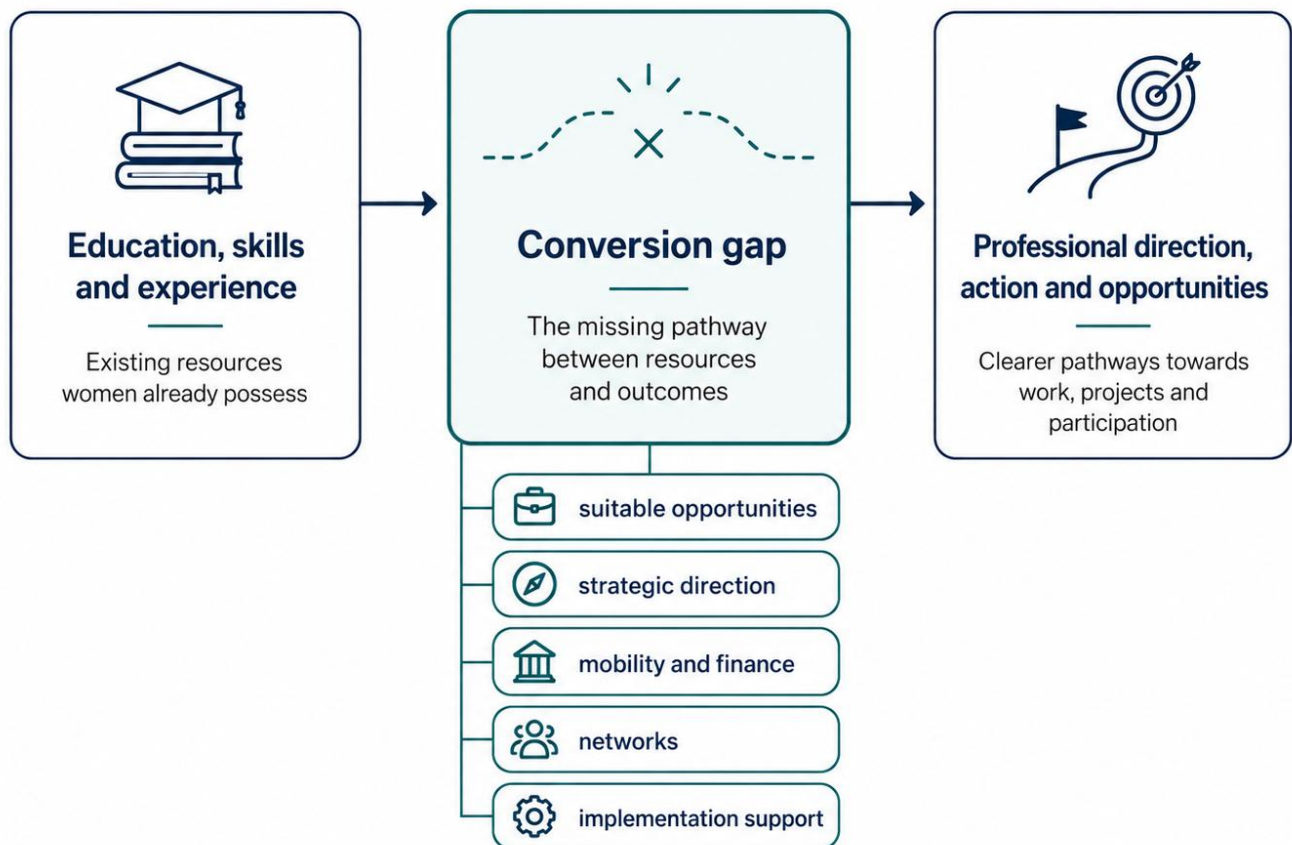


What prevents women's skills from becoming real professional opportunities?

The research identifies a conversion gap between the resources women already possess and their ability to translate those resources into stable work, income, professional direction and meaningful participation.



HIGH EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

Qualifications and professional experience did not consistently translate into stable employment or clear professional progression.

INCOME INSTABILITY

Economic security remained uneven, showing that education alone does not guarantee financial stability.

