



# UNDERSTANDING THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE



A Policy and Guidance Brief Building on Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa



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### **The International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES MENA)**

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

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I. INTRODUCTION: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND IN SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)	6
II. ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF THE CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND SOCIETY	6
III. THE STATE OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES - AND MEN'S OPINIONS ON THE TOPIC - IN THE MENA REGION	7
IV. SURVEY OF KEY POLICIES, PROTOCOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR GENDER-EQUITABLE WORKPLACES	9
V. CASE STUDIES OF BUSINESSES SEEKING GENDER EQUALITY IN EGYPT AND PALESTINE	13
<b>Case Study #1 – Mansour Group: Gender Diversity and Equity in Corporate Business</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Case Study #2 – Bank of Palestine – Gender Equality in the Product and the Process</b>	<b>14</b>
VI. TRANSLATING THESE INSIGHTS INTO CONCRETE GUIDANCE FOR THE MENA REGION	16
CONCLUSION	18
END NOTES	19

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## I. INTRODUCTION: THE BUSINESS CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND IN SOCIETY IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA (MENA)

*The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to witness progress – driven by new Government policies and civil society initiatives – toward the greater advancement of women’s rights and equal opportunities for men and women alike.* However, as in all regions of the world, there is a long road ahead before women attain true equality with men.

During this important period of social change in the MENA region, UN Women, Promundo and their partners commissioned the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) in multiple locations, to compile a multi-country report published in 2017.<sup>1</sup> This first part of the study involved nearly 10,000 survey male and female respondents in Egypt, Lebanon (where the sample included Syrian refugees), Morocco<sup>2</sup> and Palestine, which involved investigating many of the stereotypes commonly associated with men, women, boys and girls in these countries and highlighting pathways to equality, including, importantly, how men can be engaged and supportive partners and allies in achieving this goal.

*This brief draws upon data and recommendations presented in the first IMAGES MENA multi-country report, along with other data sources and case studies from the region, to explore the business case for gender equality in the workplace.* Although Governments in MENA are searching for new sources of economic growth, including job creation, innovation and increased competitiveness,<sup>3</sup> and despite investments in women’s education, women’s workforce participation in MENA still lags behind men’s and continues to be some of the lowest in the world.<sup>4</sup> Many factors reinforce these inequalities: these include legal barriers that constrain women’s rights and freedoms; institutions that have not yet embraced – in policy and practice – full gender equality; and social expectations about what it means to be a man or a woman, both at work and at home.

Using a variety of data sources and UN Women and UN Global Compact Women’s Empowerment Principles,<sup>5,6</sup> alongside in-depth case studies of two businesses pursuing new gender equality policies in Egypt and Palestine, this brief aims to provide action-oriented steps and guidance on how business leaders – the vast majority of whom are male – with the support of civil society partners, United Nations key players, and Governments can implement policies and programmes and bring about a change in corporate cultures to achieve greater gender equality in the workplace.

## II. ESSENTIAL PRINCIPLES OF THE CASE FOR GENDER EQUALITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND SOCIETY

Advancing gender equality in the workplace through the implementation of promising policies and protocols could provide significant positive benefits for employers, employees and can contribute to transforming societies. There are many reasons why gender equality should be prioritized in business.

*Gender equality and women’s equal rights are fundamental elements of thriving societies.* Gender equality in all spaces – the social, economic and political realms – is a basic human right, a precondition for sustainable development and a provision in many international conventions (including, notably, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women<sup>7</sup>). Women should have equal rights and access to professional development opportunities, decent work and career advancement in leadership positions. Workplaces free from gender-based discrimination, violence and sexual harassment and that have gender responsive employment and social protection policies are basic requisites for an inclusive and sustainable socioeconomic future.

*Gender equality in the workplace has far-reaching positive economic effects.* In addition to direct benefits for employees and their families, better economic opportunities for women can lead to economic growth (by expanding the workforce, contributing to higher levels of children’s school enrolment and driving the increased purchase of goods and services, including those that contribute to family well-being, such as food and medicine).<sup>8,9</sup>

According to one study, MENA could have boosted its gross domestic product by \$415 billion if it had reduced the gender gap in its workforce participation rates by 20 percentage points by 2017; another study estimates that gender gaps in employment and entrepreneurship are equivalent to a total income loss for the region of 35 per cent in the short-term and 38 per cent in the long-term.<sup>10</sup>

***Women's participation at all levels of business will provide benefits.*** Providing equal opportunities for women in the workplace will lead to a diversification and capitalization of an untapped talent pool, which is a result of the significant investment made in women's educational advancement in the region in recent decades. There is also evidence of the positive impacts of women's participation at the highest levels of business: women's leadership – for instance, in the form of participation on boards and in senior management – has been shown, in certain cases, to improve a company's ability to serve consumer markets dominated by women,<sup>11,12</sup> to provide a wider range of perspectives and decision-making styles,<sup>13,14,15</sup> and to reduce high-risk financial transactions.<sup>16</sup> Expanding roles for women is only one component of creating a more diverse workforce, and increasing opportunities for members of racial, ethnic minority and other marginalized groups can also lead to similar benefits.

***Gender equality in the workplace can help boost a company's profitability.*** Policies which support equal opportunities and treatment for men and women can lead to cost savings as the result of increased retention and reduced turnover, in part due to satisfaction from an environment that is free from harassment and is supportive of work-life balance: a need that persists more strongly in the private than in the public sector.<sup>17</sup> While companies reap substantial benefits when women participate equally in the workforce, this will not become a reality without supportive policies and protocols within business, the Government and other key sectors.

