Supporting Women's Economic Empowerment
Fostering Intraregional Cooperation Between Practitioners

Cairo, 20-21 April 2015 - Workshop report
“The views expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of UN Women, the United Nations or any of its affiliated organizations.”
Table of contents

Table of contents .................................................................................................................................... 1
Background ............................................................................................................................................. 2
Day 1: Monday 20 April 2015.................................................................................................................. 4
Workshop objectives and expected results ............................................................................................ 4
Session 1: Where are we now? ............................................................................................................... 6
Session 2: What have we done to date? ............................................................................................... 12
Session 3: What have we learned? ....................................................................................................... 12
Day 2: Tuesday 21 April 2015................................................................................................................ 14
Session 4: What have been the good practices, new trends / innovations? ........................................ 16
Session 5: What specific issues would need to be discussed further? What are the areas where more
learning is needed? ............................................................................................................................... 20
Closing session / Next steps .................................................................................................................. 21
Background

The Middle East and North Africa region ranks sixth, that is, last, in the 2014 Gender Gap Index on economic participation, and there has been no significant progress in the last few years.\(^1\) Recent decades’ investments in social sectors have improved women’s health and education but this has not translated into greater economic participation. Moreover, the current situation in countries such as Libya and Syria could jeopardize some of the achievements made on education and health. Women’s participation in the economy, whether in the formal labour or product markets, continues to be relatively low. Their capacity to influence governance and institutional structures remains limited. Given the generally more vulnerable position of women in most economies, labour-market pressures and social tensions emanating from the lack of jobs/unemployment and rising poverty are further constraining women’s economic opportunities and ability to act and have influence on economic outcomes. Women are more likely to suffer from both increased inequality and increased economic uncertainty.

With women comprising half of the population, focusing on women’s economic empowerment in development programmes does not only support women in safeguarding and maintaining their rights and lead to a greater reduction in poverty, but working with women makes good business sense and can lead to stronger national economies. Women with the right skills, when provided opportunities, can help businesses and markets grow. The Beijing Platform for Action commits governments

The Beijing Platform for Action commits governments to “Ensure women’s equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication and markets, as a means to further the advancement and empowerment of women and girls, including through the enhancement of their capacities to enjoy the benefits of equal access to these resources, inter alia, by means of international cooperation”.

“Gender equality is not limited to improving the quality of life for half of the population. In fact, gender equality is development itself and improvement of the life of the family as a whole.”

Mohammad Naciri, UN Women Regional Director for Arab States

---

\(^1\) See Global Gender Gap Index (2014) - DAVOS
to “pursue and implement sound and stable macroeconomic and sectoral policies that are designed and monitored with the full and equal participation of women, encourage broad-based sustained economic growth, address the structural causes of poverty and are geared towards eradicating poverty and reducing gender-based inequality.”

It is imperative to mobilize all stakeholders in order to achieve significant changes rapidly. As mentioned by Mr. Mohammad Naciri, UN Women Regional Director for Arab States in the opening session of the workshop: "Gender equality is not limited to improving the quality of life for half of the population. In fact, gender equality is development itself and improvement of the life of the family as a whole." The year 2015, year of both the Beijing +20 review and the launch of the new sustainable development goals, provides an opportunity at the national and regional levels to move forward on women’s economic empowerment. It is an opportunity for the Arab States region to move forward on economic empowerment at a time when the region is challenged by finding ways to ensure growth.

Progress towards achievement of the new sustainable development goals (SDGs) will require a revived global partnership, expeditious delivery on commitments already made, and an agile transition to a more environmentally sustainable future. As indicated by Miryam Ibanez-Mendizabal, European Commission Programme Manager, although women are active in a range of entrepreneurial activities, they still tend to be concentrated in micro, small and medium businesses as a result of their unpaid work, limits on mobility, lack of collateral and limited financial skills. Similarly, limited access to land and property, housing, credit, technology, markets and extension services has undermined women’s livelihoods and restricted their ability to benefit from growth they help to generate. Too often “women’s projects” do not move beyond the pilot phase, only ever amounting to ‘boutique’ projects - “saving one woman at a time.”2 As stated by Ms. Neveen Ahmed, Programme Manager to the Human Rights – Bilateral Cooperation with Egypt at the delegation of the European Union to Egypt (EUDEL) "(...) women’s economic empowerment is a significant need for the women in Egypt in particular. There is a need to see women as part of the society and not as a targeted group. This is women’s right and thus women should be put as a central element for the approach of achieving economic empowerment and economic development.”

