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Driving Gender Equality in MENA: The Role of the Private Sector

Gender equality has been a longstanding issue of concern globally, with greater focus on increasing women's economic inclusion and equality of opportunity. Both public and private sector corporations have joined the fight, leveraging their influence and access to resources in order to drive gender equality forward in their respective sectors. However, while efforts to achieve greater gender equity have made significant and notable progress in many developed countries (such as Sweden, Norway, Finland, Australia, Canada, and Germany), real impact remains lacking in less economically developed regions across the globe. One region that is witnessing a greater push towards women's economic inclusion is the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

Status Gender Equality

Emerging economies in MENA represent a diverse collection of populous, resource-rich countries, most of whom share common languages, and similar cultures and traditions. Unfortunately, the MENA region also shares the lowest gender parity¹ rate globally, estimated at 60 percent². Less than a quarter of women in the MENA region are employed. This results in an estimated loss of USD 575 billion annually in the regional economy.³ Equality is not limited to employment opportunities, it encompasses the ability to access a wide range of services and opportunities, including education, healthcare, housing, security, finance, and legal and political rights. For example, educational prospects for a majority of women in MENA, especially for those from lower-income families, are more difficult to attain than for men, with women having a 10.24 percent lower literacy rate than their male counterparts and a prevailing culture of prioritizing male education over female education in the house-

¹ A numerical concept, »[g]ender parity concerns relative equality in terms of numbers and proportions of women and men, girls and boys, and is often calculated as the ratio of female-to-male values for a given indicator.« The European Institute for Gender Equality <https://eige.europa.eu/thesaurus/terms/1195>

² The Global Gender Gap Report. Report. World Economic Forum. 1-298.

³ Ashkar, Hani. »The Key to Sustainable Growth in MENA? Getting More Women into Work.« World Economic Forum. April 7, 2019. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/04/the-key-to-sustainable-growth-in-mena-more-women-in-work/>.

hold⁴. Rates of gender-based violence are perhaps among the most alarming manifestations of gender inequality, with approximately 37 percent of women having experienced some form of gender-based violence in their lifetime⁵.

High potentials for improvement

Nevertheless, despite the multiple challenges facing women's greater inclusion both economically and in the public and political spheres, the MENA region has some of the highest potentials for improvement. Many governments in the region have adopted policies that target improving the conditions for women at all levels. These governments have recognized that women's economic inclusion does not only reap social benefits, it also provides a sustainable boost to economies at the household, community, national and regional levels. In the majority of cases, when women work, they boost household incomes, increase household spending power, improve standards of living (housing conditions, medical care, educational access for children, nutrition, etc), and can have a positive impact on women's shared decision-making within the home.

In addition, from the business side, more and more companies are realizing that greater diversity in the work force, company management, and value chains improves business performance and has a positive impact on their bottom line. Furthermore, as more MENA companies aspire to enter international markets, they are obliged to conform to global standards for company environmental, social and governance performance, which include performance according to internationally accepted standards for gender equity. It is within this context that a steadily growing number of regional businesses are committed to improving their gender equality performance.

Cross-sectoral cooperation

Current initiatives promoting women's economic inclusion in the region are supported by a range of stakeholders, including private sector enterprises and non-profit/non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This spectrum provides an ample variety of creative ways to promote gender equality. One notable example of cross-sectoral cooperation between non-profit/for-profit enterprises is in the work of JPMorgan Chase and Co. and the Cherie Blaire Foundation for Women in Lebanon with female entrepreneurship. The partnership, formed in 2011 between the international banking giant and the foundation, involves supporting and empowering female entrepreneurs in Lebanon through a range of services including enter-

⁴ Sadasivam, Haarthi, Kelly Payne, and Mildred Kotch. »Data of Women: Education and Literacy Around the World.« Looker Blog. March 8, 2018. Accessed July 17, 2019. <https://looker.com/blog/data-of-women-education-and-literacy-around-the-world>.

⁵ »Facts and Figures.« UN Women: Arab States. Accessed July 17, 2019. <http://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>.

prise development, mentorship programs, and incubation services⁶. Additionally, the two began networking with local social enterprises notably Al Majmoua, a microfinance institution largely tailored towards supporting female-owned start-ups and SMEs, and The Rene Moawad Foundation, a non-profit organization founded by former Minister of Social Affairs, and MP, Nayla Moawad. Successful collusion amongst these regional and international actors has already born fruit, as the coalition is successfully providing microfinance and capacity building to over 42 female-owned companies in Northern Lebanon and has supported the creation of 49 new jobs in the entrepreneurship sector⁷. While a majority of businesses in the nation are largely male-owned and managed, and while more work remains to be done in the way of further driving gender equality, the success of this venture stands as a testament to the ability of home-grown SMEs and international corporations to prioritize and promote equality of opportunity for a relatively disenfranchised female population.

