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Resilient nations.*

Working with and for women for development

Background paper for thematic sessions

UNDP Regional Conference

“Development challenges and priorities in a changing Arab region”

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Background

Most Arab countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and are bound by its provisions; however, many of these same countries have made reservations to key articles such as Article 9 on nationality, Article 16 on marriage and family and Article 15 on the legislation. Gender equality is far from being achieved and discrimination still exists. Revolutions and uprisings in the region have changed the status of women's rights in some countries and, women's status varies across the Arab States. Some countries have made a concerted effort to close their gender gaps, while others have widened them.

In the region 37% of women have suffered from some form of gender based violence. Women's participation in the labor force in the Arab region is the lowest globally, at under 21% for women overall and 13.5% for young women.¹ The unemployment rate for young Arab women (49%), highest in the world, is almost twice that of men (26.3%). In countries of conflict, women and men have been deprived of livelihoods with women often having to take on new tasks of providing for families without the requisite skills. In more stable areas of the region, increasing numbers of women are graduating every year from university but are unable to access the job market.

Many of the countries within the region perform poorly in terms of political participation with slow progress reflected in some having closed less than 3% of the political gender gap.² Women are underrepresented in the civil service, the judiciary, military, and police forces. Women also face barriers to decision-making positions in both elected and non-elected positions. The proportion of seats held by women in national Arab parliaments have been increasing but is still at 18.8% compared to a world average of 23%. Even when women are represented in public administration, for instance, they are rarely in decision-making positions; the average proportion of women in ministerial level positions in the Arab countries reach 10.5% compared to the global average of 17.7%

Nevertheless, there are efforts to improve representation in many states. Parliamentary quotas and local government quotas are fairly common in the region, although Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen lack a current³ quota to increase female representation in parliament.

In terms of women's peace and security, the region holds the largest number of conflict-induced refugees in the world. Conflict has detrimentally affected women resulting in increased child marriage, severely reduced access to education and healthcare facilities, and increasing numbers of female headed households. Among Syrian refugees child marriage is a matter of growing concern, with over 50% of Syrian girls in Jordanian refugee camps reporting marriage before age 18, while in Yemen and Sudan, one in three girls report marriage before age 18.⁴ In Gaza, with Israel's frequent military operations in Gaza during July-August 2014, at least 15 out of 32 hospitals were damaged and an estimated 40,000 pregnant women could not access basic reproductive health care, leading to a surge in neonatal mortality from 7 to 14%.⁵

Conflict has also exacerbated issues of access to documentation, specifically documentation related to housing and land property rights, which is already a struggle for women in the region given the complexity of inheritance and property laws. Moreover, women have been increasingly targeted during conflict, as

¹ Arab Human Development Report (UNDP, 2016)

² Global Gender Gap. World Economic Forum. <http://www3.weforum.org/docs/GGGR2015/cover.pdf>. 2015. Page 12.

³ In 2014, Egypt used a one-time quota through Law 46 of 2014.

⁴ 2015. Child Marriage in Humanitarian Settings in the Arab Region, pg. 6. *UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, [Online]. Available at <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/child-marriage-humanitarian-settings-arab-region-dynamics-challenges-and-policy-options>

⁵ 2016. Against Wind and Tides: A Review of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Arab Region (Beijing +20), pg. 27. *UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia*, [Online]. Available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2283ESCWA_Women%20and%20Gender%20Equality%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region_Beijing20.pdf

seen in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. By mid-June 2016, over 3,200 Yazidi women and children were held in captive by the so called “Daesh”.⁶ While women, men, and their families are impacted by conflict in distinct ways, those involved in peace negotiations are almost exclusively men. There is much progress to be made to provide gender-sensitive responses and to engage women in all layers of peace and security.