---

Much more effort needs to be invested in order for women’s economic rights to be recognized, respected and fully enjoyed. Essential to this is creating a space where practitioners of women’s economic empowerment meet to pull their expertise and experiences together in order to create the basis for concrete change. The purpose of this workshop, the first of two, was to initiate a conversation between 28 practitioners in the region and to contribute to the overall debate on women’s economic empowerment and the way forward within the context of a challenging and changing regional environment. The two-day workshop provided a space to:

- Discuss: Where are we now? What have we done to date?
- Exchange: What have we learned? What have been the good practices, new trends/innovations?
- Foster: What are the specific issues that would need to be further discussed? What do they need more support on (non-financial) / what areas would it be useful for them to learn more about?

Day 1: Monday 20 April 2015

Workshop objectives and expected results

The workshop had the following objectives and expected results:

Workshop objectives

- To reflect on and share successful initiatives undertaken through the various SFW components, such as research, networking, business and non-business development services.
- To identify key approaches and mechanisms for successful women’s economic empowerment initiatives.

Expected results

- Increased knowledge on work conducted on women’s economic empowerment in the region.
- A shared understanding and awareness of innovative approaches and mechanisms to advance women’s economic empowerment.
Participants introduced themselves through the “blind date exercise”. Participants were requested to approach other participants in the room and introduce themselves to each other by name, country, job title and their professional expertise. After the one to one introduction, the facilitator asked selected participants to count how many colleagues in the room they were introduced to and to give a brief about their personal background and respective organizations. By the end of this ice breaking activity, all participants got to know the basic information of other colleagues participating with them in the workshop.

Following this, the facilitator walked participants through the workshop agenda to ensure their buy-in and agreement and to highlight that all their expectations were clearly addressed in the agenda.1

During the first day of the workshop, the “Marketplace” methodology was applied taking into account the number of presentations. The “Marketplace” methodology is an interactive activity whereby participants are divided into two groups, one to sell and one to buy.

While applying the “Marketplace” methodology, it is not just important to present good practices, but it is also important to explain the surrounding circumstances. Such detailed explanation may identify for example, why the number of entrepreneurs in Morocco is three times higher than the number of entrepreneurs in Egypt.

Participants were provided with laptops, flip charts and they could also use and distribute any material or knowledge product they had with them.
Session 1: Where are we now?

The first session of the workshop was dedicated to collectively identifying what is the current situation on women’s economic empowerment in the region. As a first step, participants were asked to provide their definition of women’s economic empowerment:

- Women’s ability to control the resources of their production and income.
- Providing adequate living conditions which help women attain a decent economic life.
- Building personal and technical capacities of women leads to an increase in women’s economic efficiency.
- Reforming and enhancing policies related to women’s empowerment as economic actors, not only as producers or vendors but also by being involved in management and administration of economic activities.
- Providing women with equal opportunities.
- Developing women’s capacities within the legal system. Providing women with equal financing opportunities, in addition to job opportunities that are suitable for their nature as mothers and do not conflict with their family duties.
- Providing women with all the necessary resources (healthcare, education, etc.) to build an enabling environment that increases their opportunities to choose what they want to do and support themselves economically.
- Economic empowerment represents a pivotal component within the wide spectrum of the multi-dimensions of empowerment. It cross cuts with security empowerment and the right to inherit.
- Creating an economic marketplace for women that ensures sustainability for them.

In 2015, the regional economy is expected to witness flat growth and this will affect employment, mostly of young people and women. For the first time in four years, a fiscal deficit for the whole Arab region is expected due to low investment and a high unemployment rate.

While addressing the issue of women’s economic empowerment, we should not focus on women alone, but we should look at the whole picture of economic empowerment. In Europe, there is still a salary gap between men and women, but in the Arab region the gap is greater. Moreover, the Arab region records the highest rate of unemployment among women. By reviewing official indicators related to women’s economic participation, it is indicated that 1 in 8 women in the region run their own businesses compared to 1 in 3 men, and 1.2 per cent of firms are led by a top female manager.
increased, from 34 per cent (1990-1995) to **45 per cent** in 2011, while men’s contribution has decreased from 66 per cent to 55 per cent during the same period. Women remain mostly involved in the care-related sectors (nursing, food, textiles and other informal sectors).

