



UNITED NATIONS  
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION



BETTER POLICIES FOR BETTER LIVES

MENA-OECD  
Competitiveness Programme

Women's Economic Empowerment Forum (WEEF)



# How to foster women's entrepreneurship in the MENA digital sector?

## Barriers and success factors

[Register here](#)

18 November 2021, 11:00-13:00 (CET)

Interpretation will be provided in English, French and Arabic

## Objectives

The joint OECD-UNIDO webinar “*How to foster women’s entrepreneurship in the MENA digital sector? Barriers and success factors*” is part of a series of regional dialogues on “*Women’s Empowerment and Digitalisation in the post-COVID-19 MENA economies*”, organised by the MENA-OECD Women’s Economic Empowerment Forum ([WEEF](#)). As digitalisation is transforming our living and business environments, this series of events aims to **identify successful policy actions to empower women in the digital age**, through dialogue and sharing of good practices between governments, private sector and civil society representatives from OECD and MENA countries, as well as regional and international organisations.

During the first WEEF regional dialogue “*Gender-sensitive education and skills development policies in the MENA region: Developing girls’ digital skills in the post-COVID-19 world*”, held on 5 July 2021, participants concurred that MENA governments should sustain their efforts to ensure that enhanced women’s digital skills and increased use of technology fully contribute to women’s labour market integration, as both employee and entrepreneurs.

This second regional dialogue will focus on **women entrepreneurship in the digital sector** with the aim to:

- ✓ Get a better understanding of how the digital world can open up new business opportunities for women entrepreneurs by offering more flexibility to reconcile work and family life and improve their access to information, markets and networking platforms;
- ✓ Identify the main barriers restricting women entrepreneur’s investment in the digital sector;
- ✓ Identify the success factors of women-owned businesses in tech, and the policy actions that can successfully promote women entrepreneurship in the digital sector;
- ✓ Discuss the impact that diaspora investors and entrepreneurs may have on the digitalisation and internationalisation of domestic economies;
- ✓ Showcase innovative programmes to fill the data gap and improve the use of sex-disaggregated data in policy-making.

The panel discussion will be informed by a presentation of the key results of UNIDO’s study on “*Women entrepreneurs’ access to and use of information and communication technologies in the manufacturing sector*” conducted within the project “*Promoting Women’s Empowerment for Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development in the Middle East and North Africa Region*”.

## Policy Issue

**The fourth industrial revolution opens a wide range of entrepreneurial opportunities for women in the digital sector:**

- ✓ The COVID-19 has accelerated the ongoing digitalisation of production processes and adoption of digital technology across businesses, as well as the intensity and extent to which those businesses use digital technologies to maintain operations. Teleworking and distance learning have surged across the world, as has the uptake of digital tools in businesses.<sup>1</sup> Digital technologies enable online payment and e-commerce innovations, which can facilitate trade across borders and enable MENA women entrepreneurs to reach new markets, while supporting social distancing.
- ✓ The digital sector will continue transforming how businesses operate and creating significant wealth and jobs opportunities for women in the MENA region, where the share of women in

professional and technical jobs is estimated to double by 2030 through digitisation, online platforms and entrepreneurship.<sup>ii</sup>

- ✓ Digital businesses are usually less capital-intensive and labour-intensive than traditional industries, and so tend to require less office space. In MENA countries where women face impediments in accessing capital, or in leasing and owning property, being able to dispense with the need for expensive real estate could make all the difference to women entrepreneurs.<sup>iii</sup>
- ✓ The digital economy facilitates the realisation of entrepreneurial projects operating from home, offering a possible compromise between paid work and family responsibilities, which play a pivotal role in women's labour participation in the MENA region.

