



OECD / UNDP / UN Women Regional Webinar

**COVID-19 in the Middle East and North Africa:  
Impact on Women’s Economic Empowerment  
and Policy Response**

8 July 2020

Webinar Summary

The **MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme**, in collaboration with UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States and UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, organised a webinar on 8 July 2020 to address the impact of Covid-19 on women’s economic empowerment in the MENA region. It gathered over 230 representatives from government agencies, international organisations, academia, CSOs, and the private sector from the MENA region and beyond.

Discussions highlighted the intensity of the economic impact of the crisis on women in public and private sectors in the MENA region and looked at whether and how different countries have taken into account the gender equality perspective in their crisis response and economic recovery plans.



Mr. Yermo, Mr. Doraid, and Ms. Lagunas opened the webinar jointly by speaking about the measures that the OECD, UN Women and UNDP have been taking to address the challenges faced by women during the pandemic and beyond. The three agencies all reiterated the strong need for **multi-stakeholder partnerships**.

Mr. Yermo summarised the key findings of a recent OECD policy paper on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the region and policy responses. He stressed numerous challenges that exacerbate the existing obstacles faced by women in MENA, including **restrictive social norms and discriminatory legal frameworks**, female unemployment

rates and vulnerability, unequal distribution of unpaid care work in MENA, and surge of gender-based violence during the confinement. He then highlighted that the keys lie in unleashing the full potential of women in the region, leveraging gains in education attainments and addressing vulnerability. Mr. Yermo also announced the handover of the co-Chairmanship of the MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum to H.E. Jan Thesleff, Ambassador of Sweden to Egypt.

Mr. Doraid alerted that the pandemic risks reverting the past gains in the region. Although women are backbones of the health response, they face multiple challenges. He highlighted the need for **transformative measures** while capitalising on positive changes to build a better future.

Ms. Lagunas illustrated three policy areas for UNDP to engage to advance gender-responsive recovery. (1) Bridge the **digital divide** so that women can benefit from digitalisation in education, digital payments and entrepreneurship; (2) Support women in SMEs through bank loans targeted at women; (3) Provide different options for **universal basic income** as a non-contributory social protection measure to reach those who are generally left behind.

In **session I**, H.E. Asma Shiri Laabidi, Tunisian Minister of Women, Family, Children and Seniors reiterated the importance given to gender considerations in the immediate response to the crisis, but also in the elaboration of the 2021-2025 Development Plan, at the level of all Ministries. She underlined the important work done to support women's economic empowerment, such as **building resilience** of small women-led projects/initiatives to enable them to grow and become sustainable; developing reskilling programmes for women; expanding access to social protection and healthcare for rural women; developing a legal framework for domestic workers. She also announced that the Ministry is working on a draft law to enhance the representation of women in the civil service.

Ms. El Serafy, International Co-operation Specialist (on behalf of H.E. Dr. Maya Morsi, President, Egyptian National Council for Women), presented the efforts made by Egypt to address women's needs during the crisis. She underlined that Egypt is the first country to have issued a **Women Policy Tracker** to monitor all the measures taken by the government that include a gender lens. She emphasised the key role played by the NCW to identify and address women's needs, i.e. through conducting a survey to understand the trends of VAW, distributing ID cards to women free of charge to enable them to benefit from public services during the pandemic, and working on developing e-wallet services to facilitate financial transfers to women. She recalled the importance of working together with CSOs and the private sector.

In **session II**, Dr. Nisreen Salti, Associate Professor, American University of Beirut, Lebanon brought a **fiscal perspective** to the discussion by highlighting how regressive tax systems in the MENA region contribute to exacerbating gender gaps. She showed that, due to the higher concentration of women among the more vulnerable groups women disproportionately benefit from any social protection agenda. However, due to the current structure of tax systems (over-reliance on indirect taxes, income tax not progressive enough, etc.) women are also disproportionately contributing to funding them. As MENA countries are making funds available for social protection during the pandemic, she emphasised the importance of **rethinking and reforming tax systems towards more progressive taxation**.

Mr. Ahmad Haj, CEO, National Bank of Palestine, presented the three pillars of gender-sensitive measures the Bank has been taking. At the **workplace**, the Bank is taking proactive steps for caregiver parents (men and women) especially after the closure of daycares and schools. In terms of **products and services**, as part of the USD 300 million fund for SMEs, the Bank committed to channeling at least 34% of funds to female clients. As for **corporate social responsibility**, a fund was created pulling funds from the private sector to help the government cover the needs of the society during the pandemic. The National Bank provided both donations and technical assistance.

The webinar ended with closing remarks from H.E. Masaki Noke, Ambassador of Japan to Egypt and H.E. Jan Thesleff, Ambassador of Sweden to Egypt, who reiterated the strong engagement of their respective countries towards gender equality, including as part of their international cooperation.

H.E. Noke called for broader reflections on how to **scale up** such good practices and further mainstream gender considerations across policies in the long-term. H.E. Thesleff reminded that we not only need **gender-sensitive policies**, but also to have **women as part of policy-making**. He also emphasised the importance of having a broad mobilisation from the civil society and private sector, as it is the private sector, and namely SMEs, that will be able to provide new economic opportunities for women in the recovery period.