



ARAB INTERNATIONAL  
WOMEN'S FORUM  
المنتدى العربي الدولي للمرأة

THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO



## THE ARAB INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM AND THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY IN CAIRO JOINT CONFERENCE

# Women as Engines of Economic Growth: *Empowering women innovators, entrepreneurs, executives and educators towards fulfilment of the SDGs in the MENA Region*

The American University in Cairo, Egypt  
September 16 - 18, 2019

### CONFERENCE RECOMMENDATIONS

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## Recommendations emerging from the Arab International Women's Forum and The American University in Cairo Joint Conference on *Women as Engines of Economic Growth: Empowering women innovators, entrepreneurs, executives and educators towards fulfilment of the SDGs in the MENA Region*

*Recognising* that sustainable and inclusive economic growth is a clear priority for the MENA States but will only be achieved with the full engagement of young people, with the rightful economic, political and social participation and the valuable contributions of women who make up one half of the Arab population;

*Recognising* that gender equality and the empowerment of women lie at the heart of the SDGs as a core issue under SDG 5 (Gender Equality), the achievement of which would have a “multiplier effect” across many other SDGs including ensuring equal access to decent work, full and productive employment, tackling poverty, improving education, bettering health outcomes, promoting innovation, and crucially, driving economic growth;

*Recognising* that there are broad differences between each of the MENA States yet the core challenges – fast-rising populations and the urgent need to provide decent work opportunities for new labour market entrants with equal participation for women and opportunities for the youth majority – are acutely shared by all countries in the region;

In consultation with valued speakers, partners and all stakeholders in the *Women as Engines of Economic Growth* initiative, these are the recommendations to emerge from the valued contributions of all distinguished subject matter experts who participated at the *Women as Engines of Economic Growth* conference in Egypt in September 2019, led by the Arab International Women's Forum and the American University in Cairo with the proud partnership of PepsiCo as Lead Conference Partner and PwC Middle East as Conference Supporting Partner.

### General Recommendations

**Recommendation 01 | Education reform** Universities should focus on producing tech savvy, world ready graduates, and on graduating men who understand what gender equality means, not as a political nicety but a requirement of the success of society. Universities need to better prepare students for an unpredictable future of work and to take ownership in the social development process. Universities need to encourage a culture of critical thinking and innovative learning to help people “learn how to learn”. Education policymakers should recognise that access to education alone is not enough – there is an urgent need in the MENA Region to improve education quality overall especially in STEM subjects. Encouraging more women to study information and communication technology subjects in particular is key to improving women's engagement in tech careers given technology's role as an empowering agent in the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Secondary schools feeding into universities should encourage more young women to pursue STEM and other challenging non-STEM subjects as in many parts of the region there is a lack of such skills among women for careers in international public service, in diplomacy or in policy development – mainly, law, politics, and international relations. Education in the MENA needs to evolve from the highly specialised, narrowly focused ‘vertical education’ and to be replaced by ‘horizontal education’ across the

disciplines to engage both left and right sides of the brain – science and creativity combined – to produce a future-ready labour market and leaders who will revolutionise the Future of Work.

**Recommendation 02 | Collective action** We need collective action for and by women. Mobilizing around common and shared concerns is key. Supporting women's organisational capacity and women's access to paid work transforms the economic pathway, empowers collective empowerment and active citizenship, and can help to transform entrepreneurship policy and access to financial and non-financial services as they apply to women.

**Recommendation 03 | Legislative reform** should be prioritised to ensure gender-neutral legislation and implementation on the ground. Laws around new investment must mention equal opportunity and women's financial inclusion. This applies equally to laws around bankruptcy, inheritance, and property. Legislative reform should particularly address violence against women with laws in place to prevent and address harassment and violence in the world of work. Arab women have identified unfair treatment in the workplace as a barrier to economic participation, which includes abuse, violence, harassment and discrimination. Arab governments must take stock of the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment 2019 (No 190) and Recommendation (No 206). For the first time violence and harassment in the world of work are covered in new international labour standards, adopted at the Centenary International Labour Conference in June 2019 and currently open for ratification by ILO Member States. The Convention urges all Member States to implement as it provides a roadmap for governments, employers and workers to address one of the largest barriers to women's participation in the labour market. A large majority of Member States have endorsed the ILO Convention on Violence and Harassment, and its ratification and further implementation in national legislative agendas should follow.

