

# WOMEN ENERGIZE WOMEN

## Blog Article

# Is it different? - founding a female-led business in MENA & Germany

Women Energize Women @ Arab-German Energy Forum (12th OCTOBER 2022)

Gathering decision-makers from the private and public energy sector community in the Arab world and Germany, the Arab-German Energy Forum by the Arab-German Chamber of Commerce & Industry (Ghorfa) presents an outstanding opportunity for networking and exchange. To this year's 12th edition Women Energize Women was invited to host a panel discussion on "Female-led SMES and startups: framework, challenges & opportunities" after an inspirational keynote speech by Rana Adib, executive director at REN21 and one of the first #womenenergize speakers.

## Some numbers

The entrepreneurial and startup sector are highly important drivers for innovation. Especially in the energy sector, start-ups can often provide new, adventurous ideas from technological innovation, to energy provision, to small scale decentralized renewables. However, the entrepreneurial sector is still largely dominated by male founders and CEOs. In Germany the share of female startup founders across all sectors laid at about 15,7% in 2020 (but 40 % of founders in general), in the US the share of startups that are owned by women was at 31% in 2022. In Arab countries World Bank Enterprise surveys found that women are the principal owners of 13 % of firms across Arab countries. Is this rather low share in Germany and Arab countries due to unequal opportunities and obstacles for women in the startup sector? Are there specific obstacles to female-led SMEs, that are seldomly spoken about? How could Germany and the Arab world tackle this issue together and learn from one another? And what are important steps to secure female-led startup funding and development (both systemic and personal steps) and foster innovation in the energy sector? These were the question guiding through the discussion and thus answered by four inspiring female experts from Germany and Arab countries.

## Different experiences

While Ilona Ludewig, founder of Octopus Energy Germany, was challenged by the German bureaucracy during her founding process, Majd Mashharawi, CEO and founder of Sunbox Group in Gaza, Palestine, had to overcome obstacles even before formalities. "I spent so much

time fighting instead of building up my company. There are so many women struggling, there is a pressure inside and outside. What would help is international recognition - media interviews and different awards. At the moment many women are not connected to the world, but we need to be connected," said Majd about founding her business. "I wanted to start in Gaza, but I didn't want to end in Gaza." Being secluded from the rest of the world was a major issue for her, her business and development process. But different perspectives and an increase in diversity not just in startups is crucial to innovation. "If you are not aware of a problem, you won't solve it. Awareness is important," stated Pia Dorfinger, director of Start-ups Ecosystem at dena (German Energy Agency). "If you empower women in your community everyone will benefit from that." A statement we often heard at our Women Energize Women events, but never get tired to emphasize.

### **Important steps**

The obvious demand of trainings and workshops should be fulfilled. That would be an important step to support women all over the world as Myriam Sallemi, CEO and founder of AGS Tunisie, pointed out, and to future female founders: "Try to seize all opportunities, you can get!" Another call to action was presented by Ilona Ludewig: "Think of a wonderful woman and speak to people about her. Role models are so important. We need to tell the story more widely, that women are driving innovation!" There seems to be still a lack of female role models in the energy sector. A central task of the Women Energize Women campaign is exactly that: highlighting women working in the renewables. But still, Ilona explained "girls following into our footsteps need to see, that we are successful. Let's all help everyone having more (female) role models!" And we could put it better into words.

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