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**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

## **Report**

### **Expert group meeting on women's economic empowerment in the Arab region Beirut, 28-30 July 2020**

#### **Summary**

The Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the International Labour Organization, held a virtual expert group meeting on women's economic empowerment in the Arab region from 28 to 30 July 2020. Participants discussed the proposed structure and preliminary outline of a forthcoming study on women's economic empowerment. Participants discussed the dynamics of women's participation in the economy, and how to support member States to promote women's economic empowerment and move women from unpaid to paid work.

The meeting provided a platform to collect expert views and recommendations on how to strengthen and finalize the study. Participants agreed on guiding principles and recommendations enabling policymakers and development practitioners to boost women's economic empowerment and address gender inequalities in the region. The present report summarizes the meeting discussions and presents the main conclusions and recommendations for the study.

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## **Introduction**

1. The Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), held a virtual expert group meeting on women's economic empowerment in the Arab region in Beirut from 28 to 30 July 2020.
2. The meeting consisted of four sessions, with three or four experts in each session. Overall, 15 international and regional experts participated, known for their work on care policies, paid and unpaid work and gender equality, in addition to ESCWA and ILO staff members.
3. Participants discussed the proposed structure and preliminary outline of a study on women's economic empowerment, to understand the dynamics of women's participation in the economy and how to support member States in promoting women's economic empowerment and move women from unpaid to paid work.
4. Each of the four meeting sessions began with a brief opening statement and a presentation of the study's proposal containing its structure, methodology and content.

### **I. Opening statement and presentation of the study's proposal**

5. Ms. Mehrinaz Elawady, the Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster Leader, gave the opening statements for the four sessions. She presented ESCWA work on gender equality, including violence against women, and women's political participation, representation and economic empowerment. She said that ESCWA was preparing a forthcoming study, in partnership with ILO, on women's economic empowerment with a focus on the care economy, which was a new domain for the organization. ESCWA work on women's empowerment had been relatively limited in the past, but was now being considered rigorously to guide Arab policymakers on ways to enhance women's economic participation and empowerment.
6. Ms. Rouba Arja, Social Affairs Officer, introduced the overall objective, proposed structure and preliminary outline of the study. She said that the narrative on women's economic empowerment in the Arab region had remained largely unchanged over the last four decades, with significant progress achieved in women's education and health that had not been mirrored in the economic sphere. The region as a whole was trailing behind global averages on women's economic participation. The overall objective of the study was therefore to support member States in promoting women's economic participation and empowerment. The study would mainly focus on the care economy and on efforts to reduce women's involvement in unpaid care work, which had been identified as a major barrier to women's economic participation and empowerment in the region. She presented the proposed conceptual framework, initially developed by the World Bank, which relied on the concepts of agency, opportunity structure and development outcomes. She also presented the proposed structure of the study that revolved around five chapters. Chapter 1 highlighted the persistent gender gap in women economic participation in the Arab region. Chapter 2 focused on the care economy and the characteristics of care services available in the region. Chapter 3 examined the disabling environment impeding women's economic empowerment and their participation in paid work. Chapter 4 discussed how women were mistakenly viewed as a homogeneous group, and how that perception was impacting and shaping care policies and development programmes. Chapter 5 provided recommendations and ways forward to boost women's economic participation and empowerment.

## **II. Discussions**

### **A. Session 1: Tuesday, 28 July 2020**

7. Ms. Valentine Moghadam, Professor of Sociology and International Affairs at Northeastern University, stressed the importance of issues related to the absence of childcare services in the region and the importance of tackling and addressing them in the forthcoming study. She commended the proposed intersectionality

perspective, and recommended following it throughout the study as it would be interesting to examine how women were stratified across each country according to their ethnicity, religion, race, national origin and social class and how that was reflected in their economic participation. Female labour participation differed across the region and across countries by educational attainment, age and marital status. She said that reference should be made to the health sector, when examining the concentration of women in defined sectors, especially since a large proportion of the female labour force was employed in both health and education in countries like Algeria, Lebanon and Tunisia. She added that it would be beneficial to include Jordan and Tunisia as examples when looking at women's involvement in both family care work and in the institutionalized care economy, and to highlight institutional gaps and deficiencies. She noted that two of the main disabling features for women's economic empowerment in the region were labour laws and their application to the private sector, and family laws. She added that it was important to consider gender budgeting and governance structures in institutional structures.

