

# ITU study on

## The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Empowering Arab Women



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This ITU study on The Role of Information and Communication Technologies in Empowering Arab Women is available online at: [Click here](#)

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## **The role of Information and Communication Technologies in Empowering Arab Women**

### **Background on ICT usage in the MENA region**

Information Communication Technologies are considered one of the main drivers of economic growth, making it a high priority in the agendas of Arab countries. Over the last decade, the region has witnessed a sharp increase in ICTs usage with mobile telephony ranked first, followed by the Internet<sup>1</sup>. According to the 2011 edition of ITU's Measuring Information Society report, the United Arab Emirates leads the Arab countries in ICT usage, second is Qatar followed by Bahrain and Saudi Arabia respectively<sup>2</sup>. The early 90's witnessed the launch of ICTs integration strategies in most Arab countries by deploying the necessary infrastructure and developing a favorable regulatory framework. However, in the early stages of ICT exposure, few efforts were made by the Arab governments to define indicators for ICTs to measure readiness and usage, both being important elements for assessing the impact of ICTs. It could be suggested that a lack of vision for ICTs has led to neglect when developing an effective strategy to reap the benefits of the new technologies.

In order to keep pace with the fast developments in the ICTs field, Arab region countries have maximized their efforts to establish a stable ICTs environment catalyst to lay the ground for a solid policy framework. According to the Global Technology report 2010-2011 edition<sup>3</sup>, many Arab countries managed to improve their Networked Readiness Index (NRI) which measures the impact of ICTs use on the economy in general. NRI assesses the extent to which ICTs usage influences the states policy based on three main principals:

- 1- Favorable overall environment for innovation and ICTs including market conditions, regulatory framework and infrastructure
- 2- The leadership of the government in setting and implementing a national ICTs vision with the collaboration of the private sector and individuals.
- 3- Usage/impact principal which relies upon having national actors (government, private sector and individuals) who lead interest towards ICTs usage in their daily activities which can be a main driver to use it more effectively.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.itu.int/dms\\_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-RPM.AR-2009-R1-PDF-E.pdf](http://www.itu.int/dms_pub/itu-d/opb/ind/D-IND-RPM.AR-2009-R1-PDF-E.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2011/Material/MIS\\_2011\\_without\\_annex\\_5.pdf](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2011/Material/MIS_2011_without_annex_5.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> <http://reports.weforum.org/global-information-technology-report/>

Measuring gender ICT use in the Arab region has been an all time challenge which affected negatively setting up adequate ICT strategies for the future. In 2008, ITU has developed the ICT Development Index (IDI) in response to ITU member states to establish a single Index to measure developments in information and communication technology. The main objectives of the Index evolve around following up on the level of evolution of ICT developments both in developed and developing countries. The index also reflects the changes taking place at different levels of ICT development.

IDI also showcase the existing digital divide between different countries and aims at highlighting the development potential of ICT and to what extent it can enhance growth based on available capabilities and skills<sup>4</sup>.

The main challenge of this exercise is that ITU depends entirely on the data submitted by each government to set up ICT indicators. This data submitted by Arab countries rarely includes any gender specification which makes it difficult to define gender access discrepancies in the Arab region and therefore one has to rely on the socio-economic and socio-cultural facts to assess the state of the art of ICT access by Arab women.

Arab countries have worked independently and consistently placing ICTs at the core of their state policy to aid economic development and taking into consideration the aforementioned ICT "readiness indices". However, a regional scope that should define the priorities of the Arab region as a whole is yet to be tackled

The International Telecommunication Union (ITU) is leading many programs to build capacity in the Arab countries to establish ICT indicators. "Connect Arab States"<sup>5</sup> for instance, is an initiative aiming to achieve the following 5 objectives:

1. Establishing ICT indicators and capacity building for measuring them
2. Development of an Arab regulatory framework/guidelines for ICTs
3. Arab centre for digital documentation (Memory of the Arab world)
4. Connection of Arab internet networks (National access points)
5. Translation and arabization of ICTs terminology

Reviewing the ICT initiatives taking place both at the local level and the regional level in the Arab world, the lack of policies that guarantee the full integration of Arab women in the digital revolution is quite significant.

