

SAFA Women's Day Celebrations 2023

On Wednesday, March 15, 2023, the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Pakistan hosted the first **SAFA Women's Day Event 2023** on behalf of SAFA Women Leadership Committee (WLC) online through Zoom and Facebook live. The theme of this event was '*Building a Sustainable Future Through Diversity and Inclusion*' with hashtag *#EmbraceEquity* and was attended by SAFA Members in Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Maldives.

As master of ceremonies, Ms. Sadia Shakoor, Supply Chain Controller, Nestle Pakistan Limited and Ms. Qurat ul Ain Hassan, Member CA Women Committee, co-hosted the event and expertly steered the entire program.

Ms. Hina Usmani, Chairperson of the SAFA WLC, commenced the event by extending a cordial welcome to all attendees and providing an overview of this year's theme. In her welcome address, she highlighted the key landmark decisions taken by SAFA Board based on the Committee's proposal which includes 1) declaration of SAFA women's day 2) Announcement of achievement awards and 3) allowing social media presence which significantly helped in enhancing the SAFA brand on a global scale. She provided a brief overview of the SAFA WLC's upcoming initiatives for the year and also mentioned that the diversity and inclusion guide has been issued by ICA Pakistan. She emphasized the need for all SAFA member bodies to adopt these initiatives to promote diversity and inclusion.

After Ms. Hina Usmani, Vice President ICAP, Mr. Asad Feroze was invited to share his viewpoint on 'The Promising Outlook of D&I in Pakistan'. While emphasizing on diversity and inclusion as fundamental principles of a forward-thinking society, he appreciated the efforts of CA Women Committee of ICA Pakistan and their efforts to create a Women Inclusion Guide for the CA profession and workforce in Pakistan. According to him, the D&I initiative aims to promote fairness and equality in all aspects of life, with the fundamental objective of providing equal opportunities to all citizens of Pakistan. He also highlighted the critical role of the D&I initiatives in driving economic growth and development throughout the SAFA region. By promoting a more diverse and inclusive workforce, the initiative can foster increased innovation and productivity.

SAFA President, CA. Nihar N. Jambusaria also acknowledged the importance of diversity and inclusion in achieving all-round progress, particularly in the context of gender diversity. While sharing the tremendous progress made by ICA India in terms of women intake in CA profession, he mentioned that the time has come in the profession to take a leap forward and shift focus from our traditional activities of auditing & taxation to uplifting MSMEs, helping startups and participating in sustainability by guiding business professionals on adding value. He emphasized on the importance of creating a workplace environment that is conducive to women participation and overall growth can be achieved only if both men and women bring their unique skills to the table. He congratulated the WLC for organizing the event and encouraging continued efforts towards diversity and inclusion.

President IFAC, Ms. Asmaa Resmouki shared a special video message for the SAFA Community for this event. In her message, she recognized the importance of diversity and inclusion in the global accountancy profession, especially with respect to gender parity. While acknowledging that progress has been made in appointing more women to leadership positions, she emphasized that achieving fairness and inclusivity across the profession remains a distant goal. She also mentioned that digital innovation and technology hold particular relevance to our profession, as they showcase the potential of digital tools to establish more inclusive and flexible working arrangements. By embracing these technologies, we can create a more level playing field for all professionals, regardless of gender or

other factors. She further stated that IFAC is introducing a new initiative to advocate for gender equality in the field, which will include monthly interviews with inspirational female change makers. The goal of this initiative is to empower women and promote a more diverse and sustainable future.

The next agenda item included an overview of D&I journey, challenges and initiatives taken by SAFA member country and for this purpose, a representative from each country was invited to share their experience in this regards.

Ms. Ammara S. Gondal, Chairperson NRC represented ICA Pakistan. She presented the journey of CA Women Committee over the years and the initiatives taken which led to a significant increase in the number of women students and members as well as a greater representation in leadership and management roles. These advancements have had a beneficial effect on organizations and economies.

Ms. Mariam Khawar, Member SAFA WLC represented ICMA Pakistan. While highlighting the specific obstacles faced by women such as lack of mentorship and financial literacy, she emphasized on the significance of promoting authentic diversity and inclusion by establishing an all-encompassing atmosphere that will facilitate a more just and diverse future.

Ms. Chamila Cooray, Vice Chair SAFA WLC, represented CA Sri Lanka. In her presentation, she highlighted two critical challenges, i.e. high dropout rates in professional stages of qualification (including training) and low representation of women in senior management. She further mentioned that various initiatives have been implemented to address these challenges and create a diverse and inclusive workplace. She mentioned that CA Sri Lanka aimed to attract and retain top talent and promote long-term growth.

