



Women economic participation and ICT in the Mediterranean Region: Constraints and opportunities

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CONCEPT NOTE

BACKGROUND

Key findings

Today, Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are rapidly changing the global landscape, serving a potent force for shaping and impacting the way people live, work and communicate, with resulting changes in social interaction, economic and business practices, political engagement, education, health, leisure and entertainment. ICTs also have the potential to improve interaction between Governments and citizens, fostering transparency and accountability in governance.

The ICT sector offers many opportunities in terms of jobs or entrepreneurial openings. First, it remains an important and growing sector for employment. Job opportunities in the digital economy continue to grow, and many countries and regions are anticipating growing demand for qualified personnel with mathematics, science, engineering, and computing skills.

On the other hand, access to information technology can help entrepreneurs to start and develop their own businesses. The range of potential benefits ICTs offer is extensive, including better access to crucial information in area such as business development, market and pricing information, production technologies, compliance, forecasts and training. Affordable access to ICTs can also enable entrepreneurs to communicate better along the value chain as well as make their administration more efficient.

ICTs have therefore an impact on women living conditions, and their role in society.

Gender and ICT

Several international frameworks and actors have recognised the importance to improve the access of women and girls to the ICTs sector. They have all recognised that improving the female to male employment ratio is good for economic growth. Engaging women and girls in ICT sector work is not only the right thing to do from the point of social justice. It is also smart economics.

The Beijing Platform for Action adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 called for the empowerment of women through enhancing their skills, knowledge, access to and use of information technologies. It also included a strategic objective: *“Increase the participation and access of*



women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication”.

The International Telecommunication Union Conference in 2010 encourages Member States and Sector Members to facilitate the employment of women and men equally in the ICT/telecommunication field, including at senior levels of responsibility, and to increase opportunities for women and girls in ICT careers during elementary, secondary and higher education.

In addition, over the recent years, many actions and initiatives have been undertaken by different actors to contribute to achieve this objective.

The **European Commission** published a study on "*Women active in the ICT sector*" and launched a campaign, in 2014 to find and celebrate digital role models who could encourage young women and girls to study and to pursue careers in IT.

The **OECD** highlighted the importance and the interest for increasing participation of women in the ICTs sector, for several years ago, through several reports and studies. Their report "ICTs and gender" provides an overview of the gender distribution of ICT and ICT-related employment in OECD countries, and compares these to the gender distribution of total employment. Participation in ICT related education and training, and differences in ICT access and use by gender are also shown.

Providing access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women figures also amongst the strategic objectives of the **International Labour Organization (ILO)**. ILO predicted that there will be 12 Million new jobs in IT enabled service in developing countries in the next decade.

Many other actors and organisations have also developed programmes or have launched initiatives aiming to increase the women participation in the ICTs sector.

However, while the enormous potential offered by ICTs for stimulating economic growth, socioeconomic development and effective governance is well recognised by governments and by international frameworks, **the benefits of ICTs are still by far unequally distributed between men and women**. The ICTs sector is still male dominated. Women are underrepresented at all levels in the ICT sector jobs, especially in technical and decision-making positions and as business owners. At the same time and paradoxically, companies are looking to increase the number of women in the sector.

Far from suffering from any technological handicap, women and young girls, in their daily life or school, are as sophisticated users as their male counterparts.

WHY TO FOCUS ON WOMEN IN THE MENA REGION?

The MENA region has the lowest rate of participation in the workforce of women in the world, with a female participation rate of the labour force by 22%, against 73% in East Asia and about 50-52 % for other regions. The difficulty for young people to get good jobs is relatively high for both sexes at the MENA region, but women are more than twice likely to be unemployed than men. In addition, available data strongly indicates that women entrepreneurs are largely underrepresented as business owners of



formally registered enterprises. In developing countries, they tend to be clustered in the micro and informal sector and consequently, they have limited legal rights, social protection, status and recognition.

Although most MENA countries have engaged in setting up policies to integrate ICTs in their agendas as a major tool to improve social and political inclusion and economic development, the gender perspective is however, still lacking and requires immediate attention.

ICTs offer a great potential to facilitate poverty reduction, gender equality and women empowerment, however that potential is not yet fully utilised in the MENA region.

Developing the capabilities of women in the region through the use of ICTs is an important element to generate social and economic benefits to the MENA region and also play a major role in empowering their status. ICTs have the power to eradicate inequality faced by women in the region and it is a tool to restore their confidence and reinforce their independence.

Promoting women's empowerment and economic participation in the Euro-Mediterranean region is at the heart of the mission of the Secretariat of the Union for the Mediterranean. The **Third UfM Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, held on 11-12 September 2013** in Paris, has strengthened the mandate of the UfM Secretariat to identify and facilitate the development, launch and funding innovative programs and initiatives to achieve this objective.

In addition, the final Declaration of the **UfM Ministerial meeting on digital economy, which was held 30 September 2014 in Brussels**, the Ministers called upon the UfM Secretariat to intensify its involvement in the Digital Economy by identifying, and developing regional initiatives with relevant stakeholders with the objective of **promoting inclusive economic development and creating decent jobs particularly for small and medium enterprises, young people and women.**

As mentioned before, there are several actions, initiatives and programmes that have been undertaken by different actors aiming to increase the women participation in the ICTs sector. However, UFM believes that improving the coordination and synergies between all stakeholders at national and regional levels to avoid unnecessary duplications and competition and developing joint and relevant actions, can significantly help in advancing economic participation of women in the region.

By organising the workshop, UfM aims to launch the first step of a regional platform of dialogue and coordination between the key stakeholders active in this field, with the aim to let them think together on how to improve the women participation in the sector in the MENA and thus contribute to increase their economic participation.

OBJECTIVES

The workshop seeks 3 objectives:

- To provide a platform of dialogue for key stakeholders (public authorities, private sector, civil society organisations, donors...) in the Mediterranean region to share knowledge, successful initiatives and



best practices on promoting the women participation in new technology of information and communication and improve the coordination and synergies between actors and initiatives.

- To identify the main challenges and obstacles that hinder the gender equality in this field and share solutions between actors.
- Identify the opportunities, potential niches and initiatives to increase women participation in ICT and prepare recommendations to be presented in the coming UfM Women Conference planned in May 2015.

PARTICIPANTS:

Target participants in the workshop are:

- Representatives of international and intergovernmental organisations
- Civil Society actors
- Private sector and platforms of entrepreneurs
- Donors

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