

AIWF x WiSER REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

On the Road to COP28:

Women-Led Innovation in Climate, Sustainability & STEM

Fostering UK-GCC-MENA Partnerships for Growth

An initiative of the Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF - UK) and Women in Sustainability, Environment and Renewable Energy (WiSER - UAE)

Recommendations

1. **Promote women's representation and leadership in agricultural, climate, and STEM policy, research, and innovation.** Amplifying women's voices in agriculture ensures policies address their specific needs, especially concerning technology, finance, and innovations combating climate change. Enhanced female representation ensures gender-responsive climate strategies, harnessing the collective talents, ideas and resources of both genders. Collaborative international action between Arab women and their international counterparts optimizes advocacy, fosters innovation and maximizes resilience against climate adversities, fostering a sustainable, equitable future for all.
2. **Engage with women farmers to comprehend the unique challenges faced by women in rural economies.** Policymakers must genuinely understand these communities to tailor effective empowerment programs. Recognizing their specific needs, such as appropriate technologies, essential value chains, and financial product accessibility is crucial, particularly in MENA countries where women often lack collateral due to discriminatory property and inheritance laws. Legislative reform is imperative, with a gender-sensitive lens ensuring full enforcement of the law. Integral policies, like those concerning vital resources such as food and water, must be scrutinized for inclusivity. Furthermore, public campaigns should be initiated to remove financial barriers and support women innovators, propelling them forward without bias.
3. **Create platforms for multi-stakeholder dialogue and action, with women and young people at the forefront** Empowering women and young leaders to play a leading role on the international stage and participate in multi-stakeholder dialogue is an inclusive strategy to bring fresh ideas, knowledge and creativity to rethink the harm being done to the planet, people, peace and prosperity. Women and young people are an important part of the equation. We will not be able to solve global climate and sustainability crises without women bringing forward their unique perspectives, experiences and ideas that can foster innovation in sustainability and climate solutions.
4. **Build resilience of vulnerable communities and help women farmers and agriculturalists create sustainable livelihoods for the benefit of whole communities** Recognizing that women are most vulnerable and disproportionately impacted by climate-driven food and water insecurity, it is important to identify effective resilience initiatives already operating in, or implemented by women living in, affected communities. These initiatives can be leveraged to bring local partners together to support resilience building for women farmers, provide training in cutting-edge food production, sourcing, technologies and techniques, and build valuable knowledge on global logistics, shipping and transportation systems.
5. **Create international knowledge sharing programs and young farmer exchange opportunities to connect young and female farmers around the globe** There is potential for international knowledge sharing programs and farmer exchange opportunities which connect young and female farmers and sustainable agriculturalists from around the globe to benefit from on-the-job training, cultural exchange opportunities and valuable technology and innovation incubation opportunities focused on sustainable agriculture with a regional focus. There is also great scope for working with agricultural colleges and university faculties to involve young and female agriculture students in such exchange programs, giving them valuable opportunities to learn farming production, marketing and sustainability techniques from agricultural schools and expertise in other markets.
6. **Develop training programs providing climate education and literacy training for women farmers** Education and specialized training for women and young farmers – both formally within higher education and informally through community-based programs – is a critical priority in the mainstreaming of gender quality in sustainable agriculture. Infusing education with perspectives and input from grassroots advocates to more effectively understand the needs, challenges and opportunities ahead for female and young farmers is essential. It increases their capacity, resilience and creativity for the generation of innovative ideas which may well transform agritech in the region, for the benefit of women, families and communities.
7. **Engage the private sector and multinational corporations in the food security and water resilience mission** Large conglomerates and cooperatives alike can do more to encourage diversity and inclusion and eliminate exploitation or any other adverse human rights impacts within their supply chains, within their organizations and leadership structures, with full auditing, accountability and compliance with international mechanisms, such as the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. Specialized schemes within corporate environments to develop and inspire women's leadership in food and water systems, at every stage of the supply chain, can pave a new way forward for the next generation, underpinned with a rights-based approach to food security and water resilience.