**Recommendation 04 | Workplace policy change** should be at the forefront of legislative reform, with regard to updating labour codes around workplace regulations, maternity and parental leave, childcare and elderly care policies. Recruiters should be prohibited in law from asking women if they are engaged or married, or the ages of their children. The region must move away from 'maternity' leave and towards a progressive model for 'parental' leave which would help change workplace culture and incentivise shared responsibility of childcare.

**Recommendation 05 | Leveraging the power of social media** Social media is a powerhouse in the region for both business growth, entrepreneurial success and engagement of advocates for social progress with key constituents and other supporters. Social media should be leveraged to allow change agents to directly reach hundreds of millions of users in the Arab world to change norms and correct stereotypes and behaviours that negatively impact the ability of women to play an active role in society.

**Recommendation 06 | Research and data** There is an urgent need to publish more data in the region so that policy formation, economic reform and social development is tied in with hard facts and objective, ethically produced data. Data should be made available on an open basis to facilitate the sharing of knowledge and innovation in the region. Data should be made available in the Arabic language. In the Arab region, not enough countries are collecting viable, ethical data, aggregated properly or collected using various methodologies or updated technologies. Statistics, data collection and analysis are vital to strategic policy design and critical to making institutional and organizational changes in the region that will promote gender balance and address legislative gaps or advocacy priorities.

**Recommendation 07 | Re-educating the media** We must re-educate the Arab and global media to represent women accurately and fairly, without stereotype, to emphasise and 'normalise' women's leadership and success stories across a broad spectrum of sectors and in all spaces – not just top ministerial appointments but including human stories on the impact made by small-scale social entrepreneurs, teachers, mothers, and community leaders.

Awareness and knowledge of gender issues and the negative impact of gender inequality in the Arab world hinges on responsible, objective reporting, and regional media training programmes should be engaged with directly in order to highlight the importance of gender balanced reporting. Advocates for women in the region must be prepared to modify the ways in which they are communicating with the media, utilising new tools and platforms to circumvent biased media if necessary.

### **Recommendation 08 | Transforming influential popular culture to champion gender balance**

The role of popular culture and the production thereof in the region, which has vibrant Arabic language entertainment and creative industries, cannot be underestimated in terms of championing progress in social and institutional culture and promoting a shift in the mindsets of men and children – at home, in school, in the media, and in films. Without this mindset shift, endorsed in the region's entertainment, news consumption and digital media output, most legislation and policy reform will remain ineffectual. Artists, musicians, filmmakers, producers, writers and other creatives in the region's entertainment value chain must shift cultural output in the region away from depicting and therefore 'normalising' violence against women, in films, television series, or other popular culture and entertainment platforms, and towards engaging with other stakeholders in the arts, the film industry, and the entertainment industry as a whole to take violence against women off our screens and thereby change dominant narratives. Egypt is a significant and influential player in the Arab entertainment industry especially in Arab television and cinema, and therefore can have a tremendous impact in leading narrative change and promoting strong, empowered, working, entrepreneurial, leading female characters in entertainment output.

## **Advancing women's leadership and gender diversity on corporate boards and in family business**

### **Recommendation 09 | Examine the feasibility of expanding the Women on Boards**

**Observatory regionally** The Women on Boards Observatory, established in 2017 at the AUC School of Business, issues an annual monitoring report on the representation of women as Members of Boards of Directors in Egypt and maintains a database of qualified women who can serve on Boards. This initiative should be examined in consultation with AUC and a consortium of MENA and international universities to determine feasibility of rolling out the initiative to Business Schools around the region feeding data into a main centralized regional observatory body at AUC.

### **Recommendation 10 | Champion quotas to increase female representation on corporate boards as a temporary measure until there is gender balance on boards**

We need to change the rules in the Arab region with quotas until gender balance on boards becomes the norm. Quotas are not only required to ensure gender diversity but diversity in all its forms (for example, we need young people on boards who understand tech and can update corporate approach to technology thereby enhancing competitiveness). Gender quotas should not be limited to just 30%, but to 50% if the benchmark set by France is to be followed, and it is necessary to have prominent and active legislation that mandates women's participation as well as implementation and monitoring mechanisms to guarantee legislative effect.

