



● Princess Sabeeka and Prince Talal sign the MoU to launch the Ibd'a'a Bank



● Princess Sabeeka with Mr Ban, Shaikh Khalid and others at the UN signing

Breaking barriers

Bahrain set the standard this year when it became the first country in the Gulf to set up a community bank that provides loans to help low income families start their own businesses.

It was launched in February by His Majesty King Hamad's wife and Supreme Council for Women chairwoman Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa.

The Ibd'a'a (Creative) Bank community bank aims to help 5,000 people within the next three years.

Princess Sabeeka signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Arab Gulf Programme for United Nations Development Organisations (AGFUND) president Prince Talal bin Abdul Aziz Al Saud to set up the bank, with a capital of \$5 million (BD1.89m).

Thousands of Bahrainis on low incomes are set to benefit from project that provides them with small loans to start their own businesses.

The bank aims to help 1,000 Bahrainis in its first year and 5,000 by the end of the third year. "This ambitious scheme couldn't have come at a better time with the spiralling global economic downturn and the growing dangers and challenges," said Princess Sabeeka.

"It reflects our deep belief in the necessity of protecting the less advantaged and vulnerable social categories and ensuring their welfare and growth."

An historic agreement that aims to achieve gender equality in Bahrain was signed later in the year by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Supreme Council for Women (SCW).

The deal aims to strengthen and promote the co-operation between both organisations towards implementing the country's National Strategy on the Advancement of Bahraini Women.

The programme is designed to improve national capacity at different levels with the ultimate aim of creating gender equality.

Political and economic empowerment of women and gender mainstreaming into national development plans are also key objectives of the deal.

It was signed by UN resident co-ordinator and UNDP resident representative Sayed Aqa and council general-secretary Lulwa Awadhi at a ceremony, held at the SCW headquarters in Riffa.

The signing took place in the presence of Princess Sabeeka, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and Foreign Minister Shaikh Khalid bin Ahmed Al Khalifa.

Princess Sabeeka highlighted the start of women's education more than 80 years ago, saying it marked the beginning of the country's continuous development to empower women.

She said Bahrain was a nation that had gone through significant reforms, which had established it as a country that provided women with equal opportunities.

"In efforts to provide women with universal parity the council has launched the Strategy for the Advancement of Bahraini Women," added Princess Sabeeka.

"We have been working hand-in-hand with governmental institutions, civil societies and the private sector in order to implement this proposition which aims to pilot women to our goals."

"The UN has set a major foothold for all women by providing the basic principles for their rights, which proves to be fundamental in paving the path for a bright future."

Mr Ban praised the achievements of Bahraini women and highlighted the increasingly active role they were playing in society and the country's development.

He also pointed out the achievements of Shaikha Haya bint Rashid Al Khalifa during her role as UN General Assembly president, between 2006 and 2007.

"While we all know that much more needs to be done on gender equality here and globally, the world should know more about the achievements of Bahraini women," said Mr Ban.

"You are setting an example for the region and contributing to the world to promote the empowerment of women."

"I am proud that the UN and my team here in Bahrain, represented by the UNDP, have established a solid partnership with the Supreme Council for Women and Bahraini non-governmental organisations."

"The signing of our partnership document today will further advance the active role of Bahraini women in the political and economic spheres, particularly as the country moves towards national elections next year."

Earlier this month, Princess Sabeeka honoured 39 female health professionals, in celebration of the annual Bahraini Women's Day.

"The country should be proud of the progress made in empowering women to fulfil crucial



● Princess Sabeeka honours female health professionals on Bahraini Women's Day

roles," she said at the ceremony, held at the Health Ministry's College of Health Sciences.

According to the latest figures released by the government, nearly 60 per cent of doctors working for Bahrain's Health Ministry are women. They account for 57pc of doctors and 67pc of dentists.

"Sixty per cent of all ministry employees are women and 81pc of them are Bahraini," said Health Ministry public health and primary care assistant under-secretary Dr Mariam Al Jalahma.

"Female nurses make up 88pc, while women in supervisory positions are 51pc, specialist ranks 58pc, and executive ranks 44pc of Bahrainis for 2008."

The data for last year shows that women are making in-roads in the healthcare sector, in particular Bahrainis, who make up a large proportion of the ministry's female staff.

"Although achievements have been made to empower women, we still have more to do."

We should be proud of our achievements and appreciate the contributions of women," said Princess Sabeeka.

The SCW issued a joint statement with Bahraini Women's Union paying tribute to female employees who are taking part in building their country's future.

Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry (BCCI) chairman Dr Essam Fakhro paid homage to Bahraini women's contribution to economic development.

Citing official figures, he said businesswomen represented 15 per cent of BCCI members.

The Labour Ministry has lined up a programme to honour outstanding female employees, as part of the celebration.

Meanwhile, eight women have announced their intention to stand in next year's parliamentary and municipal elections.

Thirty women attended a conference organised by the Supreme Council for Women in co-ordination with Mayasim Telecommunications

Company, earlier in the year, on running election campaigns.

The five-day event, at the council's premises in Riffa, was part of a nationwide campaign to secure seats for women in parliament and all five municipal councils in the 2010 elections.

The goal is to secure at least two seats for women in each of the five municipal councils and in parliament.

It also aimed at creating a team of women capable of influencing the elections outcome, by managing or taking part in campaigns.

The Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa's Award for Empowering Bahraini Women was presented this year to two organisations, at a ceremony at the council's premises in Riffa.

Tamkeen (formerly the Labour Fund) won in the government sector category, while GPIC topped the private sector.

They were among 37 organisations vying for the award, including 26 governmental organisations and 11 private sector establishments.

The winners received their awards from Princess Sabeeka.

The award, which was established following the orders of His Majesty King Hamad, is one of the council's key projects in promoting the role of women in line with the National Action Charter and the Constitution, said Princess Sabeeka.

"The objective of the award is to encourage public and private establishments to back and promote the role of Bahraini women, strengthen their training and integrate them in the national development plan," she said.

The award is granted once every two years to organisations for their efforts in supporting and empowering working Bahraini women.

The winners were presented a shield and BD10,000 each, which will be dedicated to supporting training programmes for female employees.