مؤسسة محمد بن راشد آل مكتوم للمعرفة
MOHAMMED BIN RASHID AL MAKTOUM KNOWLEDGE FOUNDATION

UNDP



POLICY BRIEF 04

Advancing Gender Equality in Tomorrow's Labour Markets

Addressing structural barriers and unlocking opportunities for women in the Arab States

KNOWLEDGE PROJECT.

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Introduction

Gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Arab region still lag behind other regions. Arab States score 45 on the Empowerment of women sub-pillar of the Global Knowledge Index (GKI) 2025, the second-lowest regional score globally, well below the global average of 57.[1] Specifically, female labour force participation (age 15+) in 2025 (estimated at 19 percent) is significantly lower than male labour force participation (71.1 percent) and lower than the global average for females (40.2 percent).[2] Women's participation is also lower in 'future' sectors—digital, green, and blue sectors—which signifies a risk that the gender equality gap in the future economic transition would not be bridged. Evidence from United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) technical papers covering several Arab States shows how gender dynamics are evolving in the digital, green and blue economies and how structural barriers continue to shape women's participation. Findings show that across these three sectors, gendered employment patterns diverge significantly, revealing both emerging opportunities and persistent inequalities. Examining where gender equality stands within labour market transformations across the digital, green and blue economies, according to the papers, reveals gender segregation across levels of skills, education, degree of formality and employment type.

In the **digital economy**, women's participation in the information and communications technology (ICT) sector has expanded and, in some cases, exceeds their representation in the broader labour market. However, this inclusion is highly selective: digital jobs are overwhelmingly concentrated among highly educated women and in high-skill occupations, with minimal access for those with lower- or mid-level education. Women are largely confined to salaried roles in medium and large firms, with almost no self-employment.[3] Digitalization also offers opportunities for telework, and women hold more jobs with higher potential for telework, which would offer greater flexibility; however, these jobs are concentrated in occupations such as teaching, clerical and administrative work.[4] Given that the latter jobs are at high risk of job displacement as per the World Economic Forum, *Future of Jobs Report*,[5] this occupational segregation poses high risks of job losses among women, especially in the absence of their entry into new sectors and job categories.

1 United Nations Development Programme and Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (2025). *Global Knowledge Index 2025.* Available at: https://www.undp.org/arab-states/publications/global-knowledge-index-2025

2 International Labour Organization. "Labour force participation rate", ILOSTAT database: ILO Modelled Estimates. Available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/bulk/

3 United Nations Development Programme (2025). *Gender dynamics in the digital economy: Opportunities and barriers to women's employment in the Arab region.*

4 United Nations Development Programme (2025). Teleworkability and unpaid care work in MENA: Evidence from Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. Discussion paper.

5 World Economic Forum (2025). *The Future of Jobs Report 2025.* Available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs-report-2025

In contrast, the **green economy**[6] remains male-dominated across countries, with women's participation not only lower than in the overall economy but also declining. Women in green sectors are predominantly found in lower-skilled and informal roles, often within small enterprises, and they face persistent wage gaps. Structural inequalities in access to skills and quality and formal jobs continue to limit women's ability to participate meaningfully in the green transition, despite the sector's growth potential.[7]

45/100

Arab States' average score on the GKI 2025 Empowerment of women sub-pillar, against a global average of 57

19%

Female labour force participation rate in the Arab States region, against 40.2% for females globally

~20%

Average gender gap in the use of AI tools globally

The **blue economy**—covering fisheries, aquaculture, coastal tourism, maritime transport and marine services—already supports large volumes of livelihoods across the Arab region,[8] though employment and measurement remain fragmented across sectors. The blue economy[9] presents a mixed but relatively positive picture. Women's economic participation in the blue economy is generally higher than in the overall economy, particularly in knowledge-intensive sub-sectors such as research and biotechnology. Women in the blue economy tend to have higher educational attainment and are more represented in formal and salaried employment, especially in larger firms, than in the broader economy. However, their participation remains low in absolute terms and concentrated in specific sub-sectors with continued underrepresentation in low- and mid-skill roles.[10]

