

IV. DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

In a digital, global and hyper-connected world, integrating new technologies into businesses and education systems is no longer a matter of choice, in order to keep up and adapt to innovation and competition. This tendency has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has shown the divide existing in the Euro-Mediterranean region in terms of digital access and digital use.

Government backing key for the digital transition

In the digital age, integrating new technologies into every system is no longer a matter of choice for any country seeking smart and sustainable growth. COVID-19 has underlined the pre-existing need to catalyse the transition and prepare each sector of society for widespread digital integration.

In 2019, the UfM Conference on Digital Transformation and Digital Skills for the Future, held in Tallinn, marked an important step towards the UfM's engagement with the rapidly shifting technological landscape across the labour market. The conference drew on Estonia's experience as one of the most advanced digital societies worldwide.

As a follow-up to the Conference, in 2021 the UfM launched a series of three workshops on e-governance implemented in Algeria, Palestine and Mauritania, in partnership with the German Development Cooperation and the Estonian ICT Cluster.

Bringing together participants from public institutions, the private sector, civil society and academia involved in the digital transformation in those three countries, the initial workshops' aim was to share best practices and encourage exchanges on topics related to e-governance, such as digital transformation

enablers, digital identity, the interoperability of state registers and secure data exchange, digital skills, and digital solutions for favourable business environments.

Some sessions went beyond the initial inception and explored in more depth the conducive legal framework to build secure digital societies, with some concrete examples of digital public services (e-taxation, e-health, e-justice...) including those aimed at ensuring an attractive business environment (business registry, digital trade, cross-border services).

Good business sense: focusing on digitisation

In 2021, BUSINESSMED, the main representative of business confederations in the Mediterranean region, joined hands with the UfM to organise a webinar on the sanitary crisis as an accelerator of the digitalisation path of the Mediterranean Business Ecosystem.

The event reviewed several aspects related to the digital transformation of the region including the changes planned by business support organisations in their economic and structural models, the emergence of cross-border e-commerce, as well as an assessment of the use of technology by female entrepreneurs in the Mediterranean region.

The webinar focused on providing concrete solutions to meeting the challenges of the post-COVID19 economic recovery for SMEs to access new markets. The debate emphasised the way internationalisation benefited SMEs in industrialised countries focusing on the innovative platforms and opportunities offered for cross-border e-commerce.

In 2017,
only 8% of SMEs in the wider MENA region had an online presence
(compared to 80% in the United States) and
only 1.5% of the region's retailers were online

Source: UfM & OECD

A digital transformation with women at its heart

Celebrating its 6th edition, supported by 5 years of knowledge and experience, the UfM Women Business Forum (WBF) is an ideal regional platform that offers women-owned and women-led businesses a unique opportunity to take their business to the next level.

In 2021, the WBF focused on digital transformation and how technology

can be harnessed to empower women as entrepreneurs, traders, workers and professionals. The COVID-19 pandemic has indeed taken an especially heavy toll on jobs traditionally held by women such as retail, tourism and hospitality, and the forum offered an excellent opportunity to identify where digital inequalities remain gender biased and to ensure that women are not left behind as our societies start to rebuild.

The Forum brought together over 500 female entrepreneurs, business organisations, international organisations and business support schemes from the Euro-Mediterranean region, and was also followed live on social media by more than 1000 viewers.

Experts shared their insights, knowledge and good practices regarding education and training initiatives to enhance digital literacy and women's participation in digital environments, and explored the opportunities digital transformation and technologies offer, their impact on value chains and how they can be used to enhance the competitiveness of women-owned SMEs and women's bargaining power.

In partnership with CIHEAM and UNIDO, the 2021 WBF also offered participants training sessions on Digital Transforma-

More on partners

Mobile World Capital

Mobile World Capital is a foundation driving the digital advancement of society, while helping improve people's lives globally. With the support of the public and private sector, MWC Capital focuses on four areas: the acceleration of innovation through digital entrepreneurship, the transformation of industries through digital technology, the rise of digital talent among new generations and professionals, and reflecting on the impact of technology in our society.

Within the framework of the MWC Capital Barcelona 2021, an MoU was signed with the UfM to achieve common objectives in the fields of digital transformation, bridging the digital gap and promoting digital skills and entrepreneurship across the Euro-Mediterranean region.

Learn more here:



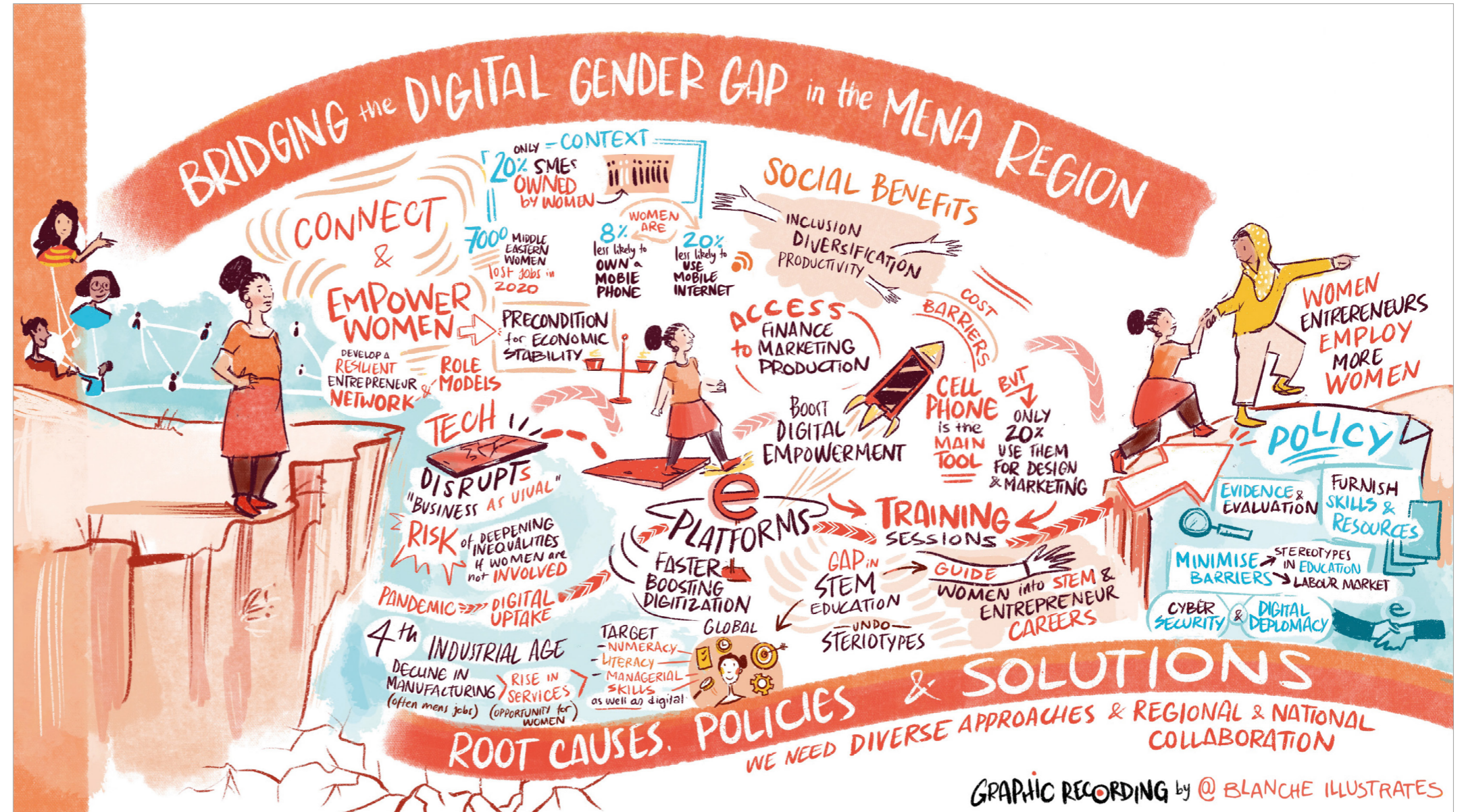
Graphic recording of the 6th UfM Women Business Forum

tion for Women-Led SMEs, e-commerce for women entrepreneurs and innovation and digital opportunities for businesses in rural areas.

Furthermore, the WBF participants were taken on a virtual site visit to three inspiring women-owned businesses in Tunisia. Viewers and participants observed the first-hand experience on how digitalisation is giving businesses the edge in the natural cosmetics sector. This session was brought to life thanks to the pilot initiative funded by the Principality of Monaco in Tunisia under the UNIDO, UN Women and FAO joint program labelled by the UfM “Promoting Women’s Empowerment for Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development in the MENA Region” project (see p. 32).

A blue economy fit for the future

In the blue economy sector, digital transformation requires new skills and competencies, updated education programmes, as well as comprehensive training programmes. Aware of this pressing need, the mandate set by the



Women face a persistent **gender gap in terms of access to and use of digital technologies** – a gap which increased **from 19% to 24% between 2013 and 2019** in Arab countries



Source: CIHEAM

2nd UfM Ministerial declaration on sustainable blue economy (February 2021) prioritised the promotion of blue skills, careers, and employment through education and vocational training. In this framework, the UfM Secretariat joined forces in 2021 with WESTMED to organise a webinar on digitalisation skills in the aquaculture and tourism sectors. Gathering more than 150 representatives from government agencies, regional organisations, SMEs and academia, the webinar provided an overview of the specific needs identified in the sector and offered practical sessions on how to apply digitalisation skills to the specificities of aquaculture and tourism.

More on UfM initiatives: the Mediterranean Blue Economy Stakeholder Platform

Managed since 2017 by the UfM Secretariat and funded by the EU, the **Mediterranean Blue Economy Stakeholder Platform (MedBESP)** is a web-based portal aimed at sharing knowledge and supporting the development of the blue economy in the Mediterranean region. Working as a true “one-stop-shop”, the platform allows sharing and consolidation of general and technical information on marine and maritime affairs and promotes a blue economy community by facilitating contacts between existing education networks, while serving as an interface for mobility programmes.

The platform’s ultimate goal is to provide a systemic and coherent framework on maritime governance, through a more integrated and coordinated approach to policies.

Learn more about the platform on its website:

