



# Women at Work

**Best practices for promoting  
equal rights in  
the MENA region**





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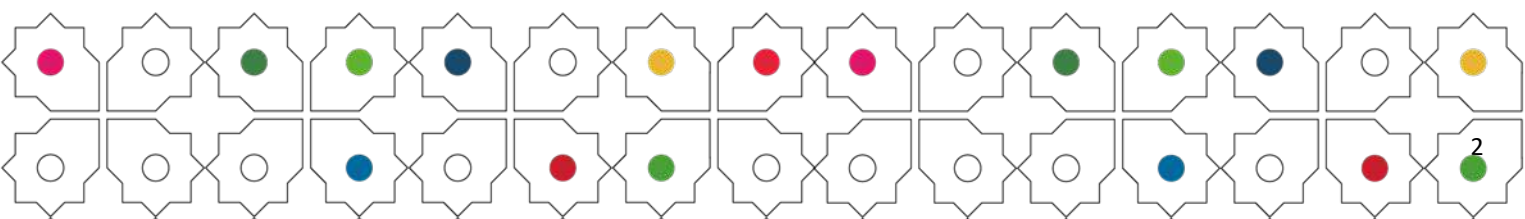
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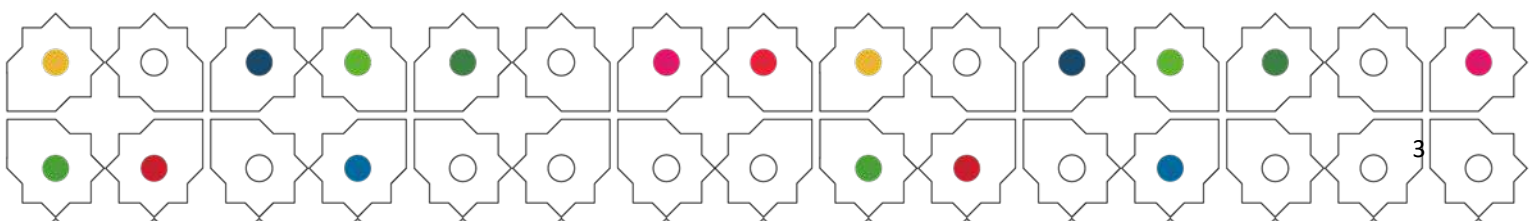
# Executive summary

Building inclusive societies is a high priority for Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia and all have made notable progress on gender equality in recent years, among others by improving education, ratifying key international conventions that promote women's rights, and either adopting new constitutions or amending them to better reflect international commitments.

Despite this strong momentum, the countries – and the entire MENA region – still have the world's lowest rate of female participation in the labour market. Inadequate legislative frameworks, restrictive gender norms and implementation challenges seem to be holding women back, impeding their economic independence.

Despite the political, economic, and cultural factors that cause the low rate of female participation in the labour market, the economic empowerment of women and gender equality are key priorities for the enterprises in the region. They have taken a number of initiatives to enhance the number of female employees, addressing underlying barriers to women's economic participation, enhancing their recruitment processes and improving working conditions for female employees. These—and other -initiatives are portrayed in this publication, produced by the Confederation of Danish Industries and The Danish Trade Development Agency (DTDA).

We believe that cooperation between all stakeholders including employees, enterprises, trade unions and employers' organisations are important to create lasting changes. Our ambition is to showcase solutions to create a more equal labour market and hopefully inspire other workers, companies and organisations to take their own initiatives to promote women's participation in the labour market.







*Hajar El-Sayed, technical assistant at Arab Mechanical Engineers*





# Best practices to improve the female work participation rate

Drawing on the experiences of labour market organisations and companies in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia the recommendations in this publication is the result of a study carried out by Copenhagen Social in 2021.

The objective of the study was to identify the most significant barriers to gender equality in these countries and pinpoint the most effective actions that workers and management in companies as well as trade unions and employers' organisations can take on their own and together through social dialogue to increase the female work participation rate.

The study method consisted of a literature review followed by qualitative interviews with HR managers and shop stewards from seven private companies and representatives from six labour market organisations.

## Results

All participants highlighted that the low rate of female participation in the labour market is caused by a complex mix of economic, societal, and cultural factors.

The key economic factor is the weak growth rate in the countries, which decreases the ability of the economy to create sufficient job opportunities.

Societal factors play an important role, especially in the traditional gender division of labour, where men are seen as breadwinners while women often are limited to housework and family care. These social structures make it difficult for women to enter the labour market or continue their employment after marriage.

