63\textsuperscript{rd} Session of the Commission on the Status of Women  
Side Event on  

“How can digital technology support gender equality in the MENA region?”  

12 March 13.15 - 14.45  
Hall 7, UN HQs  
New York  

Concept Note

Digital technology has the power to transform the ways in which women live, work and communicate, particularly for those who, because of socio-cultural barriers, are confined to their communities with limited exposure to the outside world. Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can be leveraged for access to information about rights, productive resources, technologies, key services, government entitlements and benefits including social protection, and economic opportunities. As expressed by the Special Rapporteur, Prof. Joseph Cannataci of Malta, on the Right to Privacy the internet can be a catalyzer for gender and women in particular. Through ICTs, women’s economic empowerment is enhanced by expanding business and access to decent jobs, including in the ICT sector itself. With the internet, women entrepreneurs can more easily reach out to customers and gain unprecedented opportunities to enter national as well as global markets. Moreover, ICTs, including mobile telephony, can significantly boost economic growth and the development of small businesses, by facilitating greater financial inclusion and hence access to credit. ICTs can also greatly facilitate women’s (i) continuous learning and development of business skills, (ii) network building, (iii) adoption of new technologies, (iv) opportunities to run a business in remote or inaccessible areas, (v) opportunities to organize for collective action and participate more fully in decision-making processes, and (vi) capacity to work remotely/online, and thus remain in the labour force despite such responsibilities as childbearing or caring for dependent household members.

Yet, according to ITU data, the global proportion of women using the internet is 12% lower than that of men. Furthermore, while the gender gap on internet use has narrowed in most regions since 2013, it has widened in Africa and the Arab States where the respective proportions of
female internet users are 25% lower and 17% lower than those for men. In addition to the yawning social divide that this reality reflects, it also represents a loss for the economy, as well as a loss for the women themselves, undermining their potential as economic, social and political actors in the digital society.

These disparities represent a major challenge, but also an opportunity. The importance of ICT for gender parity is stated in SDG target 5.b, which calls on development partners to “Enhance the use of enabling technology, in particular information and communications technology”, to promote the empowerment of women. If the interests, needs and constraints of women are addressed, there is significant potential for ICTs to foster gender equality and the improvement of women’s livelihoods.

To benefit from the opportunities offered by ICTs, women’s use of such technologies needs to be enhanced. This entails addressing a range of issues, including: availability of internet networks and connectivity, affordability, security and relevance of content, and above all women’s literacy and skills. As women are typically more likely than men to have low or no digital skills, they are at a greater risk of being socially and economically excluded by the digital divide that currently exists. As the world transitions toward the digital economy, increasing numbers of entrepreneurs and workers will in fact require a range of digital tools and skills, and it is of critical importance to ensure that women are empowered to acquire the skills they need to take advantage of the new economic opportunities.

Through its project “Promoting Women Empowerment for Inclusive and Sustainable Industrial Development in the MENA region – Phase II”, UNIDO is working to enhance women’s entrepreneurship and economic participation, in both rural and urban areas, by improving women’s digital literacy to facilitate access to information, markets and finance, thereby contributing to the reduction of the digital gender gap. The project has been designed by UNIDO, UN Women and FAO and will be launched beginning of 2019 for implementation in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine and Tunisia.

**Women as users of digital technologies in the MENA region:** A state-of-the-art study on women’s access to digital technology carried out by UNIDO in the 7 MENA countries revealed that in almost all of them, women have lower access than men. However, the gender gap in mobile and internet use varies by country and study. For example, men and women were found to have similar levels of mobile phone ownership and mobile internet use in Egypt (53% of women and 54% of men own a phone), and similar levels of mobile phone use in Tunisia (79% of women and 82% of men use a phone). Conversely, gender gaps are reported in Jordan, where 35% of women and 66% of men were found to use mobile internet, Palestine, where 48% of women and 60% of men were found to use the internet, and Morocco, where 51% of women and 63% of men were found to use the internet.
In addition, across all countries, there are significant disparities between different groups of people (including women) relating to the rural-urban divide as well as age, education and wealth differentials. For those living in urban areas, mobile phone use is more widespread, and mobile phones are a primary means of getting online. However, women in rural regions tend to have lower education and literacy levels and are less likely to possess digital literacy and skills, which limits their access. Women in the MENA region are also less likely to have autonomy over the cash they are able to spend on technology, and their activities may be restricted by their families. Concerns about security and online harassment are also reported to be barriers for women in Egypt and Jordan.

