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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**REPORT****EXPERT GROUP MEETING TO REVIEW A DRAFT STUDY ON
“ADDRESSING BARRIERS TO WOMEN’S ECONOMIC
PARTICIPATION IN THE ESCWA REGION”
BEIRUT, 26-27 JUNE 2012****Summary**

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held an expert group meeting to review a draft study on “Addressing Barriers to Women’s Economic Participation in the ESCWA Region”, at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 26 and 27 June 2012.

The meeting reviewed the draft study and solicited feedback from experts from the region. The meeting also included two presentations, one on the efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to promote gender equality and another on gender in the workplace.

This report contains a brief overview of discussions held and proposals made at the meeting.

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Introduction

1. To follow up on the implementation of international conferences, conventions and declarations, including internationally agreed development goals and Millennium Development Goals, which have called for increasing and enhancing women's economic participation, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held an expert group meeting to review a draft study entitled "Addressing Barriers to Women's Economic Participation in the ESCWA Region" at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 26 and 27 June 2012.

2. The purpose of the meeting was:

(a) To review and provide comments from an interdisciplinary perspective on the draft study entitled "Addressing Barriers to Women's Economic Participation in the ESCWA Region";

(b) To exchange knowledge and best practice in integrating a gender perspective to enhance women's participation in the labour force.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

3. Key proposals for change included the following points:

A. POLICY FRAMEWORK

(a) Endorse a gender perspective in designing, implementing and monitoring cohesive policies and programmes to increase women's participation in the labour force;

(b) Strengthen statistical capabilities of Governments to ensure accurate, timely and regular collection of disaggregated data on wage employment;

(c) Promote equitable social dialogue and cooperation among the principle stakeholders;

(d) Increase women's representation in economic decision-making bodies and facilitate their access to unions and syndicates.

B. EDUCATION AND SKILLS

(a) Reform obsolete and archaic education systems and teaching methodologies to provide quality education based on gender equality, in tune with the challenges of the twenty-first century;

(b) Invest in early years education to shape positive gender identity among boys and girls;

(c) Remove gender biases from textbooks, curricula and programmes and address harassment and other forms of violence against women in schools and universities;

(d) Endorse programmes to facilitate young women's school-to-work transition;

(e) Partner with the private sector to provide mentorships and business incubators for recent female graduates;

(f) Mainstream gender equality in technical and vocational education and training and raise awareness about their value among young women and parents in a participatory manner;

(g) Encourage women to venture into new fields of study, especially the sciences.

C. LEGISLATION AND REGULATORY MEASURES

(a) Ratify and implement International Labour Organization (ILO) core conventions on gender equality in the world of work: the Equal Remuneration Convention, C100 and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, C111, and the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, C156 and the Maternity Protection Convention, C183;

(b) Increase the role of the State in financing paid maternity leave with the aim of presenting the private sector with incentives to support and facilitate women's employment;

(c) Endorse anti-discrimination legislation to hold employers in the private and public sector liable for any act of discrimination against women;

(d) Adopt all necessary organizational regulatory measures to enable women to achieve work/life balance.

II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

A. GENERAL TOPICS

4. The participants commended the draft study for tackling a very important question and pointed out that it should acknowledge that women's work includes many activities. They expressed concern relating to women's unpaid work, multiple activities in the informal sector, female migrant labour and human trafficking, the impact of rural/urban divide and poverty on women's capacity for employment.

5. Some participants highlighted the adverse effects of conflict and instability which have impacted and impaired women's participation in the labour force. Some participants noted the cases of Iraq and Palestine, where women suffer from increasingly high rates of unemployment as a result to armed conflicts and insecure environments.

6. Some participants mentioned countries witnessing transition and questioned whether the current political discourse will support commitments made by previous governments to advance the situation of women in all fields. In particular, many participants indicated that in the new environment, women's voices and social dialogue should be strengthened. They emphasized the need to enhance the presence of women in syndicates and unions.