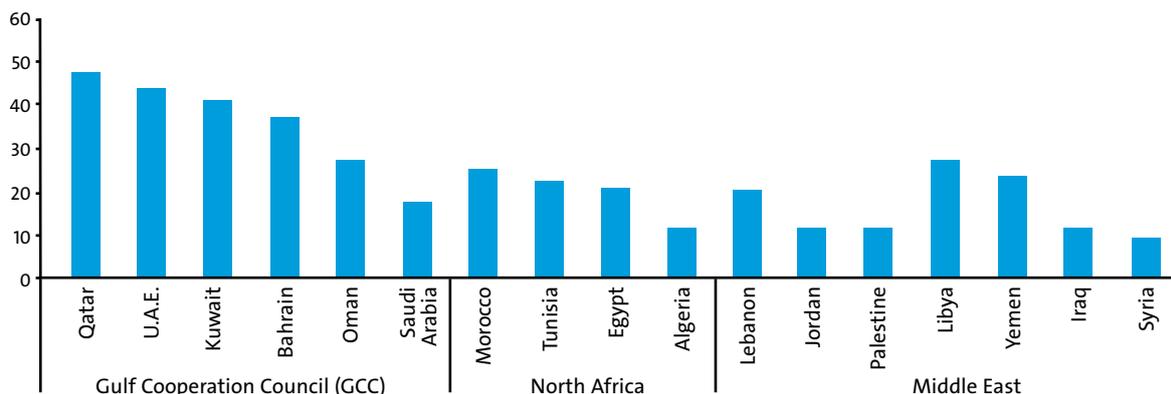
***Gender equality in the workplace is also a positive factor for men.*** Often corporations that take the needs of women seriously also make the workplace better for men. For example, offering policies, such as parental leave that is equal, well-paid and non-transferable for all caregivers, may not only lead to better pay and greater advancement for women in

the workforce, but may also increase men's connectedness at home.<sup>18</sup> Evidence suggests that men also experience more life satisfaction, happiness, better health and mental health and may be more productive at work when they participate more fully in caregiving.<sup>19</sup> When companies promote everyone's roles as income-earners and caregivers, regardless of gender, they can help alleviate the unequal burden of care on women and also validate productive identities for men beyond just being financial providers to the benefit of all.

### III. THE STATE OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES – AND MEN'S OPINIONS ON THE TOPIC – IN THE MENA REGION

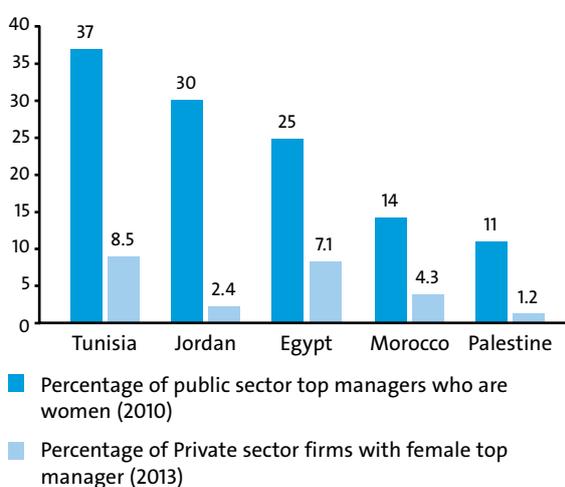
***While the female labour force participation in the MENA region is very low compared to men's, and compared to other regions, it is rising faster than in any other region of the globe.***<sup>20</sup> The International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that only 27 per cent of working age women in the MENA region participate in the labour force, as compared to 77 per cent of men.<sup>21</sup> The disparities exist for young people as well: in Northern Africa and the Arab States, the ILO reports that the female youth unemployment rate (which is as high as 44 per cent) is almost double that of young men.<sup>22</sup> However, the story of the female labour force participation in the region is neither static nor uniform. Labour force participation rates vary widely across the MENA region: World Bank data estimates rates as low as 15 per cent in Algeria, Iraq and Palestine, and as high as 50 per cent in Qatar (see the chart below).<sup>23</sup> And even as labour participation rates remain low, data suggest that they are increasing, perhaps even more rapidly than elsewhere in the globe, rising from 21 per cent to 27 per cent between 1990 and 2015.<sup>24</sup> While globally, women often make up more of the informal labor market (having informal working arrangements, often without legal or social protection) than men do, MENA is one of the two regions globally where this is not the case: 47 per cent of men and 35 per cent of women workers are in informal employment, meaning that women have much less access to any kind of employment when compared to men.<sup>25</sup>

**FIGURE: WOMEN’S LABOUR FORCE PARTICIPATION BY SUBREGION<sup>26</sup>**



*The share of management positions, chief executive officer (CEO) positions and firm ownerships held by women is well below the percentage held by men, as well as by women in other regions.* ILO data estimate that women in MENA hold up to only 15 per cent of private sector management positions, the lowest such rate in all regions in the world (see the chart below).<sup>27</sup> Likewise, while 21 per cent of CEO positions are held by women in all participating “developing countries,” only 13 per cent of CEO positions are held by women in the MENA region.<sup>28</sup> In a World Bank survey of eight countries in the region, women were found to own less than 8 per cent of firms on average, significantly lower than the rates for all middle-income or lower-middle-income Enterprise Survey economies (although, it must be noted, in none of those economies did women own more than 16 per cent of firms).<sup>29</sup>