8. Ms. Jonna Maria Lundwall, Senior Social Scientist at the World Bank in Washington D.C., echoed the importance of classifying and mapping out working women in various countries to get a good sense of the layout of the entire region. She said that in the framework developed by the World Bank, in the component on the opportunity structure, the market and thus the link to the private sector was missing and should be added to highlight the influence of laws on the private sector. She added that it was important to highlight that the male labour force participation was stagnant while women's participation had slightly increased, so the ratio had improved, primarily since economic crises had led to weaker job growth. She suggested that it was vital to look at policies of ministries of labour, social affairs and health.

9. Mr. Salman Asif, Senior Human Rights Advisor at UNDP in Pakistan in the Decentralization, Human Rights and Local Governance Project, said that the study might benefit from incorporating the political economy dimension of unpaid care work. It was important to analyse how those policies had been created and evolved. He recommended looking at the sociological and economic context and seeing how communities as a whole (women, men, institutions, private and public sector) had previously made decisions and how they had changed over time. He said that it was important to look at behavioural patterns in the public and private sectors, and what shifts had been made.

10. Ms. Nada Darwazeh, Chief of the Gender Equality Section of the ESCWA Cluster on Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development, stressed the importance of eliminating institutional and investment barriers. She gave the example of opening a pre-school in Jordan, and the associated rigid rules governing the process and the huge investment needed. Other hindering factors were issues of transportation and accessibility. She also raised the issue of informal care work and the struggle to formalize it.

11. Ms. Maia Sieverding, Assistant Professor at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut (AUB), introduced a study on the care economy that was being conducted by AUB in partnership with UN-Women. It provided case studies on Egypt, Jordan, the State of Palestine and Tunisia, and relied on micro data analysis of women and men's time spent on unpaid care activities according to a variety of household and social demographic characteristics. She also provided comments and recommendations on the forthcoming ESCWA study. On women's labour force participation, she advised incorporating the continued preference among women for employment in the public sector as opposed to the private sector, especially in the education and health sectors. Even in the private sector there was a strong feminization of the early childhood care sector. She said that part of why women concentrated so heavily on care sectors was that other sectors were not that open to them. Creating jobs in those other sectors would benefit women. Another issue was low-quality jobs in the early childhood care sector, which were generally heavily privatized in the region because most public systems did not provide early childhood care. She advised utilizing a case study approach, which would be valuable in terms of bringing in various perspectives. She mentioned examples from Latin America, where provisions had been reached through non-governmental organizations or local councils, which might be interesting to consider in the ESCWA study. She advised that such information was available in an UN-Women report entitled Progress of the World's Women 2019-2020: Families in a Changing World.

12. Ms. Jonna Maria Lundwall introduced examples that would be valuable to include in the study, namely Uruguay in Latin America where a country-wide inclusive and participatory care system had recently been set up, and Columbia which was a perfect example on how to formalize and register informal networks with a community-based childcare system. She added that cultural aspects were extremely important to consider, especially since parents would not necessarily want men to take care of their children because of potential abuse and preconceived notions that men were incapable of properly taking care of children. The cultural element was therefore a vital and sensitive issue when talking about the female-dominated care sector.

13. Ms. Moghadam raised the issues of financing the institutionalized care network, and suggested examining examples from Nordic countries. She said that in Nordic countries, funding usually came from general revenues, or from public-private partnerships or community-based informal initiatives, like in the United States where neighbourhood women looked after other women's children. Enhancing and expanding preschool facilities should be looked at as part of the expansion of educational facilities and bettering the educational system. She added that military spending in the region was very high and some of those funds could be used to invest in human capital.

14. Ms. Maia Sieverding discussed financing maternity leave, which was largely done through an employer liability system rather than the social insurance system. She said that measures had been taken in the region to require employers to establish nurseries if they have a certain number of women employees. Some countries had allowed women employees to take certain types of leave, or granted them more flexibility than men. However, many policy measures designed to help or protect women workers instead make them more expensive to employers and more inconvenient, thus posing a strong disincentive for the private sector. She added that Jordan was an interesting example of a country which had tried to place maternity leave under the social insurance system in 2010. It had also recently reformulated the requirement for nurseries, so that it was now based on the total number of employees in the institution and not just the number of female employees.

15. Ms. Frida Khan highlighted the importance of shared responsibilities. She said that ILO recommended recognizing childcare as a parental responsibility and not only a female responsibility, especially when formulating policies.

16. In the ensuing discussion, participants agreed that paternity leave might be counterproductive. Examples were given of the reluctance of men in the region to regularly look after their children. Participants agreed that paternity and maternity leave should be taken separately to increase the likelihood of fathers caring for their children. Participants also discussed care for older persons, which was usually provided by women in the region in addition to childcare.