8. **Nurture and finance women's entrepreneurship and engagement with sustainable agriculture**
Supporting women's entrepreneurship and involvement in food systems and in the agricultural sector overall can help create new economic opportunities, reduce poverty, and empower women. Women entrepreneurs need to understand their sector, their market, their investor, and themselves, to think about their presence, and what they are projecting. It is also advisable for women entrepreneurs in this space to find investors with the patience and capital to support projects long-term as agricultural technology solutions will often take a long time to scale. Women entrepreneurs should seek out specialized climate tech, food security or food technology investors who know how to plug in and support projects and the entrepreneur through the fundraising journey.
9. **Foster diversity within community resource management mechanisms and committees**
For gender-sensitive agricultural policymaking in the region, it's imperative to position women equitably in decision-making forums, both nationally and locally. Community-based resource management must be inclusive, ensuring genuine female leadership without tokenism. This amplifies female voices and establishes a paradigm where women's leadership in communities, cooperatives, and corporations is normalized. A female-led network or committee typically fosters more women leaders, subsequently influencing policy domains. However, women leaders should anticipate challenges, not only from male counterparts but occasionally from fellow women. Emphasizing male allyship is vital in this transformative journey.
10. **Tailor capacity building initiatives to respect women's circumstances and challenges**
Some capacity building initiatives should be conducted in female-only spaces depending on the cultural context, as this is sometimes the only way women are genuinely comfortable with receiving support and programming capacity building in ways that work alongside their other responsibilities. There should also be consideration for the free movement / travel restrictions that continue to hold women back in some parts of MENA. There must be demonstrable political will and action to ensure that women can own, access, borrow and inherit in the same way as men in every context and in every country in the region. Here, civil society becomes instrumental in advancing legislative progress to remove arbitrary and outdated barriers to their full, rightful and fruitful inclusion in the MENA economy, in all sectors and spheres.

Women in tech

11. **Bridge the industry-academia gap that is holding young STEM students back from meaningful careers in STEM sectors more broadly and tech in particular**
Promote digital literacy, STEM education and tech entrepreneurship as a career option to girls in schools and universities, with a particular focus on reaching underrepresented communities. Include tech and AI courses in STEM curricula in the MENA higher education and continued professional development space. Ensure that scholarships, apprenticeships, paid internships and executive / entrepreneurship education offerings are available to bridge the empowerment gap experienced by students from backgrounds that we know are under-represented in the tech industry.
12. **Design interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration-driven initiatives that bring young women in tech together to create, innovate and inspire**
Set up industry consortiums to share best practices, developing and sponsoring mentorship programs, prizes, hackathons, and collaborating on initiatives that help bridge the diversity gap in technology innovation and entrepreneurship, foster deep connections, provide support, and facilitate the exchange of ideas, experiences and opportunities. Establish well-funded mentorship programs that reach young female talent in schools and universities with accelerators, internships and apprenticeships and have big tech corporations behind them as visible, engaged sponsors and partners.
13. **Foster international collaboration and partnership between like-minded organizations that focus on promoting DEI in the tech sector, both regionally and globally**
International and regional organizations and initiatives should work more closely, strategically and meaningfully together in order to amplify impact and momentum and deliver more opportunities to women in MENA by bringing them together with women entrepreneurs in tech in the UK, the EU and the wider international tech community.
14. **Use digital tools and social media technologies to platform role models so that women leaders become the norm in tech, and not the exception**
Elevating role models and increasing visibility is essential to shift perceptions about women in tech and AI. Amplifying success stories of women tech entrepreneurs and professionals in the region can inspire change.

To attract young girls to STEM and tech, diverse role models beyond the typical older white male archetype are crucial. While there are numerous accomplished women in tech, efforts to enhance their visibility are paramount. Women should command a larger presence on platforms and in campaigns, underscoring the importance of diversity from early on.