**Key barriers to women’s economic rights**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On legal and policy framework</th>
<th>On allocation of resources</th>
<th>Participation:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Issues such as the personal status code need to be addressed</td>
<td>• The lack of social support services remains a major obstacle for women’s economic rights as well as support to economic opportunities: unpaid work</td>
<td>• Women need to have access to information as well as have access to the decision making process.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On knowledge</th>
<th>Attitudes and behaviours</th>
<th>Institutional support</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• More needs to be done in order to recognize women’s contribution to the economic development of the targeted countries, including the care economy.</td>
<td>• Probably one of the most difficult set of barriers to tackle, it is also one of the most strategic.</td>
<td>• More investments need to be realised in order to ensure that services provided by microfinance institutions and other related institutions meet women’s needs and rights as well as key actors understand what needs to be put in place in order to fulfill women’s economic rights in the region.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In spite of development interventions carried out in the last 20 years, many of the same barriers to women’s economic empowerment remain. Women still lack access to opportunities to play their part as economic agents, specifically in entrepreneurship and the cooperative and employment fields. Some of the key barriers to women’s economic rights can be categorized in six main categories as illustrated in the above chart. Workshop participants were asked to identify some of the main barriers in their countries, using the following three main themes:

- **By law:** It is indicated that men and women should have equal opportunities. However, when employers are deciding between a male and a female candidate, they hire the male, because they believe that the woman will have more family duties and request more time off. In Jordanian law, if a firm has at least 20 female employees, the employer should provide day-care. However, this never takes place.
- **In Palestine,** the political situation is the main barrier that hinders economic development. Hence, it is important to consider standards when mentioning the issue of economic empowerment in countries facing terrorism and political conflict.
- **Education barrier:** The fields of study offered to women do not allow them to be very involved in the labour-market as they usually study subjects like history, arts, etc. Even when women engage in the male-dominated labour markets, employers do not provide them with equal learning opportunities.

The six categories were reduced to three main categories: women’s agency, economic opportunities, and enabling environment. Participants were requested to divide themselves into three groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1: Women’s agency</th>
<th>Group 2: Economic opportunities</th>
<th>Group 3: Enabling environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The barriers that are related to “Women’s Agency” can be divided into two basic components: 1) Legal &amp; policy framework, 2) Allocation of resources.</td>
<td>There are internal and external factors to the barriers of economic opportunities:</td>
<td>Barriers towards creating an enabling environment for women’s economic empowerment can be classified according as follows:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal &amp; policy framework  ● Unfair laws and legislation especially related to young people.  ● The gap between legislation and practice.  ● Lack of incentive arrangements for positive discrimination.  ● The law does not reflect the articles of the Constitution (labour, social security, personal affairs, and sanctions).  ● Low level of awareness of legislation on the part of women and the community.  ● Lack of a national vision towards economic empowerment.  ● Allocation &amp; distribution of resources.  ● Government’s lack of gender responsive budgeting.  ● Women’s inability to control resources (such as land/inheritance).  ● Not counting women’s economic participation in the informal sector (domestic work).  ● Women’s lack of self-confidence when it comes to controlling resources</td>
<td>Internal barriers  ● Personal perception of women and of their role in society.  ● Women having multitask responsibilities (family, household, etc.)  ● Lack of inspiring role models especially for young women.  ● Women are not empowering each other and not encouraging choice making (self-centred/negative stereotypes).</td>
<td>Knowledge / education barriers  ● Lack of knowledge, experience and training  ● Gap between education gained in college and the needs of the labour-market.  ● Decision-making barriers.  ● Gender equality issues are not integrated into formulation of national policies.  ● Lack of binding laws for the private sector.  ● Eliminating women from political participation and the decision-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External barriers  ● Cultural &amp; social barriers which are reflected in: Women’s mind-set and how they are raised, transportation, safety, infrastructure &amp; perception of their role in society.  ● Limited resources: inheritance, education and lack of facilities such as day-care in the workplace  ● Legal Barriers: Investment law (legislation that empowers women to participate in the local market) / Family law / Labour law.  ● Economic barriers: Poverty and limited access</td>
<td>Social barriers  ● Raising children on stereotypical ideas that discriminate between males and females  ● Lack of teamwork.  ● Violence against women.  ● Development barriers  ● Poverty hinders receiving good education. Consequently, this leads to the weakness of economic empowerment.  ● Pre-set action plans (needs/environment).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Supporting Women’s Economic Empowerment:
Fostering Intraregional Cooperation between Practitioners
Page 9

