

Breaking the Mold: Legal and Regulatory Reforms for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Mediterranean

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In the heart of the Mediterranean, where diverse cultures converge, lies an area brimming with untapped potential: the economic empowerment of women. While the Mediterranean has a rich history of trade and commerce, the full participation of women in its economic landscape has been inhibited by legal and regulatory constraints. However, winds of change are blowing, and across the Mediterranean basin, nations are recognizing the need for reform to unleash the economic potential of their female populations.

This article explores the importance of legal and regulatory reforms for women's economic empowerment in the Mediterranean and examines the progress and challenges faced by countries in the region.

The Economic Powerhouse Within

The Mediterranean region is home to an educated and talented female workforce. Women often excel in education and possess skills that are vital for economic development, such as in technology, healthcare, and finance. However, despite their potential, women in the Mediterranean face a complex web of legal and cultural barriers that limit their economic participation. These barriers include restrictive labor laws, gender-based discrimination, and traditional societal norms that perpetuate gender roles.

The Case for Legal and Regulatory Reforms

Legal and regulatory reforms are pivotal for unleashing the economic potential of women in the Mediterranean for several reasons:

- **Economic Growth:** Empowering women economically can significantly contribute to economic growth. A study by McKinsey & Company estimates that advancing women's equality in the Mediterranean region could add \$1.1 trillion to the regional GDP by 2025.
- **Workforce Diversity:** Gender-diverse workforces tend to be more innovative and perform better financially. Legal reforms can help break down barriers to entry for women in male-dominated sectors.
- **Global Competitiveness:** In an increasingly globalized world, gender equality is a competitive advantage. Companies and countries that invest in gender diversity are more likely to succeed in the global marketplace.

Progress Achieved Across the Mediterranean

Several Mediterranean countries have recognized the importance of legal and regulatory reforms to promote women's economic empowerment and have taken significant steps forward:

- **Tunisia:** Tunisia has made substantial progress in improving women's rights, including reforms to inheritance laws and the removal of reservations to the **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)**.
- **Morocco:** Morocco has introduced progressive labor laws and incentives for businesses that hire women, such as tax deductions.
- **Jordan:** Jordan has adopted a National Strategy for Women that focuses on economic empowerment,

aiming to increase women's participation in the labor market.

Notwithstanding these developments, the region is characterised by a scarce homogeneity. The differences in the legislative situation and workers' rights between Mediterranean countries in Southern Europe such as Spain; countries in the Anatolian area, like Turkey and countries in North Africa are evident, and they are reflected in the results of the World Economic Forum index.

In Spain, there are various types of labour contracts, including temporary, permanent and training contracts. Labour reforms have sought to reduce the high rate of temporary employment. In Turkey, there are also different types of contracts, but flexibility in temporary contracts is greater. Fixed-term and temporary contracts are widely used, which has raised concerns about employment stability. In Egypt, temporary and fixed-term contracts are common. Job stability can be a challenge, and the informal economy plays a significant role in employment.

Working hours in Spain are limited to 40 hours a week on average, with a maximum of 8 hours a day. Work-life balance is encouraged. In Turkey, working time is limited to 45 hours a week, but exceptions may be made in certain sectors and jobs. Work/life balance can be a challenge in some industries. Working hours in Egypt are generally 48 hours per week, with working hours varying according to sector and region. Overtime and lack of regulation of working hours are common problems in some sectors.

Spain has strong labour laws that protect the rights of workers, including equal treatment, non-discrimination, and job security. In addition, gender equality is pro-

moted and specific measures are in place to combat gender-based violence in the workplace. Although Turkey also has labour laws that protect workers' rights, labour practices may vary and working conditions may be less favourable in some cases. Regulations on gender equality and job security may be more lax compared to Spain. Egypt has labour laws as well, but implementation and protection of workers' rights may vary. Working conditions may be less favourable compared to Spain, and regulations regarding gender equality and job security may be less strict.

In Spain, trade unions play an important role in collective bargaining and worker representation. Collective agreements establish specific working conditions for different sectors and regions. Meanwhile, in Turkey, unions and collective bargaining also exist, but their influence and participation may vary compared to Spain. Egypt has trade unions, but freedom of association and collective bargaining may be subject to government restrictions and limitations.

Spain has a minimum interprofessional wage (SMI) that is revised annually and varies according to the age and other circumstances of the worker. Turkey and Egypt also have a minimum wage, but it is generally lower compared to Spain.

Finally, Spain has strong legislation and active policies to promote gender equality, including specific laws to combat discrimination and gender-based violence in the workplace, such as the *Law for the Effective Equality of Women and Men* (Law 3/2007), which promotes gender equality in all spheres of society, including the workplace. This law establishes specific measures to promote equal pay, the reconciliation of work and family life, and the prevention of gender-based violence.

In Turkey and Egypt, although regulations related to gender equality are in place, there are still significant challenges in implementation. All in all, each country has its approach and context concerning gender equality and labour legislation.

Inequality Challenges regarding women entrepreneurship and the legal equality framework: “Women, Business and the Law” (WBL) 2023 Report

The Women, Business, and the Law Report 2023 (WBL, 2023) presents an index covering 190 economies and structured around the life cycle of a working woman. In total, 35 questions are scored across eight indicators. Overall scores are then calculated by taking the average of each indicator, with 100 representing the highest possible score. Data refer to the laws and regulations that apply to the main business city of each country (Madrid). Different rules may apply in other jurisdictions so local legislation should be reviewed. Based on this approach, Spain scores 100 out of 100. The overall score for Spain is higher than the regional average observed across OECD high-income economies (95.3). Within the OECD high-income region, 14 economies score 100 out of 100.