7. Participants agreed that the draft study addressed key barriers to women's economic participation, and recommended that the study should begin by defining the scope of the investigation, namely on access to waged employment, as opposed to other economic activities.

8. All participants were very satisfied with the multidisciplinary peer review and commended ESCWA for seeking recommendations based on their technical expertise.

B. SPECIFIC TOPICS

1. *Statistics*

9. Participants reiterated both the importance of statistics and need to improve statistics on women's employment and cautioned that the attempt to monitor and enhance women's economic participation becomes a more daunting task in the absence of available, reliable and updated data.

10. It is important to introduce a gender perspective into statistics, harmonize data and identify ways to overcome barriers to women's economic participation. This process takes place at the macro level (policies), meso level (institutions) and micro level (individuals).

11. There is a need in the region for more data on all aspects of work. Data are already being collected on the female labour-force participation rate and other issues related to formal labour. However, more data are needed, especially on the unpaid and informal work that women do. For that purpose, ILO is working on a new formula to calculate female work including unpaid household services to develop economic policies and recognize female work.

12. Concern was voiced over the nature of existing employment statistics that overlook women's unpaid work, whether in agriculture or other informal sectors or, at the household level including care work. Participants stressed that national accounts in the region should reflect the economic value of women's unpaid work in gross national product figures. Also, women often work in the informal sector. There is a need to identify laws which hinder the participation and inclusion of women in the formal sector, and have in place an in-depth analysis of all the sectors engaging female workers, especially the informal sector.

13. Interpreting data on female labour requires a critical eye. Some participants warned that an increase in women's participation in the labour force might be a sign of poverty and rising living costs. In addition, data on female employment must be disaggregated into nationals and non-nationals, particularly in Gulf countries where there are significant numbers of expatriate workers.

14. The study should include data relating to men and women in the labour force and other work indicators such as unemployment. Moreover the study should also report data on women's economic participation in the private and public sectors.

2. *Society*

15. Participants acknowledged the limitations of economic policies, which focused on short-term employment during the past two decades. Despite huge financial investments in microcredit and small business ventures and projects, these policies did not succeed in bringing economic empowerment to women.

16. Participants, therefore, agreed to consider an alternative approach to limitations and barriers to women's economic participation. Reference was made to good practice adopted by some highly established international agencies which, over time, have shifted the focus of their gender programmes to employment facilitation and the creation of enabling environments.

17. Most economies in the region are based on small and medium enterprises, and there is ample evidence that women are generally reluctant to work in small size firms of around ten employees because local cultural norms create challenges for them.

18. Most participants noted the significant role that ESCWA could play in addressing women's economic participation, if the first chapter of the study specified the shortcomings of economic policies that overlook women's needs. The first chapter should call for a different approach and stress the need for analysis of the subject from gender and social perspectives.

19. Social controls are key barriers to women's employment. Social limitations imposed by family, relatives and spouses restrain women from seeking work opportunities.

3. *Poverty and trafficking*

20. Current economic policies in the ESCWA region are one of the major barriers to women's economic participation in addition to poverty which is clearly a huge challenge in most Arab societies. Strategies for

poverty alleviation and economic empowerment are mandatory to lift those barriers and provide opportunities for women to enhance their economic participation and achieve a better economic situation.

21. The study should highlight trafficking in women since women and children in the Arab world are the main targets.

22. A proposal was raised for a multidimensional framework that would incorporate political, economic and social perspectives. In the aftermath of the uprisings in many Arab countries, it is clear that economies have not prospered and economic analysis was insufficient. More research is needed on the daily lives of female workers, and this should be based on previous research on that subject by major sources like HDR 2005 which reflects the multi-diverse factors being economic, political and social.

23. Participants discussed the status of female migrant workers, who constitute more than half the labour force in some Arab countries. In many countries in the region, female domestic workers are being exploited. Participants identified ILO as a reliable source of information to include in the study.

