauren brings to her work was instilled in her from an early age: “My

family has always been great supporters of mine, always encouraging me to dream big. My biggest supporter has also always been my dad, an entrepreneur himself, and someone who has been in business for a long time all around the world; a great asset to have when we were starting up. Nothing was ever unattainable in my up-bringing, nothing is impossible and if you put in the hard work, consistently, then the rewards will be there.”

Now that Qanect is successful and continuing to expand, Lauren is realizing how she may help others: “Be the change is, for me, about embracing what I have accomplished and sharing the experience and knowledge where I can. As ‘pioneers’ I believe it is our duty to lead by example and to encourage others.” And the advice she has for aspiring businesswomen is practical as well as inspirational: “If you want something to change, don’t expect someone else to do it for you. Ask yourself - can you face a thousand no’s before you get that one amazing yes, are willing to sacrifice almost everything and work 24 hours a day. If the answer is yes then go for it and take everything that is thrown at you, because the feeling of fulfillment is worth every moment of the hard work, sweat and tears that has gone into building your dream!”

Alex Langston