Distinguished guests, colleagues, and friends, welcome to AUB and to this exceptional conference on a topic of great importance to us all. The story of women at AUB is an interesting one that is evolving to this day, so I hope you will allow me to begin with a little historical musing.

The first women at AUB were students and faculty at the school of nursing, which was established in 1905. This school was the first of its kind in the region and women nursing students came not only from local families but also from abroad, including from Armenia and Russia. Founded primarily as a training institute for nurses, the Rafic Hariri School of Nursing as it is known today has grown tremendously in terms of clinical research and academic scholarship. This past September, it became AUB’s seventh faculty, a tribute to its outstanding efforts in education, research, service, and leadership in the field of nursing, with a woman dean.

But just as the school of nursing was founded as a single-sex institution, so was the Syrian Protestant College, as AUB used to be known. Daniel Bliss, AUB’s first president, famously pronounced [quote] “this College is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to color, nationality, race, or religion” [unquote]. As progressive and liberal-minded as that statement may have been in the 1860s in terms of accepting all races and religions, it was true that only men were eligible to attend outside the nursing school for 50 years.

In the 1920s, women began being admitted to other parts of the university. At first, it was to other medical professional schools such as dentistry and pharmacy. But by 1924, the university began accepting women as sophomore students to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences. It is also worth noting that AUB made the bold change toward co-education far earlier than many prestigious universities in North America and Europe, such as Cambridge and Yale.

One of the first regular women students at AUB was Adma Abu Shdeed. She came here wanting to join the medical school, but was told that she could not enter as the only female student. Instead, she was allowed to enter the BA program, after which she was finally allowed to enter the school of medicine. In 1931, she became the first woman at AUB to earn an MD, leading the way for generations of women to follow.

Dr. Abu Shdeed went on to join the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at AUB and became a champion of women’s reproductive rights and health. She helped found the Lebanon Family Planning Association in 1969, serving as its first president until 1975, and helped establish free clinics throughout Lebanon.
From this first woman MD, many thousands have followed and now the gender distribution in our medical school actually favors women. That women become doctors goes without saying these days. That they succeed as clinicians, researchers, educators, and leaders is accepted by all except a few close-minded hold-outs from a prejudicial past.

To give just an example of this success, one of the most brilliant medical minds of the current century—who I hope and believe will be accepting a Nobel Prize one day—is our own graduate, Dr. Huda Zoghbi. Her groundbreaking research led to the discovery of the genetic cause of Rett syndrome and other neurological disorders that have far-reaching clinical implications. Her discoveries have provided new ways of thinking about more common neurological disorders, including autism, intellectual disability, and Parkinson’s disease, and could lead to better treatments and outcomes.

Undeniably, the world has changed for the better in terms of women having access to medical education and succeeding in every type of medical field and in all types of roles. Yet this is no time to rest on our laurels and declare “mission accomplished.” (Often a bad idea, as one US President found out.) There is far more to be done and far more for us to strive for.

One obvious area in need of further progress is women in leadership positions. Despite the tremendous gains of the past 100 years—from Adma Abu Shdeed to Huda Zoghbi—there are still not enough women leaders in medicine.

An article last year in Harvard Business Review found that for over 25 years, women have made up at least 40% of medical students in the US, yet only 34% of physicians are women. The news about women in leadership positions is even more dire: women make up only 18% of hospital CEOs and 16% of deans and department chairs in medicine in the US.

This leadership gender gap is by no means specific to medicine and many of the root factors and causes are the same as in other professional fields. The authors suggest some possible remedies that might allow more women to climb higher up the ladder, such as establishing family friendly policies, combatting workplace discrimination and harassment, and improving funding opportunities for women researchers.

Understanding the challenge facing women in medicine and academia is an important first step in taking concrete action to level the playing field. That is why one of my first priorities upon coming to AUB back in 2015 was to establish a high-level task force to consider the lives and careers of women faculty.

The task force submitted a substantive report in fall of 2017 and has since been transformed into a standing Committee on the Lives and Careers of Woman at AUB. Their work is to begin implementing the recommendations of the report related to faculty and to start examining the situation of women staff and women students.
The work of our Title IX Office is also critically important to improving the workplace atmosphere for women and all protected subgroups. With mandatory training for all AUB staff and in-depth training for all management-level staff, we are attempting to change the culture here to one of inclusiveness, tolerance, and unbiased collegiality.

But at AUB, as at other universities and medical centers around the world, we know there is more to be done. To progress further, we need more conferences like this, as well as panels, working groups, task forces, and action. Together we must try to understand the problems facing women in the workplace and the reasons they are not making it into the upper echelons of power. Then we need to work on changing the culture—person by person, and institution by institution.

No longer can we content ourselves with a token woman on the board, or one dean among 10, or one-quarter of the department chairs. We must do better. If women are half of the population, they should be half of all boards, half of all CEOs and presidents, and half of all deans and department heads. Anything less is simply unfair.

I have no illusions that it will be easy to reverse millennia of bias against women in human civilization and we will not turn the tide with one task force or conference. But it is up to each of us to do what we can. From the personal level to the institutional level, we must confront deep-seated and often unconscious biases in order to realize a more equitable future.

Thank you all for coming and being part of this important endeavor. I wish you an enriching and emboldening two days.