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2011/Material/MIS\\_2011\\_without\\_annex\\_5.pdf](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/idi/2011/Material/MIS_2011_without_annex_5.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/connect/arabstates/initiatives.html>

## **Obstacles hindering the full integration of Arab women in the digital revolution**

Women in Arab countries are struggling to overcome various obstacles related to the culture of the region and traditions. The socio-cultural perception of a women's role in society is widely believed to revolve around the family unit only; therefore women are not empowered to be an equal contributor to men and restricted from being a driving force to accelerate the social and economic development of the Arab region.

The main obstacles Arab women are facing are:

- Illiteracy is a major problem in the Arab countries; approximately 65% of adults are illiterate of which two thirds are women<sup>6</sup>.
- Poverty and low self esteem and lack of self reliance.
- Submissiveness to social norms and traditions.
- Knowledge gap and lack of exposure
- Unawareness about their civil rights

Using ICTs to improve the social standing of Arab women seems to be feasible due to the unlimited opportunities new technologies can offer. Yet, without having a clear vision of how to overcome the challenges hindering Arab women it will be impossible to bridge the digital gender gap in the Arab world.

Launching an ICT strategy for the objective of empowering Arab women could be a challenging task for the Governments of Arab states to instigate, such are the ingrained traditions of these institutions. However, these governments should be leading more initiatives at the local level by allocating further human and financial resources in order to achieve results ultimately beneficial for the state as a whole.

Extensive analytical research to define the state of art for ICTs use by women is required to set up a solid platform for a successful ICTs strategy. It is extremely difficult to measure ICTs penetration by Arab women at the moment due to the lack of the relevant statistics; even though ITU has developed ICT usage core indicators and is encouraging its country members to include ICT questions in the households' surveys to measure ICT usage disaggregated by gender.

The fact that the gender digital gap is not a high priority in Arab countries and the little attention given to the role of ICTs in sustainable development and how it can effectively change the perception of women and their capabilities; It is quite a challenge to devise a clear vision on how to integrate an effective ICTs strategy for the benefit of women.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://akgul.bilkent.edu.tr/telekom/accascina.pdf>

International organizations are at the forefront in launching initiatives related to creating new opportunities for women through technology. The next part of this report will explore some of the ITU initiatives, and their impact on the empowerment of women in the Arab region.

### **Initiatives to bridge digital gender divide in the Arab region**

- **Connect a School, Connect a Community** is an ambitious ITU project aiming at promoting broadband connectivity for schools in developing countries by producing a toolkit of best practices and policy advice, and a series of training materials, application and tools to help reach the target of connecting every school.

A specific module was developed on community ICT centres for women's economic and social empowerment. The module focused on analyzing the impact of establishing telecenters that cater for women and girls needs since they still make up the larger proportion of those left behind in terms of; in literacy education, access to information, health and financial services, or general socio-economic empowerment<sup>7</sup>.

The module provides detailed guiding principles that actively engage women and girls in setting up community ICT centres as they are familiar with the needs of their cultural background and traditions where the community ICT centre will be established.

A tailored ICT policy framework prioritizing the needs of women is essential to bridge the gender digital and knowledge gap. A detailed toolkit was developed in the Connect School, Connect Project including guidelines for ministries, private sector and regulators on how to ensure women's equitable access to ICTs and the best way they can benefit from Community ICT centres.

Involving women and girls actively in the decision-making processes of building the Information Society was recognized in various international and regional policy frameworks. However the Arab region lacks a gender specific policy framework which raises concerns regarding Arab women empowerment status.

- **Telecentre Women Digital Literacy Campaign**, ITU has teamed up with Telecentre Foundation on April 2011 to help run the Women Digital Literacy Campaign, a global initiative which helps empower disadvantaged women to improve their lives by accessing information, choices and new opportunities through using new technologies.

The campaign mobilizes women with academic and professional experience in ICT as role models to serve as mentors and tutors in the telecentre. It also encourages other women to engage in telecentre movement as associates while in the process of acquiring digital literacy.

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.connectaschool.org/itu-module/16/437/en/community/ict/women/enpowerment/Section1.3\\_important\\_reach\\_women\\_girls/](http://www.connectaschool.org/itu-module/16/437/en/community/ict/women/enpowerment/Section1.3_important_reach_women_girls/)

Women Digital Literacy Campaign is supported by the global network of telecentre.org around the world which is at the core of resources mobilization. It includes fund generation and technical know-how by providing packages for digital and e-business skills tailored for women<sup>8</sup>.

