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**Cultivating resilient institutions in the Arab region:  
national women's machineries in challenging times****Summary**

The present document analyses the ways in which conflict, occupation and formal political transitions affect the work of national women's machineries. It then examines the mechanisms by which national women's machineries in Jordan, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen cultivate their resilience. The analysis finds that these machineries continuously adapt and assume different mandates to remain relevant in challenging contexts; however, they could do more to ensure resilience, including creating their own resilience frameworks, particularly in times of stability, to better withstand shocks and challenges.

The Committee on Women is invited to discuss the contents of the present document and advise on the means to further build the resilience of national women's machineries in the Arab region.

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## Introduction

1. National women's machineries are institutions that assume a broad mandate, including designing policies for the advancement of women, advocating for their implementation or implementing them, and monitoring and evaluating their outcomes. These machineries include ministries, agencies, and offices within or linked to the central Government.
2. The global movement to develop national machineries for gender equality and the advancement of women emerged following the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995. Only a handful of countries had established national women's machineries prior to that event. Their development filled an institutional gap at the national level, and contributed to the implementation of international agreements and conventions, such as the [Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) and the [Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#).
3. All 18 member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) have designated national women's machineries. However, their performance is affected by the world's longest ongoing occupation and, since 2010, by violence, social unrest, political transition and conflict. The present document, based on a forthcoming ESCWA publication, reviews the strengths and weaknesses in the responses of national women's machineries to such difficult conditions. It highlights the experiences of national women's machineries in Jordan, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen, which had to build their resilience to cope with challenging circumstances and continue delivering on their mandates. The present document also underscores the importance of building the resilience of organizations, and demonstrates how resilience-building, as a concept and a practice, can be learned and developed.

### I. INSTITUTIONAL RESILIENCE AND NATIONAL WOMEN'S MACHINERIES IN THE ARAB REGION

4. Resilience refers to "the capacity of a system, enterprise or person to maintain its core purpose and integrity in the face of dramatically changing circumstances".<sup>1</sup> After a major shock, key institutions aim to continue providing actors with information, strategies and plans of action, thereby preventing complete institutional collapse and facilitating recovery. According to a study of public authorities, institutions and businesses under diverse types of pressure, such as natural disasters, breakdown of public utilities and climate change, resilient institutions are those that display some or all of the following five characteristics: awareness, diversity, integration, self-regulation, and/or adaptivity.<sup>2</sup>
5. Research on effective national women's machineries outlined five critical elements for their effective functioning, regardless of national contexts: location within the decision-making hierarchy and authority to influence government policy; clarity of mandate and functional responsibility; links to civil society groups that support advancing women's rights and enhancing their status; adequate human and financial resources; and accountability of the national machinery.<sup>3</sup>
6. National women's machineries face varying challenges depending on location, economic wealth, government structure, political stability, and sociocultural variations. In challenging environments where conflict, occupation and/or formal political transition are a reality, the need for gender mainstreaming and a gender-sensitized response to critical events is even more necessary. However, in such volatile settings, national women's machineries have a specific set of constraints and opportunities that must be taken into

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<sup>1</sup> Krista S. Langeland and others, [How civil institutions build resilience: organizational practices derived from academic literature and case studies](#), *Research Report*, 2016, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> Judith Rodin, *The Resilience Dividend: Being Strong in a World Where Things Go Wrong*, Public Affairs, 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Shirin Ray, ed., *Mainstreaming Gender, Democratizing the State? Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women*, Manchester University Press, 2003, p. 26.

consideration. In some contexts, national women's machineries serve as symbolic institutions, which is reflected from the outset in their purposefully weak design within the greater institutional structure.

7. In an Arab region affected by occupation and conflict, factors including political fragility, austerity measures and public perceptions influence the work of national women's machineries. The following sections consider examples from Jordan, the State of Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen that illustrate the challenges posed by those factors.