SUITABLE OPPORTUNITIES

The central challenge was not a lack of ambition, but limited access to opportunities that were relevant, accessible and realistic.

MORE THAN TRAINING

Women identified a need for practical pathways, mobility, finance, networks and implementation support—not another isolated course.

From Personal Skills and Aspirations to Strategic Agency and Economic Pathways

Background. Women and girls across the Middle East and North Africa face an acute convergence of economic, political, social and technological pressures. Rising living costs, fragile labour markets, conflict, displacement and mobility restrictions are weakening their economic security and participation in public and professional life. Rapid digital transformation and artificial intelligence are further reshaping jobs, skills and access to opportunity, with the risk of widening existing gender inequalities. This emergency persists despite decades of national and international investment in education, employment, legal equality and women's empowerment, at a time when women's knowledge, leadership and participation are needed more than ever to strengthen resilience and shape the region's future.

Institutional context. MENA Impact Women is an independent, women-led regional platform advancing applied research, strategic empowerment and women-led impact across the Middle East and North Africa. It developed this study to generate evidence grounded in women's lived realities and to test an applied response through the Strategic Empowerment Programme.

Objective. This report examines the conversion gap between the resources women possess and their ability to translate education, skills and experience into clear professional direction, concrete action and viable professional and economic pathways. It also examines the early relevance and practical applicability of the conceptual model through the Strategic Empowerment Programme – Level 1 pilot.

Methods. The study adopted an exploratory, multi-source design combining an ongoing Arabic-language online survey with the first programme pilot, delivered entirely online from May to July 2026 with women from Algeria, Egypt and Tunisia. Ten women enrolled and eight completed the learning journey. Seven completers developed final projects and Strategic Professional Development Plans, while one transitioned into a formal leadership role within MENA Impact Women after coordinating and directly supporting the Egyptian participant group. The analysis integrated descriptive survey evidence, participant-produced materials, facilitator records and programme outputs. The conceptual framework drew on Kabeer's relationship between resources, agency and achievements, Freire's concepts of dialogue, critical reflection and praxis, and Mernissi's emphasis on women's voices and lived knowledge.

Results. Preliminary survey patterns identified a highly educated respondent group experiencing uneven employment conditions, income instability and limited access to suitable opportunities. Priority needs extended beyond training to include suitable work, financial stability, mobility, digital capabilities, networks and implementation support. Programme evidence showed early progress among completers in professional clarity, recognition and organisation of existing resources, project development, strategic positioning and implementation planning.

Conclusions. Education and skills do not automatically generate employment, income or professional advancement. Their conversion into meaningful outcomes depends on informed decision-making, contextual analysis, mentoring, digital readiness, networks, suitable opportunities and continued implementation support. The findings support MENA Impact Women's integrated model linking research, strategic empowerment, peer exchange and practical implementation. The report's principal findings are summarised in Figure 1.

Keywords: *women's empowerment; agency; MENA; artificial intelligence; digital transformation; professional pathways; economic participation; strategic empowerment.*

Figure 1. Key findings from the interim survey and Strategic Empowerment Programme pilot.



Note: Survey findings are preliminary. Pilot findings refer to eight women who completed the learning journey: seven completed the standard project pathway, while one transitioned into a formal leadership role within MENA Impact Women.

Source: MENA Impact Women Under Pressure Survey, 2026; MENA Impact Women programme documentation, 2026.

The survey shows where the gap exists. The pilot shows how women begin to move through it.

The two evidence sources serve different purposes. The survey identifies recurring professional and economic pressures, while the pilot provides deeper insight into how women organise existing resources, define direction and prepare practical action.

WHAT THE SURVEY REVEALS

Highly educated women can still face uneven work, income instability, limited mobility and insufficient access to suitable opportunities. Priority needs extend beyond skills acquisition to the conditions that make skills usable.

A COMMON PROBLEM, DIFFERENT PATHWAYS

The conversion gap can appear at labour-market entry, during career transition, in freelance work, within an existing business or while developing a social initiative.

