

OECD-MENA WOMEN'S BUSINESS FORUM MEETING
TOOLS SUPPORTING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

6 June 2014
OECD Headquarters, Paris, France

– Summary record –

The meeting on [“Tools supporting women’s economic empowerment”](#) that was organised by the OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum (WBF) on 6 June 2014 brought together over 70 participants committed to improving policies affecting women’s entrepreneurship in the MENA region, including policymakers, representatives from international organisations, academia, the private sector and the civil society.

Following up on the WBF joint meeting with the Ministry of General Affairs and Governance of the Kingdom of Morocco on [“Nurturing Entrepreneurship: Improving Women’s Access to Services and Financing”](#), organised with the support of the Union of Arab Banks on 2 December 2013 in Rabat, Morocco, the meeting sought to enhance the role of the National Task Forces (NTFs) whose contributions are vital to keep the WBF relevant. It also aimed at discussing the potential upcoming activities of the WBF, notably on leveraging women’s networks and promoting women’s corporate leadership in MENA. Participants also exchanged on the major outcomes of the technical meeting of the Project *Supporting women as economic actors during the transition period*, held on 5 June.

The meeting provided the opportunity to launch the preliminary version of the publication *Women in Business 2014: Accelerating Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa region*.



Welcoming remarks

H.E. Ambassador Birgitta Holst Alani, Director of the Swedish Institute in Alexandria, Egypt, Co-Chair of the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum, initiated the discussions on the importance of closing the gender gap through knowledge sharing. In light of the significant untapped potential for women's entrepreneurship in the region, where new sources of growth and job creation are urgently needed, education goes beyond a means of income, but effectively contributes back to communities, economy, and to the development of countries at large. H.E. Ambassador Birgitta Holst Alani praised the methodological approach adopted for the "Supporting women as economic actors during the transition period" project, which preliminary finding had been presented at the workshop held the day before, and which illustrates the crucial importance of locally collected data. In this light, she emphasised the need to strengthen the fruitful collaboration of the WBF and its members, particularly through the NTFs, with a view to further promote women's empowerment in the region.

Ms. Nicola Ehlermann-Cache, Acting Head of the MENA Division, Global Relations Secretariat, OECD, addressed the alarming gap between the increasing number of educated women and the economically active ones. MENA economies have the lowest proportion of women in employment in the world and a similarly low level of women entrepreneurship. Despite a growing pool of highly educated women who aspire to join the workforce, MENA women's labour market engagement lags behind the rest of the world: force participation is at 24%, compared to more than 60% on average in OECD countries – the lowest rate of women employment in the world. This undeniably impacts entrepreneurship, where work experience is a key determinant of firm success and sustainability. With only 12% of women running their own businesses, compared to 31% of men, the MENA region has the largest entrepreneurship gender gap in the world, as well as a high attrition rate for women-led firms.

Women are a driving force for development, economic growth and the wellbeing of society at large. Harnessing the potential of women could foster the development of the private sector and stimulate productivity, innovation and economic growth that would bring high economic and social returns for MENA societies. Research estimates that closing the gender gap in the labour market could increase GDP by more than 25% per capita in MENA economies. While effective women's networks are one key method of advancing women's careers and entrepreneurship, they are also instrumental in addressing substantive issues influencing women's economic empowerment such as the impacts of the legal barriers on women's entrepreneurship and women's corporate leadership in the region.

Session 1 - Leveraging Women's Networks in the MENA Region

Led by Ms. Mathilde Mesnard, New Approaches to Economic Challenges, Coordinator, OECD, this session aimed to define the methodology and tools of some successful networking initiatives. It explored how these good practices can be applied to the women's networks in the region.

The session built on the outcomes of the debate "The Value of Networks" that took place at the OECD Forum 2014, and it strengthened the conclusions of the Forum's debate.

The overall message was clear: women's networks are key in advancing women's careers, fostering entrepreneurship, and mainstreaming women into broader business networks.

To be effective, women's networks need to have a clear purpose and determine objectives which may have to be regularly assessed in order to remain relevant and to be customized in accordance with the ongoing challenging needs of women entrepreneurs. They may focus on an array of ambitious cross-sectoral goals such as career progression, access to finance, fundraising, or more sector-specific objectives. Women entrepreneurs benefit from purposeful and structured networking opportunities that leverage both their personal and professionally-oriented contacts.

Within this strategic set up, women's networks should strive to impact the decision-making process with the aim of both stimulating reforms and changing attitudes and behaviours. Participants argued that women's networks, whether operating in the business, government or political environment, should join forces, create synergies to speak as one with a more powerful voice. Cooperation, exchange of best practice and solidarity among women's networks is fundamental in this respect. Networks should have a sense of unity and common mission, and, overall, contribute to building an ecosystem which supports gender diversity.