Telecentre.org is present in many countries of the Arab region. Egypt hosts telecenter academy<sup>9</sup> which specializes in providing training to develop ICT skills to contribute in economic and social sustainable development. The organization also exists in Morocco<sup>10</sup>, Oman<sup>11</sup>, Jordan<sup>12</sup> and Sudan<sup>13</sup>.

Some of the initiatives of telecenters in Morocco and Oman target creating new opportunities through ICTs for women. However, there is still a need for custom made programs similar to Telecentre Women Digital Literacy Campaign which prioritises eradicating digital gender illiteracy to pave the way to new opportunities for women in the Arab region.

### **ITU initiative with ALESCO and Arab Women Organization**

Being one of the major problems hindering social and economic development, illiteracy within Arab women has reached an alarming level and prompt action should be taken to eradicate this phenomenon. ITU conducted in 2010 a feasibility study focusing on the use of ICTs to eliminate illiteracy of Arab women. The study highlighted both the current programs which adopt traditional methods to deliver literacy trainings and also those using ICTs.

The outcome of the study suggests that there is a need to develop free and open source literacy training materials in standard Arabic. The study also pointed out that the lack of teacher's training material is one of the main reasons of the low rate of adult participation in literacy programs.

ITU shared the study with the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation (ALESCO) and Arab Women Organization and they agreed to launch a tripartite program to develop open source material to combat women illiteracy in the Arab region. The material will be used individually by each organisation in their illiteracy training programs and might be also used in collaborative training with third parties.

The program of this partnership will focus on the following objectives:

- **Preparing online training materials** for illiteracy eradication amongst Arab Women
- **Developing train-the-trainer materials** to enable trainers to deliver online training programs
- **Conducting a pilot train-the trainers training session** using online materials
- **Establishing specialized programs to train adults** on basic skills either during in-service training, or by spreading adult education programs at the regional level

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<sup>8</sup> [http://women.telecentre.org/?page\\_id=224](http://women.telecentre.org/?page_id=224)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.telecentreacademy.org.eg/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.telecentresmaroc.org/nationales.html>

<sup>11</sup> <http://mogtamaa.ning.com/profiles/blogs/2487793:BlogPost:44584>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.ks.gov.jo/>

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.gedaref.com/index.php>

- **Building on the learners' prior knowledge** and on the community learning environment.
- **Encouraging distance learning** using ICTs to accommodate the working schedules of the program participants.

The main incentive of this program is being in open source format for all Arab countries and it can be used by Arab local NGO's active in literacy programs. It also encourages public-private partnership amongst the stakeholders concerned by incorporating ICTs in designing learning programs to completely eradicate women illiteracy in the Arab region.

### **The impact of ICT use on women empowerment in the Arab region**

The potential of ICTs is yet to be used effectively to improve women status in the Arab region. Although most Arab countries have engaged in setting up policies to integrate ICTs in their agendas as a major tool to improve social and political inclusion and economic development, the gender perspective is however, still lacking and requires immediate attention.

ICTs can empower women of the Arab region through increasing their chances to:

- Access to information to improve tackling daily life issues related to them and their families improving their knowledge and awareness in topics related to health, domestic violence, children upbringing, civil rights, etc.
- Benefit from education opportunities online improving their skills that will open the door for new employment or private enterprise opportunities.
- Have access to services to facilitate their household chores which makes them an active partner in the family institution.
- Connect to other women in their community, or at the global level to exchange ideas and perspectives and also expertise in various fields.
- Network to define new business opportunities and partners and improved market access especially for craftswomen in rural and urban areas.

The use of ICTs might offer exciting new opportunities for Arab women; the challenge is to overcome the Arab mentality and cultural beliefs regarding the role of women being restricted to looking after the family unit. This perception does not affect women negatively since they are considered the core of society and responsible for future generations; it is a privilege that is ironically restricting them from exploring new opportunities to be more empowered in the society.

Women in the Arab region just like in other parts of the world have to deal with the deep-seated traditional biases against women and technology<sup>14</sup>. ICTs being dominated by men pose serious drawbacks on any efforts to learn new skills or even access technology.

Developing the capabilities of Arab women through the use of ICTs is an important element to generate social and economic benefits to the Arab region and also play a major role in empowering their status.

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<sup>14</sup> [http://www.usaid.gov/our\\_work/cross-cutting\\_programs/wid/ict/index.html](http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/cross-cutting_programs/wid/ict/index.html)



ICTs have the power to eradicate inequality and exclusion faced by Arab women and it is a tool to restore their confidence and reinforce their independence.