**However, enhanced women's digital skills and access to technology is a necessary but not sufficient step:**

- ✓ The first WEEF webinar of this series highlighted that, despite representing 34% to 57% of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) graduates<sup>iv</sup> and outperforming boys in digital skills,<sup>v</sup> few MENA women pursue their careers in STEM occupations or entrepreneurship. Even the best female performers in mathematics and science do not favour careers in STEM fields. In Lebanon for example, among students with high scores in mathematics or science, over 46% of boys reported that they wanted to be engaged in science and engineering professions in the future, while only 26% of girls reported so.<sup>vi</sup>
- ✓ The UNIDO study conducted on 1,400 women entrepreneurs in the MENA manufacturing sector revealed that few of them are leveraging the new opportunities offered by digital technologies.<sup>vii</sup> Around a quarter of respondents reports the use of digital technologies at some stage in the design, manufacturing and selling processes of their businesses. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) usages are mostly limited to the commercial sphere and the use of social networks as an extension of private use. Furthermore, there is limited familiarity with any concepts related to Industry 4.0.

**Therefore, the gender gap in economic participation and investment, which characterises MENA economies threatens to extend to the digital economy:<sup>viii</sup>**

- ✓ Structural gender inequalities -including limited access to finance, network and information, lack of mentoring and role models, social norms and gender stereotypes- combined with the digital gender gap threatens to exclude women from the fourth industrial revolution. In recent years women were still 20% less likely than men to have a senior leadership position in the mobile communication industry.<sup>ix</sup> Evidences from the Union of Arab ICT Associations suggest that while women in the MENA region represent up to 30% of the ICT workforce, they only held 9% of the ICT high management positions.<sup>x</sup>
- ✓ The region has the widest gender gap in entrepreneurial activity with only 23% of businesses owned by a woman and 34% of nascent enterprises created by women.<sup>xi</sup> The digital industry remains a **male-dominated environment** where strategies and decision-making are mostly influenced by male perspectives that do not necessarily ensure gender-sensitiveness in design and in addressing user needs.<sup>xii</sup>

**Time to act is now** as the digital foundations for the fourth revolution are being laid. With 60% of the global GDP set to be digitised by 2022, it is critical for women entrepreneurs to get on board.<sup>xiii</sup> MENA governments can seize the opportunity to closing the gender gap by addressing the specific barriers women willing to be entrepreneurs and women-led businesses face in investing in the digital sector and **creating a gender-friendly digital eco-system.**

## Agenda

### 11h00-11h20 Opening session

*The co-chairs of the MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum (WEEF), the UNIDO Chief of Arab Region Coordination Division and the OECD Deputy Secretary-General will stress the role of regional cooperation and multi-stakeholder dialogue in enhancing MENA support to women entrepreneurship in the digital sector.*

#### Speakers:

- H.E. Dr. Hala EL SAID, Minister of Planning and Economic Development, Egypt, Co-Chair of the MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum
- H.E. Jan THESLEFF, Commissioner General Expo 2020 for Sweden, Co-Chair of the MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum
- Ms. Hanan HANAZ, Chief of Arab Region Coordination Division, UNIDO
- Mr. Ulrik KNUDSEN, Deputy Secretary-General, OECD

### 11h20-11h30 Session 1: Presentation of the results of UNIDO's study

*This session will present the results of UNIDO's study on "Women entrepreneurs' access and use of information and communication technologies in the manufacturing sector" conducted within the project "Promoting women's empowerment for an inclusive and sustainable development in the MENA region" labelled by the Union for the Mediterranean.*

- Dr. Neila AMARA, International Project Management Expert, UNIDO

### 11h30-12h35 Session 2: Initiatives to foster women's entrepreneurship in the digital sector

*MENA and OECD governments, private sector members and civil society representatives will identify both barriers and success factors for women's investment in the digital economy, while sharing good practices to promote women entrepreneurship in tech.*

#### Moderator:

- Ms. Marina NIFOROS, Affiliate Professor at HEC Paris, Chair of Nominations Committee and Member of the Hellenic Corporation of Assets and Participations (HCAP)

#### Speakers:

- Dr. Nael ADWAN, Investment and Entrepreneurship Department Director, Ministry of Digital Economy and Entrepreneurship, Jordan
- Mr. Ernst STÖCKL-PUKALL, Head of Division Digitalisation and Industry 4.0, Department for Industrial Policy, Federal Ministry for Economic Affairs and Energy, Germany
- Dr. Svenja FALK, Head of Berlin Office and Managing Director, Accenture, Germany
- Ms. Megan TANNOUS, Project Officer, Palestinian Information Technology Association of Companies (PITA)
- Ms. Julie MURAT, Chief Operating Officer and Co-founder, Bridge For Billions, Spain
- Ms. Salmine SASSI, Entrepreneur, Innovation consultant, Tunisia

### 12h35-12h55 Questions and Answers

### 12h55-13h00 Closing session

## Further reading

OECD/ILO/CAWTAR (2020), *Changing Laws and Breaking Barriers for Women's Economic Empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia*, Competitiveness and Private Sector Development, OECD Publishing, Paris,

<https://doi.org/10.1787/ac780735-en>

OECD/European Union (2019), *The Missing Entrepreneurs 2019: Policies for Inclusive Entrepreneurship*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/3ed84801-en>.

OECD (2019), *Going Digital: Shaping Policies, Improving Lives*, OECD Publishing, Paris,

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264312012-en>

OECD (2019), *Measuring the Digital Transformation: A Roadmap for the Future*, OECD Publishing, Paris,

<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264311992-en>

OECD (2018), *Bridging the Digital Gender Divide*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://www.oecd.org/digital/bridging-the-digital-gender-divide.pdf>

UNIDO (2019), *The challenge of digitalization for firms in developing countries*, Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development Working Paper Series, WP18, <https://open.unido.org/api/documents/16411932/download/UNIDO-Publication-2019-16411932>

UNIDO (2018), *You say you want a revolution: strategic approaches to industry 4.0 in middle-income countries*, Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development Working Paper Series, WP19,

<https://open.unido.org/api/documents/10031392/download/UNIDO-Publication-2018-10031392>

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<sup>i</sup> OECD (2020), *OECD Digital Economy Outlook 2020*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/bb167041-en>.

<sup>ii</sup> Assi, R. and C. Marcati, 2020, *Women at work: Job opportunities in the Middle East set to double with the Fourth Industrial Revolution*, McKinsey.

<sup>iii</sup> Bello et al. (2021), *To be smart, the digital revolution will need to be inclusive*. UNESCO: Paris.

<sup>iv</sup> OECD, ILO, CAWTAR (2020), *Changing Laws and Breaking Barriers for Women's Economic Empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia*, Competitiveness and Private Sector Development, OECD Publishing.

<sup>v</sup> OECD (2021), *21st-Century Readers: Developing Literacy Skills in a Digital World*, PISA, OECD Publishing.

<sup>vi</sup> OECD (2019), *PISA 2018 Results (Volume II), Where All Students Can Succeed*, OECD Publishing.

<sup>vii</sup> UNIDO (2021): *Access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) by female entrepreneurs in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia - Working document*

<sup>viii</sup> [Abou Zeid, G. \(2020\) \*Feminist Perspectives on the Digital Economy in the MENA Region\*, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.](#)

<sup>ix</sup> ILO (2019), *A quantum leap for gender equality: for a better future of work for all*, ILO, Geneva

<sup>x</sup> [Zakka, N. \(2015\), \*Women economic participation and ICT in the Mediterranean Region: Constraints and opportunities State of play and challenges for the women participation in the ICT sector in the region.\*](#)

<sup>xi</sup> OECD (2017), "Women's participation in the labour market and entrepreneurship in selected MENA countries", in *Women's Economic Empowerment in Selected MENA Countries: The Impact of Legal Frameworks in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia*, OECD Publishing.

<sup>xii</sup> UNIDO (2021): *Access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) by female entrepreneurs in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia - Working document*

<sup>xiii</sup> World Economic Forum, 2018. *Our Shared Digital Future: Building an Inclusive Trustworthy and Sustainable Digital Society*.