In Egypt, data refer to the laws and regulations that apply to the main business city (Cairo). The Arab Republic of Egypt scores 50.6 out of 100. This overall score is lower than the regional average observed across the Middle East and North Africa (53.2), where the maximum score observed is 91.3 (Malta). When it comes to constraints on women starting and running a business, and laws affecting the amount of a

woman's pension, Egypt gets a perfect score. However, there are constraints on freedom of movement, on women's decision to work; women's pay, marriage freedom; women's work after giving birth, and gender differences in property and inheritance. Egypt could consider reforms to improve legal equality for women. For example, Egypt should consider equal remuneration for work of equal value, allowing women to work at night in the same way as men or be employed in jobs deemed dangerous and in industrial jobs, in the same way as men.

Israel scores 80.6 out of 100. The overall score for Israel is lower than the regional average observed across OECD high-income economies (95.3). There are no constraints on freedom of movement; women's decision to work; starting and running a business, and gender differences in property and inheritance, where Israel gets a perfect score. However, when it comes to laws affecting women's pay, marriage freedom, women's work after giving birth, and pension rights, Israel could consider reforms to improve legal equality for women. Israel could also contemplate allowing women to work in jobs deemed dangerous in the same way as men.

Economic Participation and Opportunity

If we continue with the examples of each of the zones into which the Mediterranean countries are divided, in terms of economic participation, Spain is in the 48th place (0.722), with France close behind in the 51st place (0.717). Israel ranks 76th (0.688), Turkey 133rd (0.500), Egypt 140th (0.420) and Tunisia 138th (0.451). Therefore, Israel, Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia have a gap of more than 30% in economic participation.

Educational Attainment

In the dimension of access to education, France shares first place with 24 other countries that have obtained the maximum score out of 1,000, including Israel. Spain is ranked 39th (0.998), Turkey 99th (0.980), Egypt 119th (0.943), and Tunisia 117th (0.950). Despite the low rankings that Turkey, Egypt and Tunisia may show in this area, their scores are very close to the top score.

Health and Survival

In terms of access to healthcare, all the Mediterranean countries being used as examples score close to the maximum, with the following ranking: Spain 98th (0.967), France 76th (0.970), Turkey 100th (0.966), Israel 109th (0.964), Egypt 90th (0.968) and Tunisia 81st (0.969).

Political Empowerment

The political empowerment dimension is the one with the lowest results for all Mediterranean countries, with Spain ranking 18th with a score of 0.475, France 39th with 0.338, Turkey 118th with 0.106, Israel 96th with 0.150, Egypt 85th with 0.175, and Tunisia 77th with 0.197.

Challenges and the Road Ahead

Despite progress, significant challenges remain. Implementation of reforms is often slow, and cultural attitudes are slow to change. In many Mediterranean countries, women's participation in the formal labor market remains below the global average. Access to finance for women entrepreneurs is also a concern.

The road ahead requires a multi-faceted approach:

- **Legal Reforms:** Countries need to continue and accelerate legal and regulatory reforms that promote gender equality, including labor laws that provide equal opportunities and equal pay.
- **Education and Awareness:** Promoting education and awareness campaigns to change societal attitudes toward gender roles and women's economic participation is crucial.
- **Support for Women Entrepreneurs:** Providing access to finance and support for women entrepreneurs can spur economic growth and innovation.
- **Workplace Inclusivity:** Companies must play their part by fostering gender-inclusive workplaces and leadership. There is a wide need for cultural transformations across businesses, promoting organizations better strategically gender-aligned.

Paving the way for potential solutions

Cooperation between European countries bordering the Mediterranean and those in the Eastern Mediterranean and the African region can play a crucial role in promoting equality in the region.

First, European countries can share their experiences and best practices in promoting gender equality and non-discrimination in the workplace and in society at large. This includes effective policies and measures to address the gender pay gap, promoting work-life balance, and empowering women in all sectors of society.

In addition, they can offer financial and technical support for programmes and

projects that promote gender equality and social inclusion in Eastern Mediterranean and African countries. This could involve providing funds for capacity-building programmes and technical assistance for policy development to address specific challenges related to gender equality in the region.

The promotion of education is another crucial aspect. European countries can work together to create educational programmes that promote girls' and women's education in fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), enabling them to access more diverse and higher-quality job opportunities. **The Woman Forward Foundation**, which I preside, has a specific program "*Nearing gender talent to Stem jobs*" based on research to maximize results.

In addition, working together to increase women's political participation and support their representation in leadership and decision-making positions can be a powerful initiative. This can include implementing policies that promote gender equality in the political sphere and strengthening women's participation in political and public life.

European countries can also exert diplomatic pressure and collaborate with international organisations to advocate for human rights and gender equality throughout the Mediterranean region. This could include promoting laws and regulations that protect women's rights and ensure equality in the workplace and in society at large.

In the economic sphere, facilitating investment and entrepreneurship in Eastern Mediterranean and African countries can generate employment and economic opportunities for women, which would contribute to reducing gender inequalities.

Promoting awareness is equally important. European countries can collaborate on educational campaigns that address gender equality and non-discrimination issues in the region, enacting cultural change.

Finally, working together to ensure women's access to essential services, such as health care and support services for victims of gender-based violence can be instrumental in addressing the specific challenges faced by women in the Mediterranean region.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean region has a golden opportunity to harness the economic potential of women. Legal and regulatory reforms, alongside cultural changes, can break down barriers that prevented back women's economic empowerment for generations. As countries in the Mediterranean continue to make strides toward gender equality, they are not only fostering economic growth but also creating more inclusive, diverse, and prosperous societies.

In sum, cooperation and collaboration among Mediterranean countries can be an effective vehicle for advancing equality in the region, addressing challenges and promoting more equitable and sustainable development for all.

Bibliography

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