#### Millennium Development Goals and Arab Women Empowerment

Empowering women through ICTs can be adequately linked to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are key objectives to tackle the world's main development challenges<sup>15</sup>. Poverty reduction, education, gender equality, women empowerment and the promotion of reproductive health are goals directly linked to an improved standard of living for women all over the world; ICTs have a great potential to facilitate achieving several of those goals, however that potential is not yet fully utilized in the Arab region. It could be applicable in this region to;

- **Develop the capacity of women in rural areas**

Arab women in rural areas do not benefit from the necessary support to face the hard conditions they live in. They face major obstacles mainly the lack of infrastructure, tools and political engagement. of ICTs can help rural women access and exchange knowledge and expertise; they can also facilitate their exposure to regional networks to develop their capacity.

- **Educate and for distance learning**

ICTs offer a golden opportunity to Arab women in rural areas to benefit from distance learning courses in order to bridge their knowledge gap and to eradicate illiteracy. Some of these women effectively engage in educational programs but they would drop school to help their families in housework or to get married. ICTs can help maintain the interest of this category in education via mobile telephony since it's widely used in the Arab region; by 2010 mobile subscriptions per 100 inhabitants has reached 87.9.<sup>16</sup> According to the latest data available by ITU, 62% of rural women in Egypt have a mobile device or have access to a mobile and the percentage in Morocco is at a surprising 87%.<sup>17</sup>

UNESCO is leading the Mobile-based Literacy Program in Pakistan which can be applied in the Arab region as well; its objective is to address the literacy retention issues amongst young girls. The key idea of the project is to use mobiles as a tool for delivering post-literacy materials to youth literates. Messages containing pedagogically correct, but fun and interesting, topics will be sent to post-literates.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/statistics/>

<sup>17</sup> ITU internal data of households mobile use urban rural and by gender

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.unesco.org.pk/education/mlp.html>

- **Reduce poverty and provide economic activities**

Most women in rural areas develop artisanal skills even if they are illiterate. ICTs can reduce poverty amongst women in rural areas by defining channels to commercialize their products, hence allowing them to be self sufficient financially.

- **Help women knowing their civil rights:**

Besides all the challenges Arab women are facing, they may be also subjected to abuse. Domestic violence constitutes a serious issue for women both in terms of physical and emotional stress and also social mobility. ICTs can help disseminate crucial information related to women's rights. It is also an effective tool to exchange information the phenomenon and statistics between help centres. According to a previous study on the impact of ICT on fighting violence against women in Morocco, ICTs plays an significant role, mainly in raising awareness about the phenomenon of violence and opening up new prospects for work<sup>19</sup>Improve women's health condition

ICT's can also be used to improve Arab women's health especially the ones in remote areas. Bedouin women in Jordan for instance are consulting doctors via mobile phones. These women are usually not allowed to visit the village clinic without their husband's permission. Hence, they are using Mobile phones to seek medical advice which will impact their health positively long term.<sup>20</sup>

Building women's capacity through the use of ICTs is subject to the ability of Arab states to address pressing issues like women's illiteracy. By 2009, the percentage of illiterate women had exceeded 50% in Morocco (56.1%),Yemen (55.3%) and grown to 49.7% in Mauritania and 39.2% in Sudan<sup>21</sup>. Without education, the marginalisation of Arab women will grow deeper and it will be harder to change their role in society towards becoming active contributors in the economic development of their countries.

Hopes to merge new technologies, especially the internet, in the national strategies for women's empowerment will be a formidable task with only 14% (2008) of Arab households having access to the Internet<sup>22</sup>. More efforts should be allocated in the Arab region countries to guarantee the availability and ease of access of Internet to outreach underprivileged women both in urban and rural areas especially that only 12% of rural women in Egypt for example have access to the Internet and 28% in urban areas.<sup>23</sup>

ICTs are indispensable to reach MDGs affecting women status in general; however more analytical research should be initiated at the Arab region level to decode the state of the art of ICTs use and how it impacts women status in the Arab world to pave the way towards reaching the Millennium Development Goals.

