

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been disrupting the course of global developments for a year now. The social and economic toll is felt globally, and existing imbalances have been reinforced. Gender inequalities and discrepancies are particularly obvious, and in the

region, existing challenges and hardships for women are not only reinforced but also exacerbated by the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic on women.

Prior to the pandemic, gender-related issues were already treated as a secondary interest by governments and their policies have been vastly inefficient. Issues such as unconscious bias, explicit violence and discrimination, low household bargaining power, and financial exclusion remain untreated or inefficiently addressed. As stressed by Moukaddem (2019)¹, the situation observed in the region reflects the lack of collaboration between stakeholders in addressing issues such as implementation, female employability, life-work balance improvement, transportation, and promotion of competitive sectors, creating a complex and entangled situation of multi-layered structural inequalities. In the post-pandemic period, social norms and traditional gender roles place greater burdens on women that are now faced with increasing time spent in the domestic sphere due to curfews, school closures, and economic fallout, thus intensifying their care responsibilities, depriving them of personal space and exposing them to gender-based violence (GBV) at home. This is especially a risk to watch as domestic stress brought by economic challenges and the resulting socio-economic consequences have worsened so far.

These are some of the aspects which make gender inequality in the Southern Mediterranean a particularly crucial topic to tackle in the post-COVID recovery plans. An OECD Briefing on the impact of COVID-19 on gender equality² highlights that the pandemic and the responses to it can be a watershed moment for the overall situation of gender equality in the region. This brief aims to show the need to formulate gender sensitive responses throughout the region and recommends closer regional cooperation between governments to place greater conditionality with positive outcomes for women, children and the most vulnerable.

¹ Moukaddem, K. 2019. Closing the gender gap: policy-making that promotes inclusive Mediterranean societies, FEMIE Med Brief 17, March.

² Home, O.E.C.D., COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

2. Mediterranean Context : COVID represents a multi-faceted burden for Women

The Southern Mediterranean has been marked by a decade of low growth performance, protests, and political crisis. The immediate measures to respond to the COVID-19 public health crisis are burdening economic activity, confining populations to their homes and raising socio-economic strains thus aggravating the circumstances. In its study for an inclusive recovery, Oxfam estimates that due to economic contractions, caused by measures put in place to prevent the spread of the virus, an additional 45 million people will be pushed into poverty across the South Mediterranean, reaching levels not seen since the 1990s.³

The COVID-19 pandemic affects men and women differently. As in the rest of the world, women in the Mediterranean are not only at the core of the front lines health responses (e.g. in Egypt 91.1% of the nursing staff are women⁴), but the region also has the highest proportion of women in unpaid care labor, 4.7 times more compared to men, including in childcare, care for the elderly or in household chores. **Earlier estimations indicated 1.7 million jobs to be lost in the first months of the pandemic of which 700,000 were held by women.** Considering that fewer women are in the workforce to start with, 21% of women compared to 70% of male labor force participation, this indicates the kind of toll the pandemic has on women in the region. This is aggravated by decreasing remittances, which represent a main source of income for millions of households in the region. Figures show that remittances have fallen by 20% (usually amounting to 5.7% of regional GDP) and several other negative fiscal impacts, the loss of income in the region will most likely exceed US\$42bn⁵, while each month representing a 2% loss of annual GDP growth in the Mediterranean.⁶

Unfortunately, women are employed in sectors most hit by curfews: 25.5% of employed women work in agriculture, 19.8% in education and health, and 8.5% in social work, compared to 16.4%, 4.5% and 1.9% men in those sectors respectively. In Egypt, as noted earlier, more than 90% of the nursing staff is composed of women (in the private sector this figure is of 73.1%⁷); while in Lebanon 80% of nurses are women. In the Eastern Mediterranean region overall, 79% of nurses are female (and 35% of physicians are female).⁸ In this regard, **women are on the direct frontlines at much higher numbers, however they are much less considered in the responses.** In agriculture, which mainly continues to prevent service gaps in nutrition, migrant women have had to carry-on the burden of activities while the others were confined or face being laid-off. Yet, they have less access to

