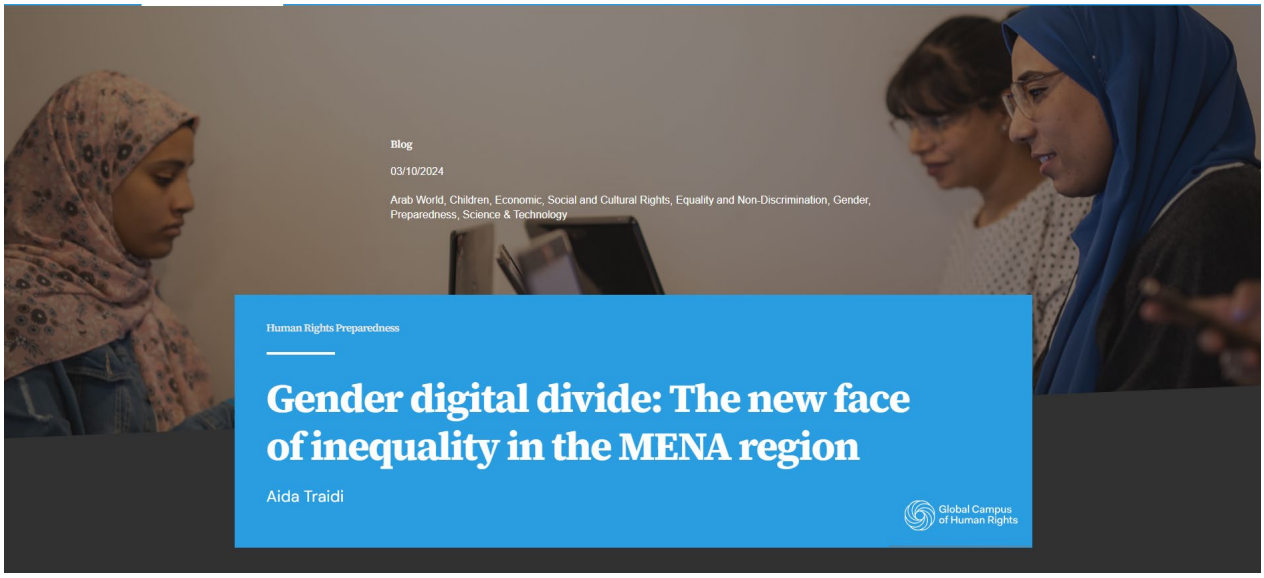

Gender digital divide: The new face of inequality in the MENA region

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Abstract: In the MENA region, the pronounced gender digital divide hinders women's socio-economic equality. To prevent women from becoming second-class citizens in technology, a human rights-based approach to educational technology and changes in educational systems and cultural norms are needed.

The digital divide -defined by the OECD as the gap in access to and use of digital technologies between different nations, regions, groups and individuals- is a key factor affecting the inclusiveness of digital transitions. In the MENA region, internet penetration has increased rapidly in recent years, with a regional internet access rate of 66 percent in 2023. However, despite the rapid digitalisation, further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, the digital divide in the region remains high, mainly associated with low socio-economic status, rural contexts, and gender disparities.
The gender digital divide, which persists globally, is particularly pronounced in the MENA region, ranking second in the world, after sub-Saharan Africa, in terms of gender

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disparities in internet access. On average, women in the region are 12 percent less likely to use the internet than men. This disparity affects women's right to education as enshrined in Article 26 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), Article 13 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) Article 28 and Article 29 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), and Article 41 of the Arab Charter on Human Rights (ACHR), preventing them from accessing the skills and opportunities needed for current and future jobs. This, in turn, negatively impacts these women's right to socio-economic equality as guaranteed in Article 3 of the ICESCR and their right to participation in decision-making as enshrined in Article 21 of the UDHR and Articles 7 and 8 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

This post explores the causes of the region's long-standing gender digital divide, the impact of digital transformation on women's economic inclusion, and provides policy guidance for a digital agenda in the MENA region which can bridge the gender digital divide and create an ecosystem where women and girls can thrive.

Understanding the gender digital divide

Several causes explain the gender digital divide, including the lack of access to ICT services, affordability, the lack of digital literacy, and discriminatory socio-cultural norms. The latter are a significant obstacle to gender equality and a key factor in the gender digital divide. The exclusion of girls and women from public spaces has been extensively documented in the region, preventing them from accessing, for example, public spaces for ICT facilities. In family households, boys' access to available digital devices, both for leisure and educational purposes, is often prioritised over girls' access to them.