#### A. POLITICAL FRAGILITY

8. Since 2010, regional instability has deepened pre-existing fragility, weakened State institutions and exacerbated grievances. State institutions have faced increasing challenges in fulfilling their mandates, with far-reaching consequences, particularly for girls and women.

9. In Tunisia, the uprising was undergirded by a powerful feminist agenda and movement, which maintained momentum and influenced the incoming administration. Tunisia implemented gender parity on electoral lists, which resulted in crucial, gender-sensitive input for the development of a new constitution. Women currently make up more than one third of the Tunisian parliament, which passed a ground-breaking law in 2017 to protect women from sexual harassment and simplify procedures for the prosecution of domestic violence.

10. Since 2015, Yemen has been plagued with an intense conflict, resulting in low levels of development, high gender inequality, and an entrenched humanitarian crisis. This situation, in tandem with pervasive marginalization, has left women and girls exceedingly vulnerable to violence and exploitation. Women and children represent over 75 per cent of the country's displaced population.<sup>4</sup> The conflict also significantly damaged the functioning and integrity of State institutions. The former Yemeni national women's machinery, the Women's National Committee, monitored the impact of the conflict on women and girls, working closely with humanitarian partners; however, it ceased most of its operations in late 2015. Its mandate was taken up by the Women and Children Department in the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, which provides humanitarian and social services aimed at reducing the impact of conflict, and engages with humanitarian actors and civil society. By being part of the Ministry of Social Welfare and Labour, the Department may be able to influence decisions at the cabinet level. Nevertheless, it is still subject to the volatile context in Yemen, which greatly limits the resilience of any institution.

11. Though relatively stable, Jordan faces fragility given its shared borders with the occupied Palestinian territory and conflict-affected Iraq and the Syrian Arab Republic. The inflow of refugees has placed a great strain on the country's already fragile economy and overstretched resources, which has led to overcrowding and concerns about access to nutrition and water for the most vulnerable segments of society. Women are particularly afflicted, with some families turning to child marriage to ensure greater financial security for their daughters and for themselves. These issues strain the social infrastructure and Jordanian institutions and civil society organizations working to alleviate the socioeconomic hardships of vulnerable groups.

12. In the occupied Palestinian territory, some of the major challenges faced by women include restrictions on movement; excessive use of force; forced displacement and house demolitions; settler violence and increasing settlement construction; detention of minors; and the wall. Palestinian women face harassment, assaults, shootings and attempted kidnappings by settlers. They are often unable to access basic services. Home demolitions are detrimental to the psychological health and physical security of women, and place further economic pressure on them.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), [Yemen humanitarian situation report – March 2019](#), 2019.

## B. AUSTERITY MEASURES

13. An analysis of 284 International Monetary Fund country reports indicate that a wide range of austerity measures have been implemented in eight Arab countries.<sup>5</sup> This shows that the fiscal space for service delivery and social protection is shrinking, limiting the resources available for State institutions to respond to their mandates.

14. Austerity measures can serve as coping mechanisms for Arab countries. In Iraq, for instance, four ministries were abolished in 2015, including the Ministry of Women's Affairs, while another eight ministries were merged. This was attributed to the limited fiscal space associated with military operations against the Islamic State and the collapse of oil prices in 2014. Iraq is gradually recovering from its economic strains, and continues to reform its public finances to create the needed fiscal space to finance economic recovery plans.

15. Such measures can result in the abolition of some State institutions. Sometimes, national women's machineries are the first to be eliminated. For example, the transitional Government in Tunisia had to identify areas where it could reduce public expenditures and turned to restructuring government entities, including returning the portfolio of family affairs to the Ministry of Women and, for a brief period, merging the Ministry for Women and Family Affairs with the Ministry of Youth and Sports. Consequently, in some countries, national women's machineries have become particularly vulnerable to austerity measures.