Turning to **entrepreneurship and business dynamics**, using women's self-employment as a proxy indicator for entrepreneurship, the findings show that women's self-employment remains strikingly lower in digital and blue sectors than men's. In the green economy, self-employment of women is predominantly informal. When looking at digitalization in firms, women-led firms show stronger potential for digital adoption and innovation than men's firms, although access to finance, rather than the gender of firm leadership, emerges as the more critical enabler of investment in digitalization and innovation.[11]

6 The ILO defines the green economy as economic activities that prioritize mitigating environmental risks and ecological scarcities while promoting sustainable development. The green economy emphasizes environmental protection and economic growth, creating employment opportunities that promote ecological balance. The UNDP technical paper concerned with the green economy used the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities (ISIC) in its fourth revision at the two-digit level to identify and analyse green economy sectors.

7 United Nations Development Programme (2025). *Women and the green economy in Arab countries: Pathways for inclusive growth.*

8 World Bank (2026). MENA Blue Program: Overview. Available at: https://www.worldbank.org/en/programs/mena-blue-program/overview

9 The blue economy in the referenced paper includes six sub-sectors: direct marine and coastal activities, tourism and coastal services, cultural heritage and recreation, research and biotechnology, support services, and marine equipment rental. Results were based on analytical aggregation of ISIC Rev.4 industries, informed by international definitions of the blue/ocean economy.

10 United Nations Development Programme (2025). *Women's employment and gender dynamics in the Arab blue economy: A comparative analysis*.

11 United Nations Development Programme (2025). Digitalization, innovation, and firm performance: Does gender matter? Discussion paper.

Across all sectors in the labour market and in entrepreneurship, one structural constraint cuts across labour-market outcomes: **unpaid care work**. Women in the Arab region spend significantly more time on unpaid care than men, and this remains a decisive barrier to labour force participation. Evidence shows that marriage and childbearing in several countries in the region sharply increase women's care burdens and reduce their likelihood of entering the labour market, while having the opposite effect for men.[12] Even when employed, women face a 'double burden', combining paid work with disproportionate care responsibilities. The expansion of telework likely does not significantly alleviate these constraints, suggesting that care responsibilities are deeply structural and not easily mitigated by changes in job modality alone.[13] Global patterns also show challenges and opportunities regarding gender equality in future labour markets related to behavioural factors. There is gender differentiation in the use of artificial intelligence (AI) tools globally, around 20 percent on average,[14] which is often attributed to lower education or training in this area, however, emerging evidence from Kenya shows that even when there is equal training, the gap in utilization persists. Global patterns also show that women assign higher significance to issues of data protection, privacy and ethics of using AI affecting the gap in usage.[15]



12 Egypt, Jordan, the State of Palestine, and Tunisia.

13 United Nations Development Programme (2025). Teleworkability and unpaid care work in MENA: Evidence from Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. Discussion paper.

14 Cranney, K., S. Delecourt and R. Koning (2026). Global evidence on gender gaps and generative AI over time. Harvard Business School Working Paper, No. 25-023. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School.

15 Hupfer, S., and others (2024). Women and generative AI: The adoption gap is closing fast, but a trust gap persists. Deloitte Insights, Deloitte Center for Technology, Media & Telecommunications.

A synthesis of key findings and recommendations

TOPIC 01

Gender labour market dynamics and skills in relation to the future of jobs

Labour market demand patterns are shifting in the digital sectors but secondary and tertiary education institutions in the Arab region are not keeping pace. Digital skills are becoming foundational across sectors, and digital jobs increasingly require AI capabilities. Nearly one in three online job postings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region require at least one digital skill, and around a quarter of digital roles (23 percent) now require AI skills.[16] Despite increasing policy attention to the transition, there remains a significant mismatch between the skills graduates acquire and those demanded by employers, especially in advanced digital fields. This misalignment is recognized by employers, pointing to systemic gaps in curriculum relevance, practical exposure and skills adaptability. In Lebanon, for instance, surveys reported by the World Bank show that 76 percent of companies in the digital and technology sectors report a gap between university education and labour market needs, confirming the persistent mismatch.[17]

