

# Breaking the Glass Ceiling: Prospects and Avenues for Women's Inclusion and Empowerment in Mediterranean Societies

**Justine Leïla Belaïd.** Political scientist, EuroMeSCo Research Officer, European Institute of the Mediterranean

In most conflicts, women suffer the most devastating consequences, especially if they are migrants and young people, as has happened in recent events around the world with the Covid-19 pandemic. In this context, which has so clearly demonstrated the need for a social change towards gender equality and the green transition, governments have revealed a more or less flagrant lack of policies capable of facing the new challenges and, specifically, the glass ceiling that defines inequalities between men and women, even in the most developed countries. The gender gap is a challenge for the entire Euro-Mediterranean region, so it is necessary to establish a series of recommendations to work for the inclusion and empowerment of women. Thus, we must ensure their access to leadership and decision-making spheres, protect them against violence and vulnerability, and empower them so that they can contribute to the economic transformations the region needs.

The last decade has posed important challenges to societies across the Mediterranean basin. Among these, social justice and inclusion are two of the issues that have gained more traction in debates at all levels of societies. The rise of religious and political extremism, in its diverse forms, the Covid-19 crisis, the political and socioeconomic repercussions of the Arab Spring and, more recently, the war in Ukraine in the region invite us to consider one important common denominator on both

shores of the Mediterranean: resilience and recovery come through the inclusion and empowerment of all. In most conflicts and crises, women often pay the largest price, and even more so if they are migrants, refugees and/or young. Although women remain largely vulnerable in most societies, they are also a solid force of resilience, as Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, recalled in her speech in the European Parliament Plenary on the 2021 International

Women's Day Celebration:<sup>1</sup> "Let us have a look at what women have endured in twelve months of pandemic: the female doctors and nurses, working double shifts for entire weeks and months. The women entrepreneurs, who have fought back, reinvented their business and pulled out all the stops to save their employees. The mothers of lockdown children, who have had to learn the toughest and the most amazing job in the world with no support from the outside world."

*The infamous "glass ceiling" remains a reality on both shores of the Mediterranean and women often remain at the margins of many areas of society*

The various roles assumed by women – whether as parents, professionals, activists, policy-makers – have been and will undoubtedly be the key to ensuring just, cohesive and prosperous societies. However, the infamous "glass ceiling" remains a reality on both shores of the Mediterranean, and women often remain at the margins of many areas of society and are subject to several forms of violence.

## **New Advances... Towards More Vulnerabilities?**

In the face of new transnational challenges such as international terrorism, the rise of authoritarianisms, global warming, energy and food insecurity, government and international bodies are persistently pulling efforts to find so-

lutions, often with the help of activists and the non-profit sector. The debates emerging from this new context bring forward the interest in and appeal for new models of society and development, and thus revive the reflections on the role of women and their position within societies. However, the struggle for gender equality is, in fact, part of a much larger cross-sectoral and comprehensive rethinking of the means of production and models of consumption and lifestyle, highlighting remaining barriers to the advancement of women's participation and inclusion.

In this respect, the "green transition" sits at the core of the Euro-Mediterranean cooperation agenda, particularly as the European Union seeks to externalise its "Green Deal". With an ambitious approach aimed at setting environmental protection standards at the core of its relations with neighbours – and Mediterranean countries among them – the EU sets the tone and invites countries all around the basin to shape policies at all level in line with new sustainability goals. Nevertheless, the success of climate policies is very much interlinked with the issues of social justice and democratic governance,<sup>2</sup> and the green transition – or the transition of the means of production and lifestyles towards more sustainable models – can benefit Mediterranean countries in many ways. As markets transform towards clean energies, industry and services, the demand for so-called green skills will be increasing,<sup>3</sup> the green economy sectors may most certainly bring solutions to the rampant unemployment issue that is so characteristic of Mediterranean youth, and particularly impacting female youths,<sup>4</sup> by provid-

1. European Commission, Speech by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary on the International Women's Day Celebration [speech], 8 March 2021.

2. D. Fakoussa, "The EU Green Deal. A New Momentum for Democratic Governance in the MENA Region?", *EuroMeSCO Paper 47*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2021.

3. United Nations Environment Programme, *Global Guidance for Education on Green Jobs*, 2021.

4. H. Suleiman, "Youth Unemployment in the South of the Mediterranean: A Chronic Challenge to Development and Stability", *EuroMeSCO Paper 48*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2021.



A woman at a meeting (IEMed Collection).

ing “medium to long-term career-building and training opportunities”<sup>5</sup> in addition to fostering jobs with higher wages. However, it may also further deepen pre-existing gender inequalities in society and the labour market, since women are among the least included groups nowadays.

The digital transition – twin sister of the green transition, as labelled by the EU – has also gained significant momentum after the Covid-19 outbreak and related lockdown measures. As schools and many enterprises had to switch to remote work, all generations have had to adapt and make use of digital tools to maintain education and their professional ac-

tivities to ensure their households’ livelihoods. Although countries equipped with digital economies have managed to absorb the shocks of such a fast re-organisation of work, a gap is clearly visible with developing countries. Indeed, in many developing countries of the Mediterranean region, this shift to digital recourse while their economies were still unprepared led to a surge of unemployment affecting women to a larger extent than men. In the Arab States, women’s employment fell by 4.1% between 2019 and 2020 and men’s by 1.8% over the same period.<sup>6</sup> Women’s professional aspirations were often most affected by the Covid-19

5. International Labour Organisation, *Gender Equality and Green Jobs. Policy Brief*, 2015.

6. International Labour Organisation, *Policy Brief: Building forward fairer: Women’s rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery*, 2021.

measures as they often had to stay at home with children during school closures and often had to interrupt their work. In addition, as women still face significant barriers which prevent them from obtaining the human and financial capital required to run businesses,<sup>7</sup> and digital ones in particular. Therefore, women have had issues to transition to remote and digital work because of previously existing barriers which impede women from fully developing the capabilities they would need to ensure resilience in an increasingly digitalised economy.