## C. PUBLIC PERCEPTION

16. The generalized perception that an institution's existence, actions and contributions to society are accepted and constructive is key to maintaining and strengthening its resilience. Such perceptions are central for popular cooperation and positive engagement with the institution. Connecting to and representing constituencies is integral to improving public perception and implementing the mandate of national women's machineries.

17. Efforts should be made to address popular demands and showcase genuine attempts to rectify grievances. In Tunisia, the [Truth and Dignity Commission](#) registered nearly 63,000 claims by victims, almost a quarter of whom were women. It also conducted over 49,000 individual hearings and 14 public hearings. After nearly five years, the Commission issued its final report in March 2019.

18. In the State of Palestine, the Cabinet of Ministers established a high-level national committee for the implementation of Security Council resolution [1325 \(2000\)](#), headed by the Ministry for Women's Affairs. Its membership includes a wide range of ministries, State institutions and civil society organizations. The Committee coordinated the joint development of the [National Action Plan for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325: Women, Peace and Security – Palestine 2017-2019](#) by various government agencies and civil society partners. The Action Plan emphasized the need to protect women and girls from the impact of the Israeli occupation, and the importance of accountability for rights violations stemming from the occupation. Furthermore, the State of Palestine ratified CEDAW without reservations in 2014, and amended the Palestinian law on local council elections to secure a 20 per cent quota for women.

## II. CHARACTERISTICS THAT CAN BUILD RESILIENT NATIONAL WOMEN'S MACHINERIES

19. National women's machineries should maintain their ability to respond to all issues of concern to women and girls, especially in times of conflict, occupation or formal political transition. Often the main catalyst for gender equality at the State level, a resilient national women's machinery builds trust in government authorities through its ability to communicate and reflect the experiences of women and girls on the ground. As previously mentioned, a resilient institution is described as displaying some or all of the following five key characteristics: awareness, diversity, integration, self-regulation, and/or adaptivity.

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<sup>5</sup> Isabel Ortiz and others, [The decade of adjustment: a review of austerity trends 2010-2020 in 187 countries](#), ESS Working Paper No. 53, International Labour Organization, Columbia University and the South Centre, 2015.

20. These characteristics are mutually reinforcing as they jointly enhance the capacity of an entity to fulfil its goals, engage flexibly with the external environment, and maintain internal capacity to be productive. Moreover, they are complementary and interrelated; resilience is enhanced when all five are present. Each characteristic can be developed independently, but they must function concurrently to yield maximum benefits.

#### A. AWARENESS

21. According to Rodin, an aware institution has knowledge of its strengths and assets, liabilities and vulnerabilities, and the threats and risks it faces. Being aware includes situational awareness; in other words, the ability and willingness to constantly assess, take in new information, and adjust understanding in real time. Aware institutions are able to accurately understand situations, exercise foresight and revisit assumptions; they ideally respond more quickly and appropriately to change.

22. For example, when the Jordanian National Commission for Women (JNCW) developed the [National Action Plan for the Implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security 2018-2021](#), it conducted a thorough consultative and participatory process through meetings with women across Jordan. The JNCW also maintains its independence from the Jordanian Government and avoids competing for funding with civil society through a series of partnerships with the United Nations. However, this level of awareness may not always be possible given the need to quickly implement decisions and be accountable, particularly in conflict-affected contexts. Institutions should exhibit awareness of their mandates and abilities, and of the landscape in which they operate, allowing them to maximize their work, particularly when under-resourced or enduring instability.

#### B. DIVERSITY

23. A diverse institution has different sources of capacity, so it can successfully operate even when elements of that capacity are challenged. The entity possesses or can draw upon a range of capabilities, ideas, information sources, technical elements, people or groups. Diversity means that an institution does not rely completely on any one element for critical function, thus critical or core components or activities can be replaced by others, regardless of whether they are based at the same institution or with partners. This entails cultivating different sources of capacity, internally and externally. Institutions should be able to withstand stress or even continue functioning during a crisis or a period of instability.

