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Digital Gender Equality – Experiences from Morocco

Today, technologies and Internet are the strongest engines for both economic and social transformation in any country. The new jobs and possibilities created by the digital wave are countless, and the skills needed to perform these jobs are accessible on a large scale for the global population.

Theoretically, this evolution should be the best enabler for women in the MENA region to access decision-making positions and should be a true stakeholder in the region's economic growth. But the lack of gender-neutral opportunities and the weight of cultural and traditional stereotypes prevent a large number of the female population to participate in the change.

I was born and raised in Morocco, a country that has been economically growing since the King Mohammed VI's ascension to the throne in 1999. Indeed, the country has in 20 years made significant advancements in women's rights, but in achieving a real change it is still lagging behind many nations. According to the 2018 World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report, the Kingdom still ranks 139th out of 144 in terms of women's economic participation and equal opportunities. And the digital aspect seems to be no exception.

When I was in school, grades were equally accessed by both genders, and very often, girls outpaced boys, mainly in math class. When I started university and enrolled in computer science classes, I was surprised to see that only 10% of the class were girls. Most of my female friends opted for economic studies because it »suits« women. Ironically, the top of all the classes for all years were girls. This leads to the conclusion that girls in the Moroccan context are more successful in technical and digital occupations if they are encouraged by their personal environment. However, this is strongly influenced by a very narrow-minded culture that pushes boys for technical professions rather than girls. This deepens the digital divide.

Traditionally, the digital divide, or technology gap, means the difference between groups in access to technology and the internet. Nowadays, it seems to be referring to the gap between those who have access to digital jobs and those who are unable to transform and adapt to the fourth industrial revolution. In the Moroccan context, women and men have an equal access to internet and mobile technology which would make it possible for them to

learn equally and enter the digital workforce. Surprisingly, the digital jobs are still covered by men, where they exceed 80% of the workforce. Culture is obviously to blame, but not only.

A lack of opportunities targeting women and gender-friendly workplaces are key factors. Fortunately, there are many programs and initiatives from the private sector and civil society to bring more women in tech. Digigirlz', for instance, a program developed by Anoual Association in partnership with the US Embassy in Rabat and Microsoft, aims to promote the digital skills of girls in high school – aged 15 to 18 – and gives them the opportunity to learn about careers in technology. This program has already helped shaping the digital profile of dozens of girls across Morocco. Nada Skalli, who has attended Digigirlz in its 2018 edition, says that »Schools has never opened my eyes to technology. We only study theory and never once had a teacher who insisted on the importance of Pursuing careers in the digital sphere. As a Moroccan girl, I always hear people saying that technology is made for men and that girls are not to it. After participating in many programs related to maths and technology, I started to realize that there was more of this world I can take!«

The eye-opening effect of these programs is huge, but unfortunately still ineffective on a large-scale population.

In this sense, more efforts can be put by higher education professionals in promoting technology and digital studies for girls to break the current invisible rule making technology a man's matter. In a country where the population is almost gender balanced (49% men and 51% women), universities can play a key role in doubling the number of the digital workforce by attracting more female profiles. When I started teaching at the university, most of my female students were feeling outsiders to the class they enrolled in. In 2017, I brought my tech company to the campus and started working with different students on the company projects, through a program we called ›TechIncub‹ (stands for Technology Incubation), giving them a clearer idea on how digital jobs work in the real world. I was surprised to see that most of our applicants were female and more motivated to get involved in these projects. This experience shows that opening up opportunities and opening up more girls-oriented programs could help to bring more of them in the digital field.

Civil society can also play a major role in that by raising awareness of the importance of women in technology and by placing digital goals at the centre of gender equality work. For instance, ANA HUNNA project, supported by EconoWin and GIZ, put together a large network of partners with the aim to change the way girls are seen in the workspace. Many children and parents attended the several events and movie projections that the project organised to create debate around the issue. The project was covering different roles in the active life and wasn't targeting specifically the digital roles of women, but more initiatives with more focus on digital jobs can give more results and build more trust within girls.

The case of Morocco is not unique in the MENA region, and a global initiative, carried out in collaboration with international donors, techno-specialists, and local private and public ac-

tors, could bring real, although not rapid, change to the whole region, and have a positive impact on other issues suffered by the population, especially women, especially in terms of access to digital space.

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