



Pathbreakers, Pioneers, and Trailblazers

Interview with Bodour Al Qasimi

**For podcast release
Monday, March 1, 2020**

KENNEALLY: In March 2019, Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, vice president of the International Publishers Association, and Maria Pallante, president and CEO of the Association of American Publishers, organized the first PublisHer dinner. Three dozen women leaders in publishing gathered during London Book Fair that year for an evening of celebration, inspiration, and networking. Coming on March 9, 2020, PublisHer marks its first birthday in London at the British Library with a summit of pathbreakers, pioneers, and trailblazers, all of them women who have generated positive change in world publishing.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book.

When the UK's Publisher Association set a goal for its industry to have at least 50% of leadership and executive-level roles occupied by women, the target date was 2022. PA's latest annual diversity and inclusion survey released in January found that 55% of the British industry senior leadership and executive roles were held by women in 2019, three years ahead of schedule. That's a success to celebrate, even while the industry recognizes that more work remains.

PublisHer community events, like the upcoming British Library summit, encourage industry leaders to envision creative, viable solutions to lingering gender-based inequities. PublisHer co-founder Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi joins me now from Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates with more details on this year-old push for change. Welcome to Beyond the Book, Sheikha Bodour. *Salaam alaikum.*

AL QASIMI: Thank you, Chris. *Alaikum salaam.* And thank you for hosting me again on this podcast. It's really an honor to be here.

KENNEALLY: Well, it's a pleasure to have you join us and look forward to your event coming on March 19 (sic), a special event at the British Library. As I said in the introduction, you'll be celebrating the first anniversary of the inaugural PublisHer event. Who are you expecting to attend this year in 2020, and what highlights of activities for PublisHer can you share from the last 12 months?



AL QASIMI: So we've been very busy, Chris, and we've been busy listening to everyone. We've been busy putting together a plan. We've been busy building the PublisHer community. But before I go into the details, can I just take a couple of minutes to put the listeners into the context of why I established PublisHer?

KENNEALLY: Oh, absolutely. That's a good way to start.

AL QASIMI: Thank you. Since I joined the publishing world about 12 years ago, I've been moving in publishing circles on a local, on a regional, and on an international level. While I learned a lot about the industry, about its potential in transforming lives and boosting economies, an observation emerged along the way, which is that women across all levels of the publishing world were not getting a fair deal in this industry. And while there are many women in the publishing workforce, few of them are in key leadership positions, and I always wondered the reason behind this imbalance, but I kept it to myself.

And then when I started sharing my views with colleagues, it turned out that I wasn't the only woman with such questions. Maria Pallante, as you mentioned, had a similar concern. And a lot of my female colleagues across the world shared this view, and actually, there were some male colleagues as well who had similar questions, which was great to know. There is a big gender inequality at leadership levels, there are pay gaps, there are challenges with working cultures, and a host of other barriers that really don't make any sense in this day and age.

So to cut a long story short, I decided to take action and address these issues, and that was the reason behind the birth of PublisHer. After that, we organized a series of dinners and events throughout the year. The first one, as you mentioned, was in London. The second one was in Nairobi. And then we had one in Jordan and in Sharjah. And then the last one we had was in Frankfurt Book Fair, called the PublisHer Salon, and we launched our website, and we also got a newsletter. And for anybody who's interested, they can look our website, womeninpublishing.org. We look forward to hosting two events in 2020 – our birthday summit at the British Library, as you mentioned, and another event at Bologna Book Fair.

KENNEALLY: Tell us, then, about who you're expecting to attend and what they should expect from the program in London.

AL QASIMI: Well, we've got special guests who will be speaking at the summit in London, and let me tell you a little bit about the program. So we took the pulse of women publishers around the world when we hosted these consultations, and we wanted to focus on building intergenerational cooperation and support networks in



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this year's program. That's why our panels and our selected panelists were chosen to reflect ethnic, occupational, and generational diversity.

So the London program features three engaging panels. The first panel will focus on path-breaking women – so that's women who shattered the glass ceiling years ago. I think it's important that we don't forget these stories and that we honor these women who stood their ground in a much less supportive environment than we have today. And in the second panel, we celebrate women who made significant and distinctive contributions to the publishing industry, and many of their achievements were the first of their kind. And then the last panel includes up-and-coming women in the publishing industry as they seek to make their mark on the world. We are at the British Library, as you mentioned, and our program is on our website, womeninpublishing.org, and I just want to thank Copyright Clearance Center and the London Book Fair for sponsoring this event. It wouldn't have been possible without their support.

KENNEALLY: With all the work you're doing, Bodour, you're getting a pretty good picture of how well publishing is really addressing the challenge to be more diverse and more inclusive, particularly when it comes to promoting women into leadership roles. After a year of traveling through much of the world on this assignment, how well do you think the industry is doing? Maybe you can offer some suggestions for ways that they could advance this cause.

