

This week Gulizar Jonian, Canadian-Armenian businesswoman, charity worker, social butterfly and the capital's first female architect, took time off from her busy schedule to meet with Abu Dhabi Week



What are you involved with at the moment?

I am currently the director of an architectural firm that has over 40 employees and numerous projects in the UAE, Qatar and Northern Iraq. I supervise the day-to-day running of the office and oversee the projects on both technical and administrative levels.

Other than this, I am the Chairwoman of Women's Excellence Group (WEG) and Abu Dhabi Armenian Ladies Committee, a committee member of the International Business Women's Group (IBWG) and I actively support various local and international charities. But most important of all, I am the mother of one beautiful daughter called Anushka.

What helped you to become such a successful businesswoman?

Well, my parents always encouraged me and never doubted my abilities. I realised a long time ago that you never stop learning – you learn from everything and everyone.

Furthermore, I have an undeniable sense of perseverance and determination. I always keep going until I reach my target or get as close as possible.

That said, I do not see failure as a negative thing; I look at it as a learning experience. Failure teaches us how to be better prepared the second time around. I always give everything my best and if it does not work, then I simply just bounce back and try again.

You first arrived in Abu Dhabi in the 1970s. That must have been interesting...

It was December 1976, I was in my twenties and had been working in London. The UAE had so much potential and my firm asked me to explore the area. I spent three months doing research in Abu Dhabi and I was soon thereafter made partner. We opened a branch here and my office was located in the Sheraton Hotel.

In the 1970s I really was a woman in a man's world – the construction industry was so male-orientated. I remember when I went to renew the office license the administrator simply looked through the pile of applications and picked out the one with a photo of a female!

The people here were not used to dealing with a woman on such an executive level in my profession. It was a very challenging time, but I knew that I simply had to make it work. For a woman to succeed, she needed to try harder than the other gender.

When businessmen would see me walk into a meeting, they would smile and chuckle at first, even start flirting! But by always looking the person in the eye and maintaining a composed and serious demeanour, I was respected and treated professionally in return. It impressed them actually. Always remember that you reap what you sow.

With fellow partners, I went on to open two flower shops in the Sheraton and Hilton Hotels respectively, a Chinese restaurant in the Novotel hotel (as it was called at the time) and a gift shop.

What advice do you have for women setting up a business here in Abu Dhabi?

That depends on the type of business you want to set up, whether it is a consultancy practice, retail store or a branch of an overseas existing business etc. But in all cases there are certain steps and general rules to adhere to.

If you are an expat, get your qualifications attested in your home country and then from the local authorities here.

Visit a lawyer in the emirate, because you need to familiarise yourself with the regulations of this country. Visit your local Municipality and Chamber of Commerce to familiarise yourself with the protocol. Ask advice on how and where to register your business, find out if you need to have a local business partner and if that person needs to be a full partner or a sponsor. Even the name you want to use for your company needs to be checked with the Municipality to see if it's acceptable and available.

You must have a carefully thought out business plan. If you plan to sell a certain product, do research to see if it is saleable. Also, find out who your competitors are and if you have found a niche in the market.

It is necessary to have a certain amount of money in the bank in order to set up. Visit a bank to find out what is involved and what facilities they can offer you. Go to more than one bank – shop around. And finally, believe in yourself!

Catriona Doherty