³ Abdo, N. and Almasri, S., 2020. For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

⁴ https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/IDM/2020_IDM/2-_presentation_dr_maya_morsy_panel_4.pdf

⁵ Abdo, N. and Almasri, S., 2020. For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

⁶ Nasser Kamel, 2020. Covid-19: What next for the Mediterranean?. Union for the Mediterranean. <https://ufmsecretariat.org/covid-19-what-next-mediterranean/> [Accessed 27 February 2021]

OECD. Publishing, 2014. Women in Public Life-Gender, Law and Policy in the Middle East and North Africa. OECD Publishing.

⁷ https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/IDM/2020_IDM/2-_presentation_dr_maya_morsy_panel_4.pdf

⁸ Boniol, M., McIsaac, M., Xu, L., Wuliji, T., Diallo, K. and Campbell, J., 2019. *Gender equity in the health workforce: analysis of 104 countries* (No. WHO/HIS/HWF/Gender/WP1/2019.1). World Health Organization.

regulated protection schemes. Therefore, it is obvious that women bear a disproportionately higher burden while continuing to provide essential services.⁹

In the South Mediterranean, women account for only 21% of economic participation. Meanwhile, on average, 62% of employed women work in the informal sector¹⁰ or in daily work which are particularly hit by decreasing economic activity due to confinement measures. **Women in the region are over-represented in two very vulnerable categories of informal work: agriculture and domestic work.** This precarity further affects women with intersecting characteristics of marginalization differently, such as refugees, those without formal papers, domestic workers, but also female-headed households which are all more severely impacted as no safety nets cover the informal sector. The region hosts about 3.16 million domestic workers or 14% of the global share, the highest number compared to any region.¹¹ These domestic workers come under the Kafala-Sponsorship system, which defines the relationship between migrant workers and their employers in Jordan, Lebanon and all Gulf countries (except Iraq). However, due to a lack of regulation, the risk for exploitation of these workers as a consequence of their vulnerable status in the host country (dependent on their employer) is high. They don't enjoy protection by the labor law and are therefore easily exposed to power imbalances. In case of GBV, women usually have no way to report the case without being charged themselves or fired as no protection applies to them.¹²

Therefore, the burden is multi-faceted: On the one hand women are more at risk of contracting the virus due to their frontline role as health respondents, educators, and care-givers which additionally puts their families at higher risks. On the other hand, women are also at a risk of being hit harder by the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic, mainly because of missing social safety provisions in the sectors they work-in or because of gender-discriminatory laws or response packages that exclude them.¹³ For instance, according to World Bank¹⁴ statistics and as highlighted as well by the OECD¹⁵, in Egypt 33% of female employment is vulnerable¹⁶, in the Palestinian Authority, one out of four women working in the private sector does not have an employment contract, while in Jordan, benefits and wages of women employees were cut in sectors such as manufacturing. This raises concerns over equitable labor and protection rights of women that are based on discriminatory social norms upholding traditional gender subscriptions, in some cases even enshrined in the family law.¹⁷

⁹ Abdo, N. and Almasri, S., 2020. For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

¹⁰ Abdo, N. and Almasri, S., 2020. For a Decade of Hope Not Austerity in the Middle East and North Africa: Towards a fair and inclusive recovery to fight inequality. <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/bp-mena-inclusive-recovery-260820-en.pdf> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

¹¹ Home, O.E.C.D., COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

¹² <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/what-kafala-system>

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.EMP.VULN.FE.ZS>

¹⁵ <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/>

¹⁶ World Bank definition : Vulnerable employment is contributing family workers and own-account workers as a percentage of total employment.

¹⁷ E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief.4, 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/04/impact%20of%20covid%20on%20gender%20equality%20-%20policy%20brief.pdf?la=en&vs=4414> [Accessed 26 January 2021].