4. *Socialization, skills and education*

24. Education plays a major role in socialization and although boys and girls usually participate in the same education process, expectations remain different: men are encouraged and expected to make a living, whereas women regardless of their education level, are expected to tend to the home and family. The education system itself does not prepare students to seek job opportunities and enter the labour market. Thus, a comprehensive school-to-work transition framework is very much needed in the region.

25. The mismatch between women's skills and the needs of the labour-market in the region has been attributed to existing education systems and teaching methods that are based on indoctrination rather than learning. Archaic and obsolete methods are not fit for the challenges of the twenty-first century, nor are the stereotypes which are being applied to both boys and girls. Child labour has forced many children to drop out of school. Education systems should encourage girls and boys to pursue higher education and must include gender perspectives in their programmes and role models for the youth.

26. Removing gender bias from textbooks and curricula is at the core of the efforts of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) on gender mainstreaming. Illiteracy remains a major challenge for women in many countries, especially in rural areas.

27. Strategic intervention in educational policies should start as early as preschool, a critical period in child development, and continue thereafter to provide young women with competent and reliable guidance and counseling in career development. Leadership and the local level will make a greater difference in the region than global leadership.

28. There is a gap between the needs of businesses and the programmes offered at vocational training institutes. Efforts should be made to overcome the prejudices of women and men against such programmes, and restructure vocational institutions to make them more effective.

29. Sexual harassment at university and school is a growing phenomenon that needs to be penalized.

30. One best practice is for the private sector to support school-to-work transition through providing mentorships and business incubator programmes for female graduates. Such support is especially important because of the mismatch between education systems and the labour market.

31. There is a need to encourage women to enter new fields of specialization. In Jordan, 85 per cent of students who go to universities are female. It is important to encourage women to enter new fields. There is also a need to ensure that salaries are the same for men and women who do the same work. Measuring tools

must be developed to assess the productivity of both genders. Also, recent graduates need career guidance to recognize good opportunities and understand what to expect in the labour market.

32. Enhancing the capacities of the teachers is very important. Some participants called for facilitators and moderators for students rather than teachers. New techniques and participatory approaches should be applied in the curriculum. The private sector can be involved in changing mindsets and traditional learning models. More importantly, employment must be detached from degrees and diplomas, and the media can influence public opinion towards acceptance that a degree is not always needed for a career.

5. Gender equality in the world of work

33. In existing labour laws there are restrictions on the work of women, particularly at night. In Jordan and other countries with a booming tourism industry, women are deprived of ample job opportunities in that sector.

34. The private sector may be reluctant to employing women if social security laws make it less profitable for them to do so. There is a need for anti-discrimination legislation to hold public and private employers accountable.

35. Labour laws reflect prejudices and traditions about gender roles, and hence there are discrepancies in terms of entitlements to dependency benefits, pay and retirement age.

36. Sources of financing for maternity leave vary across the region. In some countries it is the employer alone who bears the cost. Maternity leave policies also vary from one country to another, but in most countries the lengths of maternity leaves are short and do not comply with ILO standards.

37. Wage differences are more prevalent in the private sector.

38. The two core ILO Conventions on non-discrimination and equality of opportunity are the Equal Remuneration Convention, C100 and the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, C111. Presently, Jordan is the only country in the region that has taken a national initiative to ensure equal pay in the private education sector.

39. In addition, the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, C156 and the Maternity Protection Convention, C183 are important conventions that protect the rights of women in the labour force. Currently, only Yemen has ratified C156 and no State in the region has ratified C183.

40. Organizational regulatory measures that aim to support a work/life balance for both women and men were also endorsed.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING

41. The meeting was held on 26 and 27 June 2012 at the United Nations House in Beirut.

B. OPENING

42. Ms. Mehrinaz El Awady, Chief, ESCWA Centre for Women (ECW), welcomed experts and participants and stressed the importance of studying the low level of economic participation among Arab women. She also pointed out that ECW had prepared the study in-house and was keen to select a distinguished group of experts from diverse backgrounds, to discuss the issue in depth from a balanced and integrated perspective. She thanked the participants in advance for their active participation, for sharing their

knowledge and experience in field work and research and for providing constructive comments, insights and targeted recommendations to be integrated into the final draft of the publication.