**FIGURE: WOMEN’S PARTICIPATION IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SECTOR MANAGEMENT IN FIVE MENA SITES<sup>30</sup>**



*Prevailing stereotypes related to gender – in particular, expectations of men as the financial provider and of women as homemakers – are a notable barrier to workplace equality, alongside other structural factors.* Some three-quarters or more of men across all four initial countries in the IMAGES MENA survey, for instance, agreed that when resources are scarce, men should have access to jobs before women do. Women also agreed, although the numbers were slightly lower.<sup>31</sup> These findings reflect those from many other studies focusing on the region, including the World Values Survey, which allude to social barriers that may prohibit women seeking entry into the workforce.<sup>32</sup>

Additionally, gender stereotypes can lead to discrimination against women in hiring, emerging from employers’ assumptions that marriage, domestic work and family responsibilities would limit female employees’ productivity or focus on work.<sup>33</sup> This finding in particular emphasizes how social norms prioritizing women’s roles at home – not in the workplace – continue to curtail women’s economic opportunities in the region. Additional factors may contribute to women’s lack of participation in the workforce:<sup>34</sup> firstly, men frequently dominate or control household decision-making and political and leadership spaces; secondly, the same applies to the daily lives of women and girls; and, thirdly, women also face high rates of sexual harassment in public spaces, workplaces and schools.

Furthermore, structural factors can also limit women’s participation and advancement in the workforce. These may include restrictions in terms of women’s labor rights, access to state welfare services, finances (such as barriers to passing pensions

on to beneficiaries, independently applying for loans), or related to infrastructure and transportation.<sup>35</sup> To create meaningful change, there must be a breakdown of stereotypes, harmful social norms, discriminatory practices, as well as these prohibitive structural factors.<sup>36</sup>

#### BOX 1

#### RESTRICTIONS ON WOMEN'S ROLES IN THE LABOUR FORCE ARE AT TIMES CODIFIED IN LAW

As explored in a forthcoming study by Musawah, it is not uncommon for legislation to specifically curtail the scope of women's economic participation, based on harmful stereotypes.<sup>58</sup> As the authors write, "Women are still seen as vulnerable beings within society who need to be protected, or are viewed as dependents under the financial guardianship of their husbands or fathers, and not regarded as independent citizens." Such legislation includes:

- **Laws that prevent women from working at night.** Articles 81 and 82 of Oman's Labour Law of 2003, for instance, prohibit women from working between the hours of 9:00 p.m. and 6:00 a.m., with exceptions for certain industries or "exceptional circumstances". Egypt has a similar labour law: Article 1, Ministerial Decree 183, of 2003 prohibits women working night shifts in the industrial sector from 7:00 p.m. till 7:00 a.m.
- **Laws that prevent women from working in "harmful" or "particularly difficult" jobs.** Many countries explicitly prohibit women's employment in various sectors. For example, in the United Arab Emirates, women are prohibited from working in tanneries, bars, manufacturing, mining, welding, butchering, extraction and other jobs.<sup>59</sup>

*Yet, several emerging positive shifts are taking place across the region that point to a future where women and men alike could thrive in both professional and domestic roles, regardless of their gender. A 2014 McKinsey survey found that some 60 per cent of respondents said the involvement of women in*

leadership positions is a very important driver of organizational effectiveness, and some two thirds reported that women's leadership was on their organization's strategic agenda.<sup>37</sup> Close to half of the men surveyed in IMAGES MENA believed that a married woman should have the same right to work as a man. Moreover, a majority of men in all four countries said that they would accept a woman as a boss, among other indications that they are willing to work in gender-integrated workplaces.<sup>38</sup> These signs are encouraging, even though they may be theoretical: IMAGES MENA findings tell us that many men in the region support women working outside the home – it would seem only as long as they remain the primary breadwinners, while women remain the main caregivers and organizers of domestic life. It is hard to predict whether recent income-constraining developments, such as the downturn in oil prices affecting the Gulf States and the currency fluctuation in Egypt and elsewhere, factors that have encouraged women's employment to supplement household income, will affect any of these trends.

#### IV. SURVEY OF KEY POLICIES, PROTOCOLS AND STRATEGIES FOR GENDER-EQUITABLE WORKPLACES

There are several clear policies and strategic entry points that business leaders, alongside alliances, National Governments, civil society organizations, United Nations entities, local activists and other parties in the MENA region, can invest in to create more equal, profitable companies and prosperous societies. According to the UN's Women's Empowerment Principles, business leaders can play a key role (and engage additional internal and external stakeholders) in exhibiting high-level support for policies concerning gender equality and human rights, and in establishing related company-wide goals and targets, as well as transparent systems of accountability.<sup>39</sup>

Factors that influence the entry points and success of the strategies are both **1) internal**, factors existing within a work place or work space, which impact women's retention, satisfaction and/or career advancement; and **2) external**, factors outside of the workplace, that prohibit or hinder women from entering or staying in the workforce.

## 1. INTERNAL FACTORS AND STRATEGIES:

**a. Recruitment and hiring practices:** Important measures to eliminate discrimination in recruitment and hiring – an essential element to promoting gender-equitable workplaces – include expanding methods to reach and appeal to more women candidates and eliminating sexist language in job advertisements and potentially discriminatory questions for women (e.g. their marital status, or whether they have children, for example) in applications or interviews. Establishing connections with local or regional organizations and associations that promote women’s advancement is another effective way to recruit women and to publicly demonstrate commitment to gender-equitable workplaces. Additional strategies include evaluating candidates with clear and objective rubrics rather than subjective and potentially biased opinions; developing minimum quotas for hiring female employees; explicitly encouraging women to apply for positions that are posted; requiring hiring panels to consist of an equal number of women and men; and developing affirmative action measures.<sup>40</sup> Increasing knowledge and capacities of human resources staff on the principles of fair and gender-sensitive recruitment procedures and ensuring equal payment and benefits for work of equal value, supported by explicit commitment from senior leaders in the company, are important steps to help realize these changes.