15. Tech can be a lonely world for women leaders – build allies and amplify women’s successes always (your own as well as others)

Building a diverse network of allies, both male and female, is crucial for women, especially given that pivotal career decisions might be made in their absence. Cultivating such alliances entails being an ally oneself, advocating emphatically for other women, particularly in male-centric sectors like tech. An organizational shift is observable when women constitute a minimum of 30% of participants. It is vital to highlight women’s achievements, balancing pride with authenticity and humility.

Women and clean energy innovation

16. Gendered energy poverty requires gender-responsive solutions rooted in international and regional collaboration and multi-sectoral partnership

To effectively address energy poverty, strategies must be gender-responsive, integrating the distinct needs, preferences, and roles of both genders to craft equitable solutions. A concrete step includes introducing energy-efficient cookstoves which not only reduce women’s time and labor burden but also mitigate health risks and environmental impacts. Moreover, by implementing decentralized renewable energy solutions, we can offer safer, cleaner, and more reliable energy sources, simultaneously empowering women with fresh economic and educational opportunities.

17. Clean energy projects and partnerships must be well-funded in order to be fully sustainable

Reforming climate finance is a cornerstone discussion in light of the COP28 agenda, to ensure that it is available, affordable and accessible. No matter how much we talk about mitigation solutions, no matter how much we talk about adaptation opportunities, if there is no finance, there is no pathway forward. Scalability, viability, robust support, and funding are pivotal for sustainable climate partnerships. Prioritizing initiatives that enhance education access, technology, and capacity building is key to helping constituents globally understand and experience climate change impacts. Effective climate finance entails not just capital availability, but also its accessibility. Addressing prevalent trust deficits and cynicism is essential. Promoting bankable projects that cater to climate adaptation and mitigation ensures transparency in funding outcomes, thereby stimulating innovative solutions and fostering further collaboration.

18. Projects and partnerships must embed diversity and inclusion by default to ensure women’s equitable representation in climate innovation and solutions-building

Without the inclusion of women and young people, there is no future for climate innovation, because inclusion is what will drive more ambitious, creative climate projects that are viable, sustainable and bankable. Embed diversity and inclusion and a clear commitment to women’s empowerment, with monitoring and performance tracking indicators aligned with key priorities and targets to improve women’s representation in climate action in all spheres. Closing the gendered funding gap for women climate innovators is especially necessary. Partnerships and initiatives should be designed to ensure equal participation of women in dialogue and policy design, with tailored grants available for viable climate projects led by women and youth.

19. Climate education should be deeply embedded into school and university curricula throughout the region to scale up energy literacy and encourage youth-led climate innovation

With the UAE hosting COP28 this year and bringing key actors together, including multinational corporations, universities and youth advocates themselves, it is a core recommendation of AIWF and WiSER that climate education, environment education and energy literacy should be deeply embedded into the formal school and university curriculum throughout the region.

20. Create spin-off platforms for young entrepreneurs to showcase youth-led climate projects from the region

COP28 prominently features youth, with the Green Zone spotlighting venture capital, entrepreneurs, SMEs, and youth initiatives. Youths will not just observe but actively partake, representing crucial delegations from both the Global North and South. Their inclusion in the climate dialogue is vital; as beneficiaries of climate funding, their perspectives will shape the future climate impact regionally and globally. AIWF and WiSER will continue the dialogue well after COP28 and urge all stakeholders to do the same by establishing spin-off platforms and opportunities for young leaders to convene and carry their COP conversations forward.

21. Mainstream lifelong learning as a concept and an opportunity in the MENA higher education and vocational training sectors

Much of the region's future prosperity hinges on its ability to educate its youth and equip them fully with the competencies and advanced digital skills aligned with the needs of future labor markets. This requires lifelong learning (which involves skilling, upskilling, reskilling and continuous education tailored to address the challenges of labor markets of the future and equip workers of the future to successfully compete, adapt and participate in the economies of the future). Workers also need to acquire the 'soft skills' that employers in the private sector increasingly require, including empathy, problem solving, and effective communication. Lifelong learning is not just for new graduates and new labor market entrants, older workers need to adapt if their jobs become obsolete and the work of the future demands skills they have not acquired.

