

Arab Women and Digitalization in Post Covid-19 Era

Executive summary

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Based on the background papers received from the «Call for Report Coordinator» launched by The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR)

In consultation with members of The Arab Network for Gender and Development (@NGED)

Executive summary

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Preface

It has been three years since the COVID-19 Pandemic. Still, the world is recovering from its ongoing effects as it continues to disrupt lives and livelihoods due to limitation of direct contact with people, restriction on movement and travel, change in active lifestyle, boredom and monotony, and uncertainty about the future (NLM 2021). During the pandemic, women were dramatically impacted as they dropped out of paid employment at higher rates than men, took on responsibilities for increased care of children and the ill, and faced greater risks of violence. Indeed, the virus containment measures affected women's labor market outcomes more adversely than those of men. Moreover, the increased burden of care resulting from the closure of schools and childcare centers during the pandemic fell more heavily on the shoulders of working mothers. Even in economies where a disproportionate share of women did not drop out of the labor market, women were often under additional stress trying to manage increased care responsibilities while remaining at their jobs. Women, both employees and entrepreneurs, were affected more adversely than men with regard to business closure, reduced demand for products or services, and financial distress. At the same time, women-led businesses were more likely to increase using digital platforms (WBG 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic accelerated digital transformation progress and 'almost everything' went online. E.g., since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, e-commerce expanded, and consumers across the globe have been heavily reliant on e-commerce to purchase everything from essential goods to holiday gifts. Combined with widespread stay-at-home orders and concerns over the virus, the pandemic accelerated the adoption of e-commerce by consumers and businesses seemingly overnight (McKinsey & Company 2021). Healthwise, 71 percent of healthcare industry professionals believed that the COVID-19 pandemic had been the most impactful event on digital transformation in the healthcare sector in recent years across the regions (CTA 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic has also hastened the expansion of online learning across all levels of education. Education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of e-learning, (WEF 2020). Gender-based violence (GBV) incidents increased during lockdown, women and girls were in particular affected. International and local NGOs adapted remote GBV services focusing on phone-based case management, online platforms, services, and counseling, apps, and hotlines (GBVIMS 2021).

For women and girls, digitalization (adaptation of a system, process, etc. to be operated with the use of computers and the internet.) is another rapid technological change that is bringing out both the utopian and the dystopian visions of the future. Digital technologies could significantly improve women's participation in economic life and enhance their social autonomy. Certain technologies offer women the potential to bypass, or leapfrog, some of the traditional cultural and mobility barriers they face offline, particularly in low- and middle-income countries. For example, women who were unable to join the demonstrations during protest movements that erupted in the Arab Countries, particularly rural women constrained by deeply rooted patriarchal structures, recorded and shared their support on social media, such as Facebook and Twitter (Wajcman 2020). At the same time, digital transformation can lead to widening the digital gender divide as the result of persisting

inequalities and inherited social-cultural norms that is biased against women. The power structures in many communities in the Arab World curtail women and girls' ability to benefit from the opportunities offered by the digital revolution. E.g., the number of men who are using easily accessible apps to stalk and control their victims, is increasing in a concerning way. Furthermore, women activists are the biggest victims of Pegasus spyware (TNA 2022).

The advantages of digitalization can certainly outweigh the disadvantages. However, and as stated by 'Yasmeen Al-Sharaf, the Director of the FinTech and Innovation Unit at the Central Bank of Bahrain⁽¹⁸⁾: *«to close the gender parity within the digital sector, companies should design their strategies around the notion of diversity. They must invest in employee development to ensure that women are given equal learning and training opportunities as well as equipping them with more basic technical skills, such as coding. In short, women need to be encouraged to acquire these skills and use them as a stepping-stone into the industry.»*

Dr. Soukiena Bouraoui
CAWTAR, Executive Director



Executive Summary

This Eighth Arab Women Development Report (AWDR) on Women in the Arab World and digitalization in post Covid-19 era addresses digitalization as a development mechanism, and as an important tool for the inclusive empowerment of women in the Arab Region. It takes into consideration the fact that the issue of digitalization in the Arab Region is still not addressed as a development mechanism that can significantly contribute to the overall empowerment of women and tries to bridge the gap. Through this report, the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR) aspires to document and highlight development initiatives that have been successful in reducing inequalities in the technological field, in relation with achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and with a focus on the critical role of digital transformation in improving the lives of women and their communities in the Arab World.

CAWTAR's role in empowering women economically and socially, and promoting the role of women as a mean to achieve the SDGs are cross-cutting in all initiatives. In 2022, and in cooperation with the EU's Enhancing Business Support Organization (EBSOMED), CAWTAR conducted a research on *Digitalization of Businesswomen Support Services in the South Neighbourhood Countries (SNC): State of the Art & Way Forwards*⁽¹⁾. The Research, based on the findings of a survey in Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, and Tunisia, draws on the the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) 2023, that revolved around: "Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls".⁽²⁾

The 8th AWDR Report is supported by the Arab Gulf Program for Development (AGFUND). CAWTAR issued a 'Call for Report Coordinators' to develop papers on 'Arab Women and Digitalization after the COVID-19 pandemic'. Ten expert papers were selected as background for this report. The papers highlight the Impact of Covid-19 on Women in the MENA Region, and how the lockdown has accelerated the digitalization of public and private sector activities in the countries, including countries in the Arab Region. The themes revolve around four main topics:

