One in a series profiling the recipients of the 2010 D&I Leadership Awards.

K. Aftab Ahmed, Sr. Manager, Financial Markets, MENA, IFC

Editor’s Note: K. Aftab Ahmed recently became IFC’s Associate Director, Financial Markets, for Europe, Central Asia, and Middle East & North Africa.

The International Finance Corporation provides a wide variety of services and investments in emerging markets. In fact, financial market activity represents almost 50 percent of IFC’s business. Most recently as Sr. Manager of Financial Markets in MENA, K. Aftab Ahmed was responsible for a portfolio of about $1.5 billion, and generated about $800 million of new business every year.

Decentralizing has helped IFC grow its business lately. “Our business is around our clients, so we have to be responsive to the client and their needs,” stressed Ahmed. “If you are on the ground, you have the pulse. You can come up with products that meet clients’ expectations. It’s much easier to sustain a productive relationship when you are closer to the client.”

If there’s a single common thread that runs through Aftab Ahmed’s 13-year career in IFC, it is working on the frontlines. First in South Asia and most recently in MENA’s financial markets, Ahmed has held a tight focus.

The Way Forward on Gender Parity

The WBG Office of Diversity Programs has identified gender parity as a critical workplace agenda. Dr. Anna Fels spoke at the Bank Group last year (see July 2010 issue, “Fels: Maternity Leave is Primary Policy Tool for Gender Parity”). She urged: (1) more transparency so that staff who take advantage of reduced work schedules or leave options are not punished; (2) Work-life balance committees should comprise 50 percent men; and (3) organizations should offer stronger programs of paternity leave. In the absence of a strong program of paternity leave, said Fels, organizations send a powerful message to the employee: “A child is the wife’s responsibility. We do not expect fatherhood to interrupt men’s work, or to be a priority for our male employees. For new fathers, we expect business as usual.” The Bank Group currently offers “up to five days” of paternity leave for each childbirth or adoption. “It perpetuates an outdated and largely unwieldy paradigm,” said Fels.
On October 20, the OVPs met to discuss diversity and inclusion (D&I) practices in the institution. They welcomed the steady progress made with diversity metrics and discussed ways to cultivate a more inclusive environment. Here are highlights of recommendations they made.

Staff views, as always, are welcome.

• D&I at the corporate level, seems to be all about certain diversity measures, with very little emphasis on inclusion. The Staff Survey shows that while diversity matters, the day-to-day life of our staff is deeply affected by how much respect and inclusive practices they experience in the workplace. We strongly encourage a broader vision with a focus on inclusion, especially needed in a Bank which is decentralizing heavily.

• Use the recruitment bonus to attract women, Part II, NOFs, and SSA/CR nationals. Review the compensation package in critical skill areas to help the Bank attract qualified candidates, retain high quality staff, and make the organization more competitive with the IMF and top universities.

• Identify and broadly share best practices among those VPs that have achieved significant and meaningful progress in recent years, or did particularly well on the relevant Staff Survey D&I questions.

• Make mentoring an important element of the D&I strategy since it is also a critical pillar of the Bank’s new learning strategy under “on the job training”. Many companies trying to improve diversity have found mentoring to be important. Representatives of predominant groups are often more likely to intuitively/implicitly mentor people ‘like themselves’ rather than those who are different—so create a balance by making mentoring efforts more explicit and diverse.

• Explore issues of decentralization and diversity further, e.g., how diverse are we in our current decentralization status in terms of gender, NOFs, etc.? Do the numbers in the field mirror HQ, or is it more challenging to get IRS gender and other diversity considerations hired directly to the field or rotated?

• The expansion of diversity indicators to a broader set of appointment types and funding sources is a welcome change. It is consistent with the institution’s commitment to D&I.

• Diversity should not only take into account nationality and gender, but also consider economic and educational diversity.

• The goal to “Increase the career opportunities for nationally recruited staff” does not seem to be adequately reflected in the presentation. This is of particular interest to our Region and we would like to know the Bank wide experience in advancing such an objective.

• It would be helpful if HR showed statistics of applications received to various levels of jobs (i.e all applicants to GG positions or to managerial posts), then contrast this with the actual short-listing statistics for each respective position. This would help assess whether the short-listing process met D&I expectations, such as to include female candidates or under-represented nationalities.

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Operations Vice Presidents (OVPs) Chart Way Forward for D&I

Happy Holidays!
...K. Aftab Ahmed, Sr. Manager, Financial Markets, MENA, IFC

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“My motive, what I see in terms of the purpose of my work—my utmost preference—is my clients, and then my staff,” said Ahmed, who was recognized with a Diversity & Inclusion Leadership Award this year. “My goal is to create a seamless relationship between my staff and clients. And diversity and inclusion is a mechanism to do that.”

Ahmed leverages global knowledge with small, diverse teams: “Especially when we are at the table with our clients, they are impressed when my team of five has five different nationalities. That is true value for them. Giving them a real global perspective is important, with solutions that have worked from around the world.”

When Ahmed moved to Cairo in 2004, the country office was staffed primarily with local staff. He quickly set about attracting different perspectives. “I attracted people from different places—Washington, Russia, Argentina. That added different viewpoints to the team and I’ve seen the results.”

