



The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme on Gender

The [MENA-OECD Ministerial Conference](#), held on 1 April 2021 endorsed the fifth mandate of the MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme for 2021-2025 as well as the **Ministerial Declaration**. Both acknowledged the urgency of **unlocking women's economic potential**, including for the MENA's region recovery.

The [MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme](#) has been actively engaged for more than 15 years in promoting **gender equality and women's economic empowerment** in the MENA region as a way to boost **sustainable and inclusive growth**, and as a key driver of **peace, stability and social cohesion**.

The Programme has also played an important role in stimulating countries' reform efforts through evidence-based policy dialogue, analysis and advocacy, inspiring the **adoption of legal and policy reforms in favour of women's participation in the economy**. This includes labour and social protection legislations, as well as provisions on violence against women.

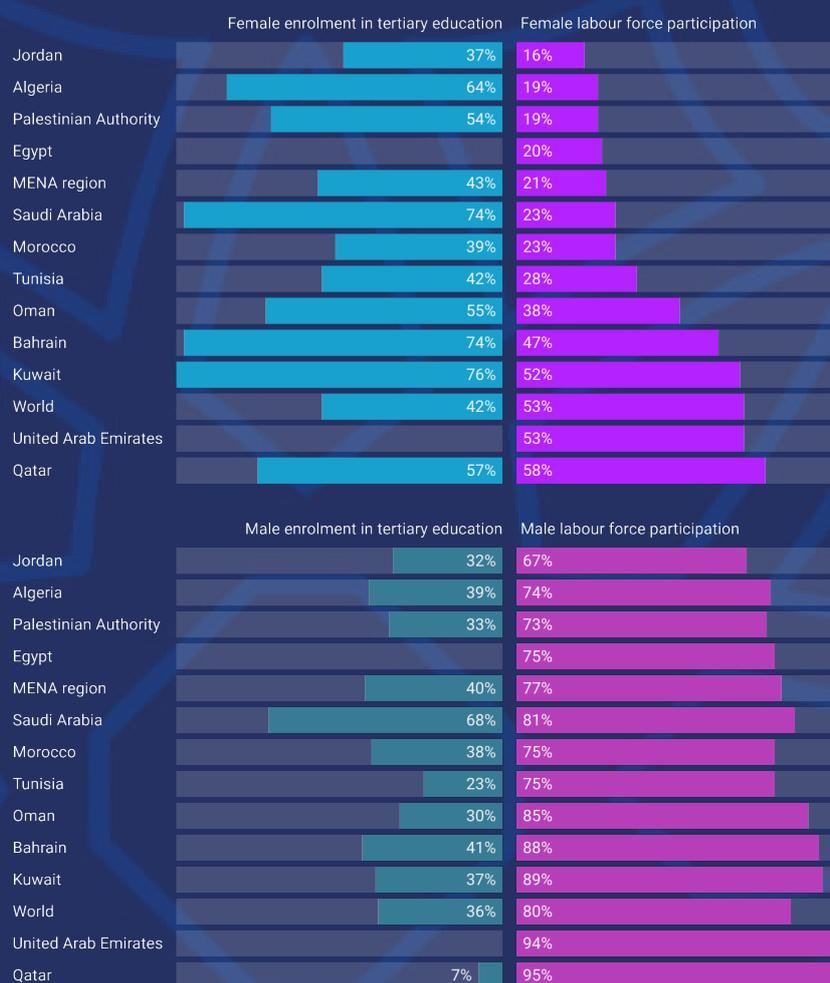
This is all the more significant in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context, which calls for building more inclusive, resilient societies and economies. Instead of being treated as a separate – sometimes siloed – agenda, policy responses for economic recovery and women's economic empowerment can both be achieved through a **mutually-reinforcing dynamic**.

As elsewhere, the **COVID-19 pandemic** hit women severely - with around 700,000 women in the region expected to **lose their jobs** in the 2020-2021 period- many of them working in the most vulnerable and low-paid categories of **informal employment**. Like women around the globe, women in MENA suffer from expanding **unpaid care burdens**, threatening their already low levels of participation in the labour market. However, the COVID-19 crisis is a watershed moment for gender equality in the MENA region and an opportunity to rethink women's roles in the economy and society. The region's long-term recovery will depend on its ability to fully leverage the potential of **women with tertiary education** (43%) which is slightly superior to men's (40%).



The MENA paradox: stagnating gender gaps in labour force despite closing gender gaps in education

Labour force participation rates (%) and enrolment rates in tertiary education (%) by sex



2018-2019 female/male gross enrolment rate in tertiary education (% of female/male population ages 15-64); 2019 female/male labour force participation rate (% of female/male population ages 15-64)

Source: World Bank, 2018, 2019 • Created with **Datawrapper**

Gender gaps in education are almost closed:

- ▶ Women's literacy rates increased from 45% in 1990 to 72% in 2018;
- ▶ Women tertiary education enrolment rates increased from 24% in 2005 to 43% in 2019, exceeding both the regional male enrolment rates (40%) and the world average for female enrolment (36%);
- ▶ Women represented 34%-57% of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) graduates in 2018, exceeding OECD averages where women accounted for just 31% of all graduates in these subjects.

Women's economic contribution remains restricted:

- ▶ Female labour force participation rate increased only slightly from 19% in 2000 to 20% in 2019;
- ▶ Two-thirds (62%) of female workers were informally employed and one-third of them (33%) were contributing family workers in 2018 compared to a far lower percentage (6%) of male informal workers;
- ▶ In 2019, 42% of young women were unemployed and 31% were not in employment, education or training (NEET);
- ▶ Women owned 23% of small, medium and large businesses in 2015, varying from 7% in Yemen to 49% in Tunisia.