- Distance learning, and the digitalization of Education
- e-marketing, e-finance, and entrepreneurship
- Digital technology to address GBV and VAW
- NGOs/WLOs using online platforms to achieve SDGs

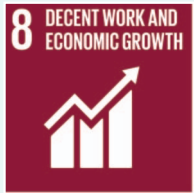
1. <https://www.bcdesk.eu/sites/default/files/2023-06/industry-outlook-study-in-digitallization-of-businesswomen-support-services.pdf>

2. [https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/230213percent 20BLS22613percent 20UNWpercent 20CSW67.v04percent 20percent 282percent 29.pdf](https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2023-02/230213percent%20BLS22613percent%20UNWpercent%20CSW67.v04percent%20percent%20282percent%2029.pdf)

Box 1: The Connectivity, Gender Equality and SDGs Nexus

SDG	Role of connectivity based on relevant ITU initiatives
 <p>Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</p>	<p>Connectivity can provide access to online education in general, as well as helping to develop the digital skills needed to work online and find jobs.</p> <p>Indicator 4.a.1: Proportion of schools offering basic services, by type of service, includes 'Internet' and 'computers' among the services</p> <p>Indicator 4.4.1: Proportion of youth and adults with ICT skills, by type of skills</p> <p>ITU is partnering with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to develop digital skills for youth to promote employment.</p> <p>UNESCO has launched the Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) on media and information literacy (MILMOOC) to empower young girls and boys through providing them with the necessary competence in media and information literacy. UNESCO supports the site with capacity building for youth organisations, including youth organisations involved in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, to integrate media and information literacy in the policy and operation of their strategy. The site is currently available in English and Arabic³.</p>
 <p>Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</p>	<p>The benefits of connectivity should be available to all equally, but currently there is a digital gender gap.</p> <p>Indicator 5.b.1: Proportion of individuals who own a mobile telephone, by sex</p> <p>ITU is involved in a number of gender equality initiatives, including EQUALS, a global network to improve women's access to technology, and that promotes female leadership in the tech sector.</p>

3. www.broadbandcommission.org/workinggroups/Pages/digital-gender-divide.aspx and www.broadbandcommission.org/workinggroups/Pages/bbandgender.aspx.



Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Internet connectivity can offer opportunities for innovation and entrepreneurship to create jobs and companies, and digital transformation can generate economic growth.

ITU has a Digital Innovation Framework to help accelerate these impacts. The International Centre of Digital Innovation is working with partners to develop strategies to accelerate digital transformation.



Reduce inequality within and among countries

Access to technologies and the knowledge that can be reached through connectivity can provide jobs and enable remote work to help reduce inequalities.

ITU's work to reduce the digital divide can contribute.

Source: ITU 2022

The following is a summary of the experts' paper, highlighting the main challenges, success stories, and recommendation for each of the selected topics:

Arab Women Development Report's Handbook on: «Arab women and digitalization post COVID-19»

First Theme: Distance learning, and the digitalization of Education

1 - Education and Digitalization

Expert: Yosra Jamal

Country: Egypt

Report's Abstract: Egypt has taken important strides to transform digitally in a number of fields including Education. The introduction of technology in education has been a strategic objective at both the governmental and educational institutional levels long before COVID-19. There were a number of initiatives before 2020 that accelerated during the pandemic. The aim was to reach out to as many students as possible. However, the transformation from a traditional classroom environment to online learning in a brief period of time caused disruption as teachers struggled to adjust with online teaching methods.

Challenges highlighted in the report: Three main challenges have been identified: 1) there are still places in Egypt, especially in the rural regions, that lacks liable internet connectivity; 2) the need to update educational tools and methodologies online; and 3) the need to secure funding to ensure the continuity of online education.

Success Stories presented: New practices initiated by the Ministry of Education include the online Educational Platforms (<https://moe.gov.eg/en/elearningenterypage/>) to facilitate online learning. This includes the 'Egyptian Knowledge Bank' which provides both students and teachers with free access to: digital library, educational resources, and online courses.

Recommendations and way forward: to ensure that the Government meets its commitment to provide online education for all, the following is recommended: 1) Sex, Age and Location Disaggregated Data are needed to understand if – and how – the 'gender digital gap' in education is narrowing; 2) update the methods and tools for more effective online education; 3) build the capacity of educators to provide the needed education; and 4) improve connectivity, especially in rural areas, to ensure that no one is left behind.

2 - Digitalization & updated technology for empowering women, Gulf States

Expert: Jafla ALamari

Country: Bahrain

Report's Abstract: In the Arab World, women's participation in the labour force is low, and their participation A number of initiatives were taken by the Arab States to encourage women's digital transformation, and bridge the gender gap in technology. Digitalization as a tool that can empower women, help to overcome discrimination, and give her access to meaningful and effective participation in all levels of society, including decision-making and achieving gender equality.

Although more women than men graduate from the Faculty of Technology and Informatics. Most services are now provided online including E-health, E-consultation, E-finance. Recently, women in the Gulf states have started considering the opportunities provided by Artificial Intelligence (AI).