43. She expressed her wish that the meeting would be a success and that participating delegates would have a pleasant stay in Lebanon.

44. Ms. Naeem Al-Mutawakel, Officer-in-Charge of the meeting, stated that the low level of women's economic participation remains a common concern to all countries in the ESCWA region regardless of varying levels of economic development. She added that part of the mandate of ESCWA is to achieve regional integration through harmonizing policies and unifying stances to empower women. She noted that there are still discrepancies in policies on women's work, especially with regard to maternity protection measures, retirement age and compliance with ILO conventions.

45. In addition, she noted that there are many facets of women's economic participation and emphasized that efforts should be made to move from merely measuring the number of women in the labour force into monitoring the access of women to decent employment. Ms Al-Mutawakel emphasized the need to transform women's economic participation into real economic empowerment, a prospect which cannot happen unless barriers are removed and enabling policies are designed and implemented. She added that the aim of the meeting was to solicit diverse comments and perspectives for an integrated framework to overcome barriers to the economic participation of women.

C. ATTENDANCE

46. The meeting brought together experts from diverse backgrounds and institutions, including United Nations specialized agencies and bodies, international development agencies, academia and national governmental and non-governmental bodies. The annex to this report contains the list of participants and organizers.

D. AGENDA

47. Experts covered the items of the agenda as presented below:

1. Opening statement.
2. Adoption of the agenda.
3. Proposed organization of work.
4. Review of ESCWA draft Study entitled "*Addressing Barriers to Women's Economic Participation in the ESCWA Region*".
5. Closing session.

Annex*

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Egypt

Ms. Yomn Al Hamaki
Professor of Economics
Ain Shams University
E-mail: ethraa616@gmail.com

Ms. Ghada Abdel Tawwab Hassan
Senior Gender Expert
E-mail: ghadadbeltawwab@gmail.com

Jordan

Ms. Hala Ghosheh
Director Gender Social Fund (CIDA)
E-mail: halaghosheh@nets.com.jo

Mr. Nayef Stetieh
President and CEO
Business Development Centre
E-mail: nstetieh@bdc.org.jo

Qatar

Mr. Waleed Mohamed
Legal Expert on Labor law and Human Resources
Ministry of Labour
E-mail: waleed_justice@yahoo.com

Lebanon

Ms. Nada Darwazeh
First Human Rights Officer/Gender Advisor
Middle East Regional Office, Office of the United
Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights
E-mail: ndarwazeh@ohchr.org

Ms. Seiko Sugita
Programme Specialist, Social and Human Sciences
UNESCO
E-mail: s.sugita@unesco.org

Mr. Patrick Daru
Skills and Employability Specialist
ILO Regional Office
E-mail: daru@ilo.org

Mr. Frank Hagemann
Deputy Regional Director and Director for Decent
Work Technical Support Team for the Arab
World, ILO
E-mail: HAGEMANN@ILO.ORG

Mr. Hassan Hammoud
Associate Professor
Department of Social Sciences Lebanese American
University, Beirut
E-mail: hhammoud@lau.edu.lb

Ms. Dakmara Georgescu
Programme specialist on Education, UNESCO
E-mail: d.georgescu@unesco.org

Mr. Marwan Khawaja
Senior Statistician, Statistics Division, ESCWA
E-mail: khawaja@un.org

Mr. Mansour Omeira
Labour Economist
E-mail: Mansour.omeira@gmail.com

Yemen

Ms. Eman Hamami
Director General of Women's Unit
Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation
E-mail: eman006@maktoob.com

ORGANIZERS: ESCWA CENTRE FOR WOMEN

Ms. Mehrnaz El Awady
Chief, Centre for Women

Ms. Aida Abu Ras
Regional Advisor

Ms. Naeem Al Mutawakkel
Social Affairs Officer

Ms. Rania Al Jazairi
First Social Affairs Officer

Ms. Ghya Baccar
Research Assistant

* Issued as submitted.