



Partner-led side event

Advancing women's entrepreneurship ecosystems

19 November 2026

13:00–16:00 | Room TBC

Background and regional context

Women-owned businesses are increasingly recognized as important drivers of economic growth, job creation, innovation, and social equity across the Arab region. Women have made significant advances in educational attainment and participation in entrepreneurship. However, continued efforts are needed to address structural challenges related to business growth, access to finance, market participation, and integration into entrepreneurial ecosystems.

Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that the Arab region continues to record one of the lowest female labour force participation rates globally, highlighting the need for more effective and inclusive approaches to support women's economic participation and entrepreneurship.¹

Emerging evidence suggests that improving outcomes for women entrepreneurs requires moving beyond individual-focused interventions towards strengthening the institutions and ecosystems that shape entrepreneurial opportunities. Research by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM)² highlights the importance of programme design, access to finance, policy frameworks, institutional coordination, and ecosystem collaboration in supporting the growth of women-owned businesses. According to the International Finance Corporation (IFC),³ women-owned small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) globally continue to face significant barriers to accessing finance. Addressing this gap presents an important opportunity to drive business growth and expansion, and broaden participation in economic activity.

These challenges disproportionately affect some underserved groups in the Arab region, particularly women in rural areas, women with disabilities, refugee and internally displaced women, and women in countries affected by conflict and crisis. Limited access to resources, finance, services, and economic opportunities is often combined with institutional and social barriers. Regional evidence highlights the need for more inclusive approaches that respond to the different needs of these groups and ensure they can benefit from entrepreneurship and economic empowerment opportunities.⁴

Arab Governments are increasingly strengthening women's entrepreneurship through national strategies, dedicated institutions, financing programmes, and entrepreneurship support initiatives. In Jordan, the **Economic Modernization Vision** identifies women's economic participation as a national priority linked to entrepreneurship, employment, and private sector growth. In Bahrain, the **Tamkeen** initiative, together with the Supreme Council for Women, provides integrated support through financing, business development, skills development, and advisory services for women-owned businesses. In Lebanon, the **National Strategy for Women (2022–2030) and its National Action Plan (2024–2026)** promote women's entrepreneurship by strengthening women's economic participation, developing entrepreneurial skills, expanding business networking opportunities, and fostering collaboration among public institutions, the private sector, and entrepreneurship support organizations. In Iraq, the **National Development Plan (2024–2028)** for Iraq focuses on increasing women's economic participation, supporting SMEs, and improving the institutional and regulatory environment for entrepreneurship. This is complemented by the **National Strategy for Women in Iraq (2023–**

2030), which identifies women's economic empowerment and their participation in the labour market and entrepreneurship as key priorities. Together, these efforts support a more inclusive environment for women to participate in economic activity and contribute to private sector growth.⁵

International initiatives are also helping strengthen women's entrepreneurship by expanding access to finance, mentoring and business networks, and fostering collaboration. At the regional level, the **Digital Enabling Platform in the Arab Region (DEPAR)**, developed by ESCWA, supports initiatives such as the **Women and Youth Entrepreneurship Network** and **MicroMentor**, promoting mentoring, collaboration, and support for women entrepreneurs.

At the same time, in several parts of the Arab region, conflict, economic uncertainty, displacement, and the recovery efforts that follow have further highlighted the importance of women-owned businesses as contributors to livelihoods, economic resilience, and community recovery. Ensuring that entrepreneurship support systems remain accessible, inclusive, and responsive in fragile and crisis-affected contexts is an increasingly important priority for policymakers, financial institutions, and ecosystem actors across the region.

This event explores practical approaches to strengthening gender-responsive entrepreneurship ecosystems through three interconnected pillars: designing inclusive entrepreneurship support programmes, advancing gender-smart finance, and promoting ecosystem-level change. It identifies practical recommendations and approaches for building more inclusive, coordinated, and effective ecosystems that enable women-owned businesses across the Arab region to start, grow, access finance, and scale.

Objectives

- Examine the institutional and regulatory factors affecting the participation of women and young people in business, and propose measures to expand their access to government support and services.
- Promote gender-smart finance approaches and financing models that enable women-owned businesses to achieve sustainable growth and scale.
- Highlight successful policies, programmes, and financing mechanisms that have strengthened women's entrepreneurship across the Arab region and beyond.
- **Suggest practical recommendations** for policymakers, financial institutions, entrepreneurship support organizations, and other actors to build more inclusive and effective entrepreneurship ecosystems.
- **Identify tailored support and financing solutions** for each stage of the business lifecycle, from identifying opportunities and developing ideas to growth, expansion and entry into regional and international markets.

Participants

	Polymakers and government representatives supporting entrepreneurship and economic development.
	Entrepreneurship support organizations, incubators, accelerators, and women's business associations.
	Women entrepreneurs, and owners of micro, small and medium-sized enterprises.
	Financial institutions, investors, and development partners supporting women-owned businesses.

Potential partners

- United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).
- Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative (We-Fi).
- Arab Women Organization (AWO).
- Endeavor.
- International Finance Corporation (IFC).
- Regional women's business associations.

Agenda

Time	Title	Session description	Speakers
13:00–14:00	Session 1 Creating an enabling environment for women and young people to start businesses	This session examines the barriers that women, young people, and underserved groups face when starting a business, in areas such as entrepreneurship support programmes, business registration procedures, digital government services, the legal and regulatory environment, and taxation. The session also explores ways to simplify procedures and improve access to services and support.	
14:00–15:00	Session 2 From microfinance to inclusive financing for women, young people and underserved groups	This session explores ways to strengthen financing systems to enable businesses owned by women, young people and persons with disabilities to grow at different stages. It covers credit guarantee schemes, blended finance, alternative financing mechanisms, investment readiness, and financing models that support business expansion. It also highlights inclusive investment approaches and innovative financing tools that respond to the needs of women and underserved groups and support sustainable growth.	Tamara Ghandour, Founder & CEO, Rama Impact, United Arab Emirates Huda Tahboub, Director, Intersect Innovation Hub, State of Palestine
15:00–16:00	Session 3 From skills to success stories: pathways to entrepreneurship and innovation	This session explores how education and technical and vocational training can help young people lead sustainable and scalable businesses. It focuses on strengthening links between young people, the private sector, financial institutions, and business development service providers to foster innovation. It also identifies policies and programmes that support young people's transition from learning to employment and entrepreneurship.	Hanaa Alhasan, Youth Economic Empowerment Expert, International Trade Centre (ITC)

Endnotes

1. ILO, The ILO Women's Entrepreneurship Development Programme: Direction for 2025–2030, 2025.
2. Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (GEM), GEM 2024/2025 Women's Entrepreneurship Report: Navigating Challenges, Driving Change, 2025.
3. International Finance Corporation (IFC), IFC's Roadmap 2030 for Gender and Economic Inclusion.
4. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), Social Development Report 5: Unpacking the Promise to Leave No One Behind in the Arab Region, 2025
5. United Nations in Iraq, On International Women's Day, UN renews commitment to Iraqi women and girls as Baghdad named the Capital of Arab Women 2023, 9 March 2023.