Challenges highlighted in the report: Women's participation in the labour force is still low, although gradually increasing. They outperform men in educational qualification. However, this is still not reflected in the workforce. While women in the Arab Gulf countries are becoming well integrated in technology and the use of digital tools, there is still stereotyping against female politicians and activists. ITC companies requires long working hours, which are beyond the office work, making it difficult for women with responsibilities to commit.

Success stories presented: Digitalization role in empowering women in general, and specifically in the economic and political sphere.

Recommendations: 1) Most jobs rely on the use of technology and digitalization; 2) To empower women in transformative digitalization, two types of training should be available: I) to enable women's access to market, and II) to support women entrepreneurship; 3) Policies that aim to enhance women's role and use of technology; and 4) Bridging the geographic gap between the east and west use of technology

Second Theme: e-marketing, e-finance, and entrepreneurship

3 - Women and Digitalized Marketing

Expert: Ahmed Alajarma

Country: Jordan

Report's Abstract: The pandemic had negative impact on the economy in Jordan. The Ministry of Finance anticipated a 3.4 percent deflation. The impact on women's livelihood opportunities was obvious, especially women in the informal sector, estimated at over 60 percent of the total informal enterprises. Some women were able, nevertheless, to turn towards e-marketing, as a tool that helped them to continue with their Income Generating Activities.

Challenges highlighted in the report: When the pandemic struck, and a lockdown was imposed, women's own businesses tremendously suffered as they were not prepared to work online. They did not have the needed skills to go digital. They also suffered from lack of platforms that provided the needed services and promoted online marketing. In particular, women in the rural areas lacked the tools, including access to internet, mobiles, and laptops. Capacity building programs were postponed during the pandemic lockdown. The organizations and beneficiaries were not well prepared to turn into online training.

Success stories presented: A number of programs and initiatives were developed to empower Jordanian women economically. This includes the 'Sanad Fund for MSME' <https://sanad.lu> which provides support to women entrepreneurs. The 'Solidarity is Global Institute (SIGI) <http://sigi-jordan.org/en> offers economic capacity building to women. Sanabel, the Microfinance Network of Arab Countries <https://sanabelconf.org/index.php/en> works towards abridging the gender gap by empowering women entrepreneurs, and promoting digital transformation. Souqfann <https://souqfann.com> provided an opportunity for women with small businesses to market their local products and handicrafts online.

Recommendations: e-marketing is a valuable tool for women's economic empowerment and must be encouraged and further developed. It provides a platform where women, even those with small businesses, can exhibit their products in a safe and reliable environment. E-marketing should come with other complementary tools including online payment, photo scanning, online editing, and online quality control, among others. Therefore, to advance e-marketing, specific online trainings and capacity building programs must be developed.

4 - Digitalization, COVID-19, & positive impacts on women's digital economic participation

Expert: Ruba Darwish

Country: Jordan

Report's Abstract: Women in the MENA Region, including in Jordan, have always faced obstacles in entering the labour market. The COVID-19 lockdown further hindered women's equal access to the labour market, and at the same time stimulated the needs to find potential solutions. One of the few 'positive impacts' of the pandemic's lockdown is that it opened ways to consider the importance and need to accelerate digital transformation and use technology, including online technology as a main tool for advancing women's economic participation and inclusion in labour market.

Challenges highlighted in the report: women's social responsibilities are main hinder to their economic participation and inclusion. Yet, at the same time, Social Responsibilities can enhance women's role and participation in different digitalization related fields.

Success stories presented: Legal reforms to enhance women's economic empowerment, and protect their rights, have been initiated in the Arab Countries at accelerating speed, during the last decade the countries have also started to consider Digitalization as a tool to open new avenues for women's integration in MENA labour markets, create job opportunities and help lift traditional impediments to women's economic contribution.

Recommendations: 1) Government's role in empowering women via innovative national policies that aims at bridging the gender divide, 2) establish training centers throughout the country and ensure reaching out to the most remote and vulnerable population; and 3) Collaboration with international research and training centers to conduct researches that are based on Sex disaggregated data and gender analysis.

Third theme: - Digital technology to address GBV and VAW

5 - Digitalization tools for Addressing GBV post COVID-19 pandemic lockdown

Expert: Azza Kamel

Country: Egypt

Report's Abstract: Gender-Based Violence (GBV), Violence Against Women (VAW) and domestic violence in specifically have exacerbated in the Arab World in general and in Egypt in particular as the result of the Covid-19 lockdown. According to the National Council for Women <http://ncw.gov.eg/>, domestic violence increased 33 per cent. NGOs are addressing the problem by providing online platforms, hotlines, and basic network services for GBV survivors. Using digital services, they were able to distribute more information and achieve broader outreach.

Challenges highlighted in the report: internet connection and apparatus (mobile, laptops) are expensive, especially for women who are economically and socially disadvantaged. The most vulnerable cannot afford to buy high end technology and are therefore left behind. Although vulnerable groups have suffered the most during the pandemic, at the same time, they were the ones who lack access to online services. Even women who had access to the internet were not spared from online attacks and exploitation, which dramatically rose during the lockdown. Platforms were even used to promote human trafficking. Such was the case of the two female Tik Tok influencers who were sentenced to imprisonment for offences under the Cybercrime Act (Columbia University 2021).

