The OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum

Supporting Women’s Entrepreneurship Development in the Middle East and North Africa since 2007
The OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum

Women in the MENA region: an untapped potential

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WOMEN IN THE MENA REGION: AN UNTAPPED POTENTIAL

Although MENA women are increasingly qualified, their entrepreneurship rates remain among the lowest in the world. Strong leadership and targeted policies are needed to support the development of women-led businesses, potential catalysts for growth in the region.

Women remain an untapped resource for driving growth and competitiveness in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). They represent half of the region’s employment potential, yet today only 27% of working age women in MENA enter the labour force, as compared to 65% in OECD countries. Women’s entrepreneurship rates are also among the lowest in the world, with only about 9% of adult women starting businesses, less than half the rate of men (19%).¹ This despite studies showing that women-led firms in the formal MENA region are internationally competitive, well established, and contribute to job creation³.

While there have been improvements in many MENA countries in the operational environment for private enterprises, stronger and more targeted efforts are needed to support businesses, in particular women-led firms.

KEY FACTS ABOUT WOMEN’S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE MENA REGION

- Over 90% female-to-male enrolment rate in almost all MENA countries in primary, secondary and tertiary schools, with women outnumbering men in tertiary education in over half the countries

² World Bank (2005-2009), Enterprise Surveys
³ World Bank (2008), The Environment for Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa

¹ IDRC (2009), Global Entrepreneurship Monitor: GEM-MENA Regional Report
To strengthen women’s economic empowerment in the region, MENA Ministers endorsed the creation of the OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum, which has grown into an open and dynamic platform for women entrepreneurs.

**Origins of the WBF: A MENA-OECD Ministerial Commitment**

At the 2007 MENA-OECD Ministerial Conference, MENA ministers adopted the Declaration on Fostering Women’s Entrepreneurship in the MENA Region. In 2009, they endorsed the Action Plan on Fostering Women’s Entrepreneurship and Employment in the MENA Region. Ministers agreed that implementation of this work would be driven by the newly-launched OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum (WBF).

**An Open and Growing Network**

The WBF has become an open and growing inter-regional network which leverages the expertise of over 200 women and men leaders from the private sector, government, international organisations and civil society to support the growth and development of women-led businesses in the Middle East and North Africa. Through regional conferences, capacity-building workshops and policy analysis, it helps governments and the private sector make concrete improvements to the business environment for women entrepreneurs.

**Mainstreaming Women’s Entrepreneurship in MENA and OECD Policy Fora**

The WBF’s analysis and recommendations feed into the broader policy dialogue of the MENA-OECD Investment Programme through its Steering Group, Business Council and Working Group on SMEs, Entrepreneurship and Human Capital Development. Through participation in OECD events such as committee meetings or the annual OECD Ministerial Forum, the WBF aims at further mainstreaming women’s issues into international policy fora and seeks to help identify areas where targeted intervention is needed to support women-led businesses.
The WBF galvanizes concrete action to improve operational conditions for women’s enterprise development by focusing on five key areas.

**FOCUS AREAS OF THE WBF**

1. Ensuring policy leadership and institutional co-operation
2. Improving women entrepreneurs’ access to credit and financial services
3. Strengthening the provision of tailored business support services
4. Building the advocacy capacity of the businesswoman’s community
5. Supporting greater research efforts and data collection on women’s entrepreneurship

The 2009 WBF Ministerial Conference in Beirut focused on “Enhancing the Business-Enabling Environment for Women in Arab Economies”. Panelists included (right to left*): U.S. Ambassador to the OECD H.E. Karen Kornbluh, Moroccan Minister for Economic and General Affairs H.E. Nizar Baraka, Palestinian Minister of Justice H.E. Ali Khashan, Lebanese Minister of State H.E. Adnan Al Kassar, Lebanese Minister of Finance H.E. Raya Haffar El-Hassan and Director of the *Groupement Professionnel des Banques du Maroc* El Hadi Chaibainou) *Positions held at time of the meeting*
The political momentum of the WBF is reinforced through a multi-tiered MENA-OECD partnership and strong regional ownership.

**CO-CHAIRS** attend annual meetings and validate overall direction

H.E. Ms. Dina Kawar, Jordanian Ambassador to France (left) and H.E. Ms. Karen Kornbluh, U.S. Ambassador to the OECD (right).

**MEMBERS AT LARGE** enable the WBF to act as a hub for the myriad organisations working to promote women’s economic empowerment

**PARTNER INSTITUTIONS** enrich the work of the WBF with their expertise and networks. Current partners include the Council of Arab Businesswomen, the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), Union of Arab Banks, World Association of Women Entrepreneurs and various national women’s business associations.

**LOCAL TASK FORCES** composed of representatives from government, private sector and academia from over 12 MENA economies provide regional input and guidance and strengthen impact on the ground. The WBF is working to establish task forces for all 19 MENA economies which participate in the MENA-OECD Investment Programme.

