



**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL
COUNCIL**

Distr.
LIMITED
E/ESCWA/ECW/2009/WG.3/3
15 February 2010
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: ARABIC

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON THE REVISION OF GUIDELINES TO INCREASE EFFECTIVENESS OF NATIONAL MACHINERIES FOR WOMEN IN THE ESCWA REGION BEIRUT, 11-12 DECEMBER 2009

Summary

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held an expert group meeting to review the guidelines to increase effectiveness of national machineries for women in the ESCWA region at the United Nations House, Beirut, Lebanon, on 11 and 12 December 2009.

The meeting included a presentation on how to draft periodic reports to follow up on the implementation of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) based on international conventions, such as the treaties of the International Labour Organization (ILO). It comprised as well a model of a national mechanism for mainstreaming the gender perspective in policies and programmes in the ESCWA region and the Pacific (the Indian case). A study prepared by ESCWA on the guidelines for mainstreaming gender issues and enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of women was presented to the group of experts for revision and updating. ESCWA will introduce necessary ratifications before sending it back to the Arab countries.

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

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Introduction

1. In the context of efforts exerted by the United Nations to build mechanisms for the advancement of women in the Arab region and to enhance its capacities and effectiveness as to the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, ESCWA held an Expert Group Meeting to review the guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of national mechanisms for the advancement of women in the ESCWA region at the United Nations House, Beirut, Lebanon, on 11 and 12 December 2009. The meeting aimed:

(a) To review the drafting of periodic reports to follow up the implementation of the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) based on international conventions, such as the treaties of the International Labour Organization (ILO);

(b) To review the national mechanism of work for mainstreaming the gender perspective in policies and programmes in the ESCWA region and the Pacific (the Indian case);

(c) To review and update the guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of women in the ESCWA region.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

2. Discussions, summarized in a roundtable, concluded with the following:

A. DRAFTING PERIODICAL REPORTS TO FOLLOW UP THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CEDAW BASED ON INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS, SUCH AS ILO TREATIES

3. Participants commended the valuable information they were provided with. However, most of them raised the issue of reports in terms of entities preparing them, as they considered such reports do not accurately reflect the reality, but merely illustrate the positive aspects overlooking the negative ones, which are usually highlighted in shadow reports prepared by national mechanisms and civil society organizations.

4. Therefore, participants unanimously agreed to the necessity to take the following actions:

(a) To draft reports more reflective of the reality;

(b) To define specific indicators to measure the value of work in order to determine appropriate remuneration and identify the extent of discrimination against women;

(c) To include domestic workers in rural areas in the workforce and in the reports.

B. MODEL OF A NATIONAL MECHANISM FOR MAINSTREAMING GENDER ISSUES IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE ESCWA REGION AND THE PACIFIC (THE INDIAN CASE)

5. Participants lauded the Indian experience in view of its success, thus requesting to diffuse this experience in ESCWA member countries to make use of it and try to choose the aspects which most suit their current situation.

C. REVIEW OF GUIDELINES FOR ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN FOR MAINSTREAMING GENDER ISSUES IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE ARAB REGION

6. Participants commended the study and made proposals on updating it. ESCWA took note of the proposals which will be added to the study. They raised as well some recommendations and general demands aimed at the advancement of women, including:

- (a) The need to focus on real awareness of women in order to change their trends into social issues, given the weak capacities of national mechanisms to attract the female element to defend women's issues;
- (b) To prepare appropriate indicators for measuring the progress made and identifying gaps;
- (c) Civil society organizations should give greater importance to qualitative studies;
- (d) To establish a women's parliament similar to the shadow parliament;
- (e) To sensitize decision makers to transfer the concept of gender accurately and avoid falling into the confusion between such a concept and the concept of sex;
- (f) To introduce women with high educational degrees to the labour market;
- (g) To open up to male communities which have the greatest influence in society;
- (h) To establish special departments for the complaints of women;
- (i) The mechanism should be the only reference for women's issues on legal, social and economic levels in order to be able to solve problems and collect data.