Success stories presented: despite the lack of safe online spaces for survivors of GBV, still a number of platforms were initiated including: Daftar Hekayat Al-Modawana (story book)⁽⁴⁾, a blog that shares testimonies of SGBV survivors, providing confidentiality and anonymity. Also, the #Metoo Egypt platform and campaign <https://www.instagram.com/assaultpolice/> that provides a space for women to share their stories with sexual harassment and assault online and announce the perpetrators to the public.

Recommendations: continue to use all available online platforms, and create new ones as needed, to fight against GBV of all sorts. Ensure that 'no one is left behind' and that the most vulnerable are able to use online services to protect them. Measures should be taken to protect online platforms from cyberattack. Build the capacity of girls and women to be able to use online technology and eradicate stereotyping.

4. https://www.facebook.com/p/افضح-معتدي-Out-an-Abuser-100064332026417/?locale=hi_IN&paipv=0&eav=Afby6oNK3Fyo51mupsPQMhZGMuCFLTz9prEh1P4v_Upp_aFlfABwDXiKEzLQqVh6CCA&_rdr

6 - Sociological impact of COVID-19, globally and in Jordan

Expert: Maysoon AlAtoom

Country: Jordan

Report's Abstract: One of the main impacts of COVID-19 lockdown was the unprecedented increase in the SGBV cases worldwide. Jordan was no exception. This brings AlAtoom to draw a literal analysis on Antonin Artaud's horror theater, to compare between the similarities and patterns between ancient plagues, and today's modern Covid-19 plague. Both plagues have had long lasting impacts and consequences on the most vulnerable, which are mostly women and girls. Today, it has become obvious that technology is a main tool that can be used in such cases to help eliminate VAW.

Challenges highlighted in the report: NGOs have been providing online services, including psychosocial support to GBV survivors. However, these services are still limited, as most staff lack the skills and capacity to be able to provide online services and continue to play a significant role in empowering women.

Success stories presented: A number of projects aiming at 'Protecting Women and Vulnerable Groups' have been initiated by the Arab Women Association (AWA) in cooperation with ActionAid and Orange

An increase in the initiatives that Provides psychological, legal support services, and group counseling via online confidential sessions using mostly Whatsapp, Messenger, IMO.

A number of NGOs provided online sessions on 'protection against GBV' to university students. Furthermore, the 'Jordan Open-Source Association' (JOSA) is working towards utilizing from technologies to boost Jordan's transformation efforts, digital rights and strengthen the Cybercrime Law.

Recommendations: 1) NGOs need to take on a new updated role to stay efficient in providing the needed services, especially for women; 2) Projects and plans need to be gradually updated to ensure that they meet the needs and expectations; and 3) Coordination at various levels between NGOs and government institutions

7 - Digitalization Mechanism for Addressing GBV post COVID-19

Expert: Ghanya Alaywy

Country: Bahrain

Report's Abstract: During the pandemic lockdown, NGOs in Bahrain were able to provide much needed online services and initiate new initiatives. Different tools, platforms and methods were used to ensure that women equally access the services. The NGOs played vital role to response to and overcome the negative impact of the pandemic. They ensured that women and vulnerable groups have access to digital infrastructure and are digitally literate.

Challenges highlighted in the report: The Government is overcoming the challenges faced to include women in digital transformation. Aligning with the global trend of digitalization, the government continues to position SCW at the forefront of its commitment to innovation, development and ensuring equal access to both men and women.

Success stories presented: The Supreme Council for Women (SCW) in Bahrain <https://www.scw.bh/en/> was able to provide a 'surge response mechanism' to women, during the COVID-19 lockdown. Online legal, psychosocial, and economic services were provided, and ensured that they reached everyone. Through the "Moutakatifeen" (In Solidarity) campaign, SCW continues providing support to Bahraini women and families, in cooperation with the National Taskforce for Combating COVID-19 and the e-Volunteer platform (BNA 2020). In cooperation with the Ministry of Justice, it automated services of the Family Reconciliation Office' to provide online services.

Recommendations: 1) Focus on the role of Bahrain women and exacerbated burden as the result of additional responsibilities; 2) Highlight the role of women who were able to become role models, as 'She is at the forefront of success', when implementing initiatives; 3) provide different mechanisms and tools to be used; and analyze the impact of the initiatives on women and girls; 4) Continue to enhance skill development and training plans, and use of platforms; 5) Enhance collaboration to better utilize from the services; 6) A hotline for difficult to reach cases; and 7) Offer capacity building trainings free of charge, to ensure that 'no one is left behind',

Fourth Theme: NGOs/WLOs using online platforms to achieve SDGs

8 - Commitment and moving forward during COVID-19 pandemic

Expert: Huda Dahroj

Country: Egypt

Report's Abstract: Technology is an essential tool for women's empowerment and achieving Egypt's 2030 Vision. The vision focuses on the role of Egyptian women as contributors to the achievement of SDGs. Accordingly, the Government continues to initiate policies and regulations aiming at advancing the role of women in development, not only in the urban areas, but also reaching out to rural areas.

Challenges highlighted in the report: The gender digital gap in Egypt is still wide as the result of widespread gender inequality in vital areas such as access to entrepreneurship. COVID-19 lockdown have negatively impacted around 80 percent of women's SMEs as they witnessed decline in productions and profit. On the other hand, only 2 percent stated that the lockdown has provided new opportunities for them and their economies boosted during the pandemic.