For the green sector, slower overall shifts in labour market demand patterns are noted in the region, and these shifts are concentrated in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, suggesting lags by industry and education institutions. Despite growing policy attention, a proliferation of employment opportunities is not yet apparent; jobs remain limited, geographically concentrated and not in high demand. According to the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) Skills Monitor, green employment accounted for around 4 percent of total employment, and green jobs represented approximately 5 percent of online job postings in the Arab region in 2024, with high sectoral and geographical concentration (mostly in the GCC).[18] This suggests that both industry and educational institutions in the region at large are lagging behind in the creation of green jobs.

The care sector is a promising sector for job creation and preservation in future labour markets. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), investing in care services can generate almost 300 million jobs by 2035 globally,[19] and while digitalization and AI will replace some jobs, AI is more likely to complement human capital in the care sector, and nurses and teachers will still be needed. For the Arab region, the job generation potential is 13 million jobs in 12 countries[20] according to an ILO simulation.[21] This makes the economic case for investment in the care economy to generate future jobs for men and women.

Investing in care services can generate almost 300 million jobs by 2035 globally.

16 Sabarwal, S., and others (2025). *Are Green and Digital Skills a Pathway to Jobs in Middle East and North Africa?* Report 204336, vol. 1. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group.

17 World Bank Group (2023). Lebanon: Survey reveals gaps between education and the job market. World Bank blogs, 28 March.

18 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (2025). *Empowering a Sustainable Future: Green Jobs in the Arab Region.* Policy brief.

19 United Nations Development Programme (2025). Teleworkability and unpaid care work in MENA: Evidence from Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia. Discussion paper.

20 The 12 countries are Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates.

21 International Labour Organization, Regional Office for Arab States (2024). *Care at Work: Investing in Care Leave and Services for a More Gender Equal World of Work – Companion Regional Report for the Middle East and North Africa.*

The lack of sufficient decent jobs acts as a constraint to female labour force participation.[22] Evidence across the region points to a structural deficit in the creation of decent and productive employment. ILO analyses show that labour markets continue to generate insufficient quality jobs, leading to high unemployment, widespread informality and significant levels of vulnerable employment. Deeply rooted gender norms and roles in the region further shape women's economic participation decisions, with preferences for jobs that offer stability, protection and social coverage. Poor job quality acts as a deterrent to women's participation, while the availability of decent and secure employment would likely significantly increase female labour force engagement. As explained in the introductory section, the creation of formal jobs in the digital and blue economy has led to higher absorption of women, albeit rates remain low overall, with access limited to highly skilled and educated women. Conversely, women are disproportionately represented in care-related occupations.[23] Improving the quality of jobs in these sectors is critical for engaging women in decent jobs in the labour market.

The 'education–employment gender paradox' is linked to the skills mismatch between labour market requirements and skills supply as well as structural issues. Universities still offer outdated curricula to both men and women, which are misaligned with dynamic industry demands. Women in the region are achieving high levels of educational attainment—often higher than men—including in STEM. In several Arab countries, women often reach or exceed parity in STEM education, representing more than the 35 percent of STEM graduates globally.[24] While this is leading to educated women's entry into specific STEM jobs, it does not translate into proportional labour-market participation. This paradox reflects deeper structural barriers beyond education, as labour markets fail to absorb qualified women graduates.

In several Arab countries, women often reach or exceed parity in STEM education, representing more than the 35 percent of STEM graduates globally.