### BOX 2

#### WOMEN AND PUBLIC SECTOR EMPLOYMENT

Women in the MENA region often prefer employment in the public sector due to more favourable conditions than in private sector employment, including better benefits, higher job security and more flexible working hours. In Egypt, around three-quarters of employees in the public sector are women, and in Morocco, women constitute half of public sector employees.<sup>60</sup> In Egypt and Jordan, evidence indicates that the majority of women employed in the private sector stop working after marriage, in contrast to those working

in the public sector.<sup>61</sup> Women who do work in the private sector are often concentrated in certain fields that are considered traditionally feminine, such as education, social work and health services. Moreover, women account for the largest share of employment in education across the vast majority of MENA countries.<sup>62</sup>

**b. Family-friendly workplace policies<sup>41</sup>:** A significant hindrance to women’s participation in the workforce is a lack of family-friendly workplace policies, given the expectation that women will be primarily responsible for caring for the children and/or the elderly within the family. While leave policies should not just be left to employers and individuals – and should be Government-mandated, included within existing or new employment benefits, or social insurance – workplaces can play a key role in creating and implementing these policies.<sup>42</sup> Family-friendly policies should include maternity, paternity and parental leave, as well as flexible working hours and high-quality affordable childcare. While most countries in the region guarantee some maternity leave, ranging from four weeks in Tunisia to 15 weeks in Jordan,<sup>43</sup> paternity leave or longer-term parental leave that includes both parents has yet to be adopted across the region, although some multinational companies do provide longer maternity leave, better maternity benefits, a short paternity leave and onsite childcare or subsidies for childcare expenses.

Parental leave and innovative childcare policies that help promote women’s advancement opportunities at work are limited: most existing leave is unpaid. In addition, only three countries in the region guarantee women the same or an equivalent position after maternity leave.<sup>44</sup> Leave entitlement (maternity, paternity, and parental) that is equal,<sup>45</sup> well-paid, and non-transferable would encourage and support all parents to be responsible for the care and upbringing of their children, removing the burden from women as sole caretakers and promoting continued employment and equal opportunities for women’s career advancement.<sup>46</sup>

**c. Policies prohibiting sexual harassment:** Ensuring workplaces and public spaces that are free from any type of female harassment is also a key component to

promoting women's economic empowerment. Only one-fifth of countries in the MENA region have legislation prohibiting sexual harassment at work or in public places. Yet research shows that 40-60 per cent of women have experienced street harassment (less data is available on workplace sexual harassment).<sup>47,48</sup> Businesses should implement policies that explicitly condemn sexual harassment in the workplace, provide gender-transformative, awareness-raising trainings for all staff and management and create an environment in which perpetrators are held accountable. Human resources procedures, such as systems for filing complaints against workplace harassment and consequences for offenses, should be embedded in institutional policies and clearly communicated to all staff. As the following strategy emphasizes, businesses must consider women's safety both in public spaces and in the workplace. As noted above, women too often experience harassment outside the workplace, which suggests that progressive workplaces should also add their voices to efforts to end harassment against women in all spaces.

**d. Promotion of women into management and executive positions (including through retention strategies):** Although some progress of women in management positions has occurred in the region, women continue to experience significant barriers to advancement into leadership positions, due to internal workplace factors and external factors, such as opportunity-limiting legislation or access to safe transportation, as highlighted below). However, programmes and initiatives emphasizing the importance of gender balance in management are accelerating in many countries in the region. Common measures supporting women's career advancement include the following: executive trainings; exposing women to all company operations and functions; ensuring senior management support for a gender equality strategy; making promotion systems and career advancement prospects clear and accessible for women; and quotas for women, both in senior management and in executive roles. However, these initiatives being implemented in the region are too limited in scope to drive adequate change and contribute to economic growth. Less than 12 per cent of companies' employees interviewed in a 2013 ILO study reported prioritizing the implementation of retention strategies for women, or flexible and family-friendly work policies.<sup>49</sup>

### BOX 3

#### EXAMPLES OF – AND OBSTACLES TO – FAMILY-FRIENDLY MEASURES IN MENA BUSINESSES

Few companies are institutionalizing sufficient gender-sensitive or family-friendly measures, but some are implementing innovative and strategic policies and initiatives to promote women's economic advancement. Less than 12 per cent of companies' employees interviewed in a 2013 ILO study reported prioritizing the implementation of retention strategies for women or flexible and family-friendly work policies.<sup>63</sup>

- Under the Gender Equality Model Egypt initiative launched by the Government in partnership with the United Nations and other international organizations, 10 companies in Egypt implemented gender-equality trainings and gender-sensitive human resource policies and codes of conduct, then they publicized their commitment to the programme on their websites and in their print materials.<sup>64</sup> One participating company, the Egyptian investment bank, the Prime Group, instituted a company code of ethics and standard of conduct that explicitly forbade harassment and discrimination, and recognized the outstanding performance of female employees. The female respondents to a survey of the effectiveness of these initiatives noted the additional benefits.<sup>65</sup>
- Chemical Industries Development, an Egyptian pharmaceutical company, prioritized gender equality by implementing actions that included subsidized childcare, an emphasis on equal pay for women and men, employee trainings on gender equality and improved recruitment procedures.<sup>66</sup>