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<sup>19</sup> [http://www.idrc.org.sg/en/ev-137007-201-1-DO\\_TOPIC.html](http://www.idrc.org.sg/en/ev-137007-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html)

<sup>20</sup> <http://morocoworldnews.com/2011/07/%E2%80%98mobile%E2%80%99-changes-in-the-arab-world/>

<sup>21</sup>[http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=125&IF\\_Language=eng&BR\\_Fact=LTR AF&BR\\_Region=40525](http://stats.uis.unesco.org/unesco/TableViewer/document.aspx?ReportId=125&IF_Language=eng&BR_Fact=LTR AF&BR_Region=40525)

<sup>22</sup> [http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/wtdr\\_10/index.html](http://www.itu.int/ITU-D/ict/publications/wtdr_10/index.html)

<sup>23</sup> ITU Internal data Internet use urban rural and by gender

## **Arab Women and technology Success stories**

- **Argan Oil Cooperatives in Morocco**

Despite the socio-cultural challenges that women have to face in the Arab countries, there are few women oriented initiatives that encourage the use of ICTs. A case in point is women Cooperatives of Argan oil<sup>24</sup> in Morocco which were created to improve the economic status of Berber women. From the heart of the Atlas Mountains, the internet is now used to market the Argan Oil products online since most cooperatives<sup>25</sup> have their own websites. This has resulted in tracing new business opportunities and having direct contact with the end consumer, which allows the women members of the cooperative, who actually extract the oil themselves, to benefit from the majority of the money generated from the sales.

Argan Oil cooperatives in the south of Morocco have helped to provide job opportunities for mostly widowed or divorced Berber women from poor backgrounds<sup>26</sup>. Using ICT's have effectively boosted their chances to define a sustainable source of income and help them to be financially independent. This example could be followed by other countries across the Arab world where craftswomen excel in a specific product.

- **Loan Information via SMS in Palestine**

Asala is a Palestinian Businesswomen's association which allocates micro loans to female entrepreneurs locally. In 2009, Asala<sup>27</sup> partnered with Souktel<sup>28</sup> to send SMS alerts to businesswomen including information about the available services and loans and to keep in touch with the borrowers since most of them live in rural areas with no access to land line phones or the Internet.

The SMS reminders are also used to outreach hundreds of women at one go to inform them about new training opportunities and other key information. This service presents an enormous help especially to Palestinian women in rural areas. It helps them stay connected and empowered to be financially independent and self-sufficient.

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<sup>24</sup> Argan oil is extracted from the nuts of the Argan tree which exists only in Morocco

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.targanine.com/>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.idrc.ca/EN/Resources/Publications/Pages/ArticleDetails.aspx?PublicationID=192>

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.asala-pal.com/>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.souktel.org/>

- **Peace Building by Women via SMS in Iraq**

The unstable political circumstances Iraq is facing for the last seven years have contributed in women isolation. Mercy Corps<sup>29</sup> is an aid agency whose main mission is to help people in crisis zones to build secure and productive communities; it's helping northern Iraqi women peace builders by training them to promote tolerance and reconciliation within their environment. Mercy Corps launched a project "Empowering Women Peace builders" to help women leaders communicate key news between each other using text messages.

The service will help women peace builders' access leadership training to strengthen their community by promoting peace and tolerance. Using this service allow the outreach of girls from different ethnic or religious backgrounds. It also facilitates communication with other women fellow using the same service to get more information about the required resources, potential participants and safe places to hold meetings.

**Recommendations:**

A better world for women in the Arab region would be characterized by equal opportunities with men, opportunity to access basic rights such as education, eradication of poverty, improving the current standards of living, and fair treatment.. ICTs present ample opportunities for women's empowerment. The following recommendations aim at facilitating the tasks of policy makers in the Arab region to set up a suitable framework to adopt ICTs for improving women status;

- Producing a regional report about the outcome of two decades of ICT connectivity in the Arab countries. Its impact on women will help establish a clear vision of the future of Arab women in technology and a platform by which progress can be assessed. (Example EUR report on women & ICTs)
- Launching campaigns to change the perception and mentality about women using ICTs.
- Setting up pilot projects tackling the main challenges women are facing and placing ICT's at the core of their implementation.
- Deploying a gender friendly ICT strategy targeting long term objectives beyond the current challenges Arab women are facing.
- Building capacity and raising awareness about the role of ICTs in empowering women.
- Allocate financial support and technical know-how for associations in rural areas to integrate ICTs in their daily lives. (example: <http://www.womensnet.org.za/theme/violence-against-women>)

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<sup>29</sup> <http://www.mercycorps.org/>

- Creating monitoring mechanisms to assess the readiness, use and impact of ICTs in women lives, by following recommendations on harmonized measurement proposed at the global level, especially via households' surveys.

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