AL QASIMI: Diversity and inclusivity are values that IPA cherishes dearly, and that gives us a solid ground upon which we can start these discussions. So PublisHer is built on consultations and conversations. It's also built on collective action. So we are in the phase right now of collecting and packing feedback that we will have from the survey that we're distributing, and we'll engage with the right decision-makers so that we can change the current culture. And finally, we want to establish some kind of mentoring program that will help to groom the right talent to advance in leadership ladder of our industry.

KENNEALLY: I was going to ask you, Bodour, about the role that PublisHer programs are going to play in advancing these goals, but that last point you made about mentoring, that sounds like an ongoing project and one that would be especially important.

AL QASIMI: Yes. The programs we organize and the events we hold are created for the purpose of aligning our thinking and expressing our ideas, sharing experiences, aspirations, and best practices. And once we're able to package all of those, we will present our case to the relevant stakeholders, and we will ask for change to take place. Chris, I already feel the momentum of change happening.



KENNEALLY: That's wonderful. And there's been some change going on in Sharjah, as well. For the last year, since April 2019, you have been serving as the World Book Capital, and there is an exciting new library project underway.

AL QASIMI: Yes. I'm very excited that you asked me that question, and I can tell you that World Book Capital took Sharjah to a whole new level in its journey of cultural development. Besides the positive impact on our external reputation, it really rallied everyone internally and has been such a boost to us in our journey to become a true hub of Arab cultural renaissance and a credible broker in the cultural dialogues between our region and the rest of the world.

Since the opening ceremony, Sharjah's been buzzing with cultural events targeting literally everyone. We've got events and initiatives for children, for women, for the general public, for experts, for Arabic speakers, non-Arabic speakers – the list goes on. I don't think we have enough time to go into the details here.

KENNEALLY: But there is an actual physical library that has been – that construction is just completing, and it really looks like quite a monumental facility.

AL QASIMI: Absolutely. This is called the House of Wisdom, and it will be open in April – on the 14th of April. That's the closing ceremony of World Book Capital. And it'll be a world-class library that has been reinvented for the future.

KENNEALLY: So reimagining the library for the future is a fascinating project, one that could consume as much of your time, perhaps, as the PubliSHer effort has. Tell us about how the House of Wisdom does that. How will you reimagine the library for 2020 and beyond?

AL QASIMI: Well, I can't disclose all the details just yet. We will have the opening on the 14th of April. But it will be a place where everyone will gather to learn information and to collect knowledge and information. This is going to be a place for communities to gather. It'll be a place of learning. It'll be a highly digitized library. And we will also have a place for archives and physical books. So all in all, it will be a community space that will bring people together and share knowledge and information under this amazing roof that was designed by Foster + Partners, and we're very excited about the launch.

KENNEALLY: The notion of the library as a community center is one we've spoken about here on Beyond the Book fairly often. It seems an important recognition that libraries today aren't just places with bookshelves and stacks. They are places where people gather.



AL QASIMI: Absolutely – and get good coffee, as well.

KENNEALLY: (laughter) Well, the last thing we want to bring up with you, Sheikha Bodour, is that at the London Book Fair, in addition to the PublisHer event on March 9, Sharjah is the market focus of the show itself, and that really means special attention on what you are doing in Sharjah. So share with us a little bit about the message you have from Sharjah for the international publishing community.

AL QASIMI: Yes, Chris, we are so excited to be market focus at London Book Fair this year. We are ready to engage, and we want to engage. I mean, the world has traveled down the path of cultural misunderstanding before, and we know that it leads to nowhere. So Sharjah is ready to engage all international stakeholders attending the London Book Fair this year. We want to share with them a piece of our culture, our homegrown talent. We want to listen to them. And of course, we're open for business. And I'm sure the publishers and authors will find ways to create commercial opportunities, and that's something we want to encourage and support. There will be 12 writers from the UAE attending this year, and we're very excited about our selection to be market focus, and I personally look forward to meeting everyone at London in these events and activities.

KENNEALLY: That's a very nice invitation indeed. We've been speaking today with Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi. She's vice president of the International Publishers Association and a co-founder of the PublisHer organization. Its first birthday celebration takes place on March 9, 2020, at the British Library. And we will point you to more information about that event and much more about PublisHer on our own page at beyondthebook.com. Sheikha Bodour Al Qasimi, thank you so much for joining me on Beyond the Book.

AL QASIMI: Thank you, Chris. It's been an honor.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center. Our co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. Subscribe to the program wherever you go for podcasts and follow us on Twitter and Facebook. The complete Beyond the Book podcast archive is available at beyondthebook.com. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Thanks for listening and join us again soon on CCC's Beyond the Book.

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