

# Social Protection for Women in the MENA region

## Context

Social protection is a fundamental human right – and a key instrument in the fight against poverty and social inequality. The 2030 Agenda, through Sustainable Development Goal 1 (SDG 1), aims to achieve universal access to social protection systems by 2030. Yet this goal remains unmet for many: globally, over half the population is not adequately covered – and in the MENA region, only 40% have access to at least one form of social protection.

Women face especially high barriers: without social protection, they are left vulnerable to risks such as illness, unemployment, accidents or poverty in old age. The reasons are varied: women are more likely than men to work in precarious and informal jobs, earn less, and thus less often qualify for social benefits. In addition, traditional gender roles lead them to take on the bulk of unpaid care work – further limiting their access to formal employment. According to the ILO, the female labour force participation rate in the MENA region is the lowest in the world at just 20%. Only 27% of women receive a pension – compared to 47% of men.

Many countries in the region are making efforts to make their systems more inclusive and to improve social protection for informal workers. However, these measures often fail to address the specific needs of women, and programs remain insufficiently tailored to the realities and access barriers faced by informally employed women. Those in the so-called "missing middle" – women who neither qualify for social assistance nor have formal employment or sufficient income to participate in contributory systems – are particularly at risk of being left behind.



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## Objectif

The regional initiative Hiya MENA puts informally employed women at the centre. It supports governmental and non-governmental actors in selected MENA countries to make social protection systems more gender-responsive – and creates spaces for regional exchange. Through a consistently gender-transformative approach, the project contributes directly to the BMZ's feminist development policy.

The name Hiya-MENA reflects the project's vision: to improve access to social protection for women in the informal economy. "Hiya" (هي) means "she" in Arabic, referring to the women at the centre of the initiative. "Menna" (مِئْنَا) means "one of us", expressing solidarity and belonging. "Hiya-MENA" – "She is one of us" – stands for empowerment, inclusion, and social justice for women in the MENA region.





## Our approach



### Sensibilisation and policy advice

The project supports policy-makers in designing evidence-based, gender-responsive social protection systems. It analyses the needs of women and the barriers they face in accessing benefits, and strengthens the capacities of institutions to implement appropriate responses. This includes support for national strategies and action plans, collection and use of gender-disaggregated data, and targeted communication and outreach strategies and plans.

### Regional exchange

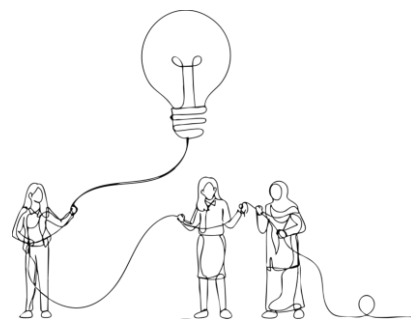
All four partner countries face comparable challenges – especially regarding social protection for informally employed women. The project brings together policy-makers and professionals from across the region to share knowledge, develop innovative solutions and advance joint strategies. It establishes regional dialogue formats and peer-to-peer approaches and collaborates with networks such as the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN ESCWA), the Arab Women Organization (AWO), the International Social Security Association (ISSA), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

### Strengthening capacities of intermediary organisations

In many partner countries, women lack knowledge about their rights and how to access social protection. The project supports cooperatives, CSOs and other intermediaries in running targeted awareness and information campaigns. It develops flexible, context-specific toolkits, trains multipliers using a "training-of-trainers" approach, and supports awareness campaigns and advisory services.

## Praxis example: The Social Innovation Lab Hiya-MENA

Since January 2025, the Hiya-MENA Social Innovation Lab has brought together around 70 key actors from Morocco, Tunisia, Jordan, and Egypt – from government, administration, academia, civil society, and the private sector. The goal: to co-develop innovative and context-appropriate solutions to improve social protection for women in informal employment.



In a guided 12-month learning and innovation process, participants develop and test practical solutions. National initiatives complement the regional dialogue – building a learning network that contributes to systemic transformation. As part of this process, four national workshops have already taken place in the respective countries. These workshops enabled participants to analyze country-specific challenges related to gender-equitable social protection in informal employment. Through collaborative discussions, they identified key barriers, mapped existing efforts, and prioritized action areas. The insights generated serve as a foundation for both national piloting and cross-country learning. They also feed into the Lab's co-creation process, ensuring that the proposed solutions are grounded in real-world needs and experiences.



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