Gender, law and policy in the Southern Mediterranean and WANA region

Since the 1970, fast progress in human development has been recorded in many Southern Mediterranean countries. For women, this has meant a rise in literacy rates which jumped from 61% in 2000 to 72% in 2011, accompanied with an upward trend in women's participation in economic life as well as politics and decision-making bodies from 3.8% in 2000 to 12.8% in 2013 (however to different degrees depending on the country). Yet, the educational gains have not translated into greater social and economic empowerment and a remarkable increase in participation in public life, which remains the lowest in the world. This is framed as a "Mediterranean Paradox".

Generally, women do not enjoy the same rights as men through legislations regarding decision authority, pursuing a profession, traveling, marrying or divorcing, heading a family, ownership of assets, receiving an inheritance or accessing wealth. Countries in the region have outlined national gender equality strategies, which mainly focus on preventing gender-based discrimination, combating gender-based violence and strengthening the economic empowerment of women. Yet, these mainly focus on the women's maternal functions and reproductive roles, which therefore risk narrowing the role of women in society.

The example of Morocco's *Moudawana*, (or family code) is an interesting example of how gender-discriminatory laws under the umbrella of Islamic law have been challenged and eventually modernized (e.g. through raising marriage age and increasing women's say in marriage contracts) while still being embedded in Islamic principles. This further led to the recognition of women's economic contribution to the household.

Most countries in the region have ratified the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), yet many have made reservations to main articles. Meanwhile, there are still legal gaps in women's rights such as "protective" labor laws which restrict working hours for women and sometimes even the sector they can work in is discriminatory and limits their participation in socio-economic life. Social expectations also persist, that subscribe housework and care responsibilities solely on women. Unequal access to financial assets and bank services further limit women's independence and choices.

Gender-based violence (GBV) increases are also a reality seen in and outside the region.

Warnings raised by GBV-hotlines highlight that homes are often the most dangerous place for women and children. Therefore, confinement and the limited access to safe shelter exposes women and children at higher risk of GBV.¹⁸

Funds are also insufficient to have any impact: before the pandemic, 1.2% of GDP was spent on average on social protection across the region which was already insufficient to reach about 60% of the poorest, as they were ineligible due to a necessity of being connected to the formal sector or to having citizenship. Female-headed households are less likely to receive state assistance through aid funds, such as in Jordan where only 1.2% of female-headed households (as compared to 5.9% of male-headed households) received such assistance at the start of the pandemic. In other instances, schemes were not sufficient to start with, such as in Morocco and Egypt where unemployment benefit provisions are not even accounting for minimum wage of these countries.¹⁹

After one year, it is obvious that the COVID-19 pandemic has not only exacerbated existing inequalities, but additionally and more importantly, **it has shown that the system in place aggravates the situation for those that are already subscribed and pushed to be weaker, more vulnerable and marginalized.**

¹⁸ UNICEF Technical Note, 2020. Five Actions for Gender Equality in the COVID-19 Response. <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Five-Actions-for-Gender-Equality-in-the-COVID-19-Response-Technical-Note-2020.pdf> [Accessed 27 January 2021].

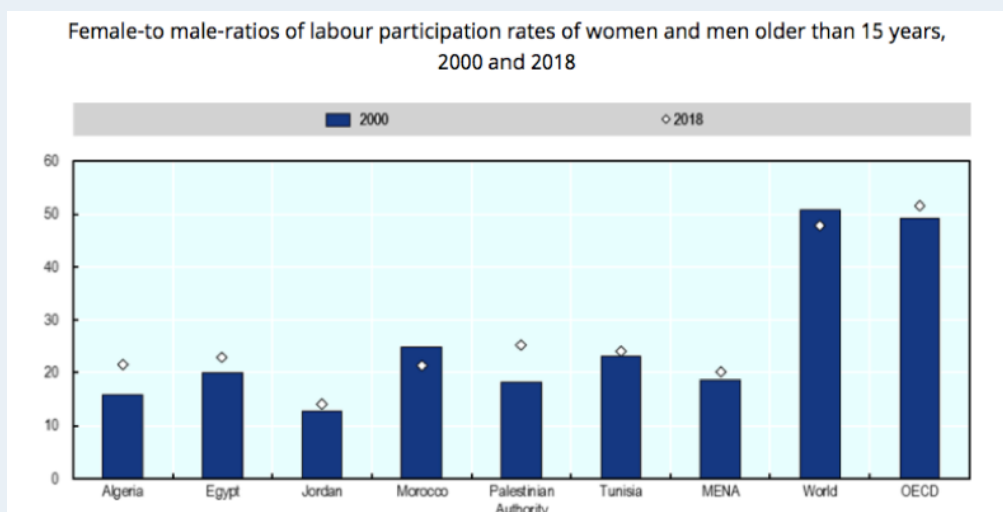
¹⁹ E/ESCWA/2020/Policy Brief.4, 2020. The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region. <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/04/impact%20of%20covid%20on%20gender%20equality%20-%20policy%20brief.pdf?la=en&vs=4414> [Accessed 26 January 2021].