In smaller companies, women's advancement programmes are less common and, if offered, are often due to informal arrangements rather than structured policies. For

example, results from a 2015 qualitative survey on recruitment procedures in Lebanese companies showed that most employers preferred to hire women in management positions on account of certain perceived qualities they believed women to have, but had not established gender-sensitive human resources programmes to support women's advancement to senior positions.<sup>67</sup> These one-off occurrences of grooming female managers on a case-by-case basis do not reflect a comprehensive and effective approach, which should include professional development opportunities, such as coaching/mentoring programmes and clear pathways to advancement into leadership positions and gender-sensitive hiring procedures, trainings and family-friendly policies. Such programmes may seem irrelevant to the region's many small family-run businesses, but even these businesses can be places of discriminatory behaviours and practices and can benefit from institutionalizing gender-sensitive measures.

**e. Alliances, organizations and professional networks:** Since Arab women executives assert that exclusion from professional networks is the main barrier to career advancement, women in the region are increasingly organizing and networking.<sup>50</sup> Most countries in the MENA region now have more than one businesswomen's association to support female leadership and entrepreneurship. Examples include the MENA Businesswomen's Network Association in Bahrain, the Palestinian Business Women's Forum, the National Association of Women Entrepreneurs of Tunisia, the Council of Arab Businesswomen and the MENA Businesswomen's Network. These networks provide training, research, networking opportunities and other services and support, both nationally and internationally.<sup>51</sup> Supporting these alliances and associations, including female colleagues and breaking down barriers for entry into male-dominated networks, expanding business relationships with women-owned enterprises (including small business and entrepreneurs), and/or creating online portals for women to help promote career opportunities across the region are additional network-based strategies that businesses can implement.

**f. Mandatory trainings on gender, diversity and other topics:** To mitigate barriers to women's economic advancement, employers can institute gender-sensitive diversity trainings to improve work environments by raising awareness of the prevalent stereotyping, gender discrimination and social exclusion well described by women executives across the region in a study by Kuwait University.<sup>52</sup> Such trainings should be gender-transformative: seeking to transform inequitable power dynamics between men and women directly and encouraging participants to reflect on gender stereotypes to achieve the truly gender-transformative norm change required in workplaces. These trainings, when complemented by formalized human resource policies, will also bolster equitable recruitment and hiring practices. Furthermore, businesses should provide all employees with equal access to company-supported education and training programs (which may include literacy classes, vocational and information technology training), as well as formal and informal networking and mentoring.<sup>53</sup>

## 2. EXTERNAL FACTORS AND STRATEGIES:

**a. Laws and legislative tools:** Businesses and civil society activists should advocate for more gender-equitable policies and better implementation of those that already exist. While most countries in the region have adopted the principle of gender equality in their constitutions, in practice, men and women are not always entitled to equal treatment and equal opportunities in the workplace. Nearly every country in the region has at least one restriction on women's work, many of which may be framed as protective of women, but in reality, placing limitations on their rights.<sup>54</sup> For example, many labour laws include restrictions for women in jobs that are considered hazardous or working hours that are perceived to be unacceptable for women, a fact that may further prevent employers from hiring women and restrict the opportunities women can pursue. Business leaders and civil society can also play a role in advocating for family-friendly workplace legislation (see item b. on page 10 for more detail). Such legislation should include equal, paid, non-transferable leave for men and women, which can reduce any incentive for discrimination against female applicants due to the presumption that they will take more leave than their male counterparts for the purposes of caregiving and parenthood.

**b. Accessible, safe, and reliable transportation:** The lack of accessible, safe and reliable transportation is a significant constraint on women’s ability to access employment, economic opportunities and resources. This is particularly the case in the private sector, where employees often demonstrate commitment by working overtime. Here women face barriers to career advancement because it is considered unsafe or inappropriate for them to commute later in the evenings. These concerns can be exacerbated by conflict-related realities in some locations in the region. Business leaders can play a role in adjusting company policy so as to be understanding and accommodating of factors like the frequency of checkpoints and barriers. For example, businesses can provide their own safe transportation services, such as company buses, as many public-sector companies do in Egypt.

## V. CASE STUDIES OF BUSINESSES SEEKING GENDER EQUALITY IN EGYPT AND PALESTINE

As part of the background research for this brief, UN Women and Promundo commissioned in-depth qualitative research<sup>55</sup> of two companies: Mansour Group<sup>56</sup> in Egypt and Bank of Palestine. These case studies demonstrate the intentions of business leaders in the region to establish more gender-equal workplaces and professional opportunities, and their successes and lessons learned in that quest.

### CASE STUDY #1 – MANSOUR GROUP: GENDER DIVERSITY AND EQUITY IN CORPORATE BUSINESS

The Mansour Group, founded 25 years ago in Egypt, is a family-owned conglomerate with 60,000 employees, a presence in 110 countries and total revenues exceeding \$6 billion. It is one of the founding members of the United Nations Global Compact, a voluntary initiative based on CEO commitments to implement sustainable and socially responsible policies. In Egypt, the Mansour Group maintains a total workforce of over 8,000 employees, however, women only make up 14 per cent of upper management, 4 per cent of middle management and 6 per cent of the workforce. While Mansour Group is realizing the importance of having more women employed in senior levels, one employee interviewed noted, *“A lot of our current top managers are those who got promoted from the bottom up, and thus they are all males.*

*That’s why we need to work on the [composition and diversity of the] workforce itself first,”* emphasizing the need to prioritize gender equity at all levels.