Egypt's role in the fight for gender equality in MENA

One of the most crucial battlegrounds in the fight for gender equality in MENA is in Egypt. As most populated nation in the region, Egypt's strategic importance in the quest for widespread gender mainstreaming and equality in MENA cannot be understated. As a regional power in both the Middle East and North Africa, successful efforts in achieving equality, opportunity, safety, and education will likely serve as adequate benchmarks for the rest of the region to follow suit. Notably, the Egyptian National Council of Women (NCW) is playing an active role in promoting women's economic inclusion, including leading efforts to establish an Egyptian Gender Equity Seal (EGES) for companies demonstrating gender equality, and lobbying for changes in relevant employment laws to improve women's access to decent work opportunities. Furthermore, there is a notable trend in the number of private sector enterprises performing gender audits of their policies, procedures and operations to ensure greater gender equity. Fortunately, the nation already hosts a sizable number of local and international SMEs, NGOs and social enterprises collaborating towards driving gender equality into the fabric of social life.

Ahead of the Curve

Ahead of the Curve (ATC)⁸ is one such local social enterprise. Founded on the belief that substantive and sustainable economic development can only happen through a responsible and inclusive private sector, ATC has spent the last seven years working at the policy, corporate,

⁶ »Lebanon Women Entrepreneurs.« Cherie Blair Foundation for Women. October 09, 2018. Accessed July 17, 2019. <http://www.cherieblairfoundation.org/lebanon-women-entrepreneurs/>.

⁷ »Mentoring Women in Business.« Cherie Blair Foundation for Women. January 16, 2019. Accessed July 17, 2019. <http://www.cherieblairfoundation.org/programmes/mentoring/>.

⁸ Founded in 2012, Ahead of the Curve (ATC) is a social business dedicated to the promotion of sustainable management practice, inclusive market growth, and social innovation.

and local levels to support sustainable business practice, diversity, and inclusion in the private sector. ATC networks with other local and international gender mainstreaming stakeholders, performing research activities, and developing and implementing initiatives that address the issue of gender from multiple angles.

In terms of interventions at the policy level, ATC is currently working with the World Bank to support the Egyptian National Council of Women (NCW) in setting up the Egyptian Gender Equity Seal (EGES). As part of the Government of Egypt's continued commitment to increasing women's economic inclusion and participation in public life, the Seal represents national certification awarded to both private and public sector organizations that have achieved specified benchmarks in gender equity, based on the completion of rigorous gender audits. This is a strong step in motivating organizations nationwide to reflect on and improve their gender performance.

Continuing to bridge international and local levels, ATC is a founding member of the ANA HUNNA International Network e.V., an international NGO dedicated to improving women's economic inclusion and wellbeing. Based in Germany, ANA HUNNA is an international network of dedicated partners from Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco and Germany. One of ATC's main activities currently being undertaken under this umbrella is the mainstreaming and adaptation of a gender awareness toolkit developed through funding by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), a Germany-based international development agency. As the media has a critical impact on knowledge, attitudes and practices, the toolkit is being adapted for use with cultural content creators (scriptwriters, directors, producers, and press and media personnel) to combat harmful gender stereotypes and promote healthier coverage and depiction of gender roles.

In order to continue to focus on the specific needs of women entrepreneurs, ATC is collaborating with Facebook as part of a local coalition to deliver »She Means Business«, a training program designed for female entrepreneurs on how to advertise their products and services, and expand their businesses, using Instagram and Facebook social media platforms. This training gives women's start-ups and established businesses the required digital literacy to grow, generate more profit, and create more employment opportunities.

Adopting the Women's Empowerment Principles to corporations

Finally, ATC has been working with Oxfam Novib over the past two years to increase women's economic inclusion in the private sector. Activities have included providing workshops for corporations on how to adopt the Women's Empowerment Principles (WEPs) in their policies and procedures; and conducting different kinds of capacity building for women entrepreneurs. In order to support the formation of a cadre of effective women leaders in the private sector, ATC developed and regularly implements The Journey, a leadership retreat for female leaders from different walks of life designed to aid women in realizing their full leadership potential. The experiential methodology takes women on an inner journey to

address both internalized social beliefs and external challenges that limit their growth. An important aspect of the retreat is that it allows women to form vital and supportive connections with other like-minded women striving towards similar goals and objectives. Future actions with Oxfam include organizing gender audits for large local Egyptian corporations. These gender audits assess company policies, procedures and practices, and provide recommendations (and training, when required) in order to achieve internationally accepted standards in gender equity.

The critical role of private sector in remedying the gender equality gap

The private sector can play a critical role in remedying the gender equality gap existing in emerging economies, including the MENA region in particular. Private sector organizations can have a huge impact, achieved by instituting and activating gender-sensitive policies and procedures to increase women's economic participation at all levels; and by sharing a commitment to collaboration and networking. This type of solidarity and cooperation drives and will continue to drive gender equality globally and regionally. In MENA, the current social landscape within which women navigate continues to present challenges to their inclusion. Ensuring more inclusive, stable and balanced societies that enjoy sustainable economic growth can only be achieved with an active and responsible private sector actively seeking cooperation and alliances with other sectors as well, as the cross-sectoral venture in Lebanon shows. In the end, research has demonstrated that including women – not only in the workforce but also at the management and board levels – makes better business sense. Women's economic inclusion not only improves business profitability and sustainability, it also has a positive and demonstrated impact on sustainable economic growth at the household, community and national levels.

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