Success stories presented: two main successful online initiatives that can help women entrepreneurs to boost their businesses were presented as follow:

Digital Egypt (<https://digital.gov.eg>) is a platform that simplifies the process of accessing government services online. It supports expanding the digital infrastructure to ensure widespread internet access. It also aims to create opportunities for employment in the digital economy, and foster entrepreneurship and digital innovation among citizens.

Qodwa-Tech (<https://www.qodwatech.com>) aims to empower Egyptian women both economically and socially by offering online marketing, and training for employment.

Recommendations and way forward: 1) update the crisis management systems in all fields (health, education, labour market...). This includes the development of a set of procedures and resources to implement and effectively respond to in case of a crisis; 2) support females' SMEs online by creating platforms that are accessible and safe; and 3) reach out to the most vulnerable via creating online opportunities.

9 - Impact of COVID-19 lockdown on WLOs' goal to achieve SDGs

Expert: Jihan Abuzeid

Country: Egypt

Report's Abstract: NGOs in the Arab World have tried to respond to the impact of COVID-19 and mitigate the negative impact that the lockdown had on NGOs, especially Women Led Organizations (WLOs) performance. The lockdown called for a new set of activities and new tools to address the impact of the pandemic. The option was to use technology to advance WLOs goals, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Challenges highlighted in the report: The impact of the pandemic lockdown on WLOs can be summarized as follow: halt in fieldwork, focusing on relief related activities, new activities to respond to the lockdown, suspending 'capacity building' trainings, staff decrease, lack of connection with local communities, decrease in funding.

Success stories presented: As the use of the internet increased among institutions (e.g. 50 percent in Algeria, 30 percent in Morocco and Jordan, 16 percent in Tunisia) NGOs/WLOs attempted to provide some of the needed online platforms. Hence, they became active in conducting online seminars, training programs, safety-related information, online services, and competitions. Platform mostly used included: Instagram, google-meet, skype, messenger, zoom, and Microsoft team. A number of platforms to help GBV/VAW survivors were also established:

In Palestine, the Association of Women Media and Development (Tam) <https://www.besafe.ps/about-us> established an online platform "be safe" for survivors of domestic violence.

In Tunisia, The Association tunisienne des femmes démocrates (ATFD) <http://femmesdemocrates.org.tn/> provided a platform for survivors of domestic violence.

Recommendations and way forward: 1) enhance collaboration between the NGOs and the Government to advance digital transformation and provide online services; e.g. online health, education, financial... services and ensure easy access to the applications; 2) develop the needed infrastructure that leads to better online platforms and services; 3) overcome the digital illiteracy among women and abridge the gender digital gap by providing the needed skills that will help women to overcome the barriers to digital access.

10 - National SDGs for empowering women in the digital market

Expert: Najat Ishaki

Country: Bahrain

Report's Abstract: While technology has the potential to help deliver the SDGs, it can also be at the root cause of exclusion and inequality. Digital transformation is a crucial tool, a catalyst, for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and the integration of a gender perspectives in technology is crucial for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development. The potentials that digitalization provides for women's economic empowerment is high. Among others, it can open new avenues for women's integration in the labour markets by creating jobs opportunities and help lift traditional barriers to women's contribution.

Challenges highlighted in the report: lack of networking to promote digital marketing and provide access to women is the main challenge; Lack of training and positive competition. The need for more initiatives to link between digitalization and SDGs at the local level.

Success stories presented: in terms of advancement and development, the Government and NGOs in Bahrain are working on multiple pillars including advancing the 2030 Agenda; digital transformation and digitalization; and promoting CSOs role in advancing gender equality. This leads to a link between technology, women's rights, and the empowerment of women, as reflected specifically in SDG5. Hence, it is important to utilize technology and ICTs to realize women's and girls' empowerment across all the SDGs. A number of initiatives including: the 'Solidarity for the safety of Bahrain' campaigns, governmental entities and startups were launched during the COVID-19 outbreak to overcome impediments to women's participation.

Recommendations: major opportunities were identified. These opportunities will turn into risks if they are not addressed. They include link between the SDGs and digital marketing; localize the SDGs; adopt digital transformation; digital marketing skills and training; provide different levels of support to women, to access the digital market; invest and promote competitiveness for new clients; promote online shopping; promote innovative thinking such as green marketing.

Based on the above expert papers, Based on the above expert papers, the report is divided into four main chapters as follow:

The first Chapter: Gender Digital Divide in the Arab Countries presents the Gender Digital Divide in the Arab Countries. It draws a general framework focusing on the digital transformation in the Arab Region, how it effects women's advancement, and the impacts on the situation of women and girls. It identifies the gender gap is in the Arab countries in terms of females' access to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) education and which accordingly leads to gender balance/imbalance in STEM related skills, and careers. It sets the framework on the link between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and digitalization; and therefore, highlights how achieving the SDGs can benefit directly from digital technologies.