3. Mediterranean responses to support women

Different countries have taken measures to ensure the gender perspective is reflected in their responses to COVID-19 in different sectors. For decision-making structures, **Algeria set-up a national crisis committee as well as cross-sectoral crisis units in the governorates**, which include representatives from different ministries. The presence of representatives from the Ministry of national Solidarity, the Family and Women's Affairs, is an important first step to mainstream a gender equal approach. **Tunisia has a similar approach** in which the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and Seniors works as an equal partner with the Ministry of Finance to ensure that these groups are actively and directly targeted in the financial response to socio-economic consequences. **In Morocco, pre-existing inter-ministerial structures have proven to be easier to activate** at the face of this crisis. The representation of bodies that work on gender policies is crucial to ensure that gender provisions can be mainstreamed horizontally into the policy response.

A good praxis from neighbouring Iraq is granting women full paid leave so that evolving and expanding care responsibilities do not harm their economic stability. Similar provisions have been implemented in the Palestinian Authority and Egypt. In the prior, companies were instructed by the government to grant women exceptional paid leave and/or flexible working hours if they have children below the age of 10 as schools and nurseries were forced to close; in the latter, the government increased monthly payments to women community leaders in rural areas from EGP 300 (USD 22) to EGP 900 (USD 57) which is an important consideration and could be enhanced with further technical provisions so that these leaders can guide the community response and their villages throughout the crisis. Furthermore, Egypt introduced exceptional paid leave for pregnant women and mothers of children below the age of 12.

Figure 1. The female-to-male labour force participation gap is slowly closing, but female labour force participation rates are still among the lowest worldwide



Source: Home, O.E.C.D., COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

Regarding informal employment, some countries in the region have taken measures to respond to the intensifying vulnerabilities. Providing provisions for informal workers can prove challenging due to the lack of regulation and information. Nevertheless, as a majority of the population of the Southern Mediterranean is employed in the informal sector, and as women tend to have more vulnerable and less paying jobs than men, **tailored responses by some governments have prevented mass impoverishment. Approaches taken by Egypt and Lebanon could also be replicated by the whole region and beyond.** In Egypt, the National Council for Women (NCW), which works directly on these issues, is party to designing measures to mitigate the impacts of the crisis particularly on informal sector women. This approach taken by the NCW is a crucial step that could be replicated in countries in which the informal sector is relevant for economic activity and output. The response could even take a more intersectional approach and include specific groups with additional layers of vulnerabilities, such as migrant workers, refugees or children. Moreover, the government expanded its Takaful and Karama cash transfer programmes to an additional 160,000 households. Women already represent 88% of the programmes' beneficiaries and the Ministry of Social Solidarity is in the process to undertake a gender vulnerability assessment across these social assistance programmes.²⁰

Furthermore, to help support the informal workers, governments have taken some positive steps. Jordan allocated JOD 27 million (USD 38 million) to the National Aid Fund which implemented temporary cash assistance support to daily workers of which over 200,000 families benefitted in the beginning of the COVID-crisis. Similar provisions were introduced in Morocco, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority where governments provided a first social safety cushion especially for workers and their families that are not covered by any safety provision.²¹ In Egypt, the Ministry of Manpower allocated EGP 50 million (USD 2.9 million) to informal workers who lost their employment due to COVID-19. Of the 1.5 million workers that were eligible, 40% were female workers and have received EGP 500 (approx. US 32) per month in cash according to the Ministry.