Objectives

The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme on Gender aims to support MENA countries in:

- Ensuring better conditions for **women's access to employment**, particularly in the **formal private sector, including entrepreneurship**, as a powerful vehicle for promoting inclusive growth and stability in the region;
- Promoting adherence to **OECD standards on gender equality**, including the [2013 OECD Recommendation of the Council on Gender Equality in Education, Employment and Entrepreneurship](#);
- **Changing laws and mindsets** that concern gender equality to ensure that legal reforms are implemented, enforced and have a positive impact on gender equality and women's economic empowerment;
- Collecting better **gender data** to better **inform policy-making**;
- **Enhancing gender mainstreaming** in critical policy areas.

Approach

The Programme builds on a **multi-stakeholder approach** and the OECD's methodology of **peer learning and sharing of good practices**.

It draws on a twofold strategy: dedicating **specific projects** to gender equality and women's economic empowerment while also **mainstreaming** gender considerations across the work programme.

The gender activities support MENA countries at both the **regional and national levels**, seeking to address the needs and development priorities of the MENA region, while taking into account its diversity:

- The **Regional Programme** is an institutionalised platform for regional policy dialogue promoting the exchange of good practices and fostering **regional cooperation**.
- Work at the **national level** complements the regional work and leads to in-depth and complementary policy advice and recommendations guiding the **design and implementation of strategies, action plans and reforms**.

Regional Programme: the MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum (WEEF)

In 2008, the MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme created the MENA-OECD Women's Business Forum (WBF), which grew to become a network of over 700 participants from MENA and OECD governments, international and regional organisations, the private sector, academia and civil society.

In 2017, the WBF became into the **MENA-OECD Women's Economic Empowerment Forum (WEEF)**. The WEEF is a **regional network** where government and non-government representatives can **exchange best practices and find solutions for enhancing women's economic empowerment**.

On December 2021, the Ministerial panel of the WEEF agreed on a targeted roadmap of action that MENA countries need to strive for in order to close the gender gap. The WEEF will use the identified objectives and priority actions to design its 2021-2025 programme of work, focusing on three policy areas:

- i) Implementation of legal reforms and women's access to justice;
- ii) Women's participation in the labour market;
- iii) Governance of data collection, analysis and dissemination.

Country Programmes with dedicated Gender Projects

The MENA-OECD Competitiveness Programme has dedicated Gender Projects in both the Morocco and Egypt Country Programmes.



The **Women's Economic Empowerment Project** of the **Morocco Country Programme** includes three components:

Component 1: Improve the collection, use and analysis of **gender data**;

Component 2: Support the **coordination** of the Moroccan gender strategy in a pilot region;

Component 3: **Mainstream gender** analysis in all the projects of the Country Programme.



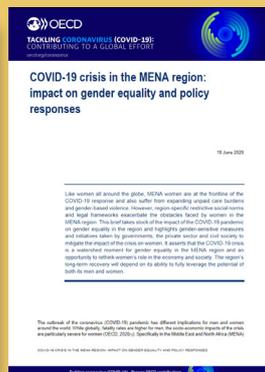
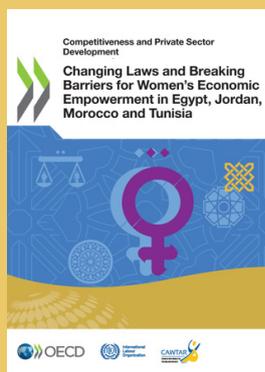
The **Egypt Country Programme** includes three gender-specific projects:

Project 1: Review **women's economic empowerment**, assess progress achieved on gender equality and explore policy options for further convergence of Egypt towards international and regional standards and principles; and

Project 2: Review **women's participation in public life** and assess the current situation of Egypt's public administration and the parliament from a gender perspective (implemented by the [MENA-OECD Governance Programme](#)); and

Project 3: Review **gender statistics** compiled and disseminated by the national statistics system of Egypt to identify data gaps.

Recent publications



OECD (2020) [Changing Laws and Breaking Barriers for Women's Economic Empowerment in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia](#). The OECD-ILO-CAWTAR publication analyses recent legislative, policy and institutional reforms in support of women's economic empowerment, identifies success factors that helped anchor reform, and delivers actionable examples and practical tools for policy makers.

OECD (2020) [The MENA-OECD Policy Brief on COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses](#). This brief takes stock of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on gender equality in the region and highlights gender-sensitive measures and initiatives taken by governments, the private sector and civil society to mitigate the impact of the crisis on women.

Recent and Upcoming Events

WEEF Regional Dialogues on "Women's Empowerment and Digitalisation in the post-COVID-19 MENA economies"

- The first dialogue of the series was held on 5 July 2021 and focused on "Gender-sensitive education and skills development policies in the MENA region: Developing girls' digital skills in the post-COVID-19 world". Its objectives centered on:

i) Gaining a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities of the digital transformation for women and girls in the MENA region;

ii) Developing a clear sense of the central role of gender disaggregated data in supporting policy making for gender equality;

iii) Identifying innovative ways to promote girls' acquisition of relevant skills for the digital economy and facilitate their successful transition to working life through improved public-private partnerships.



The panel discussion opened with a presentation of the **OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)** results in the MENA region, pointing to the areas where gender gaps persist.

- The second regional dialogue will focus on **policies** to foster women's entrepreneurship in the digital economies, while the third dialogue will address the **specific needs of rural women**.
- Concluding this series and drawing on the main conclusions of these regional dialogues on "Women's Empowerment and Digitalisation in the post-COVID-19 MENA economies", the WEEF annual meeting will aim to design a road map to support MENA women in successfully embarking on the digital train.

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