Human-centric skills and cognitive abilities are critical for future labour markets. While demand for skills such as leadership, negotiation, adaptability, advocacy and problem-solving skills is rising,[25] the skills systems in the region remain largely focused on technical sector-specific competencies. Soft skills are not consistently embedded across education, training and labour market programmes, and are often disconnected from real workplace experience. This is also true for digital/AI skills which are becoming interconnected with cognitive skills. Women face additional constraints in accessing these skills due to gender norms and roles, limited leadership pathways and progression opportunities, which restrict their ability to build and apply these capabilities in the workplace and in the wider community. Evidence shows that programmes targeting women are most effective when they combine technical and soft skills and address broader social constraints (e.g. confidence, social norms and mobility concerns).[26]

22 International Labour Organization (2024). Arab States Employment and Social Outlook: Trends.

23 International Labour Organization (2023). "Where Women Work: Female-Dominated Occupations and Sectors". ILOSTAT database. Available at: https://ilostat.ilo.org/blog/where-women-work-female-dominated-occupations-and-sectors/

24 United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (2024). *Status and Trends of Women in Science.* Global Education Monitoring (GEM) Gender Report.

25 Negotiation, adaptability and agile thinking, advocacy and problem-solving skills, teamwork, empathy and emotional intelligence.

26 World Bank (2020). *Adapting Skills Training to Address Constraints to Women's Participation.* Jobs Solutions Note No. 7.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Transition from static, supply-driven education models to dynamic, demand-responsive skill ecosystems. This involves embedding green and digital competencies across all levels of education by establishing comprehensive national green and digital skills frameworks tied to accreditation; strengthening university–industry linkages with co-production of learning curricula and internships; upgrading secondary education pipelines through strengthening teacher skills, integrating digital and green literacy and offering gender-responsive career guidance towards digital and green sectors; and investing in real-time labour market intelligence systems in national and regional collaboration platforms to allow education systems to track evolving job trends and harmonize qualifications.

Invest in upskilling and reskilling through **gender-responsive public employment services and vocational education pathways connected to emerging opportunities in the green and digital/AI transitions**[27] **and the care sector.** According to the European Training Foundation (ETF), active labour market policies (ALMPs) have proven more effective for women and youth than other groups, and training programmes have shown slightly stronger outcomes than job-creation measures. Skills systems—including technical and vocational education and training (TVET), career guidance and ALMPs—should be designed to address both gender disparities and skills shortages in specific sectors, and to prevent reinforcing existing occupational segregation and inequalities. Strong collaboration among sectoral actors, social partners and the private sector can enhance the effectiveness and attractiveness of upskilling and reskilling pathways. Targeted affirmative action measures—such as scholarships, internships, mentorship programmes, employer engagement and awareness-raising—can support the participation of women in non-traditional sectors and facilitate their transition into the labour market. Gender-responsive budgeting ensures implementation and tracking of equitable results of public employment services.

Align within employment and entrepreneurship ecosystems between digital and AI literacy on the one hand and human-centric skills on the other, along with gender-transformative approaches to ensure women's access to such skills and to leadership development. Policies and institutional support by both public employment services and the private sector are needed to meaningfully embed digital and human skills into formal education at all levels; in teacher training; in ALMPs; in professional development and lifelong learning; and through entrepreneurship ecosystems. Higher education institutions should embrace and mainstream apprenticeships, internships and other forms of hands-on training so that students are able to develop soft skills.

27 European Training Foundation (2024). *Gender Dimension of Labour Market Transitions: Implications for activation and skills development policies of the EU neighbouring countries.*

TOPIC 02

Gender equality in entrepreneurship and businesses in emerging sectors

Nascent global literature shows that mixed-gender boards of large companies have a greater propensity to adopt environmental, social and governance (ESG) standards,[28] and, as such, can have higher market competitiveness.[29] Furthermore, emerging evidence from banking studies suggests that having higher diversity and women representation on boards can influence greater lending to female-led firms[30] and increase green lending.[31] However, in the region, women remain underrepresented in businesses as owners and leaders on boards including in emerging/future sectors.