22. Legislative reform is needed to eliminate structural barriers for women in the world of work

Governments, the private sector, and civil society can collaboratively champion legislative reforms for women's economic inclusion and workplace equality by enacting and enforcing laws ensuring equal pay, anti-discrimination, and equal opportunities, and implementing gender quotas in leadership roles, both in corporations and political spheres. Businesses can foster gender-sensitive environments through training, promoting an inclusive culture, and collaborating with banks to design financial products tailored for women, ensuring their entrepreneurial ventures are supported. Civil society can elevate the importance of gender inclusivity, emphasizing the societal and economic benefits of women's full participation, and establishing transparent mechanisms for tracking gender inclusivity, ensuring accountability. It is essential to regularly convene multi-stakeholder forums to address challenges and refine strategies, ensuring women's voices shape policy decisions.

23. Address gender disparities in the labor market by aligning education and economic policy with human-centered solutions focused on diversity, decent work and lifelong learning

Align economic and education policies with future of work solutions centered on lifelong learning, continuous professional development, skilling and a new emphasis on human skills, towards the realization of an inclusive, multigenerational, just and equitable future labor market of decent work. Implement close monitoring of the impact on women's economic inclusion in the workforce and on youth unemployment, which remain two of the MENA region's most salient and interlinked development challenges. Women leaders and youth advocates need to engage more meaningfully with regulators, to ensure that policies and regulations are up to date with the needs of labor markets and the aspirations and capacity of women graduating from national universities and entering the national workforce.

24. Reform and revive the curriculum to embed core skills and literacies in MENA graduates so they are ready to hit the ground running when they enter the labor market

Reform curricula in the region from primary through to tertiary and vocational education to embed digital, financial and other key literacies, as well as promote the development of advanced interpersonal (human, or so-called 'soft', skills) to reduce unemployment and promote social cohesion. Improve access to quality education, especially in rural and conflict-affected areas. Expand and modernize vocational training programs to equip young people with market-relevant skills by leveraging greater public-private collaboration and making a conscious, cohesive commitment to bridging the industry-academic gap.

25. Address the ongoing challenge of youth unemployment and mitigate 'brain drain' by investing in apprenticeships, internships and entrepreneurship education

STEM education and entrepreneurship education should be embedded within degree programs to help encourage young people to start up their own sustainability-focused businesses and social enterprises. Provide accessible funding, business plan support, financial advice, and invaluable networking and mentorship opportunities which are vital to building communities of innovative startups that are youth-led and focused on addressing social, climate and sustainability challenges (social enterprises). Implement apprenticeship programs, paid internships, and entrepreneurship education to encourage young people to acquire the digital, financial and business skills to help them succeed in the tech-driven innovation economy. This can mitigate 'brain drain' migration of young people to other countries as well as endemic and deep-rooted lack of employment opportunities and decent jobs in the region. Open up valuable economic opportunities for young people in sectors that are vital to economic survival (such as agriculture), which have traditionally excluded youth.

26. Prioritize decent work and quality of jobs over job creation and quantity of jobs

Look beyond 'job creation' in the region to focus efforts on creating opportunities for 'decent work', and implement clear and transparent monitoring and performance reporting mechanisms to measure the quality and performance of employment and employer practices in the region. Policy makers and private sector professionals, educators and civil society leaders need to come together more strategically and cohesively to promote narrative change from the quantitative 'job creation' to 'decent work' that empowers individuals and supports people, families and communities. The potential to narrow the poverty crisis and other gendered human rights challenges in the region, including gender-based violence, is a clear societal benefit of doing so.