II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

7. Ms. Afaf Omar reviewed the agenda items. Each session was followed by a general discussion on the items raised, and participants shared their observations, opinions and suggestions. The main themes of the discussion were as follows:

A. DRAFTING PERIODICAL REPORTS TO FOLLOW UP THE IMPLEMENTATION OF CEDAW BASED ON INTERNATIONAL CONVENTIONS, SUCH AS ILO TREATIES

8. The adoption of the agenda was followed by a presentation by Ms. Simal Esim from the ILO on how to draft periodical reports to follow up the implementation of CEDAW based on international conventions, such as ILO treaties.

9. Ms. Esim started her presentation with a historical overview of the ILO, and the identification of international work standards that regulate working conditions contained in the conventions of the Organization, as binding legal obligations for ratifying member countries. The Organization established in this framework supervision bodies to ensure the application of these standards by ratifying countries through national periodical reports. With the development of women's rights concepts and the necessity of protecting them against discrimination in the workplace, the ILO issued several agreements, such as the Equal Remuneration Convention; Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention; Maternity Protection Convention; and Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, in order to ensure equality between men and women based on the principle of equal pay for equal work.

10. Ms. Esim declared that the fundamental principles stressed in these conventions are stipulated in CEDAW, in particular in articles 10, 11, 12, 13 and 14. As for bodies responsible for drafting reports, Ms. Esim pointed out that Women's National Machineries and the non-governmental organizations are responsible for preparing periodical reports on the implementation of CEDAW, whereas the governmental bodies including ministries, labour unions and trade unions draft reports related to the implementation of international labour standards (check Arabic). She indicated as well that the above conventions constitute an important stepping stone to facilitate the drafting process in view of their accuracy.

11. Ms. Esim highlighted efforts currently exerted by the Organization in the field of domestic work, in which the vast majority of women work, in order to organize it such as any other business sector. In the discussion, she stressed the importance of coordination and dialogue between official bodies and civil society, in particular through focal points and special entities within the government in order to ensure the accuracy and credibility of reports and to acknowledge their contents. As for the evaluation of work, experts in the field of human resources management are responsible for the identification of indicators and ensuring that jobs are gender-sensitive.

B. MODEL OF A NATIONAL MECHANISM FOR MAINSTREAMING GENDER IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE ESCWA REGION AND THE PACIFIC (THE INDIAN CASE)

12. The session was chaired by Ms. Bahija Dailammi, Deputy Secretary-General of the Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain. Ms. Benita Sharma reviewed the model of the Indian mechanism for mainstreaming gender in policies and programmes in Asia and the Pacific in order to exchange views and experiences and to highlight the successes of this mechanism and the remaining obstacles.

13. Ms. Benita Sharma noted that the Constitution of India contains several gender-sensitive articles, such as articles 14, 15 and 16. The gender concept has been stressed in a large part of legislation being enacted since 1923 until the present. She explained that many plans of action adopted in India led to the establishment of an independent ministry for women's and children's affairs, whereas the Ministry of Human Resource Development used to be responsible for such matters through one of its departments. These plans allowed monitoring of the necessary budget to implement women-empowering policies. Various ministries concerned with developmental affairs directly and indirectly contributed to their implementation. This coincided with the establishment of the National Commission for Women, which monitors the needs of women in the Indian society, reports their suffering, and controls the implementation of laws in force and the extent to which they are gender-sensitive, demanding the enactment of new legislation in case certain gaps in some laws emerge. This entity is also concerned with securing the necessary training to mainstream women's issues in society and educating them on their rights in order to liberate them from old, unfair cultural shackles.

14. Ms. Sharma stressed that the key to the success of the Indian experience lies in the coordination among various official bodies on the one hand, and between governmental agencies and civil society organizations on the other.