Employees interviewed generally felt that gender diversity contributes to greater success. As one employee stated, *“When there is more diversity there are more ideas, different opinions, backgrounds, varying perceptions on different issue and, more experiences. It is important to have diversity.”* One should note that diversity considerations at the Mansour Group include both gender diversity and other elements: religious ones involving both Christians and Muslims; age, with the inclusion of young employees graduating from local universities; origin, whether Cairo, Aswan or Nubia; and fields of education.

In 2008, the Mansour Group’s human resources department, in cooperation with the Corporate Social Responsibility Department, reviewed its policies in terms of gender responsiveness, gender diversity and gender-based discrimination in the company. In 2015, the company launched a programme to empower women to take more leadership and management positions. This was accompanied by gender-blind policy changes in the following areas:

- **Hiring:** The criteria for applicants to indicate their gender when applying for positions was removed. Applicants and employees are not asked about their families’ future plans, or about the members of their families (except for medical insurance coverage purposes), which in the past had reinforced an unconscious bias in a candidate’s selection.
- **Legislation:** Labour law and related legislation are consistently applied towards both men and women, including Egypt’s laws on family care.
- **Hours:** Both men and women are required to work only from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to avoid the legal consequences of non-compliance that prohibits women in Egypt from working after 7:00 pm. Requiring or placing value on working after 7:00 p.m. would lead to discrimination from the very start of the selection criteria for new employees, or for employee advancement.
- **Pay:** Equal pay for the same job is adhered to, based on a scale and grade.
- **Training:** With the support of ILO, some employees are being trained to become gender-equality advocates.

Despite these advancements, barriers still exist to women's participation and advancement in the labour market. As one employee reported, *"The problem is not with rules and policies [...]; the problem is with the mindset of the employees themselves [...]. Even at home and with our families, mothers often prefer their sons to daughters. It is something that is embedded in our culture and passed down from one generation to another."*

These attitudes may impact women's ability to enter the workforce and the types of jobs and promotions accessible to them. A woman's partner may act as a gatekeeping mechanism, not allowing her to participate in particular types of work. Moreover, perceptions about women's preferences or suitability for certain types of work can impact women's employment opportunities. Women-friendly professions are perceived to be human resources, customer service, or marketing while accounting, bookkeeping, or those that may have security-related concerns, long hours, night shifts, or require physical labour (for example, drivers or warehouse workers) are regarded as inappropriate.

There are other factors, such as work-life balance, which pose an issue, particularly for female employees, who are expected to take the lead in domestic affairs. One employee commented on the inequitable burden of care work on women, with male partners often not carrying out their share of household responsibilities: *"I have seen very successful career women, but there is a price that is paid, and it is usually paid at the expense of the family. Some sacrifice must be made, especially as it is customary that familial responsibilities pertaining to both spouses are left to women."* Moreover, one interviewee-employee cautioned, based on experience with a previous employer, that experiences of sexual harassment, particularly in the face of cultural barriers against reporting such incidents, may lead female employees to leave in the absence of robust policies prohibiting and institutionalizing consequences for harassment.

The Mansour Group is continuing its commitment to gender-equitable policies and practices. In January 2018, they will launch a grievance mechanism with the corporate affairs and human resources departments – through policy and a call centre – for both men and women, where employees can talk freely about any issue: sexual and verbal harassment,

abuse, embezzlement or corruption, for example. This effort is supported by employees, as evidenced by one employee who commented, *"I believe that every person has certain human rights – the right to happiness, security, to have enough money to look after his/her family, to apply for a job, and not be abused in any way. These are all universal needs."*

The Mansour Group also aims to continue to provide empowerment training for female employees and awareness-raising sessions for men to better understand women's perspectives and to support them. They also may become more explicit in indicating that positions are open to both women and men when hiring. In 2018 and 2019, the Mansour Group will continue to work on the existing gender employment gap, and it will work with International Finance Corporation to introduce women into traditionally male-dominated positions.

*Note: Interviews with Mansour Group were conducted by Ahead of the Curve in December 2017 with four employees, including a Corporate Human Resources and Administration Director, a Corporate Social Responsibility Manager, a Group Brand Manager, and a Medical Coverage Manager, with employment tenures with the Mansour Group ranging from 4 to 19 years.*

## CASE STUDY #2 – BANK OF PALESTINE – GENDER EQUALITY IN THE PRODUCT AND THE PROCESS

The Bank of Palestine was established in 1960 as a family business with the aim of promoting financial services in Palestine, and financing projects across the economic and social segments of Palestinian society. The Bank is one of the largest national banks operating in Palestine and one of the largest employers nationwide, employing approximately 2,200 employees across its 70 branches operating in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Currently, 37.6 per cent<sup>57</sup> of the Bank's employees are women with an increase from 17 per cent to 32 per cent taking place between 2007 and 2015.

The Bank's target is to reach a minimum of 50 per cent female employees by 2020. This commitment to advancing gender equity in the Bank's workforce has in part been driven by Chairman Hashem Shawwa, who stated: *"When I took over my position in the bank, I noticed a huge gender*

*imbalance that is not consistent with our inclusive policy. I knew then that I needed to take measures in that regard, and this is how our 10-year journey of achieving gender balance within the bank and within our services started.”*

The Bank’s efforts toward these goals include the following initiatives: new gender-balanced policies in hiring and employee benefits; promoting more women to decision-making and senior positions; and introducing financial services directed specifically toward women’s economic empowerment. This was in part informed by a Participatory Gender Audit conducted by UN Women for the Bank in 2015.