The Chapter refers to CSW67, and that the National women mechanisms in the Arab Countries adopted the 67th session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) *on Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women, and the aligning theme of the International Women Day (IWD) DigitALL: Innovation and technology for gender equality.*

The Second Chapter: Institutional Initiatives towards digital transformation identifies initiatives spearheaded by different institutions in the Arab Countries (Governments, NGOs, media...) to respond to and promote digital transformation. This includes the main policies and regulations adopted and which drive digital transformation and ensures that it reaches and serves everyone. During the COVID-19 lockdown, Governments were met with a number of challenges to abridge the digital gap and ensure that the needed services (economic, health, consultation...) were provided online. While men accounted for a higher proportion of disease-related deaths, it was women's wellbeing that was affected as they suffered from lack of access to health care, among other services. A number of cases are presented and show how social media is important in tracking down GBV cases, and responding to cyberattacks. Journalists are playing a key role in addressing the rise of GBV and VAW cases and responding to the increase in cyber-attack cases against women and girls.

The chapter refers to the specific case of Palestinian women whom for decades have been digitally empowered, with access to digital technologies, are today using their skills to convey the humanitarian situation on the ground and push for the implementation of Human Rights, including women's rights, in the occupied territories.

The Third Chapter: promoting women's e-finance, e-marketing, online training, and education showcases ways in which digitalization is supporting women and providing essential services (e-finance, e-marketing, online education...). Ministries, International and national organizations have collaborated to provide different services, reaching out to the most vulnerable. This has led, among others, to better access to the market. Events such as *the OECD's Women's Economic Empowerment and Digitalization in the post- COVID-19 MENA Economies* highlight the importance of promoting a gender perspective in digital technology. Young female entrepreneurs are deploying technology to address the challenges including environmental challenges faced by their communities as the result of climate change. There has also been initiative to use digital solution to respond to female refugees' economic needs in host communities. Furthermore, women living under occupation have also benefited from online platforms to overcome the restrictions imposed on them. Another important initiative that accelerated during the COVID-19 lockdown is online education and e-learning. However, the education shifts to online platforms clearly privileged some people over others.

The chapter highlights how ensuring equity and inclusivity in e-learning is crucial for women and girls during and after the pandemic. It is a tool that can help to overcome the socio-economic disparities, gender inequality. At school in particular, accessibility issues can impact students' ability to participate fully in online education. Therefore, efforts should be made to provide equal opportunities for all students, regardless of their background or circumstances

The Fourth Chapter: Bridging the Digital Gender Divide in the Arab Countries summarizes the main aspects presented by the experts' papers and the desk review that was carried out. It presents the main findings on the potentials of digitalization in boosting women's participation and seeks to understand if digitalization has become the norm for women in the Arab Region, and if digital platforms provide secure places for women. It also presents the potentials to turn digitalization challenges (e.g., lack of data, lack of opportunities, lack of long-term strategies...) into opportunities.

The chapter concludes with a comprehensive set of recommendations that cover the four main themes of the report: distance learning and online education; entrepreneurship and access to e-marketing and e-finance; the role of digital technology in addressing Gender-Based Violence (GBV); and the role of local NGOs, including Women-Led Organizations, in using online platforms to achieve the SDGs and abridge the gender digital divide.

Box 2: Arab Women taking STEM to the next level

Rayyanah Barnawi (Saudi Arabia) is the first female Arab astronaut travelling to the International Space Station (ISS) for the first time on a private mission to carry out a number of experiments. Barnawi is also a breast cancer researcher, and fighter pilot⁽⁵⁾. In May 2023, she entered the International Space Station⁽⁶⁾.

Rania Toukabri (Tunisia) the first Tunisian female astronaut in space. She Graduated in engineering specializing in instrumentation from INSAT. She continued her studies in the design, verification and integration of spacecraft and took part in a work-study program in European Space Agency to observe the Earth and explore space.⁽⁷⁾ In fact, there are eight Tunisian women selected for the first Tunisian and African female astronaut project⁽⁸⁾.

Dr. Heba Alzaben (Jordan) Winning a scholarship, she completed her PhD in Mechanical Engineering in Canada, researching the use of thermal remote sensing to detect crop stress. Back in Jordan, she worked in academia, continuing the research project she had started as part of her PhD. In 2021, she was selected for the L'Oréal-UNESCO For Women in Science Levant Young Talents Fellowship Program⁽⁹⁾.

Dr. Nadine Rouphael (Lebanon) is Distinguished Professor of Vaccinology and Infectious Diseases at Emory University in Atlanta, USA. She serves as the executive director of the Hope Clinic, the clinical arm of the Emory Vaccine Center and the Emory principal investigator for the NIH funded Vaccine Treatment and Evaluation Unit (VTEU) and the co Clinical Core principal investigator for NIH funded Stanford Human Immunology Project Consortium (HIPC)⁽¹⁰⁾.

5. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/5/21/first-saudi-astronauts-to-blast-off-in-private-mission-to-iss>

6. <https://www.nasa.gov/image-article/ax-2-mission-specialist-rayyanah-barnawi-enters-the-space-station/>

7. <https://news-tunisia.tunisienumerique.com/tunisia-mission-to-space-interview-with-rania-toukabri-tunisia-first-female-astronaut/>

8. <https://africanews.space/eight-women-selected-for-first-tunisian-and-african-female-astronaut-project/>

9. <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/jordanian-women-shine-science>

10. <https://med.emory.edu/departments/medicine/divisions/infectious-diseases/profile/?u=NROUPHA>

Professor Asmaa Boujibar (Morocco) is an assistant professor of Planetary Science. She recently joined both Geology Department and Physics & Astronomy Department of Western Washington University. She received her Ph.D. in 2014 from the Université Clermont Auvergne in France. She was a NASA postdoctoral fellow at the Johnson Space Center (2014-2016), then a Carnegie fellow at the Carnegie Institution for Science (2016-2021)⁽¹¹⁾.