In recent years, greater attention has been given to the inter-linkages between the women, peace and security agenda, and global efforts to counter violent extremism. There is significant evidence that women are and continue to play an important role in countering extremism within their local communities. Examples include female police officers engaging with local communities, mothers de-radicalizing their children, and female Imam’s preaching tolerance. Moreover, there is growing documentation which demonstrates that while men are more likely to be targeted for recruitment into violent radical groups, women are the first to be affected by growing radicalization within communities.^[1]

Women’s economic empowerment is still challenging, there are barriers to employment and access to the labor market. Almost all countries in the region have at least one restriction on women’s employment.⁷ When women are employed, they are more likely to be in vulnerable employment.⁸ While most states make provisions in their constitutions for the equal right to work and the prohibition of discrimination, some have laws that encourage women to exit the labor market. In Kuwait and Lebanon, a woman can obtain full end of service benefits if she resigns within one year of her marriage.⁹ Moreover, laws criminalizing sexual harassment are not implemented in all countries.

In general, discriminatory laws form a background to prevailing discriminatory social norms and there has been little change across the region, although there remain a few positive examples to draw on. Other trends in the region have negatively affected women’s access to rights, including the rise of conservative religious forces that push for interpretations of Sharia law that can challenge government commitments to international human and social rights conventions.

Analysis

The region witnessed measurable progress on key MDG targets relating to gender equality and women’s empowerment, particularly in terms of expanding girls’ access to health, education, closing gender gaps in education at all levels, improving women’s participation in political life, notably in parliaments that introduced quotas, as well as improving maternal health outcomes. The Gender Parity Index reached 1.0 at the pre-primary and tertiary levels and 0.9 at the primary and secondary stages in 2014. Improvements in the health sector have benefitted women in the Arab region, with the maternal mortality rate declining by 34.4% between 2000 and 2015 and the percentage of births attended by skilled health personnel increasing from 50% in the 1990s to 78.2% in 2012.¹⁰

However, the region is still behind the global average on some of these targets. Furthermore, these achievements have been uneven across Arab countries. Women in the Arab region continue to face challenges in realizing their full potential in the social, economic, and political spheres. As the challenges

⁶ 2016. They came to destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis. *Human Rights Council*, [Online]. Available at http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/HRBodies/HRCouncil/ColSyria/A_HRC_32_CRP.2_en.pdf

[1] UN Women and the Jordanian National Commission for Women, 2016, Women and Radicalization in Jordan

⁷ “Women, Business, and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal.” World Bank. Washington D.C.: World Bank Group, 2015. <http://wbl.worldbank.org/~media/WBG/WBL/Documents/Reports/2016/Women-Business-and-the-Law-2016.pdf>. Page 15.

⁸ “Facts and Figures: Economic Empowerment.” UN Women. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures>.

⁹ “Arab Women and Legislations.” Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR). 2015. Page 20.

¹⁰ World Development Indicators. *The World Bank*, [Online]. Available at <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/world-development-indicators>.

to the region increase in terms of unemployment, climate change and conflict, failure to achieve gender equality in the law, or improve political participation or even improve equality in national plans and budgets is more striking. As governments focus on the impacts of security challenges, climate change and economic pressure it will be ever more important to ensure that responses in all areas are fully inclusive.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development presents an opportunity for international development organizations, women's organizations and governments in the region to renew and deepen their commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment as a key pathway to sustainable development. Building upon achievements and lessons learned from the implementation of the MDGs, the new agenda underscores a holistic policy approach to gender equality and women's empowerment, emphasizing gender mainstreaming across all goals along with legal and policy reforms to address some of the roots causes of discrimination, including social norms, harmful stereotypes, gaps in legal rights as well as gender based violence.

Although gender equality is a pressing concern, some countries in the region have prioritized security in recent years as they face political instability or conflict. These security issues often divert focus, effort, and resources, which further delays development in gender equality. Prolonged conflict leads to different and acute needs for women especially in terms of health, economic opportunities, and legal access.