The Bank has made additional efforts to improve its gender-equitable policies. These include the following components:

- **Women’s economic empowerment:** The Bank’s Felestiniya (Palestinian Woman) Programme aims to increase women’s participation in the labour market; respond to the financial needs of women, including entrepreneurs; boost the performance of women-owned small and medium enterprises; and spur economic growth in the West Bank and Gaza by combining access to tailored financial products with non-financial services, such as networking, mentoring, coaching and access to business information.
- **Partnerships:** The Bank establishes and strengthens partnerships with Palestinian women’s organizations to foster a workplace culture supportive of gender equality in the private and public sectors.
- **Labor laws:** The Bank of Palestine’s policies surpass the Palestinian Labour Law’s minimum requirements for promoting gender equality in the workplace, including administrative systems to prevent gender discrimination, such as introducing a health insurance policy allowing both male and female employees to insure their children rather than only men.
- **Pay:** The Bank stipulates equal pay for men and women working at the same job and the provision of an equal child allowance for female and male employees.
- **Advertisements:** The Bank has created and implemented written, audio and visual advertisements that challenge gender stereotypes.
- **Trainings:** Gender sensitization is now part of the orientation package and training that is provided to all newly hired employees at the Bank. As the Chairman noted, *“I have seen many encouraging results and how our efforts contributed to changing traditional perceptions and stereotypes among our employees.”*
- **Parental leave:** The Bank gives full, ten weeks paid maternity leave to its female employees but also recognizes three days paternity leave for the male employees, which, while quite limited, is still uncommon for private sector companies in Palestine.
- **Sexual Harassment and Reporting:** The Bank’s management has clear whistle-blowing procedures that encourage both male and female employees to report any internal or external violations of the Bank’s policies confidentially and in a safe environment, including in cases of sexual harassment or discrimination against women within the workplace. As one employee said, *“The workplace culture we have encourages the employees to approach senior and upper management. It is a culture that is reinforced by an open-door policy and by providing various forms of communication and interaction on all levels, such as the Internet, email, staff meetings, a suggestions box, clear whistle-blowing procedures and a Facebook page for employees.”*
- **Advancement:** Opportunities for promotion are available equally to all employees. As one employee noted, *“If there is a female candidate that can be promoted to a position, gender is taken into consideration, and female candidates are encouraged to seek career advancement.”*

While the Bank has made significant progress in institutionalizing guidelines and policies that promote gender equality in the workplace, they have also faced some challenges and setbacks. New and updated policies have occasionally been challenged by staff. As one employee noted, *“Male employees, in particular, felt threatened by female colleagues. They feel that policies favouring women’s advancement in the workplace could negatively impact their chances of promotion to higher positions, and that female employees would be more entitled to promotions.”* However, these attitudes may be changing as women begin to take on and succeed

in new roles. One employee alluded to this when he said, *“I was astonished when our female employees, who were given greater responsibilities, successfully proved to be up to the challenge and even exceeded their male colleagues’ performance.”*

Senior management also initially resisted the new policies. There was some reluctance about hiring married women, because it was feared they might take maternity leave and disrupt the Bank’s daily operations. Some members of management also felt that men would be able to work longer hours due to having fewer family obligations. *“Facing internal resistance is part of the process,”* the Chairman added in the interview for this case study. He went on, *“We persisted with our efforts to demonstrate how serious the bank was about making those changes. At the same time, we took many steps to handle these challenges as we realized that we were talking about changing the organizational culture and for some individuals it involved changing their personal beliefs.”* To address this, the Bank brought in experts and specialists for trainings and to share case studies to help realize the process of transforming norms.

This dedicated, participatory process of change seems to have worked. Since the aforementioned gender audit, female employees have given encouraging feedback, reporting feeling empowered and not being discriminated against. And it has been good for the Bank’s reputation as well as its bottom line, as the Chairman notes, *“We are attracting more investors and funds that perceive us as a progressive bank, one respected locally and internationally and we are attracting more clients including many women clients as they see our bank as approachable, friendly and attentive to their financial needs. All our internal and external assessments show that most of our employees – and especially our female employees – see BOP [Bank of Palestine] as the employer of choice.”* According to some staff interviewees, the experience of Bank of Palestine is a success story with promise to be scaled up both to other Palestinian institutions and regionally, and with the potential to impact norms in society more broadly.

There is a recognition, however, that to shift entrenched behaviour patterns toward gender equality, eradicate the feminization of poverty and to do this work sustainably, it is important to institutionalize existing policies at the Bank, to implement

them in a comprehensive way and to engage employees from the beginning of the process.

*Note: The interviews with the Bank of Palestine were conducted by Riyada Consulting and Training in December 2017 and January 2018 with four employees, including the Chief of Business Development and the Financial Inclusion Officer, a Human Resources Manager, a Chief Corporate Business Officer and the Chairman of Bank of Palestine, who was directly responsible for designing the gender-equitable policies introduced in the Bank.*

While both case studies presented above highlight useful entry points and lessons learned for establishing more gender equitable workplaces – in policy and practice – companies should strive to go even further, deliberately engaging male and female employees with a gender-transformative lens and approach, aiming to transform not only the behaviours and mandates of employees, but also the underlying social and gender norms that view women primarily as wives and mothers, or as having less autonomy or value in the workplace than men.