Cultural factors are especially prevailing in norms about what is seen as suitable work for women. Such perceptions often limit women's employment opportunities to specific professional fields, mainly in the education and health sectors, as well as industrial sectors such as food and textile. Despite these barriers, all interviewed labour market organisations see gender equality and diversity as a competitive advantage for companies because they contribute to:

- a better response to market demands through an enhanced understanding of female customers.
- an enhanced public image of companies that manage to position themselves as equal opportunities employers.
- enhanced problem-solving and innovation by diverse teams with different backgrounds
- less staff turnover as women remain employed even after marriage.

## Remaining challenges

Throughout the region, labour market organisations as well as enterprises work to overcome these barriers, but many challenges remain.

The enterprises that participated in the study have local unions, except for the Egyptian enterprises. Generally, the level of unionisation among female workers is lower than for their male counterparts and several unions report 10-30% unionisation among women in their respective sectors.

Several of the unions interviewed have successfully engaged women from production units in the local union. For example, GTU Food in Jordan has integrated women into their decision-making bodies and seen a significant rise in female membership.

However, despite that more women are joining trade unions (e.g. 20% of GTU Foods' workers' representatives are currently women), there continues to be prejudices in society in general towards women's participation in union work.

The companies that participated in the study identified the following main challenges to their company.

For Arab Mechanical Engineers, the main remaining challenge is to acquire more information on and experience in how to attract more female workers to the factory floor and potentially to expand the company's care services by establishing on-site childcare. They also need to continuously prove that employees of both genders work on equal terms, as some men remain reluctant to work beside female employees.

Sukhtian has identified challenges related to female employees with small children in particular in the production facility where it is more difficult to implement flexible working time than for office roles.

For Pink Cotton, a key challenge is that the most vulnerable women often leave the factory after childbirth to look after the child. Therefore, the company wishes to establish a childcare facility. Currently, they do not have enough physical space to establish such facilities, so they will need to establish a new production unit in order to respond to the challenge.

The main issue for Lafarge Holcim is to find the balance between employing more women and treating them equally to men. They want to avoid a perception among male workers that female employees are being treated differently. The more women they have employed, the more they are able to attract.

Miyahuna is working on marketing the water company as an employer of female workers to increase their recruitment base, focusing on how they offer competencies to women. Currently, the main issue is to provide relevant training for their female employees to help them build the capacity to advance their careers in the sector.

For Baxter, one of their main challenges is to change the company culture to make male workers accept and support female workers. Another challenge is to identify and measure relevant KPIs to continuously improve the working environment, especially in the production units.

## **Good practices**

Despite the challenges, many good practices have been identified among – and across - the selected enterprises.

- Conducting workflow analyses to identify job opportunities for women in the production cycle.
- Establishing a comprehensive baseline of occupational health and safety and regularly assessing improvement.
- Sensitizing the workplace's male employees to ensure a safe and supportive working environment for female employees. This is especially important in male-dominated sectors.
- Systematically engaging with female employees to understand their needs and provide the necessary support to improve the working environment.
- Establishing a mentoring program for female employees.
- Designating peer workers to ensure that no woman is working alone in male-dominated areas of the production or on remote production sites.
- Evaluating performance using public evaluation criteria in order to increase transparency.

Common to all the good practices above is the fact that they present concrete solutions to some of the challenges to the economic empowerment of women in the region. Hopefully, they can serve as an inspiration to other companies in – and outside - the region, allowing more women to enter the labor market.

A more detailed description of the above and the full study can be accessed here: [bit.ly/improving-work-rate](https://bit.ly/improving-work-rate)





## Holcim, Morocco: Raising the number of female employees by 50%

Number of employees: 1,100

Female employees: 145

Sector: Construction



Holcim is a multinational company and the largest producer of cement and concrete in Morocco. Holcim sees diversity as part of its DNA and has started a project to increase the number of female employees in production by 50%.

At Holcim's headquarters, half of the staff are women, including the director of human resources, Malika Youssoufne. She explains that the challenge for production companies is to increase the number of women directly involved in production.

"In Morocco, there is a belief that factories are not for women. Not because they are not smart or are not able but because of other challenges: working on the ground in a dusty environment".

She explains that this can be seen inside Holcim as well:

"Despite the good working conditions we have established for women to be comfortable, it can still be difficult. The workforce is mainly masculine and women can feel like a different species."