15. This presentation was followed by a discussion in which participants lauded the Indian experience in view of the success achieved, thus calling for its generalization in ESCWA member countries to make use of it and choose the aspects commensurate with their situation. Some participants questioned the effectiveness of this experience in view of unfair practices against women still spread throughout the country. In response, Ms. Sharma pointed out that India is a large and very poor multi-ethnic country in which each group has its own customs and traditions that may conflict with prevailing laws. Therefore, a continuing effort is exerted to educate women and reduce the impact of customs and traditions on them.

C. REVISION OF GUIDELINES FOR ENHANCING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN IN INTEGRATING GENDER ISSUES IN POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES IN THE ARAB REGION

16. The session was chaired by Ms. Hana Huwaidi, Director General of Development at the National Commission for Women. Ms. Zuheira Kamal reviewed the study prepared by the end of 2006 on the guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of women in the ESCWA region. Ms. Kamal stressed the importance of national machineries for women in view of their contribution to the coordination of policies within the government and in monitoring the variables as to bridging the gender gap. Then she identified the main tasks of these mechanisms, notably providing institutional support for the establishment of gender planning structures; manoeuvring gender issues for their integration in

governmental policies and plans, as well as budgets; and preparing studies, researches and policy papers, in addition to national reports. In order for these mechanisms to succeed in implementing their tasks, certain conditions are required, such as the inclusion of these mechanisms in the highest levels within the government, to be chaired, for instance, by the Prime Minister; the decentralization of planning and implementation in order to involve civil organizations; provision of sufficient resources; and enhancing the capacity of mechanisms to impact the enactment of public policies. Ms. Zuheira covered as well the tasks of national machineries for women, such as working to provide gender data; developing the governmental commitment to gender issues and mainstreaming them in plans and policies; and monitoring the performance of governmental institutions as to the implementation of these plans and policies. However, several problems prevent the implementation of these tasks, including the lack of sufficient financial resources, and of access to adequate support for the implementation of their activities.

17. The presentation was followed by a discussion, in which participants commented on the articles related to the countries in the study, in order to update and correct any false or incomplete information. Some countries requested the modification of their data in tables or adding them to necessary tables and paragraphs. Participants agreed to send questionnaires to countries in order to identify the progress made as to the recommendations of the study previously prepared by Ms. Zuheira Kamala and answer additional questions to enrich the following study with new information on the issues of women's empowerment. Ms. Zuheira Kamal asked all participants not to settle for a brief answer, but rather to formulate a concise paragraph with detailed information.

D. CLOSING SESSION

18. During the closing session, each participant presented the experience of their country in the field of women's empowerment, with an overview of the specialized mechanism and listed the achievements made to date in this area. The main points covered in the presentations were as follows:

Jordan

19. The Jordanian National Commission for Women was established in 1998, and was chaired by King Hussein's sister, HRH Princess Basma bint Talal. The Council of Ministers issued a communiqué to all ministries to encourage them to cooperate with the Commission and to contribute to the success of its functions. The Commission takes part in the formulation of all national laws sent to the Parliament. The main committees and networks of the National Commission include: the Women's Complaints Office, the committee for coordination with non-governmental organizations, the committee of women and political parties, the Network Against Violence Against Women (*Shama'a* [Candle]), and the Women's Knowledge Network (*Nashmiyat*) to support women in municipal councils. It should be noted that the rate of illiteracy among Jordanian women is limited to 11.2 per cent, which is mostly concentrated in older age groups, indicating that the majority of young Jordanian women are educated. A very effective women's committee was also established within the House of Notables (Senate).

United Arab Emirates

20. The United Arab Emirates are characterized by local women's national machineries in each Emirate, in addition to machineries operating at the level of the State as a whole. In 1975, these machineries expressed their desire to merge, and the General Women's Union was established. The most notable achievements of the Union are as follows: efforts for the ratification of legislation; improvement of the conditions of working women; development of programmes and projects capable of influencing policies and facts, especially since decision makers are closely tied to this Union; ratification of international agreements and tight communication with other Arab organizations concerned with women's issues; and exerting efforts at the local level for the advancement of women. The Beijing +15 report reflected the main achievements of this Union, despite its short history.