Women entrepreneurs driving regenerative, care-based and community-centred economic models[32] are emerging in Jordan and the region—but often remain informal and unrecognized. Social and green enterprises are drivers of innovation with potential to become high-growth businesses and a solution for women and youth unemployment. Social enterprises comprise 10 percent of all businesses in the European Union.[33] In the United Kingdom, they contribute £60 billion to the economy[34] and 59 percent of social enterprises are led by women.[35] However, in most countries in the Arab region there is no clear definition of social enterprises[36] and systems are not yet structured to recognize, certify or channel capital towards gender-inclusive, socially responsible and environmentally sustainable enterprises.

A central constraint for women-led business formalization and growth is a lack of 'appropriate' finance. Women-led businesses are often seen as risky and have inappropriate collateral requirements by formal banks, and innovative financing opportunities remain untapped. A growing proportion of women-owned enterprises with growth potential are stuck in the middle, where on one hand, microfinance is insufficient, and, on the other hand, they are neither investment-ready nor able to mobilize more significant financing. Blended finance models or repayable grants with more lenient conditions that de-risk investment can be an opportunity, and so can impact investment in socially and environmentally conscious businesses, which to date remain relatively limited in the Arab region. Access to finance is not only about generating capital but also enables businesses to innovate and be integrated into value chains. Evidence from the United Arab Emirates shows that when financial systems embed gender-responsive practices and inclusive criteria or sustainability-linked credit lines, businesses become greener, more resilient, sustainable and competitive.[37]

Public policies that support women's entrepreneurship in the green transition, innovation and care economy, are insufficient, fragmented and implementation remains weak.

28 Omenihu, C.M., M. Abdrakhmanova and D.N. Koufopoulos (2025). Board gender diversity and environmental, social, and governance (ESG) disclosure in developed countries. *Administrative Sciences,* vol. 15, No. 4, art. 141, pp. 1–26.

29 Tahat, Y.A., and others (2026). Sustainable disclosure and market valuation: The interplay between ESG reporting and board gender diversity. *Journal of Risk and Financial Management*, vol. 19, No. 7, art. 499.

30 Core, F., and others (2026). Board Gender Quotas and Female Borrowing: Evidence from Loan-Level Data. CEPR Discussion Paper, No. 21602. Paris and London: CEPR Press.

31 Gambacorta, L., and others (2022). Gender diversity in bank boardrooms and green lending: Evidence from euro area credit register data. BIS Working Papers, No. 1044. Basel: Bank for International Settlements.

32 Across sustainable tourism, food systems, recycling, and care services.

33 European Commission, Directorate-General for Internal Market, Industry, Entrepreneurship and SMEs (2026). Social economy in the EU. Available at: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/sectors/proximity-and-social-economy/social-economy-eu_en

34 Social Enterprise UK (2019). *Hidden Revolution: Size and Scale of Social Enterprise in 2019.*

35 Social Enterprise UK (2024). *State of Social Enterprise Survey.*

36 Morocco and Tunisia are exceptions, as both countries have enacted social solidarity laws.

37 Elmassah, S. (2025). Women's empowerment, financial development and sustainability: Evidence from the UAE. *Discover Sustainability.*

There is often a lack of awareness of the necessary policy reforms that support women's entrepreneurship by relevant officials, and programmes remain largely siloed. Women-led small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) thus often remain undervalued and underserved in green policies and underrepresented in innovation incentives. A promising area for public policy investment is eco-industrial parks. Eco-industrial parks can help strengthen local value chains, technology spillovers, and industrial upgrading and create job opportunities in green, digital and innovation sectors,[38] and embedding women-led SMEs in such clusters would be an opportunity. Furthermore, recognizing the care economy in policy as a growth industry would create businesses, help formalize care work and create jobs in this sector. Exploring the potential for benefiting from digitalization/AI in the care economy in a green manner can also contribute to sustainable growth.

