

Notes & Highlights of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and Female Labor Force Presentation

Dec. 8, 2004 | AcrossWorld Communications | Joy Tang

The MENA group focuses on Private Sector Opportunities in the Middle East and North Africa and how Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can improve Female Labor Force Participation.

On average, women constitute 28 percent of the total labor force in the MENA Region, the lowest level of female labor force participation in the world. This is significantly lower than the 43 percent average of lower middle-income countries. The Dec 8 session^[1] explored how ICTs can be used to empower women to participate in the private sector as investors and entrepreneurs by focusing on countries in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) Region.

What Role do IT Corporations have to Play?

UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office in Jordan and Cisco Systems have been working together to develop gender-sensitive ICT training programs to increase Jordanian women's competitiveness in the labor market^[2].

Corporations such as Cisco help to provide support in the development of private and public sectors collaboration by contributing the best know-how. In the case of the project in Jordan, which involved collaboration between UNICEF and Cisco, the resulting collaboration empowered women through the development of professional training and management programs to the participants. The goal is to demonstrate the added values ICT offers in relation to funding, training, sharing resources and best practices etc. Also important is the "interfacers" role in community development – who are they and what do they do to facilitate the process of women supported network?

Private sector plans to deepen business interactions between Japan and the Middle East have also been designed to increase women's participation in the IT society by establishing venture capital funds and fostering female IT entrepreneurs. Yasushi Kaito, Executive Advisor, NEC Corporation, Japan said that the "New world economy" in the next 20 years will be focusing on the 'knowledge centers,' and how the emergence of these centers will be facilitated by trends in the world economy.[3]

Reforming Civil Society through the Interaction of NGOS with SMEs backed by Multinational corporations and Institutions like the World Bank

World Bank and corporate roles are only part of the process. Civil society needs to be reformed to support the women. The Ministries do not go to the people. The NGOs do and so the NGOs have an important role in developing market based solutions to issues of underdevelopment:

1. Strengthening local NGO capacity
2. Developing business plans for the women-led NGO and SMEs
3. Coaching – passing the knowledge and connect the network with the new business entrepreneurs is important.
4. Involving the governments with dialogues by establishing steering committees and task forces
5. Letting local communities' voice be heard through storytelling and participatory governance assemblies and town meetings

UNDP's "ICT for Development in Arab Region program (ICTDAR)" has launched and supported several initiatives in the region with the objective to assist poor women to better equip themselves by developing women's entrepreneurial skills, to build new capacities, and to access to knowledge through the use of ICTs[4]. The initiatives will open-up market opportunities for women, increase knowledge about women's rights, strengthen NGO capacity to support women, and to ultimately foster women's position in society which also contributes to the overall development of the Arab countries.

Importance of Cross Sector Partnerships

Partnership should be defined as broadly as possible – corporate / NGOs community[5]

1. Need for capacity building: building technical capacity and to ensure the training is linked to the job market

2. Gender emphasis. Empower the woman in the decision-making level.
3. Need role models at all levels. Create the platform where their voices could be heard.

The Vehicle for Local Transformation and Empowerment: Community Technology Centers

ICT augmented knowledge centers will integrate various individualized services into a whole systems ICT approach that will provide services such as:

1. Capacity building
 2. Access to ICT
 3. Women entrepreneurship development
 4. Access to knowledge
 5. Networking

Data collection process is important but more important is the collaboration among development groups: NGOs, local government, and social workers. Community Access Centers are not just ICT driven, but they provide a forum to address the development issues. The data collection process needs to take into consideration of the cultural issues that are the base of the communities. Issues to be considered are languages and religious background, for example.

The centers will be connecting hubs to promote youth and women empowerment as well as bridges to enable cross sector partnerships between NGOs and private sector. Also, the centers will be used as the training and skill development center to address the issues such as poverty, HIV/AIDS etc.

One particular problem associated with the MENA region is the inadequacy in the provision of business information and limited training services available for women. To address this, the major Objectives of the ICT-based Community Centers (Lebanon experiences) are to:

1. Foster SMEs creation
2. Develop and SME info Portal and Toolkit
3. Develop Entrepreneurship especially for Women and Youth

4. Bring IT jobs to rural areas to address unemployment, underemployment and population loss
5. Enable local development

Emerging development trends:

1. Clustering by nature as communities
2. Partnership and values
3. Communities of Interest: embracing each other's strength
4. Economies of scale towards global sustainability

Skills and Workforce Capacity Building:

1. Training of Trainers
2. Technology exposure and solution workshops training
 - i. Use of ICT
 - ii. ICT for business management (accounting. Etc)

Steps towards ICT and Community Empowerment:

1. Research
2. Awareness
3. Capacity Building
4. Job Placement
5. Policy Advocacy

[1] All materials of this seminar will be posted to the e-Development Services Thematic Group site at: <http://www.worldbank.org/edevelopment>

[2] Deema Bibi, ICT Programme Coordinator, UNIFEM Arab States Regional Office

[3] Yasushi Kaito, Executive Advisor, NEC Corporation, Japan (Video taped message) www.ewomen.co.jp

[4] Najat Rochdi, Regional Coordinator, ICT for Development in the Arab Region (ICTDAR) – UNDP (najat.rochdi@undp.org)

[5] Waafas Ofosu-Amaah, Senior Gender Specialist, Gender and Development, World Bank