## VI. TRANSLATING THESE INSIGHTS INTO CONCRETE GUIDANCE FOR THE MENA REGION

Business leaders seeking to build upon the insights presented in this brief and boost safety and gender equality in their workplaces for all employees should undertake the following initiatives:

- 1. Create an atmosphere where women feel safe in the workplace: Support women’s well-being, first and foremost:** physically, mentally and emotionally. Safe working environments increase women’s commitment to the workplace and improve their performance. Policies should explicitly prohibit sexual harassment in the workplace, and also mandate gender-sensitive, awareness-raising trainings for all staff and management. These should address the underlying stereotypes and norms around men and women that sanction and drive this behaviour. Meaningful disciplinary action against known perpetrators of sexual harassment in the workplace should be carried out. A system of referrals for services for survivors, including to legal services, should be established.

2. **Eliminate any discrimination from hiring practices:** Institute gender-neutral hiring processes, including abolishing the requirement that anyone list their gender. Consider stating explicitly on job postings that the company is seeking both male and female applicants, and reaching out to women’s professional alliances and associations. When hiring, create clear, gender-sensitive systems for evaluating candidates, and consider introducing quotas or affirmative action protocols. Explicitly request candidates with experience with gender-equitable initiatives in job descriptions for human resources personnel and hiring managers, and fill hiring panels with equal numbers of men and women.
3. **Support and advance women’s leadership:** Rather than a case-by-case basis, use a comprehensive approach to achieve parity. Create clear paths to management positions for women, by implementing executive trainings, coaching/mentoring programmes, exposing women to all company operations and functions, ensuring senior management support for a gender equality strategy and making promotion systems and career advancement prospects clear and accessible.
4. **Take steps to abolish discrimination based on the following:**
  - **Questions on current or future employees’ plans related to their families.** It is inappropriate to ask employees about their plans for a family as this provides opportunities for discrimination against women.
  - **Level within the organization.** Make sure any policies to promote gender equality are applied at every level of the workforce, not as a special policy only for women in senior leadership and management.
  - **Gender.** Ensure that all employee policies are applied equally to male and female employees, including, importantly, equal pay for equal work and parental leave policies.
5. **Show leadership on the issues.** Executives within the workplace can play a transformative role in both introducing and promoting gender equality as a social responsibility and as a business development objective. They can also set a standard and lead by example in order to catalyze a shift in norms and company culture alongside policies. But they should not do it alone. Leaders should involve employees at all levels in the development and implementation of policies in order to ensure effectiveness, buy-in and their adoption.
6. **Embrace equal, job-protected, non-transferable, paid parental leave for new parents of all genders:** Offer parental leave that is equal, paid and non-transferable to encourage and allow all parents to be responsible for the care and upbringing of their children, removing the burden from women and promoting their continued employment. In addition, enact policies that guarantee parents the same or equal position upon their return from leave. In addition to leave for new parents (including parents of newly adopted children), flexible leave policies and flexible work arrangements and hours are also important signs that the employer supports its employees’ caregiving and family needs in balance with their roles and responsibilities in the workplace.
7. **Combine workplace policies with programmes, campaigns and broader gender equality initiatives:** The effectiveness of workplace policies can be multiplied and improved by being combined with gender-transformative programmes and campaigns – engaging male employees in partnership with women, company leadership, families and society at large – to transform social norms that view women primarily as wives and mothers. The aim is to dispel employers’ assumptions that women’s roles in the home interfere with their productivity and commitment, and to increase equitable childcare and work in the home.
8. **Highlight the value in gender-equitable workplaces for men as well.** While efforts to support gender equality and non-discrimination should be pursued as a fundamental right for women, in order for change to be deep-rooted and sustainable, men must also be personally invested in these attitudinal shifts. Workplaces must go beyond identifying a few male “champions” who support changes toward gender equitable policies, to working with a broader cohort who

see women as truly equal, and themselves as invested allies in reaching equality. Men must understand how their own lives are gendered and even constrained by norms that encourage them to act solely as providers, as distant fathers or as ambitious employees, but which punish or sanction them for taking on caregiving roles outside of work, or for any perceived lack of professional ambition. They must understand and embrace the benefits that can emerge from gender equitable policies and workplaces built on respect, including greater work-life balance, more diverse and cooperative workplaces, and the health, emotional authenticity and deeper relationships that can emerge from being co-providers rather than the sole providers for their families.

into management and executive positions; formation of alliances, organizations and professional networks; and mandatory trainings on gender, diversity and other topics to invest in more equal, thriving companies and societies.

The pathway is clear for business leaders who want to invest in creating gender-equitable workplaces and supportive cultures within their companies.

## VI. CONCLUSION

Global evidence and experience proves that gender equality is a fundamental element of prosperous and progressive societies, and that gender equal workplaces have far-reaching positive effects, including on the economy. In an environment where Governments in MENA are searching for new sources of economic growth, greater equality of opportunity and better protection of women's rights are necessary for the development and advancement of the MENA region, and may offer important incentives and benefits – economic and others – to businesses.

The need to drive and support gender equality in the workplace is urgent in the MENA region. Here, the share of formal sector employment, including leadership positions and firm ownership held by women lags far behind the percentage owned by men, as well as the share held by women in other regions, a situation due to both social and gender norms and structural impediments.

Certain businesses, such as the Mansour Group in Egypt and the Bank of Palestine, profiled in this brief, alongside alliances, National Governments, civil society organizations, United Nations entities, local activists and other parties in the MENA region have already begun to take action in the area of laws and legislative tools; recruitment and hiring practices; child-friendly workplace policies; policies prohibiting sexual harassment; ensuring safe and reliable transportation; the promotion of women

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