Nevertheless, Holcim has no doubt that a diverse workforce is essential:

"When we have people who think the same way to find a solution for a problem, we end up with the same solution. But when it's a diverse group we see different visions. Women have a different approach than men."

#### **A plan with clear targets**

To reach the target of 50% more female employees in production, Holcim has signed a diversity charter and started the project "Ensemble" – Together. As part of the project, Holcim has taken initiatives such as sensitisation campaigns,

role models, gender quotas for job interviews and a mentoring programme.

According to Houda Bajja, a process engineer at Holcim's factory in Settat, these actions have created a comfortable work environment for both genders:

"At Holcim, I experience a kindness and equal treatment to the men that I think women at other workplaces might not. The fact that there is no gender discrimination makes me comfortable to work here."

"We have organized a workshop titled "Diversity", to which all the staff participated, both men and women, which helped create a strong bond between the collaborators and it showed how everyone was open to the idea of having more women in this work environment."

Malika Youssoufne explains that Holcim is a well-known and respected employer in Morocco with a good employer brand. This is reflected in the work of the HR department:

"Our main challenge is not to attract women but to keep them in the company. We try to do this by introducing them to the industrial world. This means integrating them in the factories and providing them with the means to build a career."

The goal today is to hire more women engineers and have them attract more people and also work with our service providers and entice them to do the same. We will get there, we are very optimistic but realistic, and we know it will not happen in a heartbeat."



## **HOLCIM'S INITIATIVES**

- **Mentorship:** 6-months programme where new female recruits are assigned a mentor from the company. This helps their integration into the company and improves their well-being.
- **Sensibilisation campaign:** All employees participate in workshops on the importance of a diverse work environment.
- **Company ambassadors:** Female employees visit schools as role models to help change the image of industrial work and demonstrate the structured working environment at Holcim.
- **Gender quotas:** An equal number of male and female candidates must be interviewed for new positions. The most qualified candidate gets the job.









## How labour market organisations work internally with gender equality

*Improving gender equality in their own organisation is important to many of the labour market organisations that have taken part in the Danish-Arab Partnership Programme.*

*Across the organisations, there are many different approaches including flexible working arrangements and a focus on safe workspaces.*

*Some labour market organisations also aim to have equal gender representation in the administration of the organisations, the work committees, and the management, as the advocacy for gender equality among members is much more trustworthy if it comes from an organisation that can show its own work and efforts as a good example.*

*Houda Bajja, process engineer, Holcim, Morocco*

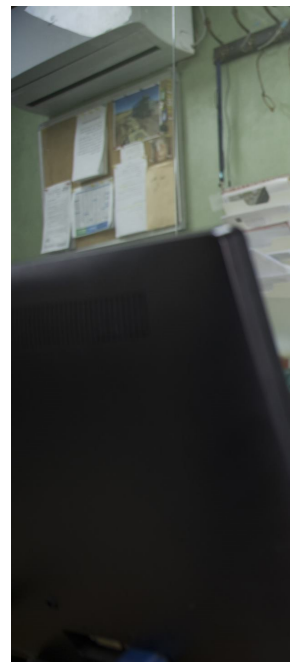


## Miyahuna, Jordan: Empowering female leadership

Number of employees: 2.700

Female employees: Around 270

Sector: Construction





Miyahuna is a utility company that provides water and sanitation services to 700,000 customers.

The water sector is traditionally male dominated, but Miyahuna is working to strengthen the role of women within the company. They have set a target of 25% women in leadership positions and developed a strategic action plan to reach the goal.

Engineer Laila Abdel Hadi Abu Rabie, Director of Customer Services Department, has identified two main challenges that stand in the way of reaching the goal:

“Society has a greater belief in a man’s ability to lead than in a woman’s. But we have made strides in changing that view because women have proven their worth in all the leadership positions they have worked in.

Second, women must be convinced of their own capabilities. Sometimes they are afraid to be in leading positions or to be in direct contact with the customer, preferring to stay back.”

A key issue for Miyahuna remains sensitising male workers to accept female colleagues. While some are supportive, others hold a more traditional view of female workers being unsuitable as leaders.

#### **Engaging with non-profits to deliver results**

To reach the objectives, Miyahuna has collaborated with USAID, which is implementing a programme to improve gender equality across the water sector, and with Georgetown University which has helped Miyahuna conduct a baseline assessment and develop a corresponding action plan.

The company has worked closely with the Union

of Workers in Food Industries.

