

# Launch of the Women's Economic Empowerment Forum (WEEF) 7-8 October

2017, Cairo, Egypt

Under the aegis of H.E. Dr Sahar Nasr, Egypt's Minister of Investment and International Co-operation, and H.E. Marie-Claire Swärd Capra, Ambassador of Sweden to Algeria in the presence of Ms Gabriela Ramos, OECD Chief of Staff, G20 Sherpa and Special counsellor to the Secretary-General.



## Introduction



WEEF Co-chairs H.E. Marie-Claire Swärd Capra and H.E. Dr Sahar Nasr and Ms Gabriela Ramos open the event

More than 200 participants representing 22 countries including many delegations at Ministerial level took part in the two-day event, joined by representatives from international and regional organisations, civil society, the private sector and academia.

The event opened with the release of the OECD publication '[Women's Economic Empowerment in Selected MENA Countries: The Impact of Legal Frameworks in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia](#)'. The report notes that while women in the Middle East and North Africa are better educated and skilled than ever, the share of them in work is still amongst the lowest in the world. The report acknowledges that women do not share the same rights as men although there are major differences between countries. Bringing the legal frameworks, in particular family and labour laws, in line with gender goals enshrined in national constitutions should enable more women to enter employment and make MENA economies more competitive and inclusive.

## Key messages from event sessions

### ♦ Women's Economic Empowerment and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)



The Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development is universal and applies to all countries; all stakeholders need to be on board to achieve the SDGs. Panellists addressed the importance of working together to accelerate action. Regarding women's economic empowerment, OECD countries and the MENA region have made significant efforts in contributing to the SDGs. Yet, two years after the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, a regional overview showing the impact of SDGs on women's economic empowerment is not available. While reporting and monitoring is done by different actors in different fora and at different levels, it is hardly possible for the wider public to gain an understanding on the region's

progress.

### ♦ Balancing Personal Responsibilities and Career Opportunities for Women and their involvement in Informality



Persisting gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship result from the interplay of legal frameworks and social norms. Family law provisions regulate, although to various degrees depending on the country, women's obligations to care which impacts their job choices. The need, in some countries, to obtain the husband's authorisation to leave the home influences employers' preference to hire and promote men. Social norms and attitudes, informed by gender-based labour regulations including parental benefits, retirement provisions and income taxes, play an important role in labour market decisions.



There are hardly any part- or flex-time arrangements supporting both women and men to reconcile work and family life. Women’s low economic participation and social expectations impact women’s representation in decision-making positions and on corporate boards. Gender-disaggregated data is limited but it is admitted that women are more likely than men to work informally notably because they are hired un-officially, are predominantly in non-regulated sectors or are home-based or self-employed. This means that a large share of women have low wages, contribute little to the economy and have no access to pension systems.

◆ **Institutional Set-Up in Support of Gender Equality**



Institutions in different countries of the region have been reinforced significantly to deliver the gender agenda. This experience has taught us that there is a need for a comprehensive, ‘whole-of-government’ approach which does not only focus on the executive branch of government. Concerted policy dialogue and policy development involving the private sectors, civil society and academia, under the leadership of governments, and particularly of national gender equality institutions, is critical to realising greater women’s agency and economic empowerment.

◆ **Access to Finance and Financial Literacy for Women**



Financial institutions tend to mainly focus on collateral, credit history, business experience and the business strategy of prospective borrowers - all elements which women may have more difficulties providing. To enhance women’s entrepreneurship, solutions to women’s demand and financial supply are required. Building women’s confidence but also their capacity to access and manage financial products is crucial. Financial practices need to take full account of women’s realities and discrimination based on gender and marital status should be prohibited. Furthermore, credit registries and bureaus as well as guarantee mechanism may compensate for women’s limited assets.

◆ **Data Collection and Informed Policy Decisions**



National statistics offices have made progress in collecting gender-disaggregated data, which are used by international agencies to develop internationally comparable data series and indicators. However, the overall availability of gender-disaggregated data in the MENA region is still limited and hence the difficulty to determine women’s key economic characteristics. Yet, gender-disaggregated data is indispensable for governments to enact informed policies. Hence further actions are necessary for governments to produce more detailed and better data for policy making and monitoring progress, including against the SDGs.

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**From recommendations to action: working at the national level**

Key findings and policy recommendations of the OECD publication “*Women’s Economic Empowerment in selected MENA countries: the impact of legal frameworks in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia*” are being discussed during national consultations among representatives from government, business and civil society with a view to identify areas for further policy reform. The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme will be ready to following up country-specific support requests on the interrelation between legal frameworks and economic impact. This may involve deepening the analysis for countries included in the publication but also extending the analysis to other economies.

