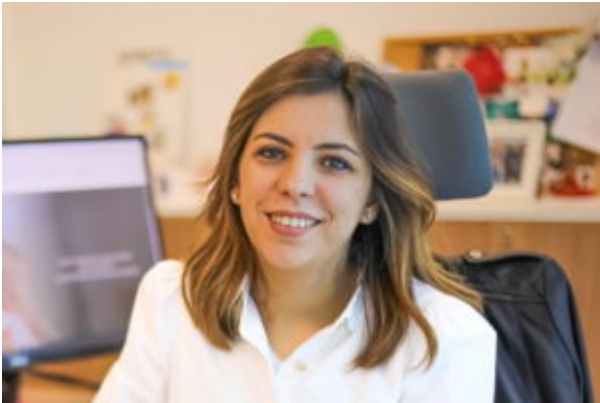


Sofia Lahlou – Country Manager, Versalya, Morocco (June 2020)



Today, we are the only laboratory in Morocco exclusively dedicated to women’s and children’s well-being, supporting women through the different stages of their life and helping their children achieve healthy development

03.06.2020

Tags:

[Morocco](#), [Versalya](#), [Iberma](#), [Italfarmaco](#), [Women’s Health](#)

Sofia Lahlou, country manager for women’s and children’s health specialist Versalya in the Moroccan market, discusses the company’s formation, its therapeutic priorities, and the opportunities that exist for women in leadership in Morocco.

How did the Versalya adventure start in Morocco?

Italfarmaco Group, a leading Italian pharma company, approached Iberma in 2009 to discuss ambitious plans to access the Moroccan market. At the time, I was part of Iberma’s Business Development team, and the firm’s leadership asked me to pilot the project. Italfarmaco wanted to create a company dedicated to women’s and children’s health, which I thought was a much-needed specialty in Morocco. Eventually, I took part in the design and launch of Versalya and oversaw the implementation of its production unit. This journey was the most rewarding experience I had at Iberma, who ended up, in conjunction with Italfarmaco, appointing me at the helm of the newly formed entity.

In 2017, we received the official approval from the Moroccan authorities to operate as an industrial pharma company. Today, we are the only laboratory in Morocco exclusively dedicated to women’s and children’s well-being, supporting women through the different stages of their life

and helping their children achieve healthy development. We have about 20 registered products, with more than 70 sales representatives covering gynaecologists and paediatricians in the entire Moroccan territory.

We are eager to continue our consistent organic growth in line with the group's strategy, which consists of a strong commitment to innovation, fuelled by marketing and sales excellence. Italfarmaco reinvests 10 percent of its annual sales into R&D, and its pipeline currently includes ongoing discovery and development projects divided into different therapeutic areas. We are also ready to help the country face its most challenging health concerns, such as appropriately responding to its high birth rate by capitalizing on the group's support to source any needed medical products.

You focus on mother and child care. How big is this market in Morocco?

The market share that we supply represents MAD 722 million (EUR 72 million), which, according to the IMS, is about seven percent of the total Moroccan pharma market. However, if you consider the annual birth rate of more than 600 K and the fecundity rate of 2.4 per 100 inhabitants, it is pretty clear that this market presents considerable growth opportunities.

Additionally, women's and children's health has been a priority for Morocco in the past decades, and the country has achieved great results. Between 1992 and 2018, maternal mortality has dropped by almost 80 percent. During the same period, the under-fives' mortality has fallen by 76 percent, and neonatal mortality dropped by 63 percent. These achievements were recognized by many experts, including The World Health Organization, who has praised the Moroccan health authorities for their efforts.

It is also worth noting that Versalya took a unique approach to penetrate this competitive market and only introduced high value-added products. We also considered the socio-economic characteristics of the market and made sure we had the right pricing strategy.

For instance, we locally produce and distribute the first drug to adequately treat the basic needs of pregnant women, who can receive it for MAD 2.50 per day (EUR 0.23 per day).

What have been the company's priorities in the therapeutic areas you cater for?

One of our priority targets is menopausal and pre-menopausal stages. These are still considered as a particularly sensitive topic in the Moroccan society, and many women are failing to receive proper and often essential treatments. Even educated women avoid consulting their doctors about health issues involving vaginal dryness, which can cause pain during sitting, standing, exercising, urinating, and sexual intercourse.