To help integrate new staff faster, Ahmed is known for a formal approach to mentoring. “I link new staff to a ‘Peer-Buddy,’ who is a kind of mentor. This person helps staff integrate in the organization, guides them with systems and procedures, and serves as a go-between on any number of issues,” said Ahmed. “As a manager, my job is to understand who is good at doing this.”

Ahmed also makes sure he talks frequently with his staff even though they are incredibly dispersed—25 people across 8 offices. “I used to have a one-hour commute in Cairo both ways, which I used daily to stay in touch with people. I knew exactly how everybody was doing with their projects; and they were fully aware of what is expected from them. Communication was quite clear.”

During the 7th Annual D&I Leadership Awards, Ahmed was celebrated for “actively recruiting women at all levels—half of his team is comprised of women professionals.” Such an accomplishment was distinctive on two levels—in finance, which is still dominated by men in some countries; and in MENA, where women professionals still lag behind.

As far as winning the award: “It was very encouraging. It boosted my enthusiasm,” admitted Ahmed. “Whatever were my humble efforts, they were recognized by my staff.”

When Ahmed got feedback that his local staff wanted more global experience, he facilitated development assignments and exchanges: “During the last two years, nine of my investment officers have worked in transactions all over the world. That really motivated them because they were dealing with new clients and new markets out of their comfort zones.”

Doing so isn’t simply a gesture of goodwill. It is at least as much pure self-interest. “We are a global organization and have to maintain global knowledge. We can’t do that by creating two classes of staff, one with global knowledge and the other type focusing on local markets,” stressed Ahmed. “We need to make sure that our staff in the field are at par with their colleagues in DC or any other country office.”

“From what I’ve seen, it’s not just a nice thing to do—it’s a win-win for everybody. When staff see that you are sincere in their career development by providing them tools and opportunities, the result is a highly motivated and enthusiastic team—ready to take on new challenges and deliver on your work program more efficiently.”

...The Way Forward on Gender Parity

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Within the Bank Group, the Staff Association’s Family Issues Working Group (FIG) is pushing for changes to improve both the policies and behaviors that perpetuate inefficiency and injustice. Created in 2002, FIG has spearheaded numerous efforts to make the Bank Group a more family-friendly place—where staff can have both successful careers and a better work-life balance. To learn more about FIG, the Work-Life Balance survey, or flexible work arrangements, type “family” in your browser.
Aperture: Good Practice in D&I

One in a series profiling the leaders of diversity programs around the world.

Q&A with Gry Tina Tinde, IDB

Tina Tinde joined the Inter-American Development Bank in May 2009 as Diversity Advisor. The IDB has 26 offices and about 1,800 staff, 30 percent of whom work in Latin America and the Caribbean. IDB has about $11 billion in annual lending and grants.

Q: What is your current role?
A: To provide advice to Senior Management on diversity and gender concepts and measures that can help IDB better reflect the diversity of Latin America and the Caribbean and member states. There are so many issues that we could keep 10 people working full time, but we only have three staff.

Q: What is your organization’s chief rationale for diversity and inclusion?
A: It’s straightforward. You make better-informed decisions by having diverse teams. We will be closer to the needs of people in our borrowing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean if we reflect their diverse composition. It’s the business case.

Q: What is your top priority?
A: I like to focus on the toughest issues. Our chief objective is including more people of Afro-descent, indigenous, disabled people, and women in general into lending and into advancement. Race is a very contentious issue and has different nuances in the countries where we work. In Brazil, people of Afro-descent are not proportionately represented in decision making. In Guatemala, where most of the population is of indigenous background, they are not equitably represented. So we are working on reaching more of such under-represented groups both in our lending and our recruitment. Specifically, we are working to build our pipeline with universities and professional networks. From a population of about 1 billion people in North and South America, we have traditionally recruited from Yale and Harvard and these elite schools, but we are doing much better now in identifying highly qualified candidates in diverse places. IDB recruits about 150 employees per year.

Q: Does your organization have targets?
A: We have a Young Professionals program, where generally half or more spaces are reserved for under-represented groups. Of nine new YPs, 77 percent are women and 33 percent of Afro-descent or indigenous background. In July 2010, for the first time, the IDB governing board set gender targets: by 2015, we aim to have 40-60 percent women in the Presidency; 38 percent women among Representatives and Managers (currently 20.6 percent) and 40 percent among women grade 4 and up (currently 33 percent).

Q: What is your biggest challenge?
A: There’s a lot of rhetoric, which doesn’t lead to anything. Colleagues sometimes lack the tools or the willingness to implement existing policies and mandates. I am constantly surprised by cocoons of gender and other discrimination and the continued dissonance between policy and practice.

Q: What is one element that is overlooked on these issues?
A: I like to speak a lot about the need to involve men. By empowering men at home, you can empower women at the workplace. Right now, it’s totally skewed. Women are still more responsible at home. It’s not optimal. Not only do we lose out on a lot of talent in the workplace, but children and families also lose out on time with fathers.

Q: Any one lesson you want to share?
A: We should not underestimate the power of individuals. From 21 years in international organizations, my lesson is that a change starts with one person, and that change is leadership. That is what keeps me going.

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