WHAT THE PILOT ADDS

Structured reflection, mentoring, peer exchange and practical planning helped participants connect dispersed experience to clearer professional value, defined beneficiaries and feasible first steps.

EARLY EVIDENCE, NOT FINAL IMPACT

The pilot documents clearer positioning, project development and implementation planning. Sustained employment, income and long-term impact require future follow-up.

Illustrative pathways emerging from the pilot

Starting point	Resource identified	Emerging pathway/project
 Master's degree; several years in marketing and communication; role not aligned with aspirations.	 Programme tools and mentoring to design an interactive media-literacy initiative.	 Media-Literacy Initiative for Children Structured programme using interactive learning to strengthen children's critical thinking and ability to recognise misinformation.
 MBA; university teacher in business strategy and economic development; two years without employment; starting a master's in international trade without a clear plan.	 Strategic guidance to connect education, business, trade and cross-cultural expertise.	 Education-Business-Trade Service Concept Concept linking education, business guidance, international trade and cross-cultural collaboration.
 Employed in tourism; established import-export company not yet operational.	 Market analysis, supplier identification, positioning, negotiation and implementation planning.	 Import-Export Business Activation Defined a viable starting activity and secured the company's first export contract before the pilot ended.
 Degree in chemistry; several years in a chemical laboratory; innovative water-treatment idea with untapped potential.	 Tools to assess impact, define value and structure a viable project.	 Innovative Water-Treatment Project Structured project defining the problem, beneficiaries, comparative value, applications and initial implementation requirements.
 Recent graduate; ~1 year seeking employment; skills in communication, video and editing; interest in medicine and rare diseases.	 Support to align skills and interest into a purpose-driven initiative.	 Awareness Initiative on Rare Diseases Communication initiative to make rare diseases and patients' experiences more visible and understandable.
 Experienced independent graphic designer considering leaving activity to pursue craftsmanship.	 Guidance to integrate design expertise with craftsmanship.	 Design & Craft Business Concept Concept combining contemporary design, traditional production and income opportunities for women artisans.
 Over 20 years in association and community work; no stable revenue model.	 Tools to design a sustainable revenue model with social and environmental impact.	 Green Social-Enterprise Concept Concept linking environmental protection, local heritage and income opportunities for women.

A model grounded in resources, critical reflection and women's lived knowledge

The report combines three complementary perspectives and translates them into an applied approach to strategic empowerment.

KABEER: RESOURCES, AGENCY AND ACHIEVEMENTS

Women may possess education, skills, experience, time, relationships and aspirations without being able to convert them into valued choices or outcomes. Empowerment depends on the relationship between resources, agency and achievements.

FREIRE: DIALOGUE, REFLECTION AND PRAXIS

Information alone does not produce direction. Dialogue and critical reflection help participants interpret their circumstances, distinguish personal gaps from structural barriers and connect reflection to informed action.

MERNISSI: LIVED KNOWLEDGE AND CONTEXT

Women are not passive beneficiaries. Their accounts of work, family, institutions and constraints are essential sources of knowledge. Support must therefore be adapted through participation and co-creation.

INTEGRATED APPLICATION

Research evidence, professional expertise and lived experience are interpreted together. The model is therefore dialogical, iterative and adapted to different social, economic and professional contexts.

How the three foundations work together

RECOGNISE

Identify the education, experience, relationships, informal knowledge and aspirations women already possess.

INTERPRET

Use dialogue and critical reflection to understand barriers, opportunities and the meaning of available choices.

ACT AND ADAPT

Translate insight into strategic choices, practical action, learning and revision within real contexts.