Fatma Abdallat is an HR manager at Miyahuna and a trade union member. She explains that the most important problems that women face are related to the working conditions and the work environment.

For example, even though women have more work tasks at home than men, they have equal working hours. Furthermore, it is important to create a comfortable work environment for women, because women have other needs than men.

She explains that negotiations with the management on concrete actions can be tricky, even in cases where they agree, as it can be difficult to change existing company legislation and policies.

#### **Gender equality is a “work in progress”**

Currently, management is working to enforce gender equality in the company policies, and they are revising recruitment and retainment policies to achieve the goal of 25% of women in leadership positions.

They are also working to identify places where employing women would provide new possibilities. For example, female customers, who are often alone with children when utility company staff visits, might prefer female meter readers, plumbers, or home payment collectors, as they have to let them into their homes.

Laila Abdel Hadi Abu Rabie has a clear recommendation for other business leaders:

“I strongly advise to give women an equal opportunity in any job and to provide competition based on qualifications and competence, because many women possess the skills and need the opportunity to highlight it.”



#### **MIYAHUNA’s Initiatives:**

- Baseline assessment to map issues and identify opportunities
- 25% target for the number of women in leadership positions
- Separate sanitation facilities
- Training men to accept female colleagues and leaders







## How local trade unions work to improve gender equality in companies

*The most important way for trade unions to increase gender equality is to increase the level of unionisation among female workers, which is considerably lower than their male counterparts. This has roots in tradition as trade union work has not typically been seen as appropriate for women. Having more female trade union members will enable the trade unions to better represent their needs.*

*Today, the most advanced trade unions have a central unit responsible for issues related to gender. In general, trade unions from sectors with larger enterprises experience a larger degree of awareness about the importance of gender equality, whereas other sectors, e.g. the health sector, consist of many small units spread over large geographical areas and therefore of lower awareness.*



*Fatma Abdallat, HR manager and trade union member, and Engineer Laila Abdel Hadi Abu Rabie, Director of Customer Services Department, Miyahuna, Jordan*





## Managem, Morocco: Attracting women to a male-dominated industry

Number of employees: 6.000

Number of female employees: 200

Sector: **Mining**





Managem is an international mining company with production in nine African countries. They operate seven mines in Morocco, where they have been active since 1928.

The mining sector is a male-dominated industry, and Moroccan legislation prevents women from working with the actual extraction. Nevertheless, Managem has decided to hire more women in engineering, planning, administrative, and executive positions and has taken concrete steps to reach the targets.

Jihane Soubabi runs the department for Change, Improvement and Corporate Performance” at Reminex, a division of Managem. She strongly supports more women in the industry:

“Our experience is that women are highly motivated and work in an efficient and safe manner and have excellent communication skills which bring about a pleasant work environment. This naturally leads to better performances from teams that include women.”

### **Three main challenges: recruitment, retention and furthering female careers**

The dearth of women in the mining sector is a result of the masculine image of the industry, of legislation banning women from working inside the actual mines, and of the mining sites being remote and far from each other.

Managem has identified three main challenges, recruitment, retention, and fair promotion of

women, and has developed measures to overcome them. To increase female recruitment, Managem reaches out to potential employees already from secondary school through workshops, internship opportunities, job fairs, open houses, etc.

To retain female workers, Managem has established small communities for women within the company and encourages that several women are always working at the same location. Furthermore, there are local HR departments at each site so the women always have a place to address any issues that might arise.

To ensure fair promotions, Managem has established public criteria for career advancement based on measurable indicators. This ensures that promotions are offered based on productivity and skills only, domains in which female workers often excel.

### **Women are given the opportunity to prosper**

“To me, the difference between Managem and other companies is evident,” says Rachida Chatibi. She is an engineer and has worked at Managem for more than 10 years in different functions:

“I have worked in several male-dominated workplaces and held positions that are traditionally male. But this has only been possible because my superiors had full confidence in my skills.”