Group 1: Women’s agency

- Lack of facilitating and assistance channels for women’s economic empowerment.
- It is important to support women to reach out for knowledge and consultancy services.
- Women’s economic role is still marginalized in the Arab region.
- The majority of the community do not believe that women and young people (aged 15–35) have the capacity and ability to create change and succeed. This is due to a preconceived notion that young people lack awareness and experience. Hence, decision makers set the laws and regulations according to their own specific perspectives without specifically consulting or involving young people and women.

Group 2: Economic opportunities

- Limited information about women leaders.
- Lack of motivation and proactivity of women since their childhood.
- Lack of support for women in leadership positions.
- Misinterpretation of religion which limits women’s role.
- Male-dominated markets.
- Stigma against women who have special needs.
- Stereotypical approach to women’s role and that they should be limited to work in specific jobs only.
- Violence/war/political conflicts.
- Media (focuses on and escalates stereotypes).
- Lack of knowledge about access to resources.

Group 3: Enabling environment

- To finance tools.
- Limited information about women leaders.
- Misinterpretation of religion which limits women’s role.
- Male-dominated markets.
- Stigma against women who have special needs.
- Stereotypical approach to women’s role and that they should be limited to work in specific jobs only.
- Violence/war/political conflicts.
- Media (focuses on and escalates stereotypes).
- Lack of knowledge about access to resources.

Additional comments from the participants (Group 1):

- Women’s economic role is still marginalized in the Arab region.
- The majority of the community do not believe that women and young people (aged 15–35) have the capacity and ability to create change and succeed. This is due to a preconceived notion that young people lack awareness and experience. Hence, decision makers set the laws and regulations according to their own specific perspectives without specifically consulting or involving young people and women.

Additional comments from the participants (Group 3):

- There is always a very limited insight into women’s economic opportunities for knowledge and consultancy services.
- Violence/war/political conflicts.
- Media (focuses on and escalates stereotypes).
- Lack of knowledge about access to resources.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1: Women’s agency</th>
<th>Group 2: Economic opportunities</th>
<th>Group 3: Enabling environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>● On some occasions, policies related to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) shift women’s status from extreme poverty to an average level of poverty. This is due to the high interest rates imposed and other strictly applied policies.</td>
<td>an act of moral violence against women.</td>
<td>● Empowering women economically in Palestine is considered one of the national means of fighting the Israeli occupation. When a woman manages to grow vegetables and fruit in a domestic plot, succeeds in being self-sufficient and fulfils her family’s basic needs for food, this step itself is an economic fightback against the Israeli occupation. However, this type of effort should be developed and generalized among all Palestinian women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Most national plans are set without women’s participation.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Most national plans are set without women’s participation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● It is essential to provide non-traditional vocational opportunities for women.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● It is essential to provide non-traditional vocational opportunities for women.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Lack of coordination between authorities/agencies working for women’s welfare: For example, if an NGO provides financial assistance to women and another NGO works on providing technical assistance, then in order to maximize the benefit, it is recommended that these two NGOs coordinate together to provide full support packages to women, financially and technically.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● Lack of coordination between authorities/agencies working for women’s welfare: For example, if an NGO provides financial assistance to women and another NGO works on providing technical assistance, then in order to maximize the benefit, it is recommended that these two NGOs coordinate together to provide full support packages to women, financially and technically.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● There is no institutionalization of women’s support. There are no official rules, regulations, or decisions made. It all depends on the character/personality of the decision-maker. If the official in charge (decision-maker) believes in women’s issues and rights, he/she will provide support and facilitate procedures. However, when another official takes over and becomes the decision-maker, he/she does not commit to the previously agreed arrangements. There are no long-term policies in regard to women’s issues that commit decision makers to abide by them.</td>
<td></td>
<td>● There is no institutionalization of women’s support. There are no official rules, regulations, or decisions made. It all depends on the character/personality of the decision-maker. If the official in charge (decision-maker) believes in women’s issues and rights, he/she will provide support and facilitate procedures. However, when another official takes over and becomes the decision-maker, he/she does not commit to the previously agreed arrangements. There are no long-term policies in regard to women’s issues that commit decision makers to abide by them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● For a long time now, Lebanon has not had a president or an official Cabinet. Hence, civil society should play a major role in regard to</td>
<td></td>
<td>● For a long time now, Lebanon has not had a president or an official Cabinet. Hence, civil society should play a major role in regard to</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Group 1: Women’s agency | Group 2: Economic opportunities | Group 3: Enabling environment

Women’s economic empowerment. Unfortunately, each NGO considers its own interests and provides support according to its own vision and development priority. Each NGO in Lebanon is working in a separate silo.