27. Build on lessons learned during the pandemic to improve social protections and make flexible, family-friendly working the norm rather than the exception

The pandemic compelled many positive advances in terms of greater social protection and a safety net for workers who have lost their incomes, improved flexibility in the labor market and more family-friendly working models. There was a renewed emphasis on a more 'human-centered' approach to skills development, both within and beyond the formal education system and throughout a learner's life. The pandemic also greatly accelerated the speed of changes with respect to the impact of technology on business, on jobs, on workers, and a rapid increase in remote learning, e-commerce, virtual working and communication. It has fast-tracked the inevitable transformation to the future of work, especially the transition to virtual, flexible working and a renewed focus on the mental wellbeing and dignity of workers. Let us build on lessons learned and make the coming decade one where people and planet are valued and protected.

28. Hold corporations accountable for embedding DEI into working culture and practice to steer sustainable sectoral change

Companies and organizations – from multinationals to SMEs – should prioritize opportunities for their employees and other stakeholders in lifelong learning and continued professional development, including for women who are already in the workforce and need to adapt to the rapid pace of technological change. Create an Annual Index of how well DEI is embedded into working culture to create a 'race to the top' mindset in working culture and practices across whole sectors. Look strategically towards filling the diversity gap in the SME ecosystem in the MENA region, both in terms of age and gender.

Women and climate finance

29. Convene all stakeholders to ease the transition towards a more gender equal and green future

In the pursuit of a sustainable future, intertwining the green economy with gender finance becomes imperative. By channelling resources into SMEs via micro-finance, we can catalyze their evolution from micro-enterprises to more substantial, medium-sized entities, especially those helmed by women. A tailored approach, as opposed to generic solutions, resonates more effectively with unique regional challenges. International stakeholders should emphasize the importance of an inclusive dialogue, converging in target countries, partnering with regulators, central banks, and dedicating financial resources to women's inclusion in the green economy. Engaging with these actors ensures a holistic approach, aligning global aspirations with local realities, steering clear from overly broad mandates influenced by external factors. The goal? A collaborative ecosystem, reinforcing inclusivity and cultivating environments conducive for women-led enterprises.

30. Raise awareness and profiles of successful female green entrepreneurs and the investors who have backed them

'Shout from the rooftops' about women's green startup success stories as this helps to raise the profile and visibility of successful female entrepreneurs and leaders in the green economy who have delivered inspirational innovations and made a strong difference in their country. Find ways to bring entrepreneurs and female investors who are investing in women-led businesses more closely together. Many women entrepreneurs do not have a support network, and networking with other women who are in the same position and share the same challenges is highly valuable. Making investors more visible also reinforces the message that there is finance out there; women just have to be knowledgeable and strategic to secure it.

31. Finance climate solutions that are community-focused but scalable

Take stock of promising solutions and work with all stakeholders to replicate those solutions at scale within a country, taking into account the unique cultural and economic context of the country itself – often, big solutions don't work and are too far removed from the region. Base solutions-building around climate finance on direct engagement with the women who are themselves suffering the effects of climate change, as they

are the women coming up with the most innovative, creative platforms and tools and technologies. This is where lasting and sustainable differences can be made. Climate finance requires regional action but, first and foremost, it requires community action.

32. Legislative reform is required to repeal discriminatory laws that prevent women from inheriting or owning assets to improve access to finance

Stakeholders should work closely with policymakers to correct discriminatory laws that prevent women from owning or inheriting assets. If access to, or owning, assets is the issue, laws must change to ensure that women can own and inherit assets equally, which could be put up as collateral, foster further innovation and in turn be reinvested into the economy. Access to finance depends largely on financial institutions that are typically asset or cash flow-based lenders. If women are being prevented in some parts of the region from owning assets or inheriting them, that makes it infinitely more difficult for that money to flow.

