

EQUIPPING WOMEN FOR BUSINESS SUCCESS

RANIA ANDERSON, AN INTERNATIONAL EXPERT ON THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF WOMEN IN DEVELOPING ECONOMIES, IS THE KEYNOTE SPEAKER AT THE GENDER MAINSTREAMING AWARDS. SHE SPOKE TO **HELEN GRANGE**

With nearly 30 years of experience as a senior corporate leader, a small business owner and an executive business coach, and having lived in a number of emerging economies, Rania Anderson knows firsthand about the difficulties that educated women face trying to achieve professional success.

"In 2010 I addressed over 450 women at the inaugural Qatar International Business Women's Forum, and afterwards three women came up to me to bemoan the fact that all career advice books were written for Western women, and that to get relevant help with their careers or businesses, they had to spend precious money and time to physically attend an event or meet with a mentor. Since then, women around the world have repeatedly told me that they face the same problems," she says.

Anderson has lived all over the Middle East, in India, Iran and England. In 1978 she went to the US to study, and has a master's degree in foreign service from Georgetown University, with an honours in business, as well as a BSc in business from Oklahoma State University.

Her career began at the Bank of America, where she rose to senior leadership, before leaving in 1997 to start and grow her executive coaching and consulting business, Meridian Consulting.

By now, Anderson has coached businesswomen and men around the world for more than 17 years, and is author of the book *UNDETERRED: The Six Success Habits of Women in Emerging Economies*, the first career advice book written expressly for educated women in growth markets. She is also founder of The Way Women Work (thewaywomenwork.com), a thriving career advice platform.

Professional women, Anderson says, need more than inspiration and the "be confident, go for it" messages. "Women are as ambitious

as men, and they want specific feedback about what to do and how to do it. Globally, we find that male managers are reluctant to give the direct feedback that women need, because they are either uncomfortable doing so, or are not sure how best to approach the conversation," she says.

She eschews the "glass ceiling" analogy, meanwhile, saying: "It presumes that the barriers are only at the top. Like on a course, hurdles are encountered throughout the race, not just at the end. And what seems to be obstacles are often just road bumps that slow women down. They can be worked around or eliminated.

"In fact, my research in emerging economies globally showed that the ability to overcome obstacles was what successful women had in common. Also, women's career advancement comes in waves, in different stages of their life, and not as a straight line to the top," she says.

According to Anderson, two things need to happen for the global economy to thrive: first, businesses need to clearly envision and identify the benefit of having shared leadership, not just from a numbers perspective, but in terms of what it would mean for them as a business, for their customers, employees and community.

Second, boards and businesses need to understand that their criteria for board members are outdated. "If boards broadened their criteria and better valued the experiences that many senior women bring, they would find lots of qualified women to sit on their boards," she says.

This naturally entails getting the buy-in from

men in business, Anderson submits. "I believe that the next frontier in achieving gender balance is to educate and activate men at all levels of business, not just at the top ... Just as we've been training women, so too do we need to train men," she says.

In South Africa, Anderson says there is significant progress in respect of gender representation, in both the corporate and non-corporate sectors. "Women are making huge progress as entrepreneurs, and as public and non-profit-sector leaders. Women are excelling because they have ideas of how to solve problems that men did not consider or didn't have the experience to solve. And they are taking the appropriate risks needed to launch and scale their businesses. The patriarchal model is slowly easing, making way for shared leadership," she says. ■

BOOK CREDENTIALS

Rania Anderson's book, *UNDETERRED: The Six Success Habits of Women in Emerging Economies*, is based on four years of research of over 250 women of all ages, at all career stages, in emerging economies.



Rania Anderson