### **Recommendation 11 | Beyond quotas, shun nepotism in recruitment to plug the leaking pipeline of female talent in executive leadership**

The majority of Board appointments are largely informal, based on the 'old boy network', and this nepotism generally limits women's access to Board appointments and leadership opportunities. If the most influential corporations in the region (largely multinationals and family-owned conglomerates) promote their female Board Member appointees extensively through the global media and all corporate communications channels, put them forward for visible Board roles and committees, and

champion their endorsement from the Chairman down of how a gender balanced board is crucial to their competitive advantage, then other corporations will follow suit.

#### **Recommendation 12 | Create a benchmark for Family Councils in Family Businesses**

Following the standard set by the AlMoayyed Group in Bahrain and others, a benchmark and toolkit should be created to encourage the formation of Family Councils within family-owned conglomerates in the region where all family members are represented in the council and meet twice a year with the company's Board of Directors, as well as a lawyer and independent auditor bringing objectivity to the Board. Family businesses in the region should also create a charter or constitution for the business, with the main factors in the constitution being succession planning and the declaring of conflicts of interest. These solutions represent excellent practice that should be considered further for emulation by family businesses around the region.

#### **Recommendation 13 | Examine the feasibility of a regional roll out of Gender Balance Councils**

Established in 2015, the UAE Gender Balance Council is a federal entity responsible for developing and implementing the gender balance agenda in the United Arab Emirates. This initiative should be examined independently and in consultation with the UAE Gender Balance Council to determine feasibility of rolling out similar Councils around the region.

### **Women in entrepreneurship and SME development, the rural / agricultural sectors and the informal economy**

**Recommendation 14 | Crowdsourcing tech solutions to agricultural issues** Technology is an enabler, some of its best uses allow for raised efficiency and productivity and increased inclusion. Another key benefit of technology in agriculture is the development of human capital through knowledge transfer, upskilling and nutrition sensitive and climate smart agriculture. Key measures to develop a pipeline of sustainable solutions are to promote entrepreneurship, support sustainable business models, and avoid 'quick return solutions' that might not be sustainable in the future. This recommendation calls for enhanced investment in initiatives to encourage people into agriculture by crowdsourcing innovative IT solutions to raise agricultural efficiency in the MENA region, following the benchmark set by the World Bank in DigitalAG4Egypt, in the forthcoming DigitalAG4MENA platform, and in the EmpowerHer Initiative (see Recommendation 37).

**Recommendation 15 | Reframing entrepreneurship** The more we work to empower women to be part of the social entrepreneurship network the more they will deliver real structural solutions to social problems. In its strategy and policy development, in both the public and private sectors, the region needs to move beyond using the term 'entrepreneurship' in the strictly profit-making sense and reframe regional awareness of how entrepreneurship, and more specifically social entrepreneurship, can inspire local solutions to local problems.

**Recommendation 16 | Redefine success in terms of 'scaling deep'** There are three ways of defining success in social entrepreneurship (Ashoka): 1) scaling up to change laws, norms, and policies that will then reduce discrimination against other women or anybody else; 2) scaling out, which refers to measuring engagement with the numbers of people reached; 3) understanding how we can impact those people, change their behavior, and inspire them to act - this impact is scaling deep, and refers to changing behaviour one woman, one man, one village, one company, one city, one country, one region at a time.

**Recommendation 17 | Reforming inheritance law and property rights to empower women's entrepreneurship in agriculture** Inheritance law in the region is heavily biased against women and prevents women from owning the land that they need for their agricultural business and their livelihoods. Although we have good laws and regulation, we have had poor implementation and a lack of intention to interpret legislation fairly due to social or cultural constraints. Noting the specific benefits to women in the agricultural business sectors, parliaments must prioritise legislation and action to protect women's property rights, reform inheritance laws and laws on joint titling, and introduce fiscal incentives on titles awarded to women.

**Recommendation 18 | Develop new gender sensitive strategies for managing the agriculture associations, which are the main players in rural areas.** 45% of the labour force in agriculture is rural women so we need strategies to recognise the potential of women. These associations are the missing link between women's empowerment and the agricultural sectors / food industries and can offer women entrepreneurs vital lifelines of support in terms of access to markets.

**Recommendation 19 | Improve access to financial literacy training** The missing link between rural women and their involvement in agriculture and SME development is financial literacy. Banks have an opportunity to educate and support women in rural with engaging with banks, understanding the range of suitable products and services available to her, how to open an account, make a transaction, to bank online, and to understand what other support might be available beyond small loans. Financial literacy is important to successful entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector and so this recommendation calls for increased investment and focus on financial education programmes for women entrepreneurs specifically in the agricultural sector and rural industries. It also calls on financial institutions to develop suitable products specifically aimed at the needs of this sector.