Session’s main takeaways:

- Participants concurred that despite interventions carried out over the years, many of the same barriers remain to women’s economic empowerment in the different countries.
- The majority of the community do not believe that women and young people (aged 15 – 35) have the capacity and ability to create change and succeed. This is due to a preconceived notion that young people lack awareness and experience. Hence, decision-makers set laws and regulations according to their own specific perspectives without specifically consulting or involving young people and women.
- Most national economic policies are set without involving women’s participation.
- There is a need to look into non-traditional vocational opportunities for women.
- There is a need for greater coordination between the different stakeholders involved in women’s economic empowerment (governing bodies, private sector and civil society).
Session 2: What have we done to date?

The second session focused on what has been done to date on women’s economic empowerment by the participants through the “Marketplace” methodology. Participants were divided into seven groups (by country). Each group was given 5 minutes to present to the audience the experience of their country in terms of challenges faced and successful models applied and achieved.

Main takeaways from the session:

After completion of every country’s presentation, the following additional comments were made by participants:

- All NGOs attending are working in the same field of activities.
- It is important to focus on what steps should be taken after the process of empowering women in need.
- It is important to be innovative in our work. For example, in Tunisia almost all women work on developing the same products. Yet, there was a project funded by UNIDO, which invited a Designer from IKEA who taught Tunisian women how to develop their products with new designs, using the know-how approach and new materials. Later on, the women’s products were sold in Belgium and Sweden. Unfortunately, this was a short-term project.
- We should benefit from the fact that we all come from different NGOs in the Arab region and are all sitting in one room. We should make use of this experience and find means to work together in the future.

Session 3: What have we learned?

This session focused on the lessons learned from different experiences and was conducted by the participants from the seven different Arab countries. Throughout the session, participants shared their opinions on the most interesting experiences presented by other countries, and what they learned that could be applied in their own projects.

Main takeaways from the session:

Main lessons learned and comments are included in the following points:

- The Social Fund for Development (SFD) experience in Egypt (One Village, One Product project) is an interesting project that, by providing beneficiaries with intensive training, will make it easy to set up a large scale marketing plan for the whole village.
- The MENNA Shop in Lebanon shows that it is important for the NGO to bear all the consequences of the first phase in collaboration with women, so they can feel that they are partners and ensure the project’s sustainability. Then in the second phase, and after
empowering women with all necessary tools, the project management should be left to them. It is also worth mentioning that during the second phase, the shop’s rent is paid from the product’s revenues.

- It is more effective not to give loans, but to provide beneficiaries with education and training and to be with them step by step during their project’s development.
- Participants mentioned that they would try to work on the methodology of providing beneficiaries with international-standard skills training, in order to set for them a strong and well-established local market.
- The Lebanese experience in creating a network between women in Lebanon and Syrian refugees has led to a positive exchange of experiences. Furthermore, it allowed women in Lebanon to have a new market for their products (a category of people they did not know about before and hence were unable to reach). This networking experience could be applied in every Arab country where a large number of Syrian women refugees are living.
- Promoting the idea of having faith in the capability of youth and especially young women to create change and make a positive impact on their country’s economy.
- To secure innovative ideas, the old generations and the new need to work together.
- It is time for NGOs to focus on and become more involved in providing specialized technical training as this will facilitate the process of emerging from typical patterns of work.
- There should be a focus on the community’s social responsibility because it can impact greatly the macroeconomy and people’s lives.

Main points drawn from countries’ experiences sharing exercise:
- Women’s role is limited to traditional industries (cooking, hairdressing, craft, etc.). It is time to work on opening new job opportunities for women in the workplace.
- Strategy and sustainability are the keys to any successful project.
- Following an integrated approach that combines political and economic aspects is vital, as working on one component may not ensure sustainability.
- It is essential to involve large sections of the private sector (CRS - Corporate Social Responsibility).