Considering the rise of violent extremism across the region, women and girls have hitherto typically featured in debates and responses to terrorism and violent extremism either as victims or peacebuilders. The gendered narrative and ideology of many violent extremist groups, as well as reported sexual atrocities perpetrated by specific groups, have fueled this partial positioning of women in the context of violent extremism, with direct implications for programming and responses. The challenge is to avoid the limitations of "victimhood" while strengthening the role and support to survivors and ensuring future prevention measures are taken especially in the context of post-conflict stabilization.

With the aforementioned issues and challenges, there is a need to seize the opportunity of having all national and international actors embarking on the implementation of a new development agenda that is inclusive in its scope and target. Gender issues across the sectors need a robust response to address the underlying causes of the inequality gap as well as challenges facing women's participation in public life.

Entry Points

- **Integrate gender across all SDGs implementation to contribute to closing the gender inequality gap across all sectors.**

SDGs are an opportunity to address challenging gender equality issues that are difficult to address across the region. Given the diversity and inclusivity of the 17 goals, it is an opportunity to ensure gender mainstreaming across all sectors.

- **Address legal gaps while addressing social barriers to ensure gender/social justice.**

Identify and publicize existing gender gaps in a range of legislation that affect the rights of women, including aspects of the criminal codes, personal status laws and inheritance laws. Parallel to addressing gaps in the legal framework, it is crucial to address social barriers as well as engage boys and men to advance the legal rights agenda.

- **Promote a more effective role for women leaders across the Arab region through increased collaboration within and across borders as well as sharing knowledge and expertise. (Networks to promote women's leadership and political participation)**

There is a need to share experiences to address the remaining challenges to women's participation in decision making, also to strengthen women politicians'/leaders' knowledge and support them to enhance their input in the political and peacebuilding processes.

- Design and support sustainable economic solutions to build women’s resilience across the region.**

Expand women’s access to labor market and finance by developing business models and national level strategies involving governments, private sector, and micro-finance institutions to facilitate women’s access to sustainable economic opportunities in the different contexts across the region. Women are a key pillar to overcome communities’ political, social, and economic vulnerabilities and bring about lasting change and sustainable resilience. “Women and Girls are the pillars of resilience - they are the first to prepare their families for a disaster and the first to put communities back together in the aftermath”. Despite their vulnerability and being sidelined from public life engagement, women in the Arab Region are often at the forefront in support of their communities during and after crisis times.
- Capitalize on the work done by women peacebuilders at the local levels and promote their role in preventing violent extremism. (Link to national and regional platforms)**

Ensure gender is fully mainstreamed in the building peace agenda, working from the grassroots and ensuring that women and girls are properly consulted and included in new decision making processes, and attempts to rebuild societies in the political, economic and social spheres. In light of the emerging issues of violent extremism, there is a need to alter our approach to women peace and security. Women should be included in processes and policymaking, interventions, and serve as advisors in preventing violent extremism. UNDP can encourage actions where women’s specific roles in preventing violent extremism are recognized, engaging both individual women and women’s groups across the region. There is also a need to invest research on the dynamics of women’s engagement with violent extremism.

Questions

- For Women’s peace and security, how to ensure women’s meaningful engagement in peacebuilding processes and emerging issues such as PVE and others? (not as victims only on the receiving end)
- Learning from the progress on MDGs in the Arab region, what policies, actions and accompanying measurements can be put in place to ensure gender mainstreaming across the SDGs?
- How can we promote not only ‘protection’ but ‘empowerment’ and ‘transformative’ solutions for gender equality?
- How can we close the gap between what is stipulated in legal frameworks and the social norms/cultural practices?
- How can we best help women in the political sphere build presence and acceptance?
- What can be done to ensure women’s access to sustainable economic solutions in crisis settings?
- How can we mobilize better a wider participation of regional organizations (Civil Society)?
- What are the hurdles to women’s economic empowerment and access to labor market?
- What role can private sector play to promote women’s economic empowerment?