
Accelerating the STEP Framework for Women of the Arab Region



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Women are playing an increasingly important role in driving progress in many critical areas of sustainable development such as water and agriculture. They are emerging as game changers in the efforts to achieve more sustainable and equitable development. However, women in the Arab region have long faced significant challenges in playing an effective role in their societies. These challenges include patriarchal societal norms and structures, limited access to education and economic opportunities, and discrimination in areas such as the legal system and political representation. Here, Hassan Aboelnga and Haifa Al Kaylani discuss the challenges and opportunities facing women in the Arab region, and how the STEP Framework (**S**cience, **T**echnology, **E**ntrepreneurship & **P**olicy) can make an important contribution to empowering women in the Arab region.

The Arab region faces multiple and overlapping crises relating to water, food and energy security. Women continue to be disproportionately affected as traditional gender roles limit women's agency and economic inclusion. Focusing on enhancing leadership and

entrepreneurship opportunities for women in the sectors of water governance and agriculture will support economic growth and human development, while protecting societal stability and reducing inequalities.

In many parts of the Arab region, access to water is a major challenge. Climate change and population growth have put pressure on water resources, and the region's arid climate means that water is a scarce and precious commodity. Mitigating and adapting to the effects of climate change will require devising sustainable agricultural schemes and economic production systems that will allow for a suitable management and utilization of water resources, thus lessening the accelerated pace of climate change.

Arab women have made significant strides in recent years towards achieving greater gender equality and breaking down barriers to their effective participation in society. The Arab International Women's Forum (AIWF), as a leading advocacy and coalition- and consensus-building platform in the region, is facilitating women's access to innovative knowledge and key networks in the field, working closely with a global network of corporate partners to promote and prioritize the engagement of women.

AIWF's recent efforts include international and collaborative initiatives on rural women, sustainable agriculture, food security and water scarcity. In all of these key areas of work, high-level recommendations have been formulated to inform international policymaking with the aim to foster cross-sectoral collaboration in the deployment of solutions. These initiatives support the growing role that women are playing in developing more sustainable and efficient water and agriculture management practices, and in advocating for policies that prioritize water conservation and climate adaptation.

Women are also driving progress in the use of technology in agriculture. In Tunisia, women-led start-ups are developing innovative solutions to address the challenges of sustainable agriculture. Examples include the development of mobile applications to help farmers manage their crops more efficiently and using sensors to monitor soil moisture levels.

Transforming agriculture will require the adoption of innovative and entrepreneurial approaches while working on reducing existing inequalities. Haseel, a Jordan-based smart agricultural project, illustrates the importance of the agriculture sector in promoting innovation, productivity, and sustainability as drivers of economic growth. Its entrepreneurial dimension targeting the employment of rural women brings new horizons in terms of job creation and economic diversification. Designed as a scalable agricultural project involving gender-

sensitive approaches, the pilot project in Jordan is intended to be scaled-up and implemented across the wider Arab region in the years to come. The role of women in sustainable agriculture and water management is not limited to the formal sector. Women are also playing an important role in their communities, advocating for more sustainable and equitable development practices. For example, in Morocco, women's organizations are promoting the use of traditional water management practices that are more sustainable and efficient.

Despite the many challenges that women still face in accessing education and employment opportunities, they are emerging as game changers in the Arab region's efforts to achieve more sustainable and equitable development. By taking on the STEP framework (**S**cience, **T**echnology, **E**ntrepreneurship & **P**olicy), and engaging women in leadership roles in sectors such as water and agriculture, women can drive progress and advocate for policies that promote sustainability and equity. The region's future success in achieving sustainable development will depend on the full participation of women in these critical areas.

The STEP framework

Science and Technology: The Arab region has made significant strides in recent years to promote women's engagement in science and technology. Despite the challenges and barriers women still face, a growing number of women in the region are pursuing careers in science and technology and are making important contributions to research and innovation.