Bahrain

21. The Supreme Council for Women was established in Bahrain in 2001 by royal decree and is chaired by Her Highness Shaikha Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa, which makes the Council an important entity with large political and social influence. With its establishment, the Council developed an integrated women's strategy that was translated into a national plan involving various programmes and policies based on accurate statistics. The Council currently focuses its efforts to raise awareness of the gender concept through the establishment of a special department concerned with this issue and with holding a convention on this concept in 2008. The Council signed a two-year work agreement with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Syrian Arab Republic

22. The current trend in the Syrian Arab Republic lies in the development of institutional and administrative infrastructure to strengthen the partnership between public and civil sectors. The establishment of the Syrian Commission for Family Affairs constituted a qualitative leap. The Commission is a governmental body affiliated with the Council of Ministers with the authorities of a ministry, as it can set strategies and present useful new suggestions in the field of family affairs. The Commission recently granted high priority to discussing the situation of children in the Syrian Arab Republic, as well as women's affairs in terms of violence and poverty. The General Union of Syrian Women, which was established prior to the Commission, constitutes as well another body concerned with women's affairs that stands up to obstacles hindering their progress.

The Sudan

23. The Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Child Affairs constitutes the governmental mechanism concerned with the advancement of women in the Sudan in addition to the General Department for Women and Family Affairs, which provides training, coordinates with ministries, and proposes draft laws. Those two mechanisms succeeded in raising awareness and enacting a special law for raising the sentence of rape of women and children to life imprisonment and execution through small, income-generating projects. The largest project currently implemented by those mechanisms is probably the national policy for the empowerment of women in collaboration with the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). This project includes six themes, namely: education, health, political participation, economic empowerment, participation of women in achieving peace, and human rights and laws. This policy was included in the new five-year-plan of the State. The Sudan is as well a member in various regional and international organizations and bodies active in the field of women's advancement, as it coordinates with women's administrations in some international financing institutions and civil society organizations.

Iraq

24. In 2004, a State Ministry without portfolio was appointed responsible for women's affairs to form in 2005 the High National Committee for the Advancement of Women, which included members from all ministries at the level of Director General and provided training on gender issues in collaboration with UNIFEM. On the other hand, the women, Family and Children Committee at the Iraqi parliament sought to raise the economic level of women, to introduce the gender concept in school curricula, and to prepare a special letter on human rights to be taught in schools. In 2004, a special conference on women was held in Iraq, and resulted in the issuance of a study of CEDAW articles, in particular the ones related to women, poverty and health. A protection network was established in parallel with the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, and the maternity leave was extended to a full year with the first eight months paid, and the last four months unpaid. The law prohibiting women from travelling was as well abrogated. The most important law voted at the parliament was the draft law for establishing a ministry with portfolio concerned with women's affairs.

Oman

25. One of the main mechanisms concerned with women's affairs is the governmental mechanism of the Ministry of Social Development and the General Directorate for Family Development, which includes different departments working on the advancement of women and children. Its main achievements comprise the ratification of CEDAW in 2006, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its two protocols, the establishment of a hotline in order to resolve any problem that may occur between spouses, and the enactment of new laws on the entitlement to land for women, and human trafficking.

Palestine

26. The Ministry of Women Affairs was established in Palestine in 2003 in order to enhance the status and capabilities of Palestinian women and establish an active civil society. The priorities of this Ministry include: the development of the governmental political commitment; coordination and networking with governmental and non-governmental establishments; and building relationships with governmental and non-governmental women's organization to exchange experiences. Four main priorities emerged from these issues, namely: enabling the participation of women in policymaking and decision-making; raising the participation of women in the labour market to contribute to poverty eradication; combating violence against women through a national strategy; developing and enhancing governmental commitment and planning mechanisms in the field of gender mainstreaming through report drafting; training ministerial cadres; and seeking to integrate gender in curricula.