Ms. Darshini Watawala, Member SAFA WLC, represented CMA Sri Lanka, while emphasizing on the low representation of women in professional and managerial positions, she also highlighted the initiatives taken by the Institute for inclusivity and diversity. She shared that CMA plans to encourage female participation, conduct surveys, and gather data on barriers to membership.

During her address, CA. K Sripriya, a member of SAFA WLC, representing ICA India, stated that their objective is to secure the longevity of women's professional journeys as chartered accountants and augment their presence in leadership and board positions. She brought attention to the Anywhere Placement Program, which provides women CAs with flexible part-time work options, and is a crucial measure in promoting gender diversity in the workforce.

Ms. Akhtar Sanjida Kasem, a member of SAFA WLC and ICMA Bangladesh, accentuated the institute's dedication to advancing diversity and inclusion by means of consistent efforts geared toward enhancing women's involvement, which has resulted in a surge in the number of female students and members. She further revealed that numerous new initiatives are in the works in addition to current measures.

Ms. Fareeha Shareef, Member SAFA WLC, represented CA Maldives. In her address, she presented statistics on the overall workforce, women in the workforce, and institutional figures. She highlighted that the Institute has implemented specific initiatives to promote inclusion and diversity, such as equal pay scales, anti-discrimination and anti-harassment measures, and increasing the number of women in leadership positions.

RA. Meera Shrestha, Member SAFA WLC, ICA Nepal highlighted the focused efforts for capacity building of women through their participation in training programs and international events to enhance their professional development. She also shared that the Institute has made significant efforts to increase the enrollment of female CA students.

Ms. Maria Howalder, a member of SAFA WLC and a chartered accountant from Bangladesh, talked about establishing a gender-friendly atmosphere and the measures taken to increase public awareness about the CA profession, its suitability for women, and encouraging their participation. She also highlighted the various initiatives aimed at promoting gender diversity and inclusivity in the profession and ensuring equal opportunities for women.

Ms. Khursheed Kotwal, Council Member, ICA Pakistan was then invited to give an overview of 'Women Inclusion Guide in CA Profession & the workforce' introduced by ICA Pakistan. She mentioned that the guide has been developed by examining the best practices adopted by various organizations. The aim is to create a secure and favorable environment for women in the profession, and the guide has been introduced for voluntary adoption. It incorporates policies such as equal opportunity, anti-harassment and anti-discrimination measures, and flexible work hours. The objective is to acknowledge organizations that prioritize women's agendas and inspire women to take up leadership positions. On an ending note, she encouraged all SAFA member bodies to introduce the guide in their respective countries to support the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls by 2030.

Event also included a panel discussion moderated by Chamila Cooray, Vice Chair SAFA WLC on the theme "Ways to unlock women potential for endless opportunities". The panel comprised of Prof. Lakshman R Watawala, Past President ICA Sri Lanka & SAFA; Parveen Mahmud, Past President ICA Bangladesh; Farrukh Rehman, Council Member, ICA Pakistan and CA. Priti Savla, Central Council Member ICA India. The panelists provided valuable insights on how to unlock the full potential of women, emphasizing the importance of examining the regulatory framework in place. They suggested that a regulatory framework that promotes women's participation in the workforce is essential for attracting and retaining them in the profession, which in turn benefits the economy. To achieve this, a collaborative effort is needed between policy makers, regulators, and industry leaders to identify areas for improvement and create a more inclusive environment. Prioritizing the advancement of women in the workplace can result in a more prosperous and equitable society. The panelists also highlighted that the COVID-19 pandemic presents significant opportunities for women to work from home and advance their careers. Remote working can increase productivity and efficiency while providing a platform for broader participation, making digital communication a unique opportunity for all.

The event ended with a vote of thanks by Mr. Heshana Kuruppu, Vice President SAFA. In his note, he summed up the key takeaways of the all discussions and commended the regional nations for their progress in promoting diversity and inclusivity. He commented that while some countries have made significant progress, there is still room for improvement in certain regions. He acknowledged that collaboration between genders has been essential in achieving progress in promoting diversity and inclusion, which is crucial for the growth of the profession. However, he also noted that diversity remains a challenge not only in accounting but in all fields, with women facing obstacles such as perception issues, work-life balance, and limited opportunities for which professional bodies need to take proactive steps to address these issues. He ended the note by appreciating the efforts of WLC in organizing this event with a special mention of Chairperson SAFA WLC and thanked the panelists and presenters for sharing valuable insights.