24. The Tunisian context can serve as an example in this regard. Re-established following the 2011 uprising, a department in the Ministry of Women, Family, Children and the Elderly is charged with mainstreaming gender equality; evaluating and proposing gender-sensitive legislation; adopting early warning systems while monitoring the situation of women; and developing mechanisms, policies and programmes for the empowerment of women. These activities are accomplished in the context of several other gender mechanisms and strategies in Tunisia. Diversity also entails the action of diversifying: moving away from a monoculture. In the Tunisian context, the Ministry diversified its portfolio to ensure its impact across a spectrum of initiatives, but also to ensure the support of other relevant government entities.

#### C. INTEGRATION

25. Integrated institutions ensure coordination of functions and actions across systems, including the ability to bring together disparate ideas and elements, work collaboratively across elements, develop cohesive solutions, and coordinate actions. Information is shared, and communication is transparent. Integration ensures that elements of a system are well coordinated and harmonized not only within the institution, but with other entities functioning in the same context. Along with diversity, integration ensures the effective action of diverse actors. Many national women's machineries reach out to and work closely with other gender mechanisms; national human rights institutions; civil society organizations; community leaders, including women leaders; academics and research centres; political parties; trade unions; the media; the private sector; and regional and international organizations to ensure that their responses are appropriate and multifaceted.

26. Combating violence against women is a key topic of collaboration between national women's machineries and other entities. In the State of Palestine, for example, the Ministry of Women's Affairs worked with the Ministry of Social Development and the Ministry of Justice on a draft law on family protection from violence, which was prepared with non-governmental women's and human rights organizations. The Ministry of Social Development, which runs shelters for women victims of violence and provides services to women and girls with disabilities and to older women, also benefited from the consultation. Furthermore, a national observatory on violence against women was established, which collates data and information provided by the Government and civil society, and is managed by the Ministry. Integration requires more than just partnership; it requires national women's machineries to ensure thorough and strategic collaboration with various diverse entities.

#### D. SELF-REGULATION

27. Self-regulating institutions regulate themselves in ways that enable them to deal with anomalous situations and disruptions without extreme malfunction or catastrophic collapse. Cascading disruptions do not occur when they suffer a severe dysfunction; they can fail safely. Consequently, a self-regulating system prevents disruptions from causing a multiplier effect. Monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be developed to ensure that success and failure are accurately captured to develop lessons learned. Regular evaluation of the work of national women's machineries is also necessary to enable them to self-reflect and strengthen their resilience. To properly function, they must be fully funded. Moreover, they must have autonomy over their planning and priority setting, to ensure capacity to respond to the needs of women and girls. Their mandates should allow them to recruit and retain appropriate staff, including leadership; to organize their work according to the most important priorities and needs; and control their internal budgeting and other processes to take effective action relating to staff well-being, safety and training.

28. Due to conflict and/or political instability, institutions may have to reinvent themselves or develop temporary structures to pick up where the previous institution left off. For example, since the beginning of the conflict in 2015, several Yemeni institutions have been paralyzed, including the national women's machinery. The role of women's departments in the various ministries was greatly affected. However, the main ones located at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour in Aden and at the governorate level in areas under the control of the Government continued to function, in addition to a few other departments. Furthermore, the National Commission to Investigate Alleged Violations to Human Rights emerged during the conflict. It has issued five reports citing violations, and has carried out a gender analysis of the impact of the conflict on women and kept a database of these investigations. This information will serve as key background analyses for future strategies.