Jordan, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority have further expanded the reach of social assistance programmes as well as put in place ad-hoc responses. These are targeted at households with several layers of vulnerability, such as refugee families, female-headed households and households whose adult members are unable to work (due to disability or being elder). Jordan enrolled an additional 25,000 households to its Takaful²² social insurance programme and coordinates with UNHCR to ensure access to health services for refugees in particular.

In countries such as Lebanon, international organisations also closely work with authorities. UN Women has supported several Lebanese ministries in their COVID-19 response and makes sure that gender-specific measures are included in the policy planning. **Through technical assistance in the fields of social protection, cash transfers, and domestic violence response, regional cooperation triggered and coordinated by an international organization**

²⁰ *ibid.*

²¹ Home, O.E.C.D., COVID-19 crisis in the MENA region: impact on gender equality and policy responses. <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/covid-19-crisis-in-the-mena-region-impact-on-gender-equality-and-policy-responses-ee4cd4f4/> [Accessed 22 January 2021].

²² Islamic insurance is a term used for takaful that is a form of insurance based on principles of mutuality and co-operation, encompassing the elements of shared responsibility, joint indemnity, common interest and solidarity (<https://www.islamic-banking.com/explore/islamic-finance/islamic-insurance-takaful>)

such as UN Women presents the chance to transnationally tackle the gender specific discriminations that differ in accordance to additional intersecting vulnerabilities.

Meanwhile, **governments across the region have enforced efforts to address gender-based violence.** Across several countries, hotlines are made 24/7 and shelters with quarantine possibilities are promoted to raise the awareness of options. In Morocco, an app was developed to more easily locate those that seek help when they use the service. In the same country, the European Council supported the Ministry for Justice to create a short awareness film on violence against women in the context of COVID-19 confinement measures. UNFPA, UNDP, UNHCR and UN Women have further teamed up with civil society organizations and governments to support efforts through technical support (e.g. a digital messaging initiative to spread relevant information on support mechanisms in Lebanon) or creating safe spaces for shelter such as in Jordan. Further, UNICEF is promoting its GBV Pocket Guide²³ to assist training first responders to handle disclosure and non-discrimination and -judgment. But further resources need to be allocated to sensitize first responders on how to handle disclosure.

Overall, **the necessity of cross-boundary, regional and even cross-regional cooperation to overcome the socio-economic consequences has been highlighted throughout the COVID-19 crisis.** A more targeted response is needed with a dedicated budget for responding to different vulnerabilities.

4. Conclusion: the need to prioritize gender equality in national agendas

Countries in the region have taken important measures to mitigate the socio-economic consequences of the pandemic. Some selected gender-specific targets through cooperation with national women's organizations and organizations such as UN Women, UNDP or UNFPA have been crucial in providing women with some social safety net. However, there are still many aspects to reconsider and to mainstream into the response to COVID-19, and further into general provisions regarding employment, social services access and social protection. Gender equality needs to be **an integral part of, and a priority in national agendas.** Creating a flexible national framework that understands the needs of women, which are diverse across sectors and contexts, and that adapts to them is key.

A structural approach is needed to foster equality in all fields. National strategies need to create the conditions giving women an equal legal framework in order to enjoy their rights and fulfill their potential. For some countries, the possibility of establishing a Ministry for Women's Affairs could be explored²⁴. An executive body at a high level could be mandated to create a short and long-term vision and strategies to change current mentalities. It could also improve/change legislations and services to promote gender-specific approaches holistically in political and economic participation, equality before the law particularly with regards to social customs, gender-specific needs in health care (especially regarding reproductive rights), family (non-discrimination of women and their choices) and access to

²³ <https://gbvguidelines.org/en/pocketguide/>

²⁴ Salman, D. and M. Bassim, 2019. Catalyst for Empowering Women and Boosting Gender Equality in South Mediterranean Countries: The case of Egypt, FEMISE Med Brief no21, September.

social safety provisions which in the long run will affect societies' well-being, happiness, expand women's capabilities, freedom, respect and thus strengthen and develop the family and society structure.