Private businesses need to reinvent themselves to keep up with the requirements of the future of work. Across the Arab region, total investment in research and development (R&D) is only 0.68 percent of gross domestic product (GDP), less than one third of the global average (2.6 percent),[39] which limits the ability of the private sector to compete in digital, green and care sectors, and to digitalize their business processes. Digital readiness can enable firms to integrate into global markets, which is especially useful for those that are women-led, given mobility restrictions on women in some locations. Balancing business digitalization with environmental sustainability, however, requires careful consideration. A research paper on global value chains and sustainability, carried out in 15 countries in the region, showed that the interaction between global value chain participation and digitalization can generate positive effects on the environment, but only under certain conditions, particularly adequate institutional quality and levels of digitalization.[40]

38 Elmassah, S. (2018). Industrial symbiosis within eco-industrial parks: Sustainable development for Borg El-Arab in Egypt. *Business Strategy and the Environment,* vol. 27, No. 7 (March), pp. 1208–1222.

39 UNESCO Institute for Statistics (n.d.). "Research and Development Expenditure", Research and Development (R&D) Statistics. Available at: https://databrowser.uis.unesco.org/browser

40 Elmassah, S., and E.A. Hassanein (2023). GVCs and environmental sustainability in MENA: Do digitalization and institutions make a difference? *Environmental Science and Pollution Research,* vol. 30, pp. 121614–121629.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Develop an effective green and innovative enterprise pipeline and dedicated regional business acceleration and financing platforms. Establish targeted regional mechanisms to build robust gender-responsive data systems; accelerate the development of pipelines of investment-ready, women-led businesses operating in renewable energy, circular economy, waste management and climate adaptation; and connect them with development financial institutions (DFIs), private financial institutions and (impact) investors. These platforms would help connect banks and investors with early- to mid-stage women-led enterprises in collaboration with intermediary organizations that provide business development services.

Scale gender-responsive green and blended finance. Expand financial instruments that integrate gender and green criteria (e.g. green bonds, transition funds, inclusive lending criteria or gender- and sustainability-linked credit lines), alongside blended finance and guarantee mechanisms to de-risk investments, close the micro-, small- and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) financing gaps, and enable women-led green enterprises to grow at scale. Government and development partners can establish gender-responsive innovation funds connected to incubators and accelerators in the green and digital sectors.

Adopt regulatory frameworks that recognize social/green enterprises and standards and certification frameworks to support green investment and quality gender-responsive job creation. This includes promoting the uptake of recognized certification systems (such as ESG standards and gender equality seals) and developing integrated certification schemes that combine gender, environmental sustainability and decent work criteria. Expanding the adoption of accessible impact measurement frameworks across the region would take this work to the next level. Embedding women-led green enterprises within such ecosystems can enhance their credibility and visibility and facilitate their access to global markets and impact-oriented finance.

Establish eco-industrial parks which offer a pathway to increase green private sector investment and growth. Public investment in such parks demonstrates how coordinated industrial systems and the clustering of green businesses—through resource sharing, co-location and common infrastructure—can enhance economic efficiency, reduce environmental impacts and foster innovation across firms. Ensuring the inclusion of women-led SMEs within these clusters enables them to benefit from technology spillovers, industrial upgrading and new green job opportunities. The local value chains within these ecosystems create additional opportunities to integrate women-led enterprises into emerging high-value sectors.

TOPIC 03

Social barriers to women's participation in the future economy with an emphasis on unpaid care work

Unpaid care work remains a critical barrier to female labour market participation and advancement in the green and digital transition. Without intentional policy intervention to address this challenge, current gender inequalities would be replicated. Globally, according to the ILO, 708 million women of working age say they are out of the labour force due to care responsibilities compared to 40 million men.[41] In the Arab region, 59 percent of women are outside the labour force due to care responsibilities while this is the case for only 3 percent of men.[42] Women in the region spend approximately six times[43] more hours on unpaid care work than men do, which limits their time availability, mobility and skill-development opportunities, and access to paid employment, leadership roles and social participation. Women also still experience a significant gender pay gap, lower access to social protection and lower access to technology.