Furthermore, women's networks provide a space where women can get empowered and meet with many role models locally and globally. Networks are critical in nurturing relationships among women, developing mentoring relationships and raising awareness. Access to coaching and mentorship programmes, capacity building, opportunities and contacts, which are knowledgeable about the regulatory environment and business operations, are important factors for successful personal and enterprise growth.

Women's networks should take a lead on raising awareness, encouraging and inspiring women entrepreneurs for whom role models are critical. One way to boost entrepreneurial learning and spirit is to collaborate with universities to foster joint events, programmes and trainings to address attitudes about entrepreneurship, build the necessary skills and raise awareness about entrepreneurship as a career option for girls.

Participants also highlighted the importance of teaming with men to increase effectiveness and awareness. Women's networks should establish fruitful dialogue and collaborative linkages with men and mixed networks, thereby mainstreaming women into broader business networks. Women entrepreneurs need better access to finance, professional business advice, information and training to improve business skills or better manage finances. These factors are necessary to fuel the expansion of women's entrepreneurship. Some meaningful ways of involving men, include coaching and mentoring programmes, skills development trainings, and specific events that address not only business development issues, but also, more broadly, the cultural and social stereotypes, intended to both women and men.

The debate emphasised that the use of networks is one of most effective methods of empowering women and supporting their career advancement, while creating more inclusive economy and society in the MENA region. All actors – business, civil society and governments – should share this endeavour and work together to make a change happen.

One practical initiative to support this endeavour that has been endorsed by the WBF is to develop a web platform resource that will gather all the relevant information regarding the existing networks.

Session 2 - Governance of the WBF: They Way Forward Through the National Task Forces

National Task Forces (NTFs) are currently in place in several countries, with varying levels of capacity, representativeness and activity. Their role is to (i) act as local contact points, (ii) co-ordinate national input into the regional work of the WBF and (iii) reach out to relevant stakeholders to advance the dialogue on measures needed to accelerate women's entrepreneurship development and assist the WBF agenda.

Since their establishment in 2011, NTFs managed to gather representatives of the key stakeholders in the MENA region, including the public and private sectors, international organisations and academia. They were instrumental to (i) improving financial support for women entrepreneurs, (ii) women's access to enterprise support and (iii) producing an "Inventory of Policies, Institutions and Programmes Supporting Women's Enterprise in the Middle East and North Africa".

Since the OECD is not able to detect all ongoing issues in specific countries, NTFs' inputs provide vital up-to-date data as well as feedback on the work carried out by the OECD. Furthermore, they have the ability to consult with various stakeholders within their countries and efficiently measure the impact of the changes

made to existing policies. Their contributions were praised and offered great visibility through the WBF's publications.¹ NTFs must now be reactivated and strengthened to provide their vital assistance to the WBF upcoming activities.

Based on the information collected for the 2014 Women in Business publication, and the recommendations included in the 2012 Women in Business report that have not been yet implemented, the WBF has identified further priorities for its future work, including: i) the development of a financial toolkit to help women become "bank-ready"; ii) analytical work on women's leadership in the corporate sector and, possibly, iii) analytical work on the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) on women's employment and entrepreneurship. This work shall be carried out with WBF members and in particular with the support of its NTFs which will assist in collecting information and helping raise awareness.

Building on the [Note on National Taskforces](#), participants discussed the key functions and objectives of NTFs members, the selection criteria and process as well as their working methods.

The highlight of the debate was the crucial need to expand the NTFs memberships, especially among youth which represent the vast majority of the MENA population. To this end, a strong call was made by the co-Chairs of the WBF towards former and potential new members to further engage within their respective NTFs.

Discussions led to the conclusion that in order to enhance cohesion and communication for further knowledge and experience sharing between NTFs members, the final list and details of the members shall be circulated.

Session 3 - Impact of Legal Barriers on Women's Entrepreneurship

The Technical Meeting "[Supporting women as economic actors during the transition period: Review of project preliminary findings](#)" that was held on 5th June 2014 at the OECD Headquarters in Paris, brought together about 50 participants. Local and international experts, as well as representatives from international organisations, academia, the private sector and civil society, discussed to what extent laws and regulations in place promote or hinder, directly or indirectly, women's capacity to engage in economic activities in the six Project countries, i.e. Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia.

Launched in 2013, the Project *Supporting women as economic actors during the transition period* seized the opportunity of the current transition experienced in the region to help ensure that ongoing democratic reforms fully take into account the high development potential that is associated with a stronger involvement of women in the economy.