One of the key challenges women face in the Arab region is a lack of access to education and training opportunities in science and technology. However, governments, non-governmental organizations, and academic institutions have been working to address this issue by providing scholarships, mentorship programs, and other forms of support to women who want to pursue careers in science. AIWF's global corporate partners PepsiCo, Pfizer and PwC are active in the recruitment, training and progression, and championing of women professionals in STEM. The 'Women in Sustainability, Environment and Renewable Energy' (WiSER) platform; AIWF's institutional partner; runs a number of highly successful initiatives to develop and nurture future leaders in STEM sectors, such as the WiSER Pioneers, a year-long program offering young women aged 25 to 35 access to bespoke educational workshops and global networking opportunities with industry experts, creating leaders with an entrepreneurial mindset who are prepared to shape a more sustainable world.

Despite the many challenges that women still face in pursuing careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics in the Arab region, they are emerging as leaders and game

changers in these critical fields. By pursuing careers in science and technology, and by advocating for policies and practices that support women's engagement in these fields, women in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region are helping to promote innovation, advance research, and drive progress in key areas such as health, energy, and the environment. Strengthening of the role of women in water governance and agriculture through science and technology in the region will be critical for building resilient systems that support food, water, and energy security.

Entrepreneurship: has become an increasingly popular career choice for women in the Arab region. Despite the challenges and barriers women face, a growing number of women in the region are launching successful businesses and are making important contributions to their communities and economies.

One of the key challenges women face in entrepreneurship in the Arab region is a lack of access to funding and mentorship. However, governments, non-governmental organizations, and other institutions have been working to address this issue by providing funding, training programs, and other forms of support to women entrepreneurs. In the agricultural sector specifically, women make crucial contributions to all aspects of agricultural practices and farm activities, as well as being a central component of rural enterprises. As they still face many obstacles when accessing land and essential know-how, women's economic empowerment in this sector can be achieved through reducing the knowledge gap and tackling existing constraints on access to finance services. By launching businesses and creating employment opportunities, women are promoting economic growth, driving innovation, and creating positive change in their communities. Specifically, enhancing the engagement of women will accelerate the benefits of adopting climate-smart agriculture programs and sound water governance policies. As more women in the region are provided with the resources and support, they need to succeed as entrepreneurs.

Policy: Women's engagement in policy has become increasingly important in the Arab region. Despite the challenges and barriers women face, a growing number of women in the region are participating in politics, advocating for policy change, and making important contributions to their communities and societies.

One of the key challenges women face in policy engagement in the Arab region is a lack of representation in government and decision-making bodies.

In recent years however there has been a push to increase women's representation in politics and government. Efforts to include women should also target water and agriculture related sectors in which critical decision-making take place. Women's participation at all levels of government will help to accelerate the much-needed agricultural transformation, thus leading to a more sustainable management of resources.

By advocating for policy change and making important contributions to their communities and societies, women are promoting equity, diversity, inclusion and social justice in the region. Women must be empowered and fully engaged at all levels of policy, practice, and decision-making processes. They are agents of change who hold the power to transform and innovate solutions to the world's most critical sustainability challenges. As more women are provided with the resources and support, they need to engage in policy and decision-making, the potential for positive change in the Arab region will only continue to grow to achieve sustainable development for all.

Dr Hassan Aboelnga is a researcher at Cologne University of Applied Sciences in Germany and an international expert in water security and sustainable development. Dr. Aboelnga is the executive manager of Arab Digital Platform and serves as the Vice Chair of the Middle East Water Forum. He sits on the Management Committee of specialist groups at the International Water Association and is Chair of the Urban Water Security working group and member of the Water Security Task Force at the International Water Resources Association.

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Banner image: Women are playing an increasingly important role in driving sustainable and equitable development. However, women in the Arab region have long faced significant challenges in playing an effective role in their societies.
(Image [FAO](#))



This article was originally published at the Global Water Forum
<https://www.globalwaterforum.org/2023/04/27/accelerating-the-step-framework-for-women-of-the-arab-region/>