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

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REPORT

BACKGROUND

The one-day Workshop was organised by the Union for Mediterranean Secretariat and supported by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It identified the barriers and constraints that hinder the women participation in the digital sector while exploring the opportunities offered by the sector and highlighting some good practices developed by some actors in the region.

The workshop brought together 30 representatives from key stakeholders in the Euro-Mediterranean region, including international and regional organisations, donors and development agencies, private sector, civil society organisations and experts.

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. The objective is to improve the synergies between all stakeholders at national and regional levels in order to avoid unnecessary duplications and competition and to develop joint, strategic and relevant actions, which can significantly help improving the impact in advancing economic participation of women in the region.

The meeting is organised in the framework of the Conclusions of the UfM Third Ministerial Conference on Strengthening the Role of Women in Society, the final Declaration of the UfM Ministerial meeting on digital economy, and as a contribution to the Beijing+20 process.

The conclusions of the workshop will be presented in the High-level Conference: Fostering Women Participation in Economic life, which will be held May 19 - 21, 2015 in Barcelona.

CONTEXT AND KEY FINDING

1. Women's economic participation in MENA region continues to be the lowest in the world, with merely 21 percent of women aged 15 and above actively participating in the labor market, compared to more than 50 percent globally.

2. In EU countries, a continuing gender disparity in terms of both opportunities and quality of employment still reigns; this tends to occur in both low value-added activities and thus low remuneration, and high-skilled occupations.

3. According to the Union of Arab ICT Associations, women in the Arab region represent around 30% of the workforce in ICT sector and only 9% in high management positions. On Internet governance and policymaking, women represent only 15% in policy and decision making roles[1].

4. In EU, women are still underrepresented in the ICT sector. Out of 1,000 women with a bachelor degree in Europe, only 29 hold a degree in ICT (compared to 95 men) whilst only 4 eventually work in the ICT sector. On the other hand, women leave the sector mid-career to a greater extent than men. 20% of women aged 30 years with ICT- related bachelor degrees work in the sector, whilst only 9% of women above 45 years old with these degrees do so. This demonstrates that the sector is still not attractive to women because it is not adapted to the aspects which women value the most (balancing work and family life): long hours, very competitive environment requires continues upgrading of skills…

5. In EU, women are particularly underrepresented in managerial and decision- making positions. Although this is a general problem, the percentage of female bosses in ICT is much smaller than in other sectors: 19.2% of ICT sector workers compared to 45.2% of non-ICT sector workers have female in senior management positions.

KEY ISSUES DISCUSSED

Opportunities offered by the sector

1. In EU, as per a European Commission study realized in 2013, if women held digital jobs as frequently as men, the gain for the European GDP each year would be around 9 Bn EUR. Organisations that are more inclusive of women in management achieve 35% higher ROE[2] and 34% better total return to shareholders than other comparable organisations.

2. In EU, females in the ICT sector earn almost 9% more than women in similar positions in other sectors.

3. In the Middle East and Africa (MEA), only in 2015, ICT products and services will exceed the $270 billion and the IT market expected to grow 9%, according to International Data Corporation. This makes MEA the second-fastest growing market worldwide.

4. According to the World Economic Forum, an estimated 150 million new jobs could be created by 2020 in the ICT sector for young Africans, including North-Africa.

5. ICTs offer a myriad of opportunities for women:
   - Especially for women in Arab countries, facilitating access to education for girls in areas where travel outside home is unsafe or restricted,.

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[1] Countries members of the Union of Arab ICT Associations: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Syria, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Tunisia, Kuwait
[2] Return On Equity

- A possibility to work from home for women that choose to combine work and family responsibilities for some time, bearing in mind this option should not reinforce the tendency to maintain women outside the public sphere.
- A possible tool for self-employment

Barriers and constraints of women participation in the ICT sector

1. There are a variety of specific Constraints affecting women's access to ICTs opportunities in the MENA Region:
   - A system that does not protect women fairly in the workforce (maternity leave, discrimination, lack of protection from sexual harassment)
   - Pressure to focus on family life after marriage
   - Negative social perceptions: family members usually play a decisive role in encouraging girls to choose an education path.
   - Lack of awareness about women's potential as leaders and of female role models in non-traditional jobs.
   - Less on-the job training opportunities and lack of mentorship to fill new vacancies.
   - Transportation & working hours
   - ICT employers are concentrated in the capital regions. This reduces opportunities for girls and women from other urban regions and rural areas.

2. In EU, the main constraints identified are:
   - Cultural traditions & stereotypes about women's role in society.
   - Internal barriers, socio-psychological factors: lack of self-confidence, lack of bargaining skills, risk-aversion and negative attitudes towards competition.
   - External barriers: strongly male dominated environment, complex reconciliation between personal and professional life, and lack of role models in the sector

3. Female entrepreneurs are facing many challenges, such as networking, marketing, permits, and access to finance.

Some Practices from the region

1. **The Cloud Startup Academy (CSA):**

   The CSA is a **100% female entrepreneurship program by Microsoft 4Afrika** partnership with the Women Entrepreneurs Association (AFEM), aiming to **empower 50 young Moroccan women building their own Cloud Startups to support Moroccan SMEs in their digital journey**. The academy will admit young women for a **six-month period**, where they will receive accelerated training on ICTs, communication, sales, entrepreneurship, marketing and even startup management.

   Market opportunity: **11,000 SMBs in Casablanca who need hand-holding**

The impact of the first edition (6 month):

- 3 candidates have already created their LoB startups
- 7 candidates are in the process to build their LoB application startup
- 15 candidates are building their startup as MS Cloud Partners and start selling MS solutions
- 16 candidates are supported to find a permanent job.
- 9 candidates were upskilled to access graduate studies.

2. **The Palestine Information and Communications Technology Incubator- PICTI**

PICTI is an independent Palestinian organisation which was built to revitalise and sustain-ably grow the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) sector in Palestine.

Their Women Entrepreneurship Initiative includes an Incubator which offers professional business services to entrepreneurs, with experience and to Fresh Graduates: Promotional Campaign, Activities, Capacity Building, Contests, Mentoring…

Despite some success stories, the initiative has achieved very few results in terms of employability. This situation can be explained by cultural and social stereotypes and the inadequacy of the education system.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Taking into account the potential of ICT to provide jobs, women should be encouraged to study areas of specialisation relevant to this sector. Mentalities should be influenced within education by including in curricula positive images of women working in non-traditional fields and by providing more professional advice when girls make education choices, not only when choosing the field of study but also during their time as students. Girls would like to gain more knowledge of the industry, its various subsectors and what it is really like to work there.

2. Facilitate women's transition from education to work by equipping students with soft skills and competences, thus preparing young people better for job-related challenges. Schools and businesses should work together to provide work placements and female students should be given preference for these placements in order to give women more opportunities.

3. It is necessary to address the negative image of women's work, in the ICT sector, by awareness raising campaigns. The media should be used to promote positive images or success stories of women in the sector.

4. Increase the number of women entrepreneurs in the ICT sector by improving access to seed and venture capital programmes for women entrepreneurs.

5. Improve working conditions for women in the sector.

6. Improve data availability: data is available but not always broken down by gender (women researchers in ICT, female ICT entrepreneurs, women in managerial positions in ICT companies).

7. Identify and exchange best practices and support the most successful existing initiatives.

8. Encourage more research in the field to better understand the challenges and propose relevant solutions

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