## **MANAGEM'S INITIATIVES**

- Setting clear goals for the number of women in different positions
- Separate facilities for women and men, including toilets, canteens, home-work transportation service
- Establishing networks and communities between women employees
- Outreach campaigns to attract new female talent
- Local HR facilities to easily address problematic issues on site
- Quantitative criteria for career advancements available to all workers to ensure non-biased promotions



## Increasing the trade union membership of women

*Increasing the number of female trade union members is crucial to ensure more gender equality in workplaces. In Jordan, the trade union for health workers has shown a way forward by establishing trade unions at the county level. This has enabled the unions to offer short training courses for members and employees in small enterprises.*

*Women have shown great interest in these courses, resulting in a high level of engagement and an increase in the membership base. The training has been focused on information about national labour laws, as well as the rights of employees. Gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace have also been addressed as part of the training.*





*Rachida Chatibi*

*Rachida Chatibi, Engineer, Managem,  
Morocco*





## Pink Cotton, Egypt: Educating and training potential employees

Number of employees: 120

Number of female employees: 100

Sector: Garment





*Pink Cotton in Alexandria specialises in clothing such as t-shirts, dresses, and infant clothing.*

*In 2014, Pink Cotton established a vocational school in an economically challenged area of Alexandria to address the lack of skilled seamstresses which was hampering the company's growth. At the school, women learn to sew clothes both in theory and in practice through internships at the Pink Cotton factory.*

*"We want to give more opportunities to women in the labour market", says Samar Al Hamshary, the executive manager of the Pink Cotton factory. Therefore, the school's focus is broader than just teaching how to sew. They also have soft skills courses and aim to give young women a broad education.*

*Even though most of the workers at the Pink Cotton factory have been trained in the Pink Cotton School, many of the graduates also choose to establish small-scale production at home.*

*In Samar Al Hamshary's eyes, the Pink Cotton establishment is especially attractive to women due to the mutual respect between male and female workers. Still, potential students face many challenges, both cultural and practical:*

*"Women suffer from patriarchal marriages, as husbands prevent their wives from working in the school", she says.*

*Furthermore, childcare is a key issue for working mothers, as the families of female workers cannot afford private nurseries. Therefore, Pink Cotton is planning to establish a childcare facility on location.*

### **Social dialogue is key**

*Pink Cotton sees regular dialogue with workers in the company as a key tool to improve the conditions for workers of both genders. Therefore, they hold monthly meetings with the employees and have an open-door policy.*

*"The approach is very special. In other companies and schools, I have never dealt directly with the administration, but here at the Pink Cotton School, the door of the administration is always open to us, and they deal with female students as if we were sisters", explains Yassmin Sami, herself a student at the school.*

*Even if the work on the sewing machine can be demanding, Yassmin Sami is happy to be at the school because of the team spirit and mutual respect in the workplace:*

*"The men in the company treat women in a respectful manner, the school is safe, clean, and equipped with modern machines, and there is no discrimination between me and my friends which makes me feel that we are all one team", says Yassmin Sami.*

*Hana Mohamed Ibrahim has been chosen as a worker's representative by the school's management. She says that the dialogue has led to concrete changes:*

*"The administration proposed extending working hours until five in the evening. I conducted a poll for the workers and offered them the opportunity to express their opinion. When the management's proposal was rejected by the workers, the management cancelled it.*



### **PINK COTTON'S INITIATIVES**

- *Creating a technical school to provide employment opportunities for young females*
- *Regular dialogue with employees through open-door policy and monthly meetings*
- *Providing private changing rooms and gender-specific bathrooms.*





### How employers' organisations help companies work for gender equality

*The employers' organisations in the Danish-Arab Partnership Programme offer services to their members to help give women more opportunities in the labour market.*

*The most important task is to raise awareness and show why it is good for businesses to invest in more female employees and to offer services to help members take concrete steps to make their company more female-friendly.*

*The problems facing women differ according to the type of company. In sectors that usually employ many women, e.g. the food and textiles sectors, the most important task is typically to improve working conditions. In sectors that have fewer female employees, e.g. the chemical and engineering industries, the focus is more on raising awareness*





## Arab Mechanical Engineers, Egypt: Putting females on the factory floor

Number of employees: 200

Number of female employees: 30

Sector: Steel manufacturing



Arab Mechanical Engineers (AME) in Egypt is a leading supplier of scaffolding and formwork. Since 2019, the company has endeavoured to make the factory floor an attractive workplace for women.

AME has a long tradition of employing women in management and office functions, but hiring women for technical and engineering positions on the factory floor is difficult.

Cultural norms are a hindrance in families and among male workers who perceive female workers as weak and can be reluctant to work with them. They also discourage women who are often afraid of harassment and sceptical of the working conditions in the factory. Some also reject such work due to religious concerns.

#### **Gender-specific facilities and social dialogue**

To make factory work more attractive to women, AME has addressed both physical and mental barriers.