#### E. ADAPTIVITY

29. An adaptive institution has the capacity to adjust to changing circumstances by developing new plans, taking new actions, or modifying behaviours. If an entity is flexible, it has the ability to apply existing resources to new purposes or for one element to take on multiple roles. This includes having control over work plans, staffing and budget. Being adaptive means making improvements and transformations to counter a disruption or instability; it also implies the ability to change in advance of the disruption, or to avoid or mitigate the effect of the disruption. Adaptability is a broad concept and can be applied to all facets of work within an institution. To ensure adaptability, national women's machineries and their regional offices need to be prepared to do targeted work that may vary between communities. This involves working in the field in various localities, through establishing local offices, and ensuring that staff can travel and develop a conducive working relationship with local governments, local civil society, grassroots organizations, and local communities. This connection to the community is vital to the resilience of national women's machineries – allowing them not only to build expert knowledge of the situation across the country, and of the realities and priorities on the ground, but also to solicit the support of the various communities they serve.

30. In Tunisia, for example, to ensure that women have access to services in both urban and rural areas, the Ministry for Women, Family, Children and the Elderly has 24 regional offices that serve as mini-outposts. Each has a head for women's affairs. The delegations implement the programmes of the Ministry while

considering local realities. They initiate programmes to suit local needs, including specific actions on human trafficking, or girl child labour and school drop-outs. They also oversee childcare centres and women's shelters. The Ministry also runs a hotline for reporting cases of violence against women, children and the elderly. By localizing its services through regional offices, the national women's machinery responds to needs on the ground as opposed to a one-size-fits-all approach.

### III. RECOMMENDATIONS

31. The following framework suggests a set of elements that may contribute to enhancing the resilience of national women's machineries to allow them to continue operating effectively, and to conduct their institutional work in difficult conditions and harsh environments. Engaging with this framework in times of stability may ensure that national women's machineries become better able to withstand shocks and challenges.

32. The framework proposes elements for the mandate and structure of a national women's machinery; its reporting mechanisms; capacities and resources; linkages; and collaboration and coordination, all geared towards enhancing its resilience:

(a) *Mandate and structure*: adopt a resilience-based model upon the establishment of a national women's machinery by law, with a clear mandate and authority to influence decision-making in relation to women's rights, gender equality, gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment across Government; ensure that the mandate and work of different stakeholders does not overlap in relation to gender equality and women's empowerment; hold government institutions accountable in their response to the mandates of national women's machineries according to each country's specific legal context; make sure that the governance structures of national women's machineries enable the participation and inclusion of civil society, women's human rights defenders and organizations representing diverse segments of society in decision-making processes;

(b) *Reporting mechanisms*: establish or enhance independent and gender-sensitive monitoring, evaluation and reporting mechanisms on institutional performance; institutionalize gender mainstreaming in planning and guarantee the production of sex-disaggregated data; support efforts to build the capacity of national women's machineries based on international standards and best practices for monitoring and evaluation of performance and impact; and set benchmarks and indicators;

(c) *Capacities and resources*: allocate the required sustainable financial resources and budgets to national women's machineries to allow them to fully implement their mandate; ensure the transparent recruitment of staff based on competence, inclusion and commitment to gender equality; support the provision of technical assistance and capacity-building for staff in pertinent areas of work, including enhancing knowledge of relevant international norms and standards; coordinate support for gender equality and women's empowerment efforts to avoid duplication and overlap; build preparedness and expertise on key gender-related practical concerns that arise prior to, during and after conflict to manage emerging and long-term needs of women and girls; and develop, adopt, resource and implement national action plans on women, peace and security;

(d) *Linkages*: establish linkages and strong working relationships with civil society, as experiences from around the region have shown that gender equality may not feature highly on the political agenda during or post conflict or during occupation; establish linkages with community-based organizations and grassroots initiatives on leadership and service provision to allow for a better understanding and responsiveness to the needs of women and girls;

(e) *Collaboration and coordination*: ensure that the voices and experiences of women on the ground are communicated to various authorities and acted upon to build trust, and so that authorities can accompany women and girls through times of stability, conflict and/or occupation, and in the post conflict, peacebuilding and/or political transition phase; advocate with the central Government to provide the appropriate support and scale up good practice, where appropriate; create context-specific visions while referring to international standards and other countries' experiences; and work with women and girls to develop their own local solutions.

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