## **B. Session 2: Wednesday, 29 July 2020**

17. Ms. Hanane Nazir, Professor in the Department of Economics at Cairo University, referred to research on Egypt indicating that sectors creating job opportunities were not women friendly, particularly construction and transport. She stressed the significant involvement of women in the informal sector in the region and the lack of data on women's activities, especially time use data.

18. Ms. Lucia Aline Rost, research consultant for the Oxfam WE-Care initiative, said that it was necessary to change the perception of care work from a burden to a contribution to the social good. She listed the four different stakeholders involved in the formulation and implementation of policies on the unequal division of care work, namely the State, the private sector, civil society, and households.

19. Ms. Nicola Ehlermann, international development advisor, emphasized the lack of care services in the region, which placed all the care work burden on women. Inadequate tax collection rendered Arab countries unable to build a solid education system, and prevented them from providing finances to the care system. Furthermore, the legal structure, especially family laws, affected people's behaviour and the involvement of men and women's in family responsibilities. She added that benefits, including flexible and fewer hours, were

major incentives for married women to work in the public sector. She gave examples of care policies, such as the establishment of day cares, which had led to adverse results. Some Egyptian firms had restricted the number of hired women employees to 99 and created two sub-companies owing to a law stating that companies must establish a day care once the number of women employees reached 100.

20. Ms. Cai Cai, Chief of the Gender Equality and Social Inclusion Section at the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP), highlighted the importance of looking at the quality of women's jobs given that women had lesser access to high-paid jobs. She raised the issue of horizontal and vertical segregation of occupations. She said that there was a need to advocate for State investment in the care sector as a strategy for economic growth, which would lead to the liberation of women from the care work burden. Numerous decent jobs could be created by fostering the care sector, thus accelerating economic growth.

21. Ms. Nicola Ehlermann said that many Arab women were unable to work from home during the COVID-19 lockdown owing to a lack of infrastructure, such as unreliable Internet services and inadequate technological equipment. She added that some women went into STEM education in the Arab region, but that it was not translated into additional employment of women in the STEM field. A study in Egypt showed that young women held back their ambition in the job market due to stereotypes.

22. Ms. Lucia Aline Rost mentioned studies which found that more adapted tools and equipment for men would allow them to play a bigger part in housework. The private sector could produce those tools to reduce the housework burden for women. Such investments could be framed in a way to benefit the care economy and child development.

23. Ms. Cai Cai emphasized the need to change expectations, perceptions and social norms. She said that well-trained educators provided stimulations that would not necessarily be available at home. Child services should grow to support women and men, and provide round-the-clock services catering for the needs of all mothers and fathers. The COVID-19 pandemic had created a more supportive work environment for women, where managers acknowledged that staff members were effectively working from home under flexible working hours.

24. Ms. Nicola Ehlermann highlighted the importance of focusing on the burden put on men as breadwinners, which they could not always honour owing to high male unemployment rates. She suggested looking at the impact of COVID-19 on places where it was legally prohibited to work from home and no flexible work arrangements existed.

25. Ms. Lucia Aline Rost said that COVID-19 had contributed to shifting norms and care-work division. A study conducted in Canada, Kenya, the Philippines, Tunisia, the United Kingdom and the United States of America showed that care work performed by men had increased during the pandemic and had made them want to spend more time with their children. She added that paternity leave was important as it encouraged men to look after children and take a more active role in parenting, which allowed mothers to enter the labour force.

26. In the ensuing discussion, participants discussed the relevance of distinguishing between gender sensitive policies, such as establishing public work programmes near homes to be close to children, and gender transformative policies entailing social norm interventions, including community led interventions such as talking to men about their responsibilities and trying to address negative masculinity. Participants emphasized the necessity of including women in public procurement and in the network of entrepreneurs. Women micro-entrepreneurs could become change agents bringing income to families. Such income could change the consumption patterns and develop the community. They also stressed the importance of enforcing laws impacting gender equality.

### **C. Session 3: Wednesday, 29 July 2020**

27. Ms. Tania Moussalem, AEGM Group Chief Operating Officer, noted that the primary problem in women's economic empowerment was preconceived ideas about women, which promoted discriminatory laws

and stereotypes. She mentioned the women empowerment programme within BLC Bank that employed a twofold approach: one concentrated on providing women employees with more flexible hours, and the other on introducing paternity leave to involve fathers in the lives of their families and teach them how to take care of children. For example, after maternity leave, female employees were allowed to work half time for two paid months, and paternity leave was allowed for three days, which was not a socially accepted concept before. Furthermore, a target was set to involve women in higher-ranking jobs and to change preconceived ideas and unconscious bias internally. In addition, internal mechanisms were established to ensure that both women and men were considered whenever promotions were available. She also encouraged services that would better serve women entrepreneurs, especially since programmes such as *Kafalat* benefited women less than men, primarily because women were less present in various sectors. She insisted on the relevance of providing online banking services in addition to loans for women, and on the impact of communicating with women role models to alter traditional perceptions of social roles. She emphasized that there was no one solution for women's economic empowerment, so several approaches should be combined and integrated. She said that a holistic approach was necessary to tackle the challenges stemming from preconceived stereotypes.

