An economy in which women are empowered is more competitive and benefits all levels of society. Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals recognise that gender equality can drive sustainable development and calls for accelerating efforts to promote women’s economic empowerment. Arab and DAC providers of development co-operation have a central role in supporting developing countries to eliminate the barriers that hinder women’s economic empowerment, for example: challenges with obtaining specialised knowledge and skills for women, young women and girls; accessing business and financial services, inputs and technologies; transitioning from education into paid employment for young women; and overcoming the constraints imposed by the uneven share of unpaid care and domestic work. In a number of partner countries, legal frameworks still discriminate against women. This session will be an opportunity for participants to discuss and share experiences with promoting women’s economic empowerment in partner countries. It will allow participants to identify good practice and successful mechanisms in this area, as well as scope the potential for future collaboration in this area, including through triangular co-operation.

Key issues for discussion:

- What tools and activities are Arab and DAC providers deploying to unblock the constraints hindering women’s economic empowerment? How do providers ensure that these tools and activities are context-specific and occur in key sectors?
- What quick wins and opportunities for Arab-DAC collaboration can enhance women’s economic empowerment in partner countries? How can these complement longer-term investments and interventions in the area?
- How can Islamic finance, triangular co-operation and engaging with the private sector support programmes and partnerships in the area of women’s economic empowerment?

Possible outcomes:

- Greater understanding of the range of programmes, tools and activities currently deployed to support partner countries in the area of women’s economic empowerment. Identifying good practices to address the challenges experienced by partner countries in this area.
- Agreeing on concrete areas where Arab and DAC providers could collaborate, such as conducting a joint study on Arab and DAC activities supporting women’s economic empowerment, analysing how Arab and DAC providers track official development assistance for gender equality and women’s economic empowerment, or exploring complementarities across different types of providers through concrete interventions at country-level.

Promoting women’s economic empowerment to achieve sustainable development

Gender equality is a basic human right and a central factor in reducing poverty and promoting a more equitable distribution of income. Greater gender equality promotes more resilient, productive and inclusive economies. Not surprisingly, the 2030 Agenda confers women’s economic empowerment a central place in achieving sustainable development – as women’s economic empowerment aims at increasing skills and access to productive resources, improving the enabling and institutional environments, and assisting women to make and act upon decisions that help them benefit from economic growth and development. Specifically, Sustainable Development Goal no. 5 aims at empowering all women and girls. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda also raises the need to ensure women’s equal access and opportunities for participation and
leadership in the economy. For example, research shows that closing the gender gap in labour force participation rates would increase GDP by 47% in 2025 in the MENA region.

Building inclusive societies is a high priority in many developing countries. While many countries have made notable progress on gender equality in recent years (e.g. in terms of education), there are indications that more can still be done in this respect (e.g. women’s participation in the formal labour force is still low and women spend more time than men on unpaid work and domestic care, activities that include time-intensive tasks such as fetching water and fuel - a burden that is especially acute in fragile and conflict-affected settings). The 2017 report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment outlined the persistent gaps and challenges, as well as the main drivers that can help achieve greater women’s economic empowerment. In particular, the High-Level Panel notes that countries need to focus on seven areas:

- Tackling adverse norms and promoting positive role models;
- Ensuring legal protection and reforming discriminatory laws and regulations;
- Recognising, reducing and redistributing unpaid work and care;
- Building digital, financial and property assets;
- Changing business culture and practice;
- Improving public sector practices in employment and procurement; and
- Strengthening women’s visibility, collective voice and representation.

The role of Arab and DAC providers in the area of women’s economic empowerment

Arab and DAC providers support women to achieve greater economic empowerment in their partner countries. Overall, bilateral Official Development Assistance (ODA) from DAC members integrating (mainstreaming) gender equality in all sectors combined was higher than ever before in 2015-16 at USD 41.7 billion USD on average per year, corresponding to 37% of DAC members’ ODA. At the same time, dedicated support focused on gender equality and women’s empowerment as the primary objective stagnated at only 4% of bilateral aid, amounting to USD 4.6 billion per year. Moreover, in the economic and productive sectors, only 1% of bilateral aid was dedicated to gender equality and women’s empowerment as a primary objective. The OECD considers that this amount is ‘a drop in the ocean’ and that all providers need to step up their assistance to partner countries in this area. Such assistance can take the form of more and better-aligned official development finance, triangular co-operation, support for more effective mobilisation and use of domestic resources, more technical support and policy advice to build capacity and more private sector investment.

At the same time, non-DAC providers are encouraged to provide more information to the OECD on their gender-related activities, which would enhance the transparency of the development co-operation system on this particular issue and would ensure a more efficient response of the international community on gender issues. Below are suggestions for areas where Arab and DAC providers could take concrete actions to accelerate women’s economic empowerment.