- ◆ **Jordan:** Dr Salma Nims, Secretary General, National Commission for Women (JNCW), led the meeting in Amman, 18 April 2017. About 30 representatives from the public and the private sector as well as international organisations attended. Participants noted a difficulty in making precise assessments on women's economic participation, due notably to insufficient gender data. They stressed the importance of furthering women's economic empowerment, including through regulatory reform and reported that deeply rooted social considerations had prevented recently suggested legal amendments to go through. Participants stressed the need to raise the issue of women's economic empowerment to the highest political level in order to ensure policy maker's support.
  - ◆ **Tunisia:** H.E. Neziha Labidi, Minister of Women's Affairs animated the meeting in Tunis, 21 June 2017. The multi-stakeholder audience acknowledged the quality of the assessment by the OECD and underlined the importance of the work already carried out in Tunisia. Going forward, they suggested the launch of a multi-stakeholder monitoring group which would seek to co-ordinate and to develop synergies between different policy actions with a view to engaging in real change. Future OECD support was requested.
  - ◆ **Morocco:** H.E. Lahcen Daoudi, Minister of Governance and General Affairs opened the meeting in Rabat, 13 September 2017. The approximately 80 participants represented different Ministries, the private sector, academia and civil society. Participants praised the OECD for the quality and relevance of the report. A lively discussion was held about the publication's findings, recent actions taken by Morocco but also the need for further policy reforms. In particular, there is a need to better understand the interplay between the social context and the legal framework, in particular at sub-national level, highlighting differences between regions. Morocco could set up a committee to further discuss women's economic participation in society.
  - ◆ **Libya:** The consultation took place in Tunis on 4 December 2017 in the context of a wider meeting on Validation of the Short Term Action Plan for SME Development in Libya. The meeting was attended by around 30 participants (of which 5 women) who represented the National Transitional Council, the private sector, and civil society. The consultation revealed that the audience was not yet familiar with the importance of gender equality and women's economic empowerment and that addressing this in the context of the wider reconstruction of the country is of the essence. There is a need for more in-depth exchanges and awareness raising on the subject matter and it is key that women will also be involved in the further follow up on the Short Term Action Plan.
  - ◆ **Egypt (Forthcoming):** H.E. Dr Sahr Nasr, Minister of Investment and International Coordination, co-chair of the WEEF, will lead the meeting in Cairo, early 2018.
  - ◆ **Algeria (Forthcoming):** the Algerian government has expressed interest in hosting a national consultation for which the timing has to be determined.
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## Next steps

- ◆ The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme and the MENA-OECD Governance Programme will work together to identify strategic data collection needs to assess women's economic and political empowerment and provide support for strategic data development and collection.
- ◆ The OECD will continue its support to the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development on goals relative to gender equality and women's empowerment. The WEEF as the recipient of information on gender-sensitive actions in various policy areas in line with the SDG framework will also be able to feed information into regional and international monitoring and reporting on SDGs. An element important to assess is the way in which the attainment of the SDGs will help improve both institutional co-operation within governments and coordination with external stakeholders.
- ◆ The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme will support individual countries regulatory and policy reforms building on assessments of how national legal frameworks as well as specific legal provisions impact women's economic participation. Overall, the WEEF will monitor policy actions and regulatory developments in the region.
- ◆ International and regional organisations called for enhanced collaboration with different stakeholders including OECD. The WEEF will support and complement actions of these organisations; in particular to foster discussions on advocacy and exchanges of good practices regarding methods and actions that further enable economic equality among men and women.
- ◆ The key findings of this event were recently shared at the High-Level Regional Conference on "*Breaking Barriers: Towards equality between women and men in politics*", in Cairo and will also be shared at the next Steering Group of the MENA-OECD Initiative of Governance and Competitiveness for Development. The Steering Group will consider ways to support joint reflection over elements holding back women from joining the economy and the consequences for their participation in politics which, in turn, impacts legislative amendments and reforms in support of equality and non-discrimination. The Steering Group will further support mainstreaming gender equality throughout different policy areas, the outcome of which will be shared at the next high-level meeting of the WEEF to take place in the summer of 2018.

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## The OECD: supporting women's economic empowerment in the MENA region and across the world

All countries stand to gain from empowering women to use their full economic potential: it directly impacts growth, competitiveness and social well-being. This remains a key challenge in the Middle East-North Africa region, where women's participation in the labour force is lowest in the world. In a ground-breaking new study, the OECD reports on the current situation in six Middle East-North Africa countries –Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia – and offers policy recommendations for boosting gender equality. The study is based on a detailed analysis of women's legal rights and on discussions with experts and focus groups in the six countries. This methodology has allowed the collection of rich and unique input following extensive research. As we aim to build better policies for a better world, promoting approaches that unleash the talent and dynamism of women in the Middle East-North Africa region and beyond will



mean better lives for us all.

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### Learn more about our work on Gender in the MENA region:

[www.oecd.org/mena/competitiveness/womenempowerment.htm](http://www.oecd.org/mena/competitiveness/womenempowerment.htm)