28. Ms. Susan Himmelweit, Emeritus Professor of Economics at the Open University in the United Kingdom, said that the issue with special and flexible measures for women is that they should be instituted for everyone, otherwise women tended to pay the price for such special treatment. In the United Kingdom, flexible employers often did not pay well and thus it was important that such measures applied to both men and women. She argued that men should also adjust their work hours to uphold equal norms. There was a trade off when such policies were not equally implemented, because it would be expensive for companies to bring in women. She also discussed the policy of investing in care, where money was spent on social infrastructure such as education, health and care services. Such investments would produce more jobs in the care services, which might be a step towards redistributing unpaid care between men and women and providing more jobs for women. She added that if countries had valued and well-respected investment in the care sector, attitudes towards care services would have changed. For example, investing in care provided more jobs than investing in construction.

29. Ms. Misbah Khatana, Economic and Social Geographer at the Department of Geography at Cambridge University, said that it was important to examine why care work was strongly seen as women's work. It was relevant to look at who really benefited from the status quo of women being responsible for unpaid care work, which results in a future workforce. The study should therefore take into account women's free work that was benefiting the labour market, and how that cycle could be broken. She added that it was important to examine why the employment gap had not been reduced and why women still dominated particular fields. Another aspect to consider was the skills women and girls were receiving. For example, in Pakistan, women were gaining skills in training institutes, but those skills were not marketable.

30. Ms. Rouba Arja said that women in the Arab region were well educated, with a relatively high percentage of women involved in STEM education. She added that Arab women often chose specific education fields based on sectors that provided good work benefits, which would allow women to assume the double burden of paid and unpaid work. Women worked in the public sector because of the holidays and benefits provided that assist them in handling the burden of care work. She concluded that it was therefore important to examine how those dynamics influenced women's choices in terms of education.

31. Ms. Tania Moussallem suggested having two sets of practical recommendations: one for the private sector and another for the public sector. She said that there was discrimination in national laws and obstacles to women entering the paid sector. Anti-harassment laws in the workplace and flexible working arrangements could be introduced to support women, especially since COVID-19 had clearly showed that it was possible to work from home. She also recommended developing a quota for women enterprises. She added that it was difficult to find data on women owned enterprises, which were greatly needed in the region.

32. Ms. Susan Himmelweit said that proactive and effective policies tended to rely on State interventions to provide social services. The pandemic had put on the agenda certain policies that were much harder to argue for. In Europe, for example, many people in precarious jobs were women. With COVID-19, women's paid or

unpaid work had been revalued and, in many countries, more men had become more aware of how much work women do at home. She concluded that one must work on all fronts at once to promote gender equality, especially since everything fed into everything else.

33. Ms. Arja underlined the relevance of better understanding the informal networks, dynamics and arrangements that families and women had for care work, and how those dynamics interlinked with formal measures. She noted that caring for the elderly was time consuming for many women. A case study on the care provided to the elderly in Morocco would be included in the study. She added that female domestic workers were often hired to work in precarious conditions to fill the gap in care services, so as to allow other women to enter the labour market.

34. In the ensuing discussion, participants recommended adding another case study on care for persons with disabilities. They highlighted interest in covering flexible working environments, which proved to support high quality work during the pandemic. They recommended further examining how to make use of gendered norms in the Arab region to improve women's economic activity.

#### **D. Session 4: Thursday 30 July**

35. Ms. Shereen Abadi, Consultant at the Mashreq Gender Facility of the World Bank's Jordan Office, said that some elements and trends of women's economic participation in the region did not apply to Jordanian women who were concentrated in the formal sector rather than the informal sector. Jordanian women gave significant importance to non-wage elements of jobs, preferring to work in large organizations where those elements were preserved. She highlighted the lack of care services in Jordan. Nurseries catered for only 5 per cent of the total number of children (95 per cent of children did not attend nurseries). She added that there were large areas and districts in Jordan that did not have nurseries, The care agenda is therefore critical. The extreme lack of service provision in Jordan was one of the main reasons that women refrained from entering the job market.