Gender stereotypes and biases related to the division of labour and employers' biases contribute to men disproportionately benefiting from investments in the green sector, renewable energy, infrastructure and AI. Online platforms, technology and e-commerce solutions can provide opportunities for flexible work that women can more easily access. To have positive outcomes, the sectors in which women participate need to be diversified, the digital divide overcome, and social protection of gig jobs strengthened.

The Arab region is increasingly investing in childcare services and policies, but services remain insufficient to meet demand, and care work remains undervalued and underrecognized, affecting the quality of care**.** Often in this region, care workers include migrant domestic workers and health and education sector workers, especially nursery teachers, who are marginalized and have low wages, limited social protection, and long working hours. The undervaluation of care workers not only affects the quality of care but is a disincentive to joining the care economy and undermines narratives that view the care economy as a sector of growth in the future labour market. Furthermore, child and long-term care services do not meet demand, while the need for services for older persons is growing due to the increase in life expectancy in the region. The lack of care facilities for people with disabilities also prevents parents with children with disabilities from joining the labour market, in addition to limiting access to a dignified and independent life for people with disabilities.

The Arab region faces not only a shortage of decent job opportunities, but also deep structural constraints that limit women's access to emerging sectors. As mentioned earlier, the labour markets in the region generate insufficient quality employment, which pushes women away, while weak enabling ecosystems—including limited safe transport, childcare and long-term care, legal protections, and persistent social norms—continue to constrain women's entry, retention and progression in digital and future-oriented jobs.

41 International Labour Organization (2024). *The impact of care responsibilities on women's labour force participation.* ILO Statistical Brief. Available at: https://doi.org/10.54394/LPTT5569

42 Ibid.

43 Charmes, J. (2019). *The unpaid care work and the labour market: An analysis of time use data based on the latest world compilation of time-use surveys.* Geneva: International Labour Organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Place the care economy at the centre of any labour market agenda related to the green and digital transition and the future of work. This requires investing in care systems, improving the legal and policy environment to recognize and value care work, investing in social infrastructure, redistributing unpaid care work by providing family-friendly policies, affordable childcare, elderly care, disability care services, and adopting context-responsive care policies with adequate financing. Collaboration among international and national development actors to advocate for policy reforms and support their implementation is essential.

Recognize and invest in the care sector as a sector of growth and raise the quality of care jobs by providing industry standards, higher social and legal protection and better conditions for all care workers, by replacing precarious contracts (domestic workers, health care and education workers). Linking jobs to AI access could be an opportunity to increase effectiveness, productivity, skills and quality of care work, such as for health care workers.

Adopt comprehensive gender-responsive policies to support equality in the transition. This includes expansion of social protection systems to improve the quality of jobs in emerging sectors, in order to enhance economic security and job attractiveness for women including those with intersectional disadvantages; proactive action to address gender pay gaps including in STEM and digital/AI sectors; ensure that work environments are free from violence, sexual harassment and exploitation; provide public employment services that address multiple barriers that women face—including constraints related to transport, legal and social protection, childcare and social norms; and incentivize firms to recruit more women. Considerations should be made at the policy level of adopting explicit quotas in specific sectors under merit conditions and introducing a gender requirement in procurement processes.

Ensure data availability related to gender equality, care work and pay gaps to inform the policy response. Data on social norms related to gender equality are still lacking, while critical for policy formulation. Comprehensive data related to women in the labour market are also necessary for policy coherence. Women often work in the informal economy and as unpaid family contributors which is neither sufficiently captured nor addressed in policy. AI can be leveraged to generate high-quality data related to gender equality.

About this Policy Brief

This Policy Brief builds on discussions held during a policy roundtable convened as part of the Knowledge Summit 2025, organized by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Knowledge Foundation (MBRF) in November 2025.

The Brief also draws on the findings of UNDP technical papers on the future of work for gender equality, developed in collaboration with the Economic Research Forum (ERF), as well as insights, perspectives and recommendations shared by experts during the dialogue.

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DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations – including UNDP, or the UN Member States – or MBRF.

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