The Project brings together national and international experts and women's groups to: (i) analyse how the legal environment concretely impacts women's involvement in the economy; (ii) raise government and public awareness of the economic and social returns of increasing women's access to the economy; (iii) collect, compile and analyse key gender-disaggregated economic and educational data; and (iv) provide targeted policy recommendations to support governments to adopt and implement legal frameworks supporting gender equality.

Building on the preliminary findings elaborated by in-country Project teams that have been presented by Ms Serena Romano, Gender Expert, External Consultant, OECD, the meeting took stock of the legal barriers hampering women's economic activity within a broad range of legal issues *i.e.*, international commitments,

¹ OECD (2012) [Women in Business: Policies to support women's entrepreneurship development in the MENA region](#); OECD (2014) *Women in Business: Accelerating Entrepreneurship in the MENA region*.

rights recognised by the constitutions, personal status laws and labour laws, and to propose advocacy actions and next steps to be undertaken.

Participants discussed the following issues:

- Are fundamental rights recognised by constitutions and if so, are those rights effectively implemented?
- Are ratified international conventions on women rights implemented?
- What are the constitutional guarantees of gender equality in a given country and how are they enforced?
- How do personal status laws like “guardianship” provisions impact women’s mobility and professional choices?
- Do protective labour laws (i.e. banning night work in certain industries or mandating child care) *de facto* hinder women’s economic integration?
- Do men and women have equal rights to own property?
- Do women have the same rights to engage in legal proceedings and do social pressures dissuade women from challenging rights infringements in court?

Following up on the inputs provided during the meeting, this pioneering comparative study will culminate in a comprehensive final report on the state of women’s economic rights in the six Project countries, that will include policy recommendations to enhance women’s economic status and involvement. This report will be supported by an interactive on-line platform and launched at a High level conference in May 2015.

Session 4 - Women’s Corporate Leadership in MENA

Studies, including the OECD report on Closing the Gender Gap, point out that enhancing the role of women in corporate leadership positions benefits companies. This enables them to attract and retain the best talent, enhance diversity, improve overall performance in the workplace, and better serve the consumer markets.

Building on the OECD *Note on Women’s Corporate Leadership in MENA countries*, Ms Fianna Jurdant, Senior Policy Analyst, Directorate for Financial and Enterprise Affairs, OECD, discussed with participants how available and relevant data reflect the very low representation of women in leadership and decision-making positions in the region.

Participants questioned the need for quotas to be implemented. It was argued that while quotas may speed up the process of women’s access to leadership and decisions making positions, there is also a dire need for promoting education, freedom to work, legislation, networks, and training for young women. Quotas are being considered as a possible temporary solution to support greater representation of women on corporate boards in MENA, but this should be supported by various initiatives to create an “eco-system” developing a virtuous circle for women’s corporate leadership.

Other initiatives for this cause that have been presented and discussed, such as those undertaken by the International Financial Centre in Yemen and Pakistan, emphasised the benefits of partnering with local media in spreading awareness and increasing economic participation of women in the region.

Based on participants’ personal experiences as board members, discussions illustrated how greater women representation provides diversity, access to role models and a more dynamic consumer market.

Finally, it was suggested that the next steps should be to provide a questionnaire for all participants that can help develop the data collection process for women on corporate boards and senior management in MENA.

Closing Remarks: Ms. Gabriela Ramos, Chief of Staff and G20 Sherpa, Office of the Secretary General, OECD

Ms Gabriela Ramos, Chief of Staff, and G20 Sherpa, Office of the Secretary General, OECD, referring to the “Global Summit for Women” where she was representing the OECD earlier the same day, noted that while there is considerable variation between countries on the gender issue, there are also several commonalities that must be observed in order to find solutions. She stressed the importance of collaboration which leads to best practice and most effective results.

Given that there is a lot to do to achieve equal representation in decision making positions, even in very developed countries where the gender gap and women’s under-representation remain significant, Ms. Gabriela Ramos expressed her belief that it is very important to maintain a strong gender emphasis, especially for the purpose of the upcoming G20.

Finally, Ms Neveen El Tahri, President and Director, Delta Shield for Investment, Egypt, co-Chair of the WBF, reiterated the crucial need to reactivate and strengthen the NTFs in order to enable them to effectively continue to provide their vital support to the upcoming activities of the WBF.



Ms. Nicola Ehlermann-Cache, Ms. Gabriela Ramos and Ms. Neveen El Tahri, OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum meeting “Tools to support women’s economic empowerment”, 6 June 2014, OECD Headquarters, Paris, France.