---

1. At the thematic level, Arab and DAC providers could collaborate on the following issues:

- **Support partner countries to understand and remove the barriers blocking women’s access to financial and other types of assets.** Germany and the Arab Gulf Fund for Development are implementing projects already in this area, aiming at promoting women’s financial inclusion in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. They do so by increasing incomes, by expanding the use of financial services and helping women to acquire professional and business management skills.

- **Help reduce the time that women spend on unpaid care and domestic work by facilitating access to public services, social protection and infrastructure,** including access to child-care and health-care, water and electricity, roads and transport. These themes are addressed by SDG target 5.4, which calls to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family. The OECD’s Policy Dialogue on Women’s Economic Empowerment aims to generate data, evidence and guidance for policy makers on “what works” in this area. A good example of this is provided by Austria and Spain, along with UNIDO, the African Development Bank and civil society partners that are supporting the ECOWAS Centre for Renewable Energy and Energy Efficiency to empower women, especially poor women and women living in rural areas, to access energy through training and targeted interventions.

- **Support vocational training and the transition into the formal labour force for young women,** addressed in SDG target 4.3. to ensure equal access for all women and men to affordable quality technical, vocational and tertiary education, including university. The ‘Skills for Success – Employability skills for women’ project of the Union for the Mediterranean is a good example on how to forge ahead in this space. The project provided disadvantaged, unemployed, secondary-level educated women with the necessary skills, knowledge and tools to enter the labour market in Jordan, Morocco and Lebanon. The project trained over 300 young women to transition into the formal labour force by developing their employability skills by providing English language training, job search tools and advice, and enhanced professional abilities.

- **Change business cultures and practices to support women’s participation in and access to leadership positions in business and economic life.** This corresponds to SDG target 5.5, which calls to ensure women’s full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life. The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has developed an approach to support women in business and economic life. With the ‘1000 Women Leadership Programme’, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) provides women and girls with leadership programs that enhance women’s skills and prepare them to handle leadership and management positions in the future.

- **Explore the impacts of laws and regulations and help ensure that these no longer discriminate against women.** Through the MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme, the OECD assists the MENA region to promote women’s economic empowerment and gender equality more broadly. The Programme works in close collaboration with a range of MENA countries to develop laws, policies and institutions that are more equitable through regional and national initiatives. One of these initiatives is the MENA-OECD Women’s Economic Empowerment Forum where policy makers from across the region monitor and exchange around legal frameworks and policies in support of
women’s economic empowerment. Besides, the MENA-OECD Governance Programme also works on gender sensitive policies and legislation, such as the project on strengthening the institutional and co-ordination capacities of assistance and judicial orientation centres for women victims of violence in Morocco.

2. Arab and DAC providers could work to support national actors to accelerate progress, for example by:

- Enhancing the efforts of national institutions and organisations that work to strengthen women’s economic empowerment, visibility, voice and representation. A good example is the UAE’s Technical Assistance Programme, which aims to provide women with capacity building in needed sectors such as aviation and management courses, and scholarship to complete graduate or undergraduate studies.

- Support partner country governments in reforming, designing, planning, monitoring and evaluating activities that accelerate women’s economic empowerment. This includes support to national statistical institutions in collecting data disaggregated by sex. The OECD is partner of the Evidence and Data for Gender Equality (EDGE) project, which is a joint initiative of the United Nations Statistics Division and UN Women that aims to accelerate existing efforts to generate internationally comparable gender indicators on health, education, employment, entrepreneurship and asset ownership. The EDGE initiative operates in three key ways: developing an online platform to disseminate gender-relevant data and metadata, developing methodological guidelines and providing technical support to countries to implement the EDGE methodological guidelines.

3. Finally, Arab and DAC providers could ensure their development co-operation systems are set up to deliver aid that promotes women’s economic empowerment, for example by:

- Engaging in policy dialogue through the DAC Gender Equality Network (GENDERNET) and participating in work streams on financing for gender equality and women’s economic empowerment; organising joint events on gender-related issues at international fora, such as the Tunis Forum on Gender Equality, April 2019.

- Encouraging the use of the DAC gender equality policy marker to track activities that target gender equality and women’s empowerment as a policy objective when reporting development finance statistics to the OECD. By doing so, non-DAC providers would contribute to greater transparency and accountability on financing for gender equality and women’s empowerment. While all DAC members are applying the marker already, the UAE started using the gender marker in 2017 in the reporting of 2016 flows and could share lessons to other non-DAC providers, notably other Arab countries and institutions, on how it is applying the gender equality policy marker in its reporting cycle.

- Gear institutional set-up and policy frameworks towards better supporting women’s economic empowerment in developing countries by ensuring that the necessary expertise and resources are in place.