**Women as actors in the MENA ICT sector:** According to the Union of Arab ICT Associations, women in the Arab region represent around 30% of the workforce in the ICT sector but only 9% in high management positions. As regards internet governance and policymaking, women represent only 15% of the persons in policy and decision-making roles.

With a fast-growing pool of university graduates, including women, and a heavy penetration of social media via smartphones, the MENA region has the ingredients to develop a strong digital sector that could create much-needed jobs, help improve the business environment, and accelerate the digitalization of traditional businesses.

Yet, for the internet to provide its transformational potential equitably for women and men, ICT policies must be gender-responsive. By equally addressing the challenges of connectivity and meaningful and tailored content, gender-responsive ICTs can be a powerful lever for women’s economic empowerment, particularly for the most disadvantaged.

**CSW Side-event on: How can digital technology support gender equality and women economic empowerment in the MENA region?**

The governments of Italy and Jordan, in cooperation with UNIDO, UN Women and FAO, are proposing the organization of a CSW63 Side-event on this subject.

The proposed Side Event would give floor to high level speakers from Italy, the MENA Region, the private sector and UN Agencies to showcase how improving women’s access to ICTs can boost entrepreneurship and job opportunities, particularly in disadvantaged and remote areas.
Main objectives of the meeting:

- To highlight the most effective policies and strategies to reduce the multifaceted digital divide in the MENA region and beyond (connectivity, affordability, skills, accessibility etc.)
- To show-case how ICTs can facilitate access to government support services and improve the overall business environment for female entrepreneurs in remote and disadvantaged areas.
- To demonstrate the relevance of public private partnerships (PPPs) in providing relevant and appropriately tailored digital content and tools to women entrepreneurs.
- To showcase how digital transformation and technologies will impact value chains by enhancing SMEs competitiveness and women’s bargaining power and to identify common challenges and good practices in bringing ICTs to individuals and communities in rural and remote areas.
- To recommend ICT solutions for women economic empowerment.

Leading questions:

- Women in rural areas have an insufficient level of digital skills. That means that they are having less chances to find work, to use online services, to have a better quality of life, to be included in today’s society. What are the ICT skills’ training platforms that facilitate access to digital skills for women and girls?
- Is ICT a male dominated sector? Is the enhancement of equity in learning opportunities a way to reduce women marginalization in ICT sector? Does an increased access to IT trainings facilitates careers’ opportunity for females?
- What are the good examples in the MENA Region of Government policies to enhance access to networks and training in the rural regions? Is there a gain for women and girls?
- A lack of relevant online content contributes to a perceived low-value in using ICTs. Are women’s specific needs considered in the development of digital contents, particularly online trainings?
- Digital transformation is impacting the way products are produced and sold. In the agroindustry sector in particular, new technologies (e.g. blockchain) are creating opportunities but also challenges for those, mainly women, who do not have digital skills. How is gender mainstreamed in the use if ICT for agriculture and rural development?
- How can ICT support women economic empowerment and facilitate access to finance and markets? What are the examples of PPP in this area?
Agenda

Opening Remarks
- H.E. Mrs. Basma Mousa Ishaqat, Minister of Social Development of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan

- H.E. Ms. Laura Castelli, Under-Secretary to the Ministry of Economy and Finance or the Republic of Italy

Panel Discussion:
- Saloua Karkri-Belkeziz, President of APEBI (Fédération des Technologies de l'Information, des Télécommunications et de l'Offshoring), Rabat
- Liat Shentser, Director of Systems Engineering Sales at Cisco Systems International B.V., Amsterdam
- Ursula Wynhoven, ITU Representative to the United Nations, New York
- Mohammad Naciri, Regional Director (Arab States and Asia Pacific), UN Women, Cairo
- Susan Kaaria, Senior Gender Officer, Social Policies and Rural Institutions Division at FAO, Rome
- Catherine Bosshart, Second Vice President, International Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW International)

Moderator:
- Monica Carcò, Senior Industrial Development Officer, Rural Entrepreneurship, Job Creation and Human Security Division, United Nations Industrial Development Organization, Vienna

Contact person: (m.carco@unido.org)