As a conclusion, the session facilitator, Emad Karim, explained and clarified the difference between a good practice and a lesson learned. A good practice is a well-documented and assessed programming practice that provides evidence of success/impact and which is valuable for replication, scaling up and further study. It is generally based on similar experiences from different countries and contexts. On the other hand, a lesson learned is knowledge or understanding gained through experience that may apply to future actions or situations. From a positive or negative experience, a lesson learned highlights a strength or a weakness that had an effect on the performance, results and the impact of an intervention. A lesson learned identifies a design, a process or a specific decision that reduces or eliminates the potential of failure or error, or reinforces a positive result. A lesson learned should be specific enough that you can learn from it and for it also to be actionable.
programming practice that provides evidence of success/impact and which is valuable for replication, scaling up and further study. It is generally based on similar experiences from different countries and contexts. On the other hand, a lesson learned is knowledge or understanding gained through experience that may apply to future actions or situations. From a positive or negative experience, a lesson learned highlights a strength or a weakness that had an effect on the performance, results and the impact of an intervention. A lesson learned identifies a design, a process or a specific decision that reduces or eliminates the potential of failure or error, or reinforces a positive result. A lesson learned should be specific enough that you can learn from it and for it also to be actionable.

Lessons learned could be extracted by following the below steps:

- **Reflect on experience** – Think back (and discuss as a team) what happened.
- **Identify learning points** – Where was there a (positive or negative) difference between what was planned, and what actually happened?
- **Analyse** – Why was there a difference? What are the root causes?
- **Generalize** – What is the learning point? What should be done in any future activity to avoid the pitfall, or repeat the success?

**Day 2: Tuesday 21 April 2015**

The second day of the workshop started with an icebreaking activity, followed by a continuation from session three under the theme of "What have we learned?" The facilitator for the second part of the workshop’s third session was Mr. Hisham El Rouby. Hisham El Rouby is the founder and CEO of ETIJAH – Youth and Development Consultancy Institute. He also serves as Synergos’ Country Director in Egypt, focusing particularly on promotion of social entrepreneurship.

Mr. El Rouby is working to help young Egyptians develop technical and leadership skills and become effective contributors to society by providing them with volunteering and job opportunities. He founded ETIJAH as a specialized institute to contribute to the development and dissemination of community-development methodologies, especially those related to youth development. The
Mr. El Rouby shared with participants the experiences of women from different Arab countries who managed to overcome cultural and legal obstacles in their countries to become social / business entrepreneurs. In Jordan, women are not usually allowed to own land. However, Mr. El Rouby shared the story of a woman named Zeinab who managed to run a Cooperative Association with a group of women and produce agricultural products. Later on, the women reached out to the Queen of Jordan to help establish a law that enables women to rent agricultural lands.

Hisham El Rouby shared another experience about two young Egyptian women who noticed that there were a lot of wasted plastic bags at their university. The girls decided to collect, wash and clean the plastic bags then used them to make furniture. After a while they opened a workshop and later established a factory called “Plastic” where their products are exported to other countries.

A challenge many entrepreneurs face is the sustainability of their projects, especially reaching financial stability. Entrepreneurs usually focus on executing their project ideas or establishing an enterprise without considering a sustainability plan. On the other hand, most donor agencies/programmes prefer to support initiatives that have a successful proven record on a smaller scale, and then support entrepreneurs by scaling up or/and replicating the
initiative. Supporting agencies can also provide services to help entrepreneurs develop their personal and professional skills such as project ideation, planning, management, fund-raising, and presentation skills.

Session 4: What have been the good practices, new trends / innovations?

This session covered participants’ perspectives on good practices, most effective approaches and innovation in achieving women’s economic empowerment.

The session started with a presentation given by Ms. Rana Tarkji, founder of Stylerail on innovation in information and communications technology. Stylerail is an online virtual mall for emerging fashion designers, online resellers and boutiques. Ms. Tarkji gave a presentation entitled “Why and How the Middle East Can Beat Out the World in Female Tech Entrepreneurs”. The presentation focused on the use of information technology within entrepreneurship and how it can facilitate and open new markets for women’s activities. The presentation also emphasized why more women in the Middle East should become tech entrepreneurs.

Technology innovation makes it easier for women to start and manage their own online business. One of the advantages of working for an online business is that it is a safe working environment. An additional advantage is that most technologies are now user-friendly and they do not require sophisticated technical skills.