It is crucial that **provisions do not enforce traditional stereotypes**. The exceptional paid leaves to women in selected South Mediterranean countries are good in the sense that they offer women flexibility to maintain their income when undertaking family responsibilities, however such leaves could also be offered to men and women in a more balanced manner so that care responsibilities can be split, installing the idea of shared care over time.

Manifesting more inclusive gender measures is crucial to pave the way for women's economic independence, but an intersectional approach is also needed. Only when all segments of society can be inclusively considered, can there be recovery in the short- and medium-term and social and economic cohesion nationally and regionally in the long-term. According to World Bank estimations, gender equality in earnings over a lifetime can add to as much as USD 3.1 trillion to regional wealth.²⁵

Regarding specific COVID-19 and public health responses, gender-sensitive programming in the short- and medium-term has to focus on an inclusive public health response which takes into consideration the higher burden borne by women in the healthcare sector as well as with regards to their unpaid care responsibilities. The prior requires a prioritization of enhanced protection to enable workers to contribute their service without risking their own health; for the latter, countries in the region need to take a stronger role and provide societies with support mechanisms such as accessible childcare models in crisis and elderly care. Additionally, regarding health services, the continuation of other basic services and particularly those concerning women needs to become a priority.

Last, but not least, a crucial requirement for gender-sensitive policy making is the **adequate collection and provision of sex-aggregated data**, with further additions on age, disability and status because numbers impact policy responses. Particularly in the informal sector, a lack of transparency makes it difficult to reflect what is needed in the response. Through ensuring a clear understanding of group-specific needs, accountability can be obtained much easier.²⁶

5. Implications and Recommendations: regional cooperation as a means to develop gender-equal societies

The topic of gender inequality is not only a concern regarding the crisis' repercussions in the Southern Mediterranean, but it is a global challenge with different extents. Therefore, I provide below some examples of regional approaches and propose further policy interventions that could make the COVID-19 crisis' response a real watershed moment for gender equality in the region. Regional cooperation will be key to develop inclusive and gender equal post-COVID societies.

²⁵ *ibid.*

²⁶ UNICEF Technical Note, 2020. Five Actions for Gender Equality in the COVID-19 Response. <https://www.unicef.org/sites/default/files/2020-03/Five-Actions-for-Gender-Equality-in-the-COVID-19-Response-Technical-Note-2020.pdf> [Accessed 27 January 2021].

Increasing the outreach of successful women: A first area where cooperation can prove efficient is in changing mentalities. Women, and Mediterranean communities in general, still perceive labor market participation as an existential and decisive trade-off between working and housework/childcare. This is in part due to prevalent misconceptions on the role of women in the society and the explicit or implicit weight of tradition on mentalities of both men and women in the region. The authorities could cooperate on a regional scale in increasing the outreach of successful women from the region itself, who managed to alleviate discriminations and to balance between household life and their jobs, and also those that choose their professional path over a family. Within the South Mediterranean, results for Tunisia are encouraging, since women participation in entrepreneurship is clearly associated to higher average labor productivity, something that is also partially confirmed for Morocco.²⁷ More regional dialogue is needed as well as regional initiatives that enable and empower Mediterranean women. Regional actors such as the Center for Mediterranean Integration (CMI) have already taken actions, having among other things initiated the series “Dismantling Mediterranean Myths” with a special issue on the status of Arab women. Meanwhile, the FEMISE think tank brought “Mediterranean Women Changemakers” to the fore during a Mediterranean conference in 2019, with the aim of sharing their best practices and identifying the impediments they encounter in their countries. By capitalizing on role models and institutionalizing local mentoring, both women’s esteem and social beliefs would improve.

Further financial support to female-headed households: Female leadership and management can be very effective in bringing in the gender perspective. Enabling more women to decision-making positions can contribute in shifting gender-sensitive policy planning to the core of policy-making. Representation is proven to be crucial, therefore it does not mean that the response would not include men, but rather that it would include gender-specific provisions to respond more adequately to all needs in a targeted manner.

The need for a regional mechanism to assist those in the informal sector: Women account for roughly 50% of the region’s population and recovery/welfare approaches have to specifically target them to build a more resilient economy for potential future disruptions. Therefore, a regional mechanism focusing on the informal sector needs to be designed and put in place. Unconditional cash transfers to bridge disruptions would keep vulnerable people from being pushed into sudden poverty while non conditioning transfers to specific statuses or formal work. Through creating a crisis fund, the governments could be incentivized to reserve a dedicated share of the national budget. Regulating the informal sector could also generate revenues to finance it. Through unconditional cash transfers, social protection could be delinked from citizenship or work status and economic cushioning until a more sustainable response can be provided region wide.

Extending protection to vulnerable groups: social protection and security have to be delinked from formal wage employment and citizenship in the region. Automatically, this will extend protection to women and vulnerable groups. Meanwhile, in the long-term, the informal sector has to be reformed. Gender budgeting and gender impact assessments can

²⁷ Martinez-Zarzoso, Inmaculada, 2018. “Inequality and inclusive growth in the South Mediterranean region: Are education and innovation activities favoring firm performance and citizens’ wellbeing?”, Femise Research Paper FEM42-10, March.

help to continuously evaluate measures that impact gender equality. Last but not least, the Kafala-Sponsorship system, which continues to place foreign domestic aid into precarity, needs to be reformed.

Regional cooperation on capacity building: Education and training are an essential part for developing women's capabilities to participate in the economy through better matching skills. They should be strengthened by a continuous process of capacity building and development specifically targeting them to acquire, broaden and improve the needed skills to diversify their economic activity and be crucial actors in a post-COVID world.

Potential of the digital sector: COVID-19 has confined the whole world into home office, but only those in certain sectors can continue under such conditions. Women tend to have less access to a computer or the internet, with 44% of women having access to internet in the region compared to around 58.5% of men. However, fields like education, where women work to a great extent, have gone completely digital. Therefore, recovery should include a focus on digital literacy and region-wide access for women in and outside the now-digital sectors. This includes implementing additional rural development measures, which would eventually benefit wider parts of the society. Women as much as school children should be provided with technological equipment and tutorials. They could be financed by public-private partnerships in order to limit costs for the end-users while giving incentives to the private sector to develop their capacities in a secured investment environment. As commerce is also going online, this tendency will benefit economic possibilities for each individual and therefore generate return on investment.

Regional cooperation on infrastructure: this is a highly crucial sector to invest in, as it can be a major barrier for certain groups to access basic and essential services. Urbanization and sustainable planning approaches need to mainstream gender-sensitive planning and take into consideration different vulnerabilities. Women and vulnerable groups such as migrants are more exposed to violence especially in settings with specific social expectations, and the design of public places and organization of public transportation can support women's participation in all parts of public life without the fear of social discrimination or GBV. Therefore, investing in safe public transportation systems could enable women to reach their workplaces. In Jordan alone, 40% of women have turned down employment opportunities due to the lack of reachability. Jordan's Ministry of Transport has introduced a Code of Conduct for actors in the transportation sector, which addresses women's public safety and security. Initiated by the World Bank Jordan's Equitable Growth and Job Creation project, such an initiative can be replicated and further expanded throughout the region. Additionally, in Cairo, women see bikes and scooters as a good way to commute²⁸. Therefore, investing in urban planning that foresees lanes, lights and accessibility could allow them to be more independent. Last, but not least, adequate investment should target better connectivity in rural areas under the same considerations: providing spaces women feel safe to use.²⁹

²⁸ <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/08/13/africa/egypt-women-bike-riders/index.html>

²⁹ Nomba Um, Paul, Effah, Dickson: If urban transport in MENA was safe for women, economies would prosper. Arab Voices. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/mena-if-urban-transport-was-safe-women-economies-would-prosper> [Accessed 27 February 2021].

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