36. Ms. Arja said that the Arab region was diverse, and the study was expected to reflect that diversity in addition to common regional features. Prevailing gender norms could differ between countries and even within a country. That diversity was also reflected in care services. In general, there was a lack of such services and those available catered for only a small segment of working women.

37. Ms. Maha Yaktin Quol stressed the importance of achieving SDG 5, which was essential to attain SDGs 8 and 9. She said that such cross-cutting factors were important when tackling the care economy. Childcare, disability care and elderly care were all important parts of unpaid care work in the region. Such work was emotionally draining and time consuming for women, especially disability and elderly care. She concluded that it was important to identify gender norms for each Arab country and work on behavioural aspects to promote women's economic participation. Decreasing gender bias was essential to moving forward on the economic level.

38. Ms. Shereen Abadi said that women preferred working in the public sector, since jobs in the private sector did not provide a conducive environment for women. The private sector typically had longer work hours and a lack of support services, such as childcare and transport. Research conducted in the region suggested that structural reforms had decreased jobs in the public sector in some Arab countries, significantly affecting women's economic participation. The quality of jobs created was an issue for the economy as a whole. In Jordan, private sector employee benefits were equalized with those of the public sector. Employers no longer had to pay for women's maternity leave as it was now covered by social security. She added that women were still concentrated in the low value added sectors. An exception was garment factories in rural areas that provided value adding jobs for Jordanian women and social security, as well as good working conditions such as being close to home and having suitable working hours for their childcare needs. As for social norms, a study found that in Jordanian schoolbooks, women were always portrayed to work in the education and health fields rather than in engineering, construction, or information technology. These curriculums reflected and engrained in the minds of students existing social norms. Children's perceptions were formed to produce such outcomes.



Reforms in certain countries could lead to regional change towards gender equality and encourage other countries to take the same path, such as the 2010 Maternity Fund Reform in Jordan and the social insurance system in Tunisia. A study by the World Bank in Jordan showed that women, men and society had different opinions on how involved women should be in the economy. A Musawah study highlighted how religious discourse played a key role in forming country rules and regulations and shaping the mindsets of individuals on the distribution of roles between husband and wife.

39. Ms. Lina Torossian, ESCWA consultant working on a case study on children's day care in Lebanon, presented the concept underlying the case study, its methodology, and the work achieved to date. She said that the case study tried to understand different aspects related to childcare in Lebanon. It covered private and public day cares. The study would consider both the demand and supply side of day cares, and aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on women's lives and that of their families since most Lebanese employees were working from home during that period.

40. In the ensuing discussions, participants stressed that policies should focus on specific interventions and outcomes for gender mainstreaming. They mentioned gender mainstreaming fatigue and a dire need to revisit the concept. Some policies initially designed to support women had the opposite effect when implemented. They raised the importance of framing care recommendations in a more appealing way for policymakers to induce the desired change. Participants emphasized the role of gender procurement and gender budgeting as factors to support achieving gender equality. They highlighted the need to understand the reasons for the lack of involvement of fathers in the care of their children (the masculinity perspective).

### **III. Recommendations**

41. Detailed discussions were conducted to understand the dynamics of women's participation in the economy and support member States in promoting women's economic empowerment and moving women from unpaid to paid work.

42. The meeting concluded with an agreement on the main guiding principles and recommendations that would enable development practitioners and researchers to achieve women's economic empowerment in a way that addressed gender inequalities in the region. The recommendations would feed into the forthcoming study, expected to provide guidance on how to advance women's economic empowerment in the Arab region.

43. The following recommendations were proposed:

(a) Advocate for State investment in the care sector as a strategy for economic growth, which then leads to the liberation of women from the care work burden;

(b) Examine the legal structure in Arab countries as it is different from other regions, especially when it comes to family law;

(c) Examine COVID-19 and its effects on women's participation in the economy;

(d) Consider childcare, disability care and elderly care, which are all important parts of unpaid care work in the region;

(e) Examine societal gender roles and the general economic situation in each country at the beginning of the study, since the situation varies across Arab countries;

(f) Highlight how women prefer working in the public sector since jobs created in the private sector do not provide a conducive environment for women, and examine how to make the private sector more appealing for women;

(g) Frame care recommendations in a way that is more appealing to policymakers so as to induce the desired change;

(h) Include more case studies, examples and success stories from the Arab region or other regions.

## Annex\*

### List of participants

#### Session I, Tuesday 28 July, 4:00 p.m.

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#### Session III, Wednesday 29 July, 4:00 p.m.

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#### Session IV, Thursday 30 July, 9:00 a.m.

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