Kuwait

27. The Women's Affairs Committee in Kuwait includes coordinators from most ministries and is affiliated with the National Assembly. Its main achievements consist of: granting Kuwaiti women the right to renew their passport; establishing an academic centre to do researches and prepare field studies focused on women as a neutral entity annexed to the centre of women at the college of Business Administration at Kuwait University; organizing training to raise awareness of CEDAW; involving women in political life, especially with the success registered by two women ministers and four women deputies; and the representation of women in various bodies and supreme councils. In addition, laws were enacted to make night work optional, to extend maternity leave to two years during which women receive half of their salaries, and to prevent ratification of marriage contracts except with the consent of both parties.

Lebanon

28. The National Commission for Lebanese Women was established in 1998 by virtue of law, and currently concentrates its work on the revitalization of its consultative role. Main achievements include the issuance of a circular stipulating the increase of focal points in governmental administrations, with the identification of the functions of each point. The Commission is currently cooperating with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities to organize media campaigns, particularly ones related to women to encourage them to take part in future municipal elections as voters and candidates. The Commission consolidates its cooperation with non-governmental organizations in preparation for a strategy for Lebanese women, as it expands its openness to civil society. The recent cooperation of the Commission with the women's committee at the Beirut Bar Association paves the way for the issuance of a decision to enable women and men to eliminate their marital status on their identity cards and is a proof to the activities of the Commission. An agreement was as well signed with the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World of the Lebanese American University, and succeeded in convincing the Association of Banks in Lebanon to issue a circular that allows women to open a trust account for their minor children without being subordinate to the Custody Act. The Commission is currently considering the national law and seeks to support the law against domestic violence.

29. In 1996, the National Machinery for Women was established for the advancement of women's issues and was followed by the establishment of the Supreme Council for Women's Affairs in 2000, chaired by the Prime Minister. The Council was reformed in 2003 to comprise a larger number of ministers and representatives from both public and private sectors. Most prominent achievements in Yemen, in terms of the advancement of women, include the issuance of a circular by the Council of Ministers for the establishment of public administrations for women in governmental institutions, the formation of national committees for women in 20 Yemeni provinces, the issuance of an annual report on the status of women in Yemen according to the Beijing axis, and the development of a training manual on the auditing policy based on the methodology adopted within the ILO and UNDP, implemented in their provinces. Necessary training for concerned entities was performed by foreign experts. Special gender researches were undertaken at Yemen University and Sana'a University where Masters Sections specialized in gender were established, and a team is being formed to work on the fourth five-year plan (2011-2016) concerned with women's affairs.

30. At the end of the meeting, Ms. Afaf thanked the experts for their useful and valuable participation in the meeting.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING

31. The meeting was held on 11 and 12 December 2009 at the United Nations House in Beirut.

B. OPENING

32. Ms. Afaf Omar, head of ESCWA Centre for Women, made the opening speech. She welcomed experts and participants and stressed the importance of enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of Arab women in the promotion of gender mainstreaming in policies and programmes. She pointed out as well that the road towards empowerment and equality will be succinct if all participants meet, discuss, coordinate, and agree on work mechanisms, and exchange knowledge and experiences. Available studies and guidelines could as well help perform the required work in the best way possible.

33. Ms. Omar stressed the necessity to update the study presented before the participants as she emphasized that the guidelines are a means to integrate women in policies and programmes and to improve the situation of Arab women.

34. Ms. Afaf Omar wished all the success to the meeting, and to the participating delegations, a pleasant stay in Lebanon.

C. ATTENDANCE

35. The meeting brought together experts from national agencies, ministries, councils and women's committees in member countries, as well as experts in the field of integrating women's issues in development policies. Annex I to this report contains the list of participants.

D. AGENDA

36. Experts covered the items of the agenda as presented in its below form:

1. Opening.
2. Adoption of the agenda.
3. Proposed organization of work.

4. Drafting periodical reports to follow up the implementation of CEDAW based on international conventions, such as ILO treaties.
5. Model of a national mechanism for mainstreaming gender issues in policies and programmes in the ESCWA region and the Pacific (the Indian case).
6. Review of guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of women for mainstreaming gender issues in policies and programