



Union for the Mediterranean
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2025 UfM-UAB-OECD

WOMEN BUSINESS FORUM

ACCELERATING INVESTMENT IN WOMEN-LED BUSINESSES IN THE MENA REGION

16-17 JULY 2025 / PALERMO, ITALY

AGENDA

With the support of:



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Background

Despite the increasing presence of women entrepreneurs in the MENA region, access to finance remains a critical barrier to business growth. Women-led SMEs face legal, institutional, financial, and socio-cultural challenges that hinder their investment readiness and participation in the formal economy. At the same time, policy frameworks, financial institutions, and business support organizations (BSOs) are ill-equipped or unmotivated to support women-led enterprises, contributing to the gender financing gap.

Investment readiness programs have become a common offering in the entrepreneurial ecosystem—but are they truly effective? The reality is that standalone investment readiness training often falls short, especially for early-stage entrepreneurs who need far more than just pitch decks and financial modeling. A more impactful approach? Embedding investment readiness within a broader support program, where it's complemented by access to networks, business model refinement, and mentorship.

A notable shortcoming in many initiatives is the limited involvement of investors throughout the process. Frequently, entrepreneurs are thoroughly prepared and well-supported, yet they encounter a lack of investor presence when it matters most. To address this, it is essential to engage investors early on—ideally through proactive outreach and consultation—to better understand the conditions and incentives that would encourage their active participation.

Another challenge is terminology. “Investment readiness” often implies venture capital as the end goal, yet many women-led businesses thrive on grants, loans, or alternative funding. A more inclusive name—like “funding readiness program”—could better reflect the full spectrum of financial options.

Finally, a one-size-fits-all model rarely works. Segmenting the program into tailored tracks—whether by business stage, sector, or funding type, could ensure each entrepreneur gets the right support at the right time.

The takeaway? Investment readiness shouldn't be a checkbox exercise. Done right, it's a strategic bridge between entrepreneurs and the capital they need to grow—but only if designed with real-world impact in mind.

The Women Business Forum (WBF) seeks to harness this momentum by convening key stakeholders to bring together their solutions and their perspectives in support to women-led business growth, by 1)

establishing a regional network of women business association which will build on and interlink the existing efforts across the region with a multi-level approach and 2) by identifying the main pillars of a multi-layer regional capacity building initiative which:

- At the macro level, will engage policymakers and regulators with the aim of creating a more enabling environment, building on existing initiatives such as the EU-OECD regional programme in support to women entrepreneurs' access to finance.
- At the meso level, will target financial institutions and Business Support Organisations to improve gender-responsive services.
- At the micro level, will support women-led SMEs in becoming investment-ready through tailored business development services. The experience of the EU Funded regional programme InvestNissa will provide the relevant reference for this specific pillar.

The Women Business Forum aims to serve as a regional platform for sharing, cross-fertilising and elevating actionable strategies, building partnerships, and amplifying the voices and ventures of women entrepreneurs.

The Forum contributes to sustain the momentum and concretise the UfM Ministerial Declaration on Strengthening the Role of Women in Societies adopted in Madrid in 2022¹ and its RoadMap for Implementation.

Objectives

The specific objectives of the Forum include:

- **Advance regional dialogues on policy innovations** in support to women entrepreneurship (e.g., gender-lens investing policies, procurement quotas).
- Discuss and **share experience from the existing efforts** helping women-led startups and SMEs with relevant technical assistance and support tools to become investment-ready, including financial modeling and investor engagement strategies.
- Contribute to **bring together** women entrepreneurs and financial institutions/investors, and **discuss improved ways to match existing tools** offered by the financial institutions, support provided by women business organisations with the **financial needs** of women entrepreneurs.
- **Mobilise and connect women entrepreneur support structures**, including incubators, accelerators, and business networks.
- **Share the findings from the EU-OECD regional** initiative on policy and regulatory frameworks for women's access to finance.

¹ 5th_UfM_Declaration_StrengtheningRoleWomenSociety_Final_EN.pdf

Expected Outputs

The WBF will be a results-oriented forum, designed to yield tangible outcomes that extend beyond dialogue:

Strategic Outputs:

- **The UfM Women Business Associations Regional Network**
- **Main objective of a regional capacity building initiative for women-led businesses**
- **A Brief on Financing Solutions** showcasing innovative models and best practices

Target Audience

- Women entrepreneurs at various growth stages (early, scale-up, export-ready)
- Impact investors and financial institutions
- Women's business associations
- Policymakers and regulatory bodies
- Incubators, accelerators, and NGOs

Forum Themes / Pillars

- Investment Readiness and Strategic Scaling
- Innovative Financing models
- Legal and Regulatory Reform for Women Entrepreneurs
- Gender-Sensitive Ecosystem Development
- Digital Innovation & Tech Enablement

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Day 1: Building the Foundation

8:30 - 9:00 Registration

9:00 - 9:15 Opening remarks

- **Stephen Borg**, Deputy Secretary General, Union for the Mediterranean (UfM)
- **Dina Kaddouh**, External Affairs Coordinator, Union of Arab Banks (UAB)

Moderated by Neila Amara, Private Sector Development & Women Empowerment Expert

9:15 - 10:45 InspireHer Contest Award ceremony

Introduction : Dina Kaddouh, Union of Arab Banks (UAB)

Sponsors:

- **Fatima-Zahra Jabri**, Bank of Africa
- **Hashim Suleiman Hussein**, Head ITPO Bahrain, UNIDO
- **Leo Bruckhuisen**, Associate in the Investment Management team SANAD
- **Méjda Ben Hassine**, Responsable RSE-ESG -Arab Tunisian Bank

10 Winners InspireHer Award:

- **Nuhayr Zein**, Leukeather, Egypt
- **Rose Bechara Perini**, Darmmess Social Enterprise, Lebanon
- **Nouha Ben Zbir**, Velours Lactés, Tunisia
- **Thelal Alshamaileh**, Easy Robot Kit, Jordan
- **Bara' Abu Shareefeh**, Coach You, Jordan
- **Randa Harb**, Green Robot Tech, Lebanon
- **Nisrine Sadik**, Lumina, Morocco
- **Kariman Almashharawi**, Belifye, Palestine
- **Tamara Ghandour**, Rama Impact, Lebanon
- **Iman Elwasifi**, Muqbis, Egypt

Moderated by Anna Dorangricchia & Giulia Maria Ferraresi, UfM

10:45 - 11:00 Coffee break

11:00 - 12:30

Investors-Led Workshop: *Looking for fundable businesses*

- **Karima El Hakim**, Country Director, Egypt Co Director, Africa Plus and Play (online)
- **Leo Bruckhuisen**, Associate in the Investment Management team , SANAD Equity Funds
- **Rasha, Kamal**, CEO Egyptian Angels Investors Associations Malaikah

The dynamic investor-led workshop will focus on what investors look for when evaluating business proposals. Speakers will present concrete criteria used in assessing fundable businesses and highlight why investment readiness is essential in the MENA region. Participants will actively contribute through interactive exchanges in working groups format. The session aims to deliver practical, operational takeaways for entrepreneurs seeking funding, with concrete insights from the point of view of the investors.

Participants divided in working groups will discuss:

1. Which criteria should be included in an investment offer to attract investors' interest
2. Which ecosystem actors need to be mobilized to support investment readiness
3. How to ensure effective follow-up and monitoring within the investment ecosystem

All participants will be requested to contribute to a dynamic interaction

Facilitated by Neila Amara, Private Sector Development & Women Empowerment Expert

12:30 - 14:00

Networking Lunch

14:00 - 15:15

Workshop: *Outlining the main pillars of a regional capacity building initiative, based on the existing good practices*

Session led by Sabrina Salama, SeedStars

The session will aim at collaboratively designing customized technical assistance approaches for four distinct segments of women-led enterprises in MENA:

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1. Micro-Growth Enterprises – livelihood-focused, family-run, low capital needs
2. Small & Dynamic Enterprises – small businesses with moderate ambitions
3. Medium-Growth/Niche Ventures – established businesses with sector-specific goals
4. High-Growth Ventures – tech-enabled, scalable startups with VC potential

Facilitated by Ms Neila Amara, Private Sector Development & Women Empowerment Expert

15:15 - 15:30 **Coffee break**

15:30 - 17:00 **Access to finance for women entrepreneurs: *regional overview and national opportunities***

The EU-OECD regional programme on access to finance for women entrepreneurs has as main objective to enhance women's economic empowerment through better access to finance for women entrepreneurs. The panel will present the interim regional findings of this project and representatives from different countries of the MENA region will share their insights on the challenges and opportunities for facilitating access to finance for women entrepreneurs.

- **Irene Salvoni**, Programme Manager, DG MENA, European Commission
- **Douja Gharbi**, CAWTAR, Tunisia
- **Sabrina Salama**, Head of Partnerships, Seedstars
- **Hana Lakhdar Ghazal**, Associate partner Instiglio, Morocco
- **Reem Badran**, CEO, Al Hurra for Management and Business Development

Moderated by Charlotte Goemans, Programme Coordinator MENA, OECD

17:00 - 17:30 **Day 1 Reflections & Action Summary**

Moderated by Anna Dorangricchia, UfM

20:30 **Dinner**

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Day 2: Deep Dive & Deal Making

9:30 - 11:00

Masterclass: Innovative Finance models

Different schemes and mechanisms will be explored based on the good practices already implemented in other regions

- **Andrea Tinagli**, Advisor for Sustainable Finance and Investments at the UfM, European Investment Bank (EIB)
- **Margaret Carroll**, Acting Head of the EIB Social Policy Unit, European Investment Bank European Investment Bank (EIB) (online)
- **Vito Intini**, Chief Economist, UNDP
- **Kateryna Morton**, Manager, Technical Assistance Management, Finance in Motion, GmbH
- **Dana Kupova**, Head of Inclusive Financial Systems at the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) (online)

All participants will be requested to contribute to a dynamic interaction

Facilitated by Neila Amara, Private Sector Development & Women Empowerment Expert

11:00 - 11:30

Coffee break

11:30 - 13:30

Launch of the UfM Regional Network of Women Business Associations (WBAs)

The session will spotlight the impactful initiatives led by WBAs at national and local level in supporting women-led business development and access to finance and their experience as members of regional and international networks

- **Aida Beji Kallel**, Member of the Executif board, CNFCE Chambre nationale des femmes chefs d'entreprises, Tunisia
- **Thanaa AlKhasawneh**, CEO Business Women Professionals Association, Jordan
- **Corine Kiame**, President, Lebanese League for Women in Business, Lebanon

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- **Ilham Bahij**, National General Secretary of AFEM, Morocco
- **Nora Regina Alawneh**, Executive Director, Business Women Forum - Palestine
- **Soha Elbaklawy**, Director International Relations MENA WBC, Egypt
- **Maria Helena De Felipe**, AFAEMME President, Spain
- What the added value of a Regional Network of WBAs?
- What governance and working methodology for a successful network?
- Sustainability and funding

All participants will be requested to contribute to a dynamic interaction

Facilitated by Neila Amara, Private Sector Development & Women Empowerment Expert

13:30 - 14:30 **Networking Lunch**

14:30 - 15:30 **Emerging trends: *Green Finance and Digital tools***

- **Tarek Elkady**, Investors of Mediterranean, Egypt (online)
- **Elisabetta Demartis**, JengaLab, partner of Inclusive NISSA, EU Funded Project
- **Rania Tarazi**, Gender Team Leader, Regional Bureau for Arab States UNDP

Moderated by Anna Dorangricchia, UfM

15:30 - 16:00 **Closing remarks and next Steps**



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