During the session participants identified potential employment sectors from their perspective countries. In Palestine there is an initiative to promote the engagement of women to work as technicians. Training and networking is provided to women to work in maintenance and electrical repairs. Another initiative implemented in Palestine is to increase the number of female judges and political leaders. In Jordan there is an initiative to include women in the police force. Despite social resistance to women working in traditionally unconventional jobs, women are challenging social norms and succeeding. On the participation of women in dangerous industries such as mining, chemicals and construction, participants agreed that further investigation of these industries must be carried out before promoting women’s involvement in them. However, it was concluded that despite the hazards of working in these sectors, women should have the freedom to choose their career path.

Ms. Viviane Thabet from CARE International
introduced the “Village Saving and Loan Associations (VSLA)” programme implemented in Egypt. The VSLA model is based on strengthening the traditional informal practice of rotating savings and credit associations because it is difficult for them to apply for loans from banks. Participants in the programme are being trained in team development, money management, maintaining basic financial records, financial literacy, business development and community intervention.

Main takeaways from the session:

- Technology innovations makes it easier for women to start and manage their own online businesses.
- Opportunities exist in non-traditional sectors, such as information and communications technology or electricity, or the support for opportunities that combine traditional and non-traditional sectors.
- Innovations are being developed and tested in the region, such as CARE’s VSLA programme, where learning and good practice can be extrapolated and shared with other stakeholders.
Recommendations and lessons learned:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1: Women’s agency</th>
<th>Group 2: Economic opportunities</th>
<th>Group 3: Enabling environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main inputs related to “Women’s agency” can be summarized in the recommendations below and lessons learned:</td>
<td>Based on the barriers highlighted and discussed during the first day of the workshop, the second group brainstormed the lessons learned / interventions that can take place within the area of economic opportunities, and came up with the following points and recommendations:</td>
<td>Using the same classification highlighted in day one, Group Three added their inputs related to lessons learned and opportunities to be approached, on the same classification as shown below:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Working on adding to pressure on legislators to update and implement existing laws related to regulations on women in the labour-force.</td>
<td>● Change is a long-term process.</td>
<td>1) Knowledge/Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Building partnerships and alliances with all social partners at the national level.</td>
<td>● Advocacy can create a change.</td>
<td>● Education is the key to solve many economic problems. There should be more focus on vocational training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Providing women with access to information.</td>
<td>● Role-models can help in creating change.</td>
<td>● Conduct workshops to address and determine market needs, in order to achieve self-sufficiency.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Involving women in the process of project planning, execution and evaluation.</td>
<td>● Need is a catalyst for change.</td>
<td>● Introducing different learning techniques (e.g. E-learning).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Continue strengthening and enhancing women’s skills and capacities in all fields.</td>
<td>● Importance of investing in a success story, sustaining it and adopting it.</td>
<td>● Identifying employers' needs and assisting them to meet their needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Amending the Labour Law to ensure the availability of nurseries in every workplace that has at least 20 female employees.</td>
<td>● Women need to support each other so that change can happen at the medium and long-term level.</td>
<td>2) Decision-Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>● Raising women's and girls’ awareness of their rights in the workplace through training workshops.</td>
<td>● Applying the bottom-up approach of change (push decisions to reach higher level / authorities).</td>
<td>● Mobilizing public opinion about laws and regulations and what needs to be amended or enforced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Creation of national committees / multi-stakeholders to advocate for change (policy level, etc.)</td>
<td>● Economic empowerment leads to women's empowerment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Finding solutions to help women to multitask.</td>
<td>3) Social</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Awareness-raising starting with the young generation (learning process).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Empower entrepreneurship/citizenship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group 1: Women’s agency</td>
<td>Group 2: Economic opportunities</td>
<td>Group 3: Enabling environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(global approach).</td>
<td>● Providing all necessary resources for change.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Linkage with institutions that can support change (NGOs/Donors, etc.)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Teach women about small-scale economy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Empowering social work initiatives (active citizenship / with schools).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Using media as a major tool to promote women's entrepreneurship.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Promote media (TV channels, radio stations, etc.) that support women's topics.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Setting strategies for unified consolidated activities and linking them with business owners.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Group loans.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>4) Development</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>● Providing good education, buses and other non-financial services are means to eradicate poverty.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additional comments from the participants:

- In Jordan, there are many laws in the favour of women but they are not implemented. Thus, efforts should be towards the implementation and application of existing laws instead of making new laws.
- Promoting the idea of women working from home and opening their own businesses. This is one of the means towards women’s economic empowerment.
- Establishing a mentoring programme at a global level. Every woman who wants to start her own business will be assigned an international mentor to assist her.
- Enhancing the quality of products produced by women working from home and supporting the production, packaging and marketing of products to meet international standards. There should be a platform that assists women working from home to expand the scope of their businesses.
- The Abu Dhabi Council for Resettlement has applied a very good approach to employment. It asks companies about their recruitment plans and staff needs within the upcoming 3 – 5 years. Based on this plan, they assist job-seekers over an extended period of time. This experience could be applied in other Arab countries.
Session 5: What specific issues would need to be discussed further? What are the areas where more learning is needed?

Ms. Tamara Abdel-Jaber, an entrepreneur, provided additional information on good practices and innovations at the start of the session. She also identified some of the issues that would merit further discussion. A second round of this workshop will take place in October 2015 where a diverse group of stakeholders, beneficiaries, private sector representative, Ministries and Government officials will also be invited. Participants highlighted the following areas that require further investigation at the second workshop:

Main takeaways from the session:

- A database of laws and good practices related to women’s economic empowerment in the Arab region is needed.
- There is not enough evidence-based knowledge about women’s contributions to specific fields in the economic sector and GDP.
- There is a need for new monitoring and evaluation methodologies to support project management.
- Capacity-building of NGOs is needed to gain more knowledge about participatory design and planning approaches.
- Innovative documentation of women experiences in the economic sector.
- Finding out the means of social protection of domestic workers.

Based on some of the above points, participants made recommendations for actions that can be applied immediately or in the near future:

- Mapping of support services for women in the economic sector.
- Creating a database of the work and contacts of relevant NGOs working in each country.
- Awarding successful women entrepreneurs in the economic field.
- Market-needs analysis and reaching out to the Ministries of Education and Higher Education to coordinate efforts to bridge the gap between the needs of the labour-market and the education students receive in schools and universities.
Issues recommended to be addressed and further discussed at the next workshop:

- Should NGOs promote the idea of women transferring from working in the informal sector to the formal sector? Or should they continue working in the informal sector? What is the best approach for each Arab country? And why?

- Measure the impact of NGO interventions; does the intervention have a positive or negative impact?

- What are the types of training that women need to increase their job opportunities in non-traditional work fields for women such as machinery maintenance / electricity, etc.

- Involving girls in their twenties in open discussions to identify their needs (participatory approach). It is also worth mentioning that young people cannot be all considered as one category. Young people should be classified into educated and uneducated groups. Each category has different needs.

- More focus on women with special needs, women refugees and women living in special agricultural areas.

- High tax rates imposed on the formal sector, encourage women to work in the informal sector, hence, we should work on projects that provide social protection for women.

- Most of the economic empowerment interventions for female refugees relate to sewing and cooking. Are there any new interventions that they can be engaged in? What can we do to support older women? How can existing interventions be improved and how can new techniques for designing and marketing products be introduced?

- Building women’s capacities and skills to enable them to start working on profitable businesses.

- Identifying strategies that ensure projects’ sustainability.

- Setting clear goals for women’s economic empowerment programmes. Do we want them to make greater profits? Add innovation to their projects? Develop their products for export?

Closing session / Next steps

During the closing session, an evaluation sheet was distributed to participants to fill in and give back to the event organizers. All notes and recommendations mentioned in the evaluation form will be taken into consideration in future workshops.
Main action points:

1. Participant list, pictures and countries’ presentations will be shared with all participants.

2. The workshop report will be shared with all participants.

3. The Spring Forward for Women Programme will follow up with the participants by sending a stakeholders’ mapping template to identify other actors to take part in this on-going conversation.

4. If you have any subject points that we failed to discuss in detail during the workshop, or you have any articles that you would like to share, kindly share them with Emad Karim at emad.karim@unwomen.org and we will publish them on empowerwomen.org and the Spring Forward for Women programme website: http://spring-forward.unwomen.org/en
Spring Forward for Women Programme

European Commission and UN Women joint regional programme for the Southern Mediterranean region

“The Spring Forward for Women”, programme implemented with funding by the European Union