As uneasy as it may feel for women to discuss these symptoms, they should know that their doctors are there to listen so that they can find the right treatment for them. For this reason, we have decided to mainly target female gynaecologists, as we noticed that women tend to open up easier with them. We have also deployed posters in their offices and waiting rooms to raise awareness of these symptoms, inviting women patients to talk about their issues with their doctor.

We also aim our awareness efforts towards women who don't know anything about the topic and don't realize that they can contract diseases that have existing adequate treatments. We adopted

this impactful communication strategy with pregnancy-related health issues as well, as many women fail to consult healthcare professionals when they plan a pregnancy or are already in the early stages. Our role is to improve patient-physician relationships that could result in pre-conceptual and pregnancy medical checks, which are fundamental to preventing serious diseases.

For instance, in Morocco, neural tube defect is still a big issue that can have dramatic consequences leading to anencephaly, a congenital disability in which the major parts of the brain, scalp, and skull of the foetus do not fully form while developing in the womb. Simple intake of folic acid (vitamin B9) before and during pregnancy significantly decreases the chances of anencephaly, but unfortunately, many women never heard about this health issue.

What is key in interacting with HCPs and, in particular, doctors?

In general, I would say that Moroccan doctors are very aware and well informed about medical issues. They are always looking for more information on medical topics, seeking training, attending international congresses, and looking for innovations in their specialty. They are not interested in hearing about yet another generic but are usually interested in novelty that brings additional value.

At Versalya, and with the support of our parent company Italfarmaco, we strive to develop new knowledge and new modes of use for current drugs, which enable physicians to obtain a better customization of therapy according to their patients' characteristics. This type of information is highly sought for by doctors, as they acquire new data that informs their decision-making, and we use it in our marketing materials to make sure they have access to it. This has been our preferred interaction model for communicating with doctors, and it helped us establish strong relationships with leading physicians – all based on the trustworthy information we presented to them.

We doubled down on this approach and built an in-house training program that prepares our sales reps to digest data and leverage the findings. It helps them develop both the hard and soft skills necessary for these presentations, eventually enhancing their career development. We also spend a lot of time and effort on both groups and individual coaching sessions, and doctors often give us positive feedback as they obtain illuminating insights.

I think that this approach benefits both parties, and I believe that pharma companies should always privilege informative marketing and promotional programs that meet the highest ethical and scientific standards.

What do you think are the three key roles in a successful Moroccan Pharma company?

I would say that the technical direction is essential as it ensures sufficient and timely supplies, which is extremely important, especially in crisis times, such as the COVID-19 pandemic we are enduring. It is also essential to have a reliable technical team that successfully handles production issues – if they ever happen.

Sales and marketing are also crucial. In pharma, sales mean creating bonds of trust between sales reps and HCPs looking for better ways to help their patients. Both head of sales and marketing provide the necessary training, but most importantly, they make sure that the messages our sales team delivers are in line with the company's values.

Last but not least, the head of finance also has a vital role and oversees the company's financial health. He performs data analysis and uses the result to advise our senior managers on how to increase profitability.

You are one of the only women leading a pharma company here in Morocco. How big a challenge is this?

Across all economic sectors, only ten percent of general managers in Morocco are women, compared to 25 percent in Europe. This is a real shame because, in reality, there are plenty of opportunities for women to take leadership roles in the pharma industry.

Yet it's true that barriers exist and often come in the shape of lack of self-confidence, which can be imposed by the socio-cultural context. Despite their potential, some talented women shy away from speaking about their achievements and don't realize they could be a leader. Most of them end up only focusing on driving results rather than on their career advancement and success.

Fortunately, things are changing, and when you look at the broader Moroccan pharma landscape, you can see that women head at least three major leading laboratories. To also take Versalya as an example, it may be a coincidence, but women now hold all four main functions (production, sales, marketing and finance). All these appointments have been made by merit, not because the candidates were women. I believe that women can break the glass ceiling if they gain more confidence, believe in their capabilities, and understand that if they're in the room, that means they deserve to be there.

[See more interviews](#)