33. Measure climate finance / gender metrics

Place social and diversity KPIs in MENA green bond framework and sustainable capital market structures, so that every bond raised has social KPIs attached to it. These KPIs could be closely aligned with the national gender equality targets or targets related to women on boards, and could foster a more robust, gender friendly ecosystem. Structure cohesive blended finance vehicles to fund women businesses as standalone investments and not as a subset of other funds. Incentivize women-led businesses by providing technical interest, better interest rates and other value add-ons.

34. Improve board leadership to diversify decision-making on finance

Ensure that women sitting on boards in financial institutions and regulatory authorities have critical mass in terms of representation and an equal voice, and are not present as 'token' female board members. Ensure that female appointments to boards are merit-based so that women accelerated to board leadership are fully competent and do not present a bottleneck for more competent female leaders.

35. More female-led acceleration and incubation programs could achieve critical mass in climate-focused women's entrepreneurship

Acceleration and Incubation programs are becoming very popular in the region, but they are not necessarily owned by women or focused on women entrepreneurs. Such programs are extremely important because they give women the confidence to make that first leap into entrepreneurship and further develop their business before beginning a more serious search for investment. The power of representation, combined with a targeted, supportive approach, can make female-led acceleration and incubation programs pivotal in achieving critical mass in climate-focused women's entrepreneurship. As more women join and succeed in these programs, a ripple effect is likely, inspiring even more women to venture into the realm of climate entrepreneurship.

The Future We Want: Recommendations for young women leaders in the sustainability, climate and STEM sectors

36. Acknowledge and address imposter syndrome; embrace adversity and reframe failures as lessons

Frequently engage with other women and other young people, sharing experiences and seeking out mentorship opportunities. Leverage every opportunity to witness women leaders in action, mentor other young women, and mentor an established female leader ('reverse mentoring'). Practice authenticity, humility, and empathy in your dealings with your peers. Adopt anxiety management techniques to retrain the voice in your head. You deserve that seat at the table. You have a voice which the world needs to hear. Use it, always, for the good of people and the planet. Encourage the mindset within your teams and especially within yourself that adversity often fosters creativity. Advocate for viewing failures as stepping stones to success. Encourage open dialogues about challenges and practical solutions.

37. Seek out community and support civil society

Actively engage with platforms like the AIWF Young Arab Women Leaders or the WiSER program, or any of the many programs available and flourishing throughout the MENA region and internationally, that aim to give women a global voice and the opportunity to connect with international leaders in academia, industry, and policy. Encourage other young women to join you, to reach out, learn from, and share experiences with women and young people from different communities and backgrounds. Connectivity and community are essential to your wellbeing and your professional development. Offer support to, and partner with, civil society organizations focusing on women's issues and empowerment. Support and encourage the establishment of women-led organizations aimed at community service and championing women's empowerment in one's specific sector. Highlight the success stories of women-led initiatives to inspire others.

38. Steer organizational and institutional change in your working world in whatever way you can

Cultivate a culture of sisterhood, offering a safe space for women to share and reflect on their challenges. Challenge the misconception that women are inherently competitive with each other. Emphasize the importance of vulnerability, mutual support, and investing in authentic female friendships and mentorships. Recognize the importance of partnership, advocacy, and finance in propelling women forward in their journeys. Amplify women's achievements, your own and those of your peers. Acknowledge the importance of cultural literacy and respect diverse voices in your working life and in your decision-making. Support women entrepreneurs with your consumer decisions and ensure equal representation of women when building teams, planning projects, launching new initiatives or hosting a work-related event. Advocate for increased representation of MENA women in your working environment, at your company, in your startup, and within your leadership development programs. Actively recognize champions for gender equality in your teams and organizations. Encourage senior women and supportive men to act as advocates, championing the advancement of women in their careers. Instill a culture of elevating others as one progresses in their career. Prioritize accountability and integrity, your own and others', calling out unsupportive behaviors and fostering an environment of mutual respect. Speak up when you see inequality, even if your voice shakes.

Initiative Partners



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