

Executive summary

At a moment when many countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) are looking to accelerate economic growth and build more stable, open societies, enabling women's economic empowerment holds one of the keys. If women were to be as equally involved as men in labour markets, the MENA region could see its gross domestic product (GDP) boosted by as much as 47%. This report reveals that change is underway across the region. It presents 24 detailed case studies of recent legislative, policy and institutional reforms to support women's economic empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia. The report draws out some of the common factors behind the success of these reforms and their implementation. Despite the challenges some countries face, some of which are exacerbated with the ongoing COVID-19 crisis, the report asserts that progress can be nurtured further through targeted, inclusive and co-ordinated policy actions.

Progress is being made

- **Education.** Women in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia are more educated than ever before. Gender gaps in education are almost closed, especially at tertiary level, with women in some countries catching up with men in the male-dominated fields of science, technology and maths. Their academic progress, however, has not translated into equally improved access to economic opportunity.
- **Equality in work.** The four countries have undertaken legislative reforms and led numerous initiatives to facilitate women's participation in the labour market and enhance their rights at work. These include measures to promote equal pay, introduce flexible work options, encourage gender balance in corporate leadership and address sexual harassment in the workplace. The private sector is increasingly taking gender equality initiatives to encourage women's participation in the labour force.
- **Work-life balance.** Countries have made efforts to reform their social protection systems to enhance women's work-life balance and ease their unpaid care burdens. Introducing paternity leave and providing better options for childcare are some examples of how countries are stimulating women's labour force participation and trying to encourage men to engage in more unpaid care work.
- **Women as entrepreneurs.** Countries are trying to boost female entrepreneurship and formalise businesses. These measures include facilitating women entrepreneurs' access to information, financial services, markets, investment opportunities, land and other assets.
- **Women as leaders.** The reform process is also becoming more inclusive, thanks to a number of initiatives to enhance women's membership and leadership in ministries of labour and employment as well as in workers' and employers' organisations. This could result in better gender equality outcomes for social dialogue and collective bargaining. This progress was made apparent during the COVID-19 crisis in governments' efforts to integrate national women's machineries into the bodies in charge of developing the countries' crisis response.

- **Vulnerable women.** Particular attention has been given to improving the situation of vulnerable women workers, such as domestic workers, rural women and women refugees. Efforts are also underway to address the high rates of violence against women and girls in the private sphere, in public and in the workplace. The extent of the reforms differs significantly between countries, however, and their level of implementation remains to be seen.

Many barriers remain

Despite this progress, female labour force participation rates in the four countries remain among the lowest in the world. The region has the largest global gender entrepreneurship gap, with women in MENA significantly less likely to run their own businesses than men. In general, women operate businesses with lower levels of capitalisation and are more reliant on self-financing. This is especially true for women in the informal economy, who cannot easily get access to credit. Because of the COVID-19 crisis, these women are therefore more likely to have to close their businesses for extended periods with substantially reduced or no revenues.

Just like in other regions of the world, women perform the bulk of unpaid care and domestic work, and restrictive social norms further stifle their participation in the labour force. In addition, during the COVID-19 pandemic, MENA women have seen the hours they devote to unpaid care work increase as a consequence of school and day care closures, reductions in public services for people with disabilities and the elderly, the non-availability of domestic workers and the need to look after family members with COVID-19. When MENA women do work, they are more likely to be concentrated in sectors with lower productivity and in vulnerable conditions with insufficient social protection. Wage gaps between men and women persist, even in traditionally feminised jobs.

Women can only contribute meaningfully to the labour force and the economy if their economic empowerment is encouraged by their families and society more broadly. In the four countries, restrictive social norms continue to hold back women's economic empowerment and condone violence against women, which is still pervasive in the region and carries significant social and economic costs. Some of these norms are also enshrined in (personal status) legislation. Discriminatory provisions on marriage and divorce, family decision making, inheritance and property rights as well as freedom of movement are contradictory to existing constitutional guarantees of gender equality and continue to curb women's economic empowerment.

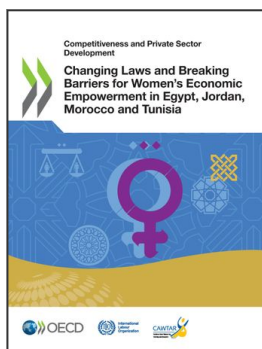
Success factors for reform

Reform is one thing – ensuring that reforms are implemented, enforced and actually have a positive impact on women's lives is another, especially when they require shifts in attitudes and entrenched mindsets. It often takes considerable effort and a range of factors to make these reforms a reality. Drawing on the experiences of the four countries in their efforts to advance women's economic empowerment, this report identifies ten "success factors":

- Adhering to, implementing and reporting against international/regional standards as well as participating in international/regional review mechanisms to measure progress on women's economic empowerment.
- Building the evidence base to advocate for and secure legal, policy and institutional reform.
- Sequencing policies for women's economic empowerment towards gradual legal reform.
- Securing political commitment for reform at the highest levels.
- Being tenacious in advocacy and lobbying to pressure governments into undertaking reform.
- Fostering women's participation and leadership

- Adopting multi-stakeholder and multisector approaches for comprehensive reform.
- Building capacity and learning from peers.
- Addressing restrictive social norms and stereotypes that underpin discriminatory legislation and hold back women's economic empowerment.
- Ensuring implementation of and compliance with reforms.

In addition to these success factors, the report makes a range of detailed recommendations, listed in the "Key findings and recommendations" below, and in each chapter of the report.



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