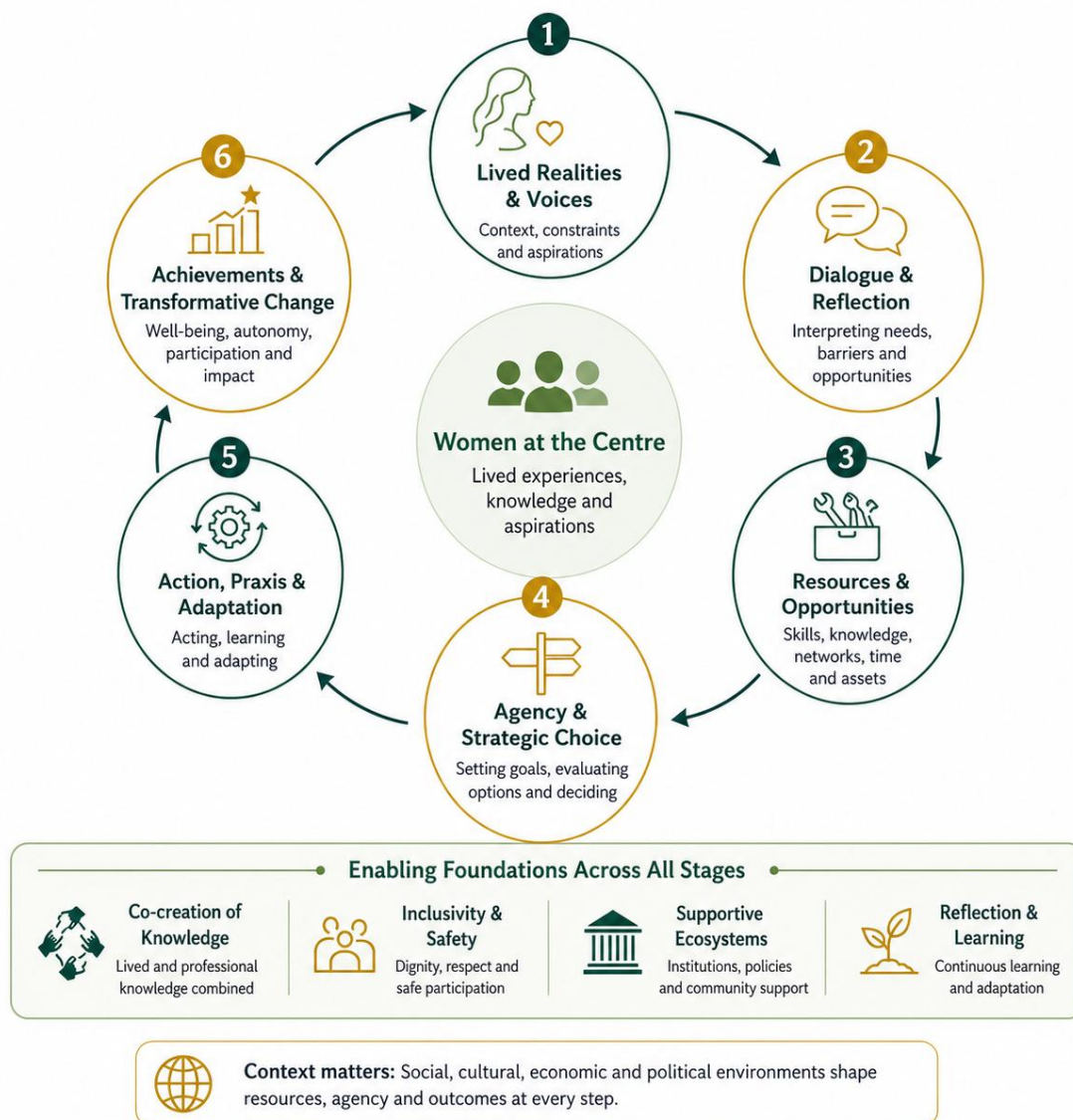
CORE PROPOSITION

Strategic empowerment is not the transfer of value to women. It is the process of recognising, organising and activating value that already exists, while addressing the conditions that shape whether action is possible.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

These foundations explain why strategic empowerment must begin with women's existing resources and lived realities. Through dialogue and critical reflection, those resources can be organised into clearer choices, feasible actions and context-sensitive professional pathways.

Girls & Women at the centre of a dynamic and context-dependent process



1. LIVED REALITIES AND VOICES

Context, constraints and aspirations are the starting point.

2. DIALOGUE AND REFLECTION

Needs, barriers and opportunities are interpreted rather than assumed.