**Recommendation 20 | Technical agriculture education must align with agribusiness and industry especially the food industries** Academia and universities must encompass capacity building as the cornerstone of degree programmes in food sustainability, agriculture and food sciences. More attention needs to be paid by universities with regard to how to link theoretical agriculture education in the classroom with technical experience and learning in the field, as well as to link graduates in the agriculture, food sciences and sustainability disciplines with the food industries to ensure that the best and brightest talent have a stepping stone into the industry and into the relevant public sector departments where their education and skills can contribute to future solutions. Similarly, universities must do more to encourage and support student-led entrepreneurship in the agricultural sector and rural industries, linking academia with industry and SME development to ensure a vibrant and thriving sector for the region. Similarly, government policies and departments must plug into this network of academia, industry and people in order to unify the work of various agencies and ministries so there is no duplication of efforts when it comes to food security.

**Recommendation 21 | Introduce social enterprise laws across the region** In Jordan, Lebanon and many other parts of the region that rely heavily upon the agricultural and rural sectors, there is no law for social enterprise (defined by Harvard Business School as "any organization that has as one of its key objectives to address a social issue, whether it is nonprofit, for profit, or public sector"). The region needs laws that allow innovators to set up social enterprises with tax exemptions as they do in Europe and the United States, as this way the region can attract impact investors to invest in the region and in agriculture. Impact investing is very important not just as a CSR activity but also in terms of value. Impact assessments are crucial as the more impact that can be shown, the more funds are attracted to the region for this vital sector.

## Women in public service and leadership: Towards gender parity in parliament and women's inclusion in policymaking

**Recommendation 22 | Governments must prioritise gender sensitive foreign and domestic policies** that aim to ensure that women's rights and participation remain central in every policy decision, emulating the 'Four Rs' that guide Sweden's 'feminist foreign policy' which could be successfully benchmarked in the region and globally: these are Rights, Representation, Resources, and Reality.

**Recommendation 23 | Adding a fifth R – Role Models** The region needs role models but not only those at the highest level, they are also needed at realistic, attainable, relatable levels – teachers, police officers, community leaders, entrepreneurs, are all female role models who can encourage women to take that extra step.

**Recommendation 24 | Create a regional strategy to address unpaid work and the care economy** More targeted action is required to ensure that the family and social and fiscal policies do not discriminate against women. Parliamentarians must prioritise national investment into the care economy because of its enabling effect (it enables women to redistribute their care responsibilities and enter the labour market, for example) and because the care economy itself also generates jobs and contributes to GDP. The region's parliamentarians must work to change perceptions of men as well as women, institutions and society, around care work and formally recognising it in the formation of policy as a shared responsibility between women, men and the state, not just the priority of mothers.

**Recommendation 25 | Government leaders in the region must ensure diversity in government portfolios led by women** Appointing women ministers to lead diverse portfolios, especially those traditionally entrusted to male ministers, will inspire diversity in senior leadership across the board. Diversity in government portfolios led by women will trickle down to diversity in the leadership opportunities that come up for women.

**Recommendation 26 | Women in public service must take ownership of the current approach to quotas in public office and parliaments and strategise as necessary** As with quotas for women on corporate boards, the issue of quotas for women parliamentarians also remains contentious, yet it is necessary for parliamentarians to understand the causes of opposition, identify their own biases and strategise to counter opposition from male parliamentarians who worry that the seats lost to a quota system might be theirs. This is a matter of re-educating parliamentarians through dedicated programmes to promote the contributions of women in parliament and public service and to highlight the vastly positive impact that women's leadership in parliament and public office can bring to matters around the family, the economy and social cohesion as a whole.

## Reflections on the future of work for women and young people in the MENA Region

**Recommendation 27 | Addressing the school to work transition is pivotal to meeting Future of Work challenges** Helping young people and women in "navigating the increasingly difficult school-to-work transition" must be a key priority for policymakers in economic development and labour policy formation. One of the most important moments in a working life is the transition from school to work and this is particularly difficult for women in this region. When women / workers don't transition well and cannot find work as they leave school, no matter what level of school, this has lasting scarring effects on women workers.

**Recommendation 28 | Aggregate research, reports, studies and perspectives on Future of Work challenges and solutions** so that policy makers and researchers alike can understand and anticipate the drivers of change and implement key strategies from now to mitigate any adverse impact in the future from technology and automation. This Recommendation is linked with Recommendation 06 on strengthening research culture, ethical research methodology and open access for research in the region.