The twin transition, particularly in the post Covid-19 context, thus highlights the remaining barriers to women's full inclusion in the economic space in Mediterranean countries. Women have been disproportionately affected by the loss of jobs directly caused by the surge of the pandemic, and even more so for women in informal work. Also, according to a recent report on gender equality released by the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), Europe and the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region lag behind in terms of women entrepreneurship. Indeed, as of 2019 the share of women entrepreneurs who own established businesses is 5.3% and 4.5%, respectively, below the global percentage of 6.2%. With regards to nascent women-owned businesses, these regions also need to step up, as they score 3.4% and 4.1%, respectively, below a global percentage of 5.5%.<sup>8</sup>

Another significant phenomenon which gained traction in the last decade and even more so with Covid-19 and the deplorable surge in domestic violence is the awareness concerning violence against women (VAW). On the one hand, societies have come to a realisation with

regards to widespread VAW and gender-based violence (GBV), and governments have, on both shores of the Mediterranean, designed policies to address this issue in spite of enduring patriarchal traditions. On the other, the amount of complaints filed and the unsatisfactory judicial response, denounced on social media, hints at the necessity to be more ambitious and engaged in this violence against women issue. As seen in Egypt and Morocco, efforts to combat violence against women and GBV are fragmented and subject to political disputes.<sup>9</sup>

*The amount of complaints filed and the unsatisfactory judicial response, denounced on social media, hints at the necessity to be more ambitious and engaged in this violence against women issue*

Therefore, societies have been transformed and, to a certain extent, equality between men and women is increasingly acknowledged to be a *sine qua none* condition to ensure sustainable and fair development in the region, as recalled by the UfM: "Equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities for women and men in all areas are not only a human right but also a necessary condition to create stronger institutions, enhance economic and social well-being and eliminate stereotypical views on women."<sup>10</sup>

However, women remain all too often on the margins of such advances and still do not fully benefit from equal opportunities in this new context. The gender gap in the Euro-Mediterranean space and the resulting asymmetries may, in the medium to long-term, put a strain on the transformative policies the EU

7. D. Salman, "The Role of Egyptian Female Entrepreneurship in the Digital Era Post-Covid-19", *EuroMeSCo Paper 55*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2022.

8. Union for the Mediterranean, *2021 Regional progress Report on Gender Equality*, 2022.

9. D. Rashed and R. Allam, "Gender-Based Violence in Egypt and Morocco: Politics and Policy-Making", *EuroMeSCo Paper 54*, European Institute of the Mediterranean, 2022.

10. Union for the Mediterranean, *op. cit.*, 2022.

and many countries around the Mediterranean basin are largely investing in. Furthermore, should the asymmetries remain, prospects for improving social cohesion, prosperity and stability all across the region will most likely remain very slim. With these new transformations come responsibilities, opportunities and risks, which should all be carefully taken into account by policy-makers and the private sector, among other actors.

## Recommendations for More Inclusion and Empowerment of Women in the Mediterranean

As demonstrated, efforts are still needed for women's inclusion and empowerment all across the Mediterranean region, as in other regions of the world. Women's inclusion is a major objective to be achieved for the long-term benefits of societies. It should be addressed in a comprehensive manner:

*The gender gap in the Euro-Mediterranean space and the resulting asymmetries may, in the medium to long-term, put a strain on the transformative policies the EU and many countries around the Mediterranean basin are largely investing in*

Ensure women's access to leadership and decision-making spheres:

- Relations between countries of the Euro-Mediterranean region are often framed by cooperation programmes and funds, provided by the EU and its agencies but also by national state governments, often taking the form of capacity-building for third countries' governance bodies. Such programmes should contribute to the mainstreaming of gender equality aware-

ness among public service officers (whether training and capacity-building is addressed to police personnel, judicial officers or health personnel, among others).

- Ensure that the public sphere is a safe space for women to work and develop their careers with clear rules and no tolerance for harassment and discrimination.
- Include gender equality in audit and monitoring processes for public administrations in order to ensure that women's inclusion is valued across the board when evaluating performances and improvements in the public sphere.

Protect women against violence and vulnerability:

- Specific training for judicial and justice personnel should be provided in order to ensure an effective handling of complaints related to harassment and all kinds of violence targeting women. Training should also be extended to school employees to increase their preparedness in the face of sexist and violent behaviour of children and teenagers.
- Harmonise the legal apparatus all across the Mediterranean in order to address VAW and GBV in a comprehensive manner and in line with the states' international commitments.
- Create an effective network to sustain connections between women and the populations at large, civil society and the authorities (whether local, regional, national or supranational).

Empower women to contribute to economic transformations:

- Provide training and capacity-building to improve women's ability to use new digital tools and to look for funding. The improvement of women's digital and financial

literacy<sup>11</sup> should nonetheless be complemented by improved legal apparatus and infrastructure conducive to women's access to digital tools and funding. Such initiatives could contribute to the expansion of women entrepreneurship throughout the region.

- Establish strategies to limit the negative impacts of informal employment, which deprives women of social protection ben-

efits and long-term perspectives and thus perpetuates insecurities and vulnerabilities. Labour legislation should provide women with conditions equal to men.

- Establish gender conditionalities for public funds to be allocated to private enterprises with demonstrated gender-equality results. Banks and other private finance organs should be encouraged to adopt the same rationale for loans mechanisms.

---

11. Union for the Mediterranean, *op. cit.*, 2022.