3. RESOURCES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Skills, knowledge, networks, time and assets are recognised and assessed.

4. AGENCY AND STRATEGIC CHOICE

Participants set goals, compare options and decide.

5. ACTION, PRAXIS AND ADAPTATION

Plans are tested, reviewed and adjusted through learning.

6. ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHANGE

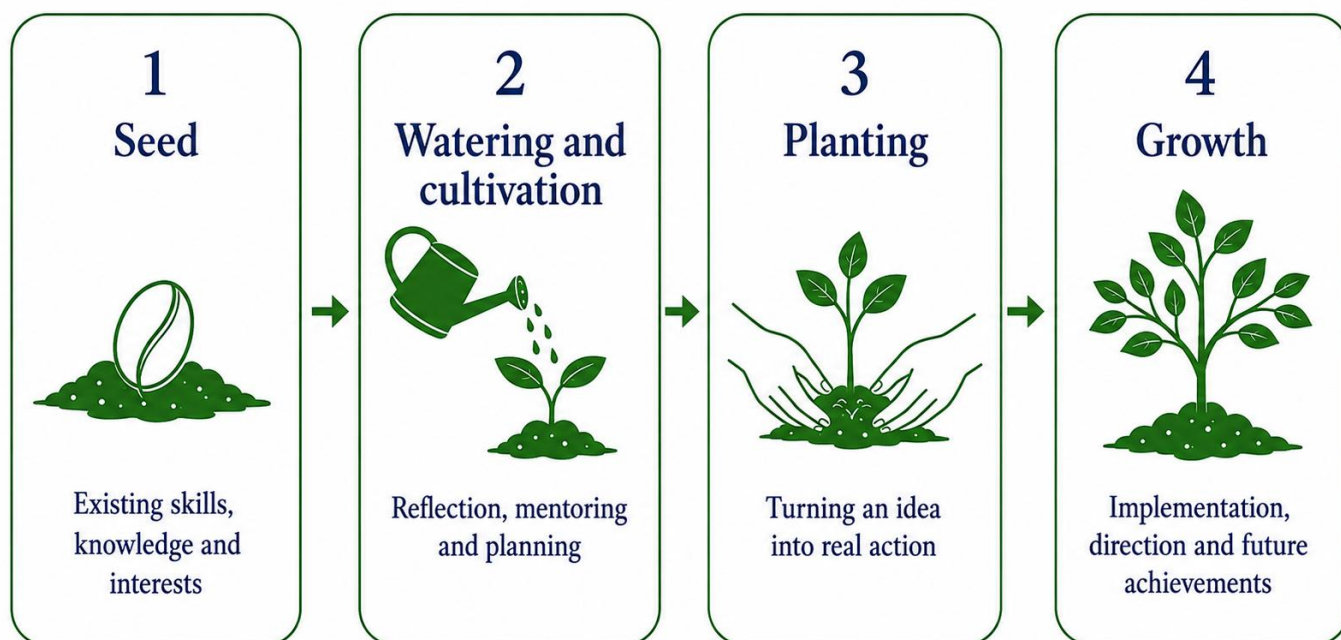
Early progress may develop into autonomy, participation and impact.

Enabling foundations across every stage: co-creation of knowledge · inclusivity and safety · supportive ecosystems · continuous reflection and learning.

THE SEED METAPHOR: FROM EXISTING VALUE TO GROWTH

Participants do not begin from zero

Each woman enters with a “seed”: education, knowledge, experience, talent, interests or an emerging idea. Strategic empowerment helps cultivate that value and connect it to action.



SEED Existing skills, knowledge and interests already have value.	WATERING AND CULTIVATION Reflection, mentoring, peer exchange and planning strengthen and organise that value.
PLANTING An idea is placed within a concrete professional, economic or social context.	GROWTH Implementation, learning and adaptation may lead to future achievements.

The pathway is not uniform or linear.

Different seeds require different conditions, timing and forms of support. The full report provides the detailed survey analysis, methodology, conceptual development, participant pathways, recommendations and complete references.

REQUEST THE FULL REPORT

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