**Recommendation 29 | Prioritise skills building, reskilling and upskilling**, as well as multi-stakeholder investment in lifelong education, as key to addressing Future of Work challenges for the MENA economies. A universal entitlement to lifelong learning “enables people to acquire skills and to reskill and upskill” and is a cornerstone recommendation of the ILO Commission on the Future of Work.

**Recommendation 30 | Minimise future disruption and gender inequality by supporting women in entrepreneurship and in all sectors**, especially the critical STEM sectors where so many of the jobs of the future will be created, to reach their full potential. By integrating skills building with SME development and matching training opportunities to the needs of the labour market, we can further help women protect themselves against disruption to traditional industries and vocations by promoting opportunities to innovate, leveraging those same technologies and processes of automation to reach new markets and grow their businesses. Access to relevant entrepreneurial support is needed, which includes establishing and strengthening links within the entrepreneurial community, and provides access to finding sources that are non-discriminatory towards women entrepreneurs.

**Recommendation 31 | Calling for the region to adopt the ILO's human-centered agenda and rights-based approach** that puts people and the work they do at the center of economic and social policy as well as at the center of business practice, by: a) Making greater investments in people's capabilities including lifelong learning; b) Making greater investments in the institutions of work, with those institutions including regulatory frameworks, labour administration and labour inspectorates (institutions should adapt to changing circumstances, changing conditions in the world of work and the nature of the employment relationship which is changing dramatically); and c) Supporting social dialogue as a public good and fundamental to empowering workers, governments and employers to come together to solve problems.

**Recommendation 32 | Investing in the care economy** would liberate women to join the labour market and potentially create over 50 million 'decent jobs' globally. Addressing the impact of unpaid care work on women and recognizing the imbalance in demands between work and family is key to resolving women's most persistent challenge to economic participation. It is important to note that this is a region with the highest share of unpaid care work among all regions and all income groups. Arab women perform 86% of the total amount of unpaid care work. This Recommendation is linked with Recommendation 24 which calls for women parliamentarians given their unique position to influence policy formation on workplace policy and legislation around unpaid work and the care economy recognizing that care of children and society's elderly is the responsibility of men, women and the state, not women alone.

**Recommendation 33 | Investing in the rural economy** which has been neglected for too long, and recognising that women truly are the engines of the rural economy particularly in agriculture. This Recommendation calls for enhanced investment in green jobs and jobs that will help the region transition to a carbon neutral economy in a way that sustains both workers and enterprises (noting that the ILO has a set of recommendations that address this directly, termed the 'just transition').

**Recommendation 34 | Investing in digital infrastructure** is key to addressing Future of Work challenges to ensure that the digital divide between advanced economies, developing and emerging economies does not continue to widen, as workers are already lacking the infrastructure and skills needed to compete in a digital-first working landscape of the present as well as the future.

**Recommendation 35 | Prepare workforces from school age to participate in 'co-bot' working situations** Work will change dramatically, and the employment relationship is already experiencing tremendous tension, but jobs will not be replaced by robots. Rather, it must be recognized that parts of jobs will change, mature, and evolve, meaning that many people will be from certain kinds of drudgery, the repetitive tasks that can be performed just as if not more effectively by robots, and they will have to learn how to work alongside robots in a 'co-bot' situation. If a task can be automated, it will.

**Recommendation 36 | Addressing the high degree of conflict and resulting economic and political fragility in the region** Women often become the economic backbone of their families in conflict situations and so jobs programmes and Future of Work policies that we implement should take full account of what it is to be living in a conflict situation and to be working in a reconstruction economy. In addition, women and young people in the region need to take full ownership of climate change as a women's empowerment and human rights issue.

**Recommendation 37 | Explore the feasibility of rolling out the EmpowerHer initiative across the region** as this project uses technology to build bridges between youth as agents of change and women as agents of societal transformation. Also explore whether the project could be broadened to sectors outside of agriculture or the rural industries, bringing young unemployed tech specialists together with entrepreneurs from a broad range of sectors with more hackathons and by allocating more funding.

**Recommendation 38 | Examine the feasibility of rolling out the Zayed University Qudwa ('Teaching for Global Excellence') Initiative regionally** Qudwa is a forum for teachers, by teachers that aims to elevate the teaching profession in the UAE and improve the future of education.