Conservative gender norms and expectations that traditionally assign certain roles to men and women affect their career choices, with women under-represented in STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and over-represented in education, health care and social work. In the MENA region, this trend is reversed, with 57 percent of STEM graduates being women, compared to only 35 percent globally. However, women still bear the burden of societal expectations that suggest they are neither as skilled in technology as men, and their increasing access to higher education is not proportionate to their labour market participation, as they represent only 41.50 percent of the STEM workforce, according to UNESCO estimates.

The lack of female role models in STEM fields is an important issue that affects women's career choices. Despite significant contributions by women scientists, school textbooks typically do not include them, depriving young girls of positive role models and perpetuating gender stereotypes.

The impact of digital transformation on women's economic inclusion

Despite rapid increase in female educational attainment and even a reversal of the gender gap in education in some countries, the MENA region has one of the lowest rates of female labour market participation in the formal sector, with only 19 percent of women participating in the workforce, according to the latest World Bank estimate. The gender pay gap, discriminatory hiring practices, and the lack of policies to support work-life balance prevent women from entering the labour market.

Digital technologies are perceived by some experts as tools with the potential to bridge inequalities within and between countries. In the MENA region, the digital transition is seen by many governments as an opportunity to create jobs for the unemployed. Bridging the gender digital divide could facilitate women's access to the labour market by equipping them with the necessary digital and technological skills to meet market demands. For those women already in the workforce, reskilling and upskilling them will allow them to meet the challenges of the digital transition.

However, in contexts where large parts of the population lack access to digital technologies, the digital transition can reinforce existing inequalities. According to 60 percent of respondents to the 2022 EuroMesco survey 'Towards more social justice and inclusiveness in the Mediterranean', digital transformation has a strong impact on socio-economic disparities in the southern Mediterranean countries, particularly on the socio-economic inclusion of vulnerable groups such as women. Gender disparities in internet access mean that women benefit less from the opportunities offered by the digital transition. Hence, narrowing the digital gender divide is a crucial step to ensure that women are not left behind.

Looking forward

Recommendations for bridging the gender digital divide

- Improving access to technology: connectivity is the first step in ensuring an inclusive digital transition. While internet access has improved significantly over the last decade, efforts must ensure internet access is fast and affordable for all citizens. In addition, data on digital devices and internet use (e.g. the purposes for which women use digital devices, and whether they have control over their use) should be collected to design targeted interventions in favour of them.
- Promoting digital literacy: internet connectivity is crucial but not sufficient. Even when people have access to digital devices and connectivity, the lack of digital skills hinders their ability to take advantage of these tools. For women to use digital technologies for education and livelihood opportunities, digital literacy should be strengthened and training should go beyond basic digital skills to include other skills such as data analysis, coding, content creation, etc. In this regard, to make training accessible for all in the region:
    - more training content should be developed in Arabic;

    - training for women in rural areas should accommodate their multiple responsibilities and provide transportation services to training centres;
    - incentives should be offered to encourage women's participation;
    - offline e-training platforms accessible to users from different backgrounds should also be created.

Recommendations for addressing gender-based discrimination

- Tackling key barriers that keep women out of STEM fields: for some girls and their families, there is not even the possibility of a successful career for women in STEM. Educational institutions and textbook publishers can raise awareness of STEM careers by including more diverse perspectives in educational materials.
- Changing social and cultural norms: access to education and opportunities should be improved through exposure to positive role models and mentors, challenging stereotypes and inspiring the next generation.
- Promoting inclusive workplaces: the full participation of women and girls should be ensured by addressing gender bias in hiring processes and promoting work-life balance. The private sector's role is key to creating a more favourable environment for women.
- Ensuring equal access to financial resources and opportunities for men and women: female entrepreneurship should be supported through incubation programmes, training to upscale their services, etc.

The role of EU-MENA cooperation

Governments from the region need to implement and/or consolidate national digital policies and strategies embedded in a human rights-based approach (HRBA) that addresses gender-based discrimination. Technologies can be an equaliser if everybody has access and knows how to use them. Therefore, the main EU-MENA cooperation priorities should include the support to governments in their institutional legal reforms to ensure these policies are human-rights based and inclusive.

Besides the EU's role in enhancing the legal framework applicable in the MENA region, EU partners can contribute to gender equality and wider inclusiveness therein by supporting initiatives to increase access to the internet for women and enhance digital skills.