



The OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum : “Policies and Services to Support Women's Entrepreneurship Development in the MENA Region”

Government and Private Sector Responses in Times of Change

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I am very pleased to be here with you to close the 10th meeting of the OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum. We are very proud to be the venue, and the supporter, of this dialogue among prominent supporters of women economic empowerment in the MENA region. I am also glad to join you after Amb. Kornbluh, who is a great supporter, and Amb. Ahnlid and many interested colleagues in the OECD.

I was in Washington last week in the meetings of the IMF-WB and could testify the interest in many institutions to help the region on achieving high and sustainable rates of growth. And of course, women empowerment is a key element of this agenda, and of the democratic and economic transformation of the region. The OECD is Deauville partnership, and besides contributing in many fields, we are particularly interested in private sector development and particularly of SME's and women.

Now let me tell you, this is not only part relationship with the region, but more broadly is the recognition that, in the current context of weak economic recovery, giving a boost to women participation and supporting SME's will help us ignite again new sources of growth that are lacking nowadays.

This is why, in a more broader mandate, and thanks to the US and Secretary Clinton initiative, and of Ambassador Kornbluh initiative, we have embarked on an important gender initiative that addresses the obstacles to the equal treatment of men and women in education, employment and entrepreneurship.

Preliminary findings were presented at the OECD 2011 Ministerial Meeting. At next year's ministerial meeting we hope to have a more complete report providing more knowledge on women's entrepreneurship as well as some indicators to monitor its progress. The work undertaken by your group will certainly enrich this wider OECD initiative and feed into reflections on future goals.

We of course believe that, to address this problem, **we need to frame it and understand it**. This is one of the key effort at the OECD, by which we measure, assess, compare and distill policy lessons in many areas. Your work here is pretty much in line with this philosophy and I congratulate you for the results, that will certainly make important contributions.

The **Inventory of Policies, Institutions and Programmes Supporting Women's Enterprise in the MENA Region** that you developed is another practical resource for women entrepreneurs. It will also serve as a basis to identify gaps in policy and institutional support.

Your **task forces**, comprised of governmental, private sector as well as NGO and academia representatives, are undeniably another important asset. They ensure that the inventories are accurate and up to date. My understanding is that the expansion of these task forces remains a priority for the Women Business Forum.

So I am aware that your discussions have been fruitful. It is also my understanding that the conclusions of the meeting, on which you can send comments to the OECD Secretariat, will feed into the broader policy dialogue of the MENA-OECD Investment Programme. They shall be discussed at its next Steering Group meeting – to be held in Spring 2012.

The regional conferences, capacity-building workshops and policy analysis by this group all aim at identifying concrete means by which governments and the private sector can improve the business environment for women entrepreneurs. They constitute a unique opportunity to support women's economic empowerment and develop their entrepreneurship potential in the MENA region.

With all this work, I am pleased to hear that you have been able to identify policy priorities to support the growth and development of women-led businesses in the Middle East and North Africa. While draft conclusions are being distributed, I would like to highlight a few key points.

First, women **are increasingly well trained in the MENA region, but are still under-represented as influential politicians, parliamentarians and economic actors.** This is, by the way, not that different from the situation in many of our OECD countries. Women in the MENA region hold ownership positions in only 20% of businesses. Their entrepreneurship rates are also very low, representing half that of men (8% compared to 16%), while their economic participation potential is very high.

It is crucial to **change this *status quo*** and accelerate women's leadership in the economic spheres in your region, and hence increase economic growth. To do so, it is important to **spread knowledge** on how women can be empowered, and to develop the **strength and reach of women's advocacy groups.** As underlined by the Iraqi Minister of Women Affairs, in times of change, women need to ensure that emerging policy leaders are fully aware of the essential contribution they are able to make to economic development.

Your discussions on **“access to business support services”** and **“access to markets”** also brought to the fore that it is essential to expand the **availability and reach of business support services and infrastructure in the MENA region.** Countries with insufficient business support infra-structure, could for example establish networks of SME support agencies, enterprise centres and business advisory bureaus, which need to be tailored to assist women entrepreneurs.

But it is also necessary to increase **women entrepreneurs' access to domestic and international markets,** and to improve their access to supply chains public bids as well as to information – for example on export regulations and market opportunities.

However, **many of your countries still lack the necessary statistical tools** necessary for effective policy making in this field. A better knowledge of the benefits of women entrepreneurship would enhance support for their integration into the formal economy, contributing in turn to the region's competitiveness. One way to compensate for this insufficient government data is to develop **some key indicators which take gender into account**. The OECD stands ready to assist in doing this.

Your work will also certainly feed into the **OECD's wider contribution to economic and social development in the MENA region**. Our long-standing MENA-OECD Initiative and SIGMA programmes have already delivered concrete results. As I said, we now fully participate to the Deauville Partnership, contributing to the successful implementation of the reform programmes enshrined in country action plans and sustained by the international financial institutions. Our contributions could cover a wide range of areas, **including governance and transparency, economic and social inclusion, job creation, accelerating private sector-led economic growth, *inter alia***.

Ladies and gentlemen,

This is a crucial moment for most of your countries. This might be a risky one, but it is certainly also a great opportunity to boost the gender agenda, to advocate for women economic empowerment, and to develop better policies for women entrepreneurship in your region.

The OECD stands ready to support your efforts. We will do so thanks to your work in this Business Forum, but also, as I mentioned, through our Gender Initiative and our contribution to the Deauville Partnership. We will stand by great women from a great region, for a better future for all.