

The current novel coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19) has led to a 'new normal', making working from home (WFH), remote working, or flexible working the norm whenever possible. Whether you work in education, commerce or even sports and recreation, the work transition to operating in quarantine via digitized platforms was fast. In all of this, women activists were at the forefront; struggling to gain a foothold within the growing digitized power structures, demanding for their rights in this new arena.

The same historical injustices that women faced in the old economy are also manifested in an invisible manner online: low pay or no pay for their informal work, unacceptable working conditions, lack of access to quality internet, and difficulties in developing their digital skills to keep up with increasing digitalization.

The below two major fields of action will illustrate how multi-stakeholder groups, combining the resources of feminist organizations, governmental bodies and private enterprise, can work together in the MENA region to achieve a gender-just digital economy.

## Promoting Women and Girls in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM)

- **To date**, only two women have been awarded Nobel Prize in Economics;
- **Women** and girls are quite often held back from pursuing their education in STEM fields, be it because of social norms, discrimination, stereotyping or social biases;
- **Studies** show that STEM is a male dominated sector in which women publish less, are paid less for their research and do not progress as far as men in their careers;
- **Gender** stereotyping and race inequality persist in the current discussion around the future of the digital economy;
- **Marginalized** voices are quite often missing or underrepresented from the technological sphere and are not reflected in power of ownership and control;
- **Today**, although women outnumber men as science undergraduates and graduates, their numbers and roles drop off significantly at the PhD level;
- **Women's** presence in higher-level managerial and decision-making positions in general is significantly less than that of men. However, these weaknesses become more evident in the STEM disciplines;
- **According** to UNESCO, 34-37 percent of STEM graduates in the MENA region are women;
- **Data** from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) shows that women are entering computer science fields at higher rates to maximize their earning potential.

**Therefore, by fighting gender stereotypes, eliminating discrimination within the labor market and increasing women and girl's participation in STEM education and careers, women can help develop the digital sector in the MENA region and boost the overall economy; thus, contributing to bridging the gender gap in society as a whole.**



## Developing Remote Work and Work-Life-Balance (WLB) Policies

- **Feminists** in the MENA have praised the fact that an increase in digitalization has led to an increase in flexible working conditions, including remote work and flexible working hours (flextime). However, this trend has also re-emphasized traditional gender perceptions, with women seen as belonging in the private sphere while men are encouraged to participate in the public sphere;
- **WLB** schemes for flexible working conditions have always been controversial. They are seen by some as an attack against traditional family values and the male breadwinner, others have criticized the WLB discourse as it promotes locking women into lower tier positions, preventing them to break through the glass ceiling within the labor market;
- **During** the COVID-19 pandemic, the trend towards digitalizing work re-stereotyped the role of women and men. Women's employment and incomes are again being portrayed as secondary to men.
- **Although** a large number of men now also work from home during the pandemic, they are portraying it to be temporary and are not, therefore, taking up their fair share of unpaid care work activities.

**Therefore, adding a set of father-friendly labor policies is an essential step in making WLB an emancipatory approach for women. Furthermore, the state must expand on care services and further develop care provision for the elderly, children and people with disabilities to lift part of the burden from the shoulders of women and increase their chances to thrive within the digital economy.**

## Recommendations for Eliminating Obstacles for Women and Marginalized Groups

- ✓ **Improve** broadband network and digital services and women's equal access to them;
- ✓ **Ensure** availability of affordable access to quality technologies and digital hardware;
- ✓ **Increase** women's digital literacy and promote their economic rights;
- ✓ **Create** and implement an inclusive governmental tech policy to mainstream gender equality and ensure women's participation in science and technology;
- ✓ **Include** more women in decision-making processes in internet governance;
- ✓ **Invest** in workers skill-building throughout their careers – Upskill and Reskill;
- ✓ **Hire** more women in decision making positions within digital platforms and companies;
- ✓ **Promote** access to e-learning.