

report

FOSTERING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN

Successful policies for in-depth transformations

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Online conference - 7 May 2021

Introduction

In the context of the 2021 Spanish co-presidency of the 5+5 Dialogue and drawing on the Tunis Declaration adopted by the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Western Mediterranean countries on 22 October 2020, the European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founding member of the Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation, organised an online conference entitled "Fostering Women's Economic Participation in the Western Mediterranean". Under the guidance of the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation, this online conference sought to contribute with policy recommendations to the deliberations of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the Western Mediterranean area in their annual meeting under the Spanish co-presidency of the 5+5 Dialogue.

In line with the UN 2030 Agenda, and particularly with SDG number 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls), this online conference sought to present gender equality as a cross-sectional axis to build more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable societies. This conference aimed to map the gender economic disparities that traverse the Western Mediterranean area whilst presenting successful practices that foster women's economic participation in the countries of the region.

The challenges and opportunities of enabling women's economic participation in the area were discussed by **Cristina Gallach Figueras** (Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation of the Government of Spain), **Nasser Kamel** (Secretary General of the Union for the Mediterranean), **Senén**

Florensa (President of the Executive Committee of the IEMed), **Carlos Conde** (Head of the Middle East and Africa Division at the Global Relations Secretariat of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD]), **Myriem Ouchen Noussairi** (Programme Management Specialist at UN Women Maghreb), **Omayma Achour** (President of the Jossour Forum des Femmes marocaines), **Leila Belkhiria Jaber** (President of the Chambre nationale des Femmes Cheffes d'Entreprises de Tunisie), **Hala Bugaighis** (Co-founder of the Libyan think tank Jusoor Center for Studies and Development) and **Fairouz Habache** (President of Women in Business of Algeria). The dialogue ensuing from the discussion and the exchange of good practices led to the creation of public policy recommendations that aim to pave the way for in-depth economic and social transformations. These recommendations and reflections by the participants are summarised in this report.

Women's economic participation in the Maghreb, crucial to ensure human and socioeconomic development

Better women's economic participation is crucial to build more prosperous, inclusive and sustainable societies. Moving towards gender equality and the full realisation of women's rights (Sustainable Development Goal number 5) involves fostering women's participation in the economy, including their access to decent jobs and decision-making positions, equal pay, control of production capacities, working time and family conciliation. The benefits for society in general are clear: women's economic participation helps spur the productivity, diversification and prosperity of the economies and makes it possible to move towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, such as eradicating poverty, food security, health, education and reducing inequalities. In contrast, lack of women's economic participation has a significant cost – both in GDP terms (15% of world GDP according to the World Bank) and sustainable development –, which no society can ignore.

Yet, it must be noted that Middle Eastern and North African countries are among those with the weakest level of women's participation in the working

population. This is notable in the Maghreb where, despite the progress in terms of education, women's participation in the labour market does not exceed 25%. Moreover, women are the most affected by unemployment, precarious jobs, particularly in the informal economy, and wage inequalities, and have extremely limited access to senior positions and entrepreneurship. Thus, according to figures mentioned by the participants, while in Tunisia women make up approximately 70% of graduates, only 25% of Tunisian women are in the labour market. In Libya, less than 1% of entrepreneurs are women.

The Covid-19 pandemic: A crisis that has particularly affected women

Participants also stressed that the role of the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated and highlighted these gender economic inequalities in the Maghreb. Indeed, women have been disproportionately affected by the economic crisis. Working mostly in tourism, domestic work and services sectors, women have become more vulnerable to unemployment and business closure than men. According to panel members, in Tunisia, 50% of companies led by women were threatened with closure, while in Algeria this risk for companies managed by women was 6 percentage points higher than for companies managed by men.

Participants also insisted on the central role played by women faced with the health and economic crisis. Women did indeed find themselves at the forefront during the health emergency as the main components of medical staff. Moreover, they had to deal with more family responsibilities concerning the education of children and household chores, which contributed to hindering their participation in economic life as well as greater exposure to gender and economic violence.

Overcoming the obstacles to greater women's economic participation in the Maghreb

For participants in the conference, it is essential to identify the obstacles and factors that influence the low women's economic participation in the Maghreb to produce responses adapted to this challenge.

The difficulty of the economies in the region in creating decent employment was firstly mentioned as one of the major elements to be taken into account, insofar as this significantly reduces the range of job opportunities available. **Fostering the creation of decent jobs in the formal economy** is a key prerequisite for further integrating women in the working population and for them to benefit from essential social rights.

Beyond the underperformance of the Maghreb economies in terms of creation of jobs that mostly affects women and youths, participants particularly noted a general environment that is unpropitious to encouraging women's economic participation.

Making socio-cultural perceptions and norms evolve

Socio-cultural perceptions and norms were actually mentioned as major obstacles to women entering the labour market. These perpetuate gender stereotypes by assigning specific roles to women, particularly that of housewives, or limiting them to certain types of jobs. These socio-cultural perceptions and norms also have a key role in wage inequalities and barriers in access to decision-making positions.

In this context, a panel member stressed the key role of the public authorities and lawmakers in the evolution of socio-cultural norms. She cited, for example, the recent organic law enacted in Algeria that stipulates that the electoral lists must include at least 50% of women. This **quota policy** aims to change social perceptions "from above" by making women holding political decision-making positions visible and creating a ripple effect in the country's economic life. Changing social perceptions also involves educating youths. Thus, the *Chambre nationale des femmes cheffes d'entreprise de Tunisie (CNFCE)* **promotes success stories of women entrepreneurs through social media**, which are powerful tools to influence young people. The project "Mille et une femmes" highlights women's success stories to inspire and change the mindsets of young Tunisians, creating new prospects for them.