1 Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Arab Rep. of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Republic of Yemen
The WBF has made important inroads in better understanding what policies and tools are needed to boost women’s entrepreneurship in the region. Some examples include:

**Facilitating exchanges**

2010: Launch of an online platform to allow women entrepreneurs to network and acquire information when travel to meetings is not possible.

**Sharing good practices**

2010: A Ministerial Conference in Beirut focused on sharing good practices for providing tailored financial and business development services to women entrepreneurs.  
2011: Inclusion of good practices in the issues papers on *Women’s Access to Finance in MENA* and *Business Incubators in MENA*.

**Improving support**

2010: Launch of local task forces and development of guidelines to complete country-specific *Inventories of Policies, Institutions and Programmes Supporting Women’s Enterprise in the Middle East and North Africa*.  
2011: Production of 12 draft inventories, in collaboration with local task forces.

**Mainstreaming in business and policy fora**

2010: Strong participation of Union of Arab Banks members at the Fall WBF Conference.  
2011: Inclusion of MENA-related information in the OECD project on *Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship*.

**Building capacity**

2010: Interactive coaching session on *Pitching a Business Plan* provided to four women finalists in the MENA 100 Business Plan Competition.

**Attribution of the 2010 “OECD Gender Mainstreaming Champion Award”**

On the occasion of the OECD Forum and 50th anniversary (May 2011), the MENA-OECD Initiative on Governance and Investment for Development received the 2010 OECD Gender Mainstreaming Champion Award from Ms. Cherie Blair, founder of the Cherie Blair Foundation for Women, in the presence of H.E. Ms. Karen Kornbluh, Ambassador of the United States to the OECD and Co-chair of the WBF. The award recognised the Initiative’s work in supporting the analysis on the role of women in economic growth; fostering the development of policy recommendations that enhance attention to gender variables; and its significant contributions to leveraging OECD work on gender in the international arena.
The WBF has held or contributed to nine events since the 2009 MENA-OECD Ministerial Conference:

- MENA-OECD Business Forum and Women Business Leaders Summit (22 November 2009, Marrakech, Morocco)
- Meeting on Supporting the Integration of Women in MENA Economies (29 March 2010, Tunis, Tunisia)
- Conference on Gender Equality in Government and Business (4 May 2010, Paris, France)
- Ministerial Conference on Enhancing the Business Enabling Environment for Women in Arab Economies (24 November 2010, Beirut, Lebanon)
- Growing Micro and Small Enterprises: Tackling Financing Obstacles in the MENA Region - meeting by MENA-OECD Working Group 2 on SME development (22-23 February 2011, Casablanca, Morocco)
- Joint meeting with OECD Working Party on SMEs and Entrepreneurship on Policies for SME and Entrepreneurship Finance (20 April, Paris, France)
- Seminar on Women in Private Equity: New Frontiers for the MENA Region (23 May, Paris, France)
- Meeting on Policies and Services to Support Women’s Entrepreneurship Development in the MENA Region: Government and Private Sector Responses in Times of Change (27-28 September 2011, Paris, France)
Inventory of Policies, Institutions and Programmes Supporting Women’s Enterprise in the Middle East and North Africa.

The inventory is the first systematic mapping of policies, institutions and programmes which provide targeted support to women entrepreneurs in the MENA region. Its ultimate aim is to provide the basis for assessing country-level gaps in supporting and formulating targeted recommendations based on international and regional good practice. The 12 inventories in progress apply to Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian Authority, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

Working papers by:

The MENA-OECD Investment Programme:

- Women’s Access to Finance in the MENA Region (2010)
- Business Incubators in the MENA Region (2010)

Members and friends of the WBF:

- Role of Women’s Entrepreneurship in the Middle East and North Africa Labour Market, Lois Stevenson (2010)
- Women as Partners for Sustainable Development and Iraq’s Transition to a Market Economy, Wafa Al-Mahdawi (2011):

These publications are available at [www.oecd.org/ MENA/investment/wbn](http://www.oecd.org/ MENA/investment/wbn)
THE ORGANISATION FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AND DEVELOPMENT (OECD)

The OECD is a unique forum where 34 member governments work together to address the economic, social and environmental challenges of globalisation. The OECD is also at the forefront of efforts to understand and help governments address emerging policy issues such as finding new sources of growth, building skills, and restoring public trust in government and business. The OECD provides a setting where governments can compare policy experiences, seek answers to common problems, identify good practice and work to co-ordinate domestic and international policies. It increasingly engages with a number of non-members who have become important actors in today’s global economy. www.oecd.org

THE MENA-OECD INVESTMENT PROGRAMME

The MENA-OECD Investment Programme was established in 2005 at the request of participating MENA governments to assist them in implementing business climate reform for investment, growth and employment in the region. It is one of two pillars of the MENA-OECD Initiative on Governance and Investment for Development, which helps MENA governments design and implement reforms to modernise public governance structures, strengthen the business climate and foster transparency—issues which have taken on increasing importance in light of recent events in the region. The OECD-MENA Women’s Business Forum is a part of the wider MENA-OECD Investment Programme. www.oecd.org/mena/investment/wbn Contact: mena.investment@oecd.org.