



I. Introduction

Fifteen years ago, delegates from 189 countries met in Beijing to declare that women's rights are human rights.

Today, the principle of gender equality is at the heart of U.S. foreign policy. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said just last week "we cannot expect there to be greater foundations built for security, democracy and opportunity – unless women are at the table."

And at the OECD, where the focus is on economic development, we are working to strengthen the link between economic empowerment and women's rights. Truly our economies cannot fully prosper if we side-line half of the world's potential workforce.

II. We've made initial progress but more needs to be done.

This is why the United States supports the efforts of MENA countries to "bring women to the table."

MENA governments have already made significant progress in reducing the gaps between women and men.

- Today there are just as many girls enrolled in primary school as there are boys. In universities there are more women students.
- In Morocco, 3500 women captured 13 percent of municipal seats -- exceeding the quota reserved for them.
- Thanks to new one-stop shops, starting a business now takes half as much time in countries across the region, including Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, the UAE, and the Republic of Yemen.
- Many of you may have participated in the MENA Businesswomen's Network, supported by the US Government's Middle East Partnership Initiative. This network has already helped 2,500 entrepreneurs in 12 countries develop their business skills.

These developments are encouraging, but much still needs to be done.

- Women's participation in the labor force remains at 26%.
- Their political participation is at 9%.



- And entrepreneurship among women is lower in the MENA region than in other middle-income regions.
- Furthermore, women often face unequal tax treatment, prohibitions on work at night, and earlier retirement.

III. OECD-MENA

That is why it is so exciting that we are all here today. From the start, the US has been a supporter of the OECD-MENA Initiative and its inclusion of women as a priority focus.

Six months ago I attended the OECD-MENA Ministerial in Marrakech where leaders of MENA countries committed to support not only transparency and innovation but also the economic advancement of women. Governments underscored - in particular - the need to improve women's participation in both the public and private sectors.

In Marrakesh, women business leaders also launched an Action Plan on Fostering Women's Entrepreneurship and Employment. This manifesto challenges governments and other stakeholders to take concrete action in order to encourage women's employment and entrepreneurship.

The OECD-MENA Women's Business Forum will help realize this Action Plan. The Forum brings together more than 120 women leaders from government, business and civil society. I had the privilege to meet many of these dynamic women in Marrakesh and was impressed by their skill and determination.

I am pleased to announce that the United States looks forward to adding its voice to the work of the Forum by joining the Steering Committee.

We will work with the Forum so that it can link together the various resources in the region and also bring in outside mentors to provide businesswomen the support they need. Meanwhile, the OECD can provide MENA governments with tools to implement policy reforms.

IV. OECD Broader Cooperation



MENA governments can also benefit from the OECD's vast resources on reform. Chile, the newest member, recently proclaimed that the OECD is no longer the "rich man's club" but is instead the "best practices club."

Egypt, for example, is now an active member of the Competition Committee. Many non-member countries have signed onto the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention. And in November of last year, Morocco joined 41 other countries in signing the OECD Declaration on International Investment and Multinational Enterprises.

And now, with U.S. leadership, the OECD is currently expanding its work on women's economic empowerment, to produce data, recommendations and tool-kits.

V. Conclusion

At the Entrepreneurship Summit in Washington last week, President Obama said that "real change comes from the bottom up, from the grassroots, starting with the dreams and passions of single individuals serving their communities."

His words made me think of Asma Alaoui whom any of you heard speak at the Tunis conference last month. Asma is a young and ambitious woman from Morocco who holds business degrees from France and Canada. But even though she gained valuable corporate experience and crafted an award-winning business plan, Asma still can't find the financial fuel to jumpstart her business.

We can do something about this.

The discussions we have here today, the plans we make, the partnerships we strengthen –will all serve to promote prosperity – for women, for families and for society as a whole. On behalf of the United States, I wish you all the very best in this shared endeavor!