To improve the physical facilities, AME has created separate toilets, changing rooms and dining facilities for men and women. Furthermore, providing female workers with flexible working hours that enable a good work-life balance, has been key to achieving a work environment better suited for women.

"There are many challenges. But now the situation with us is different", says Mervat Rashed, financial manager at AME.

AME has worked extensively with the male workers to make them supportive of hiring women

for the production site. The company has also engaged in dialogue with the workers to identify the best production areas for female workers like quality control and production areas with 3D modelling.

#### **Productivity vastly improved**

Hiring more women has had a positive effect on AME. The company now has a bigger pool of available talent and in AME's experience, the women are more productive than the men, as they are committed and want to prove their worth.

The company has ensured that women can work in a way that suits them and that acknowledges the different circumstances of men and women and provides the necessary means of comfort. This creates a process of positive competition between male and female workers which has helped increase productivity by approximately 60%.

Technician assistant Hajar El-Sayed, appreciates the changes that AME has instituted to attract more women: "We did not have a place to sit or bathroom or separate dressing rooms or a cupboard. They provided all of that. We got health and social insurance too, night allowances, meal allowances, and transportation allowances".

AME considers the commitment to hiring more women a success but says that changing workplace and cultural norms is a long-term commitment and that a lot of work lies ahead. Currently, AME has six female workers on the factory floor



#### **AME's INITIATIVES:**

- Establishing separate dining, changing, and toilet facilities
- Determining job tasks particularly suited for women
- Dialogue, for male workers to accept female colleagues.
- Demonstrating efficiency of female workers by showcasing productivity numbers publicly.

# About

## **The Danish-Arab Partnership Programme**

*The DAPP is Denmark's development cooperation programme with the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The DAPP is financed by the Danish Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

*In line with Danish foreign policy interests, DAPP's vision is to promote a democratic, prosperous, and stable MENA.*

*DAPP combines regional activities with interventions in Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Tunisia.*

*The DAPP integrates a regional and country approach in line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular through the promotion of peace, justice, and strong institutions (Goal 16), gender equality (Goal 5), decent work and economic growth (Goal 8), and partnerships (Goal 17).*

*Read more at: [www.dapp.dk/en](http://www.dapp.dk/en)*

## **The Confederation of Danish Industry**

*DI is Denmark's largest employers' organisation, representing 19,000 member companies. It has more than a century's worth of experience representing the private sector and working to promote a conducive business environment and a well-functioning labour market.*

*DI has been engaged in development partnerships with like-minded sister organisations across the world for more than two decades. We collaborate to support dialogue between employers and employees, strengthen education, improve framework conditions, and ensure women's access to the labour market.*

*Read more at: [www.di.dk/development-partnerships](http://www.di.dk/development-partnerships)*


## **The Danish Trade Development Agency—DTDA**

*The DTDA was established in 1987 by FH (Danish Trade Union Confederation), Denmark's trade union central organisation, which organises 1,3 million employees (45% of employed Danes).*

*Since its inception, DTDA has worked with sister organisations to strengthen their capacity to fight for a world with sustainable growth and decent jobs (SDG goal 8) by creating more decent jobs, strengthening worker rights, expand social security, and support labour market dialogue.*

*Read more at [www.ulandssekretariatet.dk](http://www.ulandssekretariatet.dk) (in Danish)*





## Participating labour market organisations

**JCI** (the Jordan Chamber of Industry) is the national organisation for enterprises within 10 industrial sub-sectors. It represents around 17,000 member enterprises.

**CGEM** (La Confédération Générale des Entreprises du Maroc (CGEM) is the voice of the private sector in Morocco representing more than 90.000 members.

**FEI** (the Federation of Egyptian Industries) is one of the largest employers' associations in Egypt, with 102,000 members accounting for more than 18% of the national economy.

**UTICA** (l'Union Tunisienne de l'Industrie, du Commerce et de l'Artisanat) is Tunisia's largest employers' organisation representing more than 150.000 member companies across sectors and regions.

**UMT** (L'Union Marocaine du Travail) is Morocco's oldest trade union central organisation with more than 300,000 members.

**UGTT** (L'Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail) is the Tunisian trade union central organisation with more than a million members. UGTT received the Nobel Peace Prize together with the UTICA and other civil society organisations for their role in the democratic process in Tunisia following the Arab Spring.

**GFJTU** (the General Federation of Jordanian Trade Unions) is the only national trade union central organisation in Jordan. It has 115,000 members and 17 affiliated federations.