Strengthening the legal framework and above all putting it into practice

Legal frameworks are key elements to encourage women's economic participation. In the Maghreb, from Morocco to Libya, these are relatively deficient and do not contribute to establishing an environment favourable to women's economic empowerment. Overall, participants pointed out the lack of gender mainstreaming in the legislation of these countries.

However, it is clear that **labour law reforms** are desirable **to encourage women's economic participation in the Maghreb**. Participants hoped for positive legal changes that would enable gender-based discrimination to be eliminated, evolving towards equal pay, better access to property, favouring a better organisation of working hours, encouraging the sharing of household responsibilities and, finally, developing accessible and affordable childcare services. These reforms must also tackle the issue of the informal economy to ensure that women are integrated into protective legal frameworks and enjoy appropriate social protection, notably through measures that encourage a move towards the formal economy.

Finally, although over recent years progress has been made in terms of legislation favouring women's economic equality and participation, these clash with the harsh reality. Participants insisted on the insufficient publicity, the lack of awareness among the stakeholders, the low level of compliance and enforcement of laws, leaving these positive legal changes ineffective in the field.

To remedy this situation, it was recommended that **the lobbying of associations for gender equality should be enhanced** in the economic sphere among the public authorities, **so that public policies include the gender issue in their formulation process**. To this end, participants stressed the need to base this lobbying, as well as the policy-making process, on **gender disaggregated data, enabling gender inequalities to be measured and objectivised**. This involves, as proposed by the CNFCE, the **creation of observatories** enabling the production of baseline studies and data

collection. In this respect, the example of the Observatoire de femmes de la Méditerranée in decision-making positions was mentioned as a major strategy to objectivise the lack of women's access to senior positions, a necessary step prior to lobbying actions.

Enabling the transition between the education system and labour market

Although graduates in the Maghreb are mostly women, they experience difficulties in accessing the labour market in comparison to their male peers. Today, holistic policies are needed to enable the full integration of women entrepreneurs. Associations of women entrepreneurs (such as CNFCE in Tunisia and WIBA in Algeria) or advocating women's economic participation (Jusoor in Libya and Jossour in Morocco) have realised the full extent of the problem and developed women's **capacity-building** activities to enable them to carry out this transition to professional life. Thus, they bring to the fore the need to **back and develop business incubators particularly focused on women in partnership with universities, developing support and mentorship units** to instil the entrepreneurial spirit and self-confidence in young woman graduates, thus strengthening their capacities to realise their professional projects.

In this transition towards the labour market and entrepreneurship, women are also confronted with another obstacle: limited access to assets and funding. Woman participants in the conference emphasised the need to implement, both through the public authorities and banking sectors, policies aimed at **providing financial services that are accessible, economically affordable, and adapted to women's needs** as prerequisites to their full economic participation, which can be achieved through entrepreneurship and access to property.

Gender inequalities in terms of access to technology

Finally, participants acknowledged that the digital revolution could be an opportunity to improve women's economic participation. Digital tools

enable, on the one hand, the financial inclusion of poorly served segments of society, including women, to be improved. On the other, the development of jobs in the digital sector provides new opportunities for women in the Maghreb, while the rise of telework driven by the COVID-19 pandemic enables better conciliation and flexibility between family and professional life, particularly in the case of lack of childcare services. Thus, participants on the panel pointed out that the digital divide between men and women in the Maghreb is threatening to transform the opportunities of the digital revolution into obstacles for women's economic participation. **Developing digital education aimed at women and strengthening the legal arsenal** to govern these new professions and their constraints must be a priority for governments in the region.

Conclusions

While the Covid-19 pandemic has raised awareness about gender inequalities in the labour world, particularly in the Maghreb, participants in the conference emphasised the need to draw lessons from the pandemic by including the gender issue in the economic recovery plans. They believe that the post-pandemic period is a key moment to put the social agenda forward and implement structural reforms that primarily support the passage to the formal economy, the expansion of social protection and the decrease of gender-based discriminations, so that women can become major actors in the economic life of the Maghreb countries.

Policy recommendations and key messages

- Undertaking gender sensitive reforms to extend social protection, especially health care, unemployment and family allowance plans, by adopting a gender perspective;
- Strengthening policies to accelerate the transition from informal economies to formal economies, notably through incentives;
- Developing national strategies aimed at promoting female entrepreneurship through partnerships with universities, the development of

female business incubators, support and mentorship units, and financial education and inclusion;

- Including the gender dimension in the decision-making and public policy-making processes, basing them particularly on the collection of gender disaggregated data, and ensuring the effective implementation of legislation by raising awareness among the stakeholders;
- Promoting the creation of observatories on gender inequality in the labour market, particularly in terms of access to senior positions, with the aim to objectivise these inequalities and nurture the processes of public policy-making;
- Strengthening civil society's lobbying actions among public authorities, lawmakers and the media to influence the public policy agenda in favour of women's economic participation;
- Strengthening the capacities of civil society actors for women's economic participation through the creation of regional platforms enabling the exchange of experiences;
- Imposing through legislation the evolution of socio-cultural norms and perceptions that hinder women's economic participation mainly through quota policies;
- Influencing the socio-cultural perceptions of the new generations by making the best use of social media, promoting women's professional skills and success stories;
- Reducing the digital divide between men and women through digital education provision primarily targeting women;
- Enabling women's financial inclusion through financial education programmes and an adapted and accessible range of financial products.