Professor Haneen Dwaib (Palestine) is chair of the Clinical Nutrition and Dietetics, Palestine Ahliya University; winner of a 2023 Organization for Women in Science in the Developing World (OWSD)-Elsevier Foundation Award. Despite the challenges she is facing due to the continuous unrest in Palestine, and lack of advanced technology, Dr. Dwaib continues to advance interventional studies in nutrition in the Region⁽¹²⁾

Dr. Nura Adam Mohamed (Qatar) is a Research Associate at Qatar University's Biomedical Research Center and an Honorary Research Associate at Imperial College London. She earned her BSc in Biomedical Science from Qatar University and her master's and PhD from Imperial College London. Dr. Nura was awarded for her research on developing new ways to prevent diabetes and heart diseases⁽¹³⁾.

Shadia Habbal (Syria) specializes in the study of the origin and evolution of the solar wind, the stream of protons, electrons, alpha particles, and traces of ionized heavier elements that flows outward from the Sun. She receives major research grants from the National Science Foundation and NASA to pursue the study of the solar corona which can only be seen from Earth during a total solar eclipse⁽¹⁴⁾.

Rana El Kaliouby (Egypt) is a computer scientist, and leader in Artificial Intelligence (AI) angel investor, and entrepreneur working to humanize technology. She served as Co-Founder and CEO of Affectiva, an MIT Media Lab spin-off. El Kaliouby is also an executive fellow at the Harvard Business School and author of *Girl Decoded: A Scientist's Quest to Reclaim Our Humanity by Bringing Emotional Intelligence to Technology*⁽¹⁵⁾.

Sarah Al-Amiri (UEA) is the chair of the UAE Space Agency and Minister of State for Advanced Technology who, on February 9, 2021, led Hope – the UAE's successful mission to orbit a satellite around Mars. Sarah's team consist of 80 per cent women. Hence, UEA is the fifth nation, and first Arab Nation to get their probe to orbit Mars⁽¹⁶⁾.

Dr. Eqbal Mohammed Abdu Dauqan (Yemen) is member of the Global Young Academy (GYA), and a researcher in biochemistry, food antioxidants and nutrition at the Faculty of Medicine, University of Oslo. In 2014 Eqbal established a new program entitled Therapeutic Nutrition Department at Sadde University, Taiz, where she was Head of Dep. She was selected as one of five winners of the 2014 Elsevier Foundation Award for Early Career Women Scientists in the developing countries (Chemical Sciences)⁽¹⁷⁾.

11. <https://geology.wvu.edu/people/boujiba>

12. <https://elsevierfoundation.org/her-nutrition-research-is-making-an-impact-despite-challenges-in-middle-east/>

13. <https://www.realstaffing.com/en-ae/blog/2024/february/women-in-stem-where-the-mena-region-stands/>

14. <https://people.ifa.hawaii.edu/faculty/bio/shadia-habbal/>

15. <https://medium.com/rediscover-steam/arab-women-are-breaking-the-glass-ceiling-in-stem-1e29699af80a>

16. <https://www.iafastro.org/biographie/sarah-al-amiri.html>

17. <https://globalyoungacademy.net/edauqan/>

The Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR)

CAWTAR was founded in 1993 as an independent regional non-governmental institution established to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in the Arab World. Through research, training, networking, and advocacy, CAWTAR continues to help Arab women, enhance their rights and opportunities, to empower them, and to participate in the development of their communities.

To pursue the two-folded goals of women's rights and women's empowerment, CAWTAR generates knowledge to strengthen the capacity of Arab Institutions to integrate gender effectively into their programs and projects. The Center carries out five main programs: networking, partnerships, media & communication, and documentation & database creation and management.

CAWTAR cooperates with national and international institutions, multilateral banks, research institutes, and NGOs on gender and development projects. Since 2002, CAWTAR has collaborated with the World Bank to build effective networks in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) for gender advocates, researchers, and policymakers.

Based in Tunisia, CAWTAR is mainly funded and supported by regional and international organizations. Its creation was in direct response to a long-felt need in the Arab region for a specialized center to focus on and to promote the participation of Arab women in the development process. It was founded jointly by the Arab Gulf Programme for the United Nations Development Organizations (AGFUND), the Tunisian Government, and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). Since its inception, CAWTAR has grown to include such institutions as the League of Arab States (LAS), the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), the World Bank Group (WBG), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), the European Commission (EU), and The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) among others⁽¹⁹⁾. Hence, CAWTAR's objectives can be summarized as following:

- Contribute to developing and reinforcing a new vision of the Arab woman, as well as in changing the traditional view of gender roles in the process of social development.
- Contribute to raising awareness among policymakers, planners, interest groups, institutions, and the general public about the current situation of Arab women and their real and potential contributions to national development.
- Contribute to enhancing capacity building of governments, institutions and NGOs to monitor and analyze women's changing roles, design appropriate policies, programs and projects that will facilitate women's participation in the development process.
- Coordinate efforts with governments, non-government, national, regional and/or international organizations operating in the field of women development in order to achieve common goals.

18. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/03/07/women-in-the-gcc-are-taking-over-tech>

19. Refer to <https://cawtar.org/en/partners> for a whole list of CAWTAR's partners.

As part of its efforts to create broad public awareness on women's issues and to disseminate the results of its research and analysis in the Arab region, CAWTAR compiles and publishes a periodical Arab Women Development Papers (AWDR). For each of these papers, CAWTAR holds a series of workshops, seminars and roundtables to raise awareness among policy makers, civil society actors, media representatives and the public at large about gender inequalities in the Arab region. The Arab Women Development Papers (AWDR) highlights the objectives of the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR): Raise awareness and develop the capacities of policy-makers, planners, and the general public about the Arab women's status and potential contribution to national development; empowering women in the Arab World by creating a network on institutions and experts dealing with the issues of global development; and supporting women's perspective on integrating in the public fields. The papers are:

1st AWDR (2001): Globalization and Gender, Economic Participation of Arab Women.

2nd AWDR (2003): Arab Adolescent Girls: Reality and Prospects.

3rd AWDR (2006): Arab Women and the Media.

4th AWDR (2010): Gender Equality in Decision Making in the Arab World

5th AWDR (2015): Arab Women and Legislation

6th AWDR (2019): Gender and Trade

7th AWDR (2019): Gender Equality in 2030 Agenda: The Role of Civil Society & Media

CAWTAR focuses on the 5th and 10th goals of the 2030 agenda for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. It mainstreams gender in the other goals. The work on the Gender and Digitalization nexus stems from the belief that digitalization is a necessary mechanism to achieve women's empowerment, gender equality and development. This was obvious during the challenges posed by the pandemic at this level. In all SDGs, the challenges of gender inequality have emerged, in addition to the technological challenge that exacerbates its relationship with women and vulnerable groups. Hence, there is no eradication of poverty, for example (goal 2), without sex disaggregated databases to classify the poor and meet their needs; nor is there a guarantee of quality education (goal 4) without the use of technology.

The Arab Network for Gender and Development (@NGED)

ANGED is CAWTAR's regional network of individuals and institutions comprising government officials, researchers, media professionals, and other experts, as well as research centres, NGOs, and regional institutions. There are around 500 members from 19 Arab countries. A number of international experts and organizations are also members. It is a platform for dialogue, an umbrella. For a wide range of activities. ANGED is implemented by CAWTAR, and the Network's four main objectives are:

- Mobilize regional expertise and resources to address and draw attention to issues of gender and development,
- Contribute to the regional formulation of policy recommendation on gender equality in the context of the Arab Region,
- Produce and disseminate findings of policy-oriented analyses to be used by policymakers and media in the promotion of gender equality, and
- Provide a space for dialogue on gender issues within the region.

CAWTAR's first AWRD was in the dissemination phase when ANGED was established. Hence, members were involved in the follow-up in depth papers and specific dissemination and advocacy activities. Ever since, members have participated in the production as well as the dissemination stage of the successive AWRDs. Likewise, the theme for this 8th Report: *Women in the Arab World and digitalization in post Covid-19 Era*, was selected by CAWTAR in consultation with the ANGED's members⁽²⁰⁾, as the unexpected crisis of COVID-19 pandemic confirmed the relevance of the topic. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic represented a crucial moment to identify health, economic and social challenges, especially those related to technology and digitization (as a mechanism to achieve development and security) at different levels such as education, distance work, e-marketing and helping vulnerable groups, notably those exposed to different forms of violence. In all these areas, women and girls have been the weakest populations since they suffer from discrimination.

20. <https://cawtar.org/en/nged-network>

Global priorities at the CSW67

The 67th session of CSW on: Innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age for achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women – key priorities:

- digital equality to close the gender digital divide, including in the context of innovation and technological change, and education in the digital age.
- Leveraging financing for inclusive digital transformation and innovation towards achieving gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls
- Fostering gender-responsive digital and science and technology education in the digital age
- Promoting the full, equal, and meaningful participation and leadership, as well as full employment, of women in technology and innovation
- Adopting gender-responsive technology design, development, and deployment
- Strengthening fairness, transparency, and accountability in the digital age
- Enhancing data science to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls.
- Preventing and eliminating all forms of violence, including gender-based violence that occurs through or is amplified by the use of technologies (UNESCO 2023)

Arab Countries priorities at the CSW67

The Arab Statement Issued by the Arab Regional Preparatory Meeting for the 67th session of the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW67)

- Promote women's economic empowerment in the context of innovation, recent technologies and digital development.
- Enhance women's access to decision-making & leadership positions in the digital age:
- Ensure social protection and food security for women and girls in the digital age within the context of innovation and technology.
- Achieve peace and security in the context of innovation and technological change.
- Protect women and girls from all forms of violence in the context of innovation and technological change.
- Adapt to Climate Change and Environmental Disasters in the Digital Age (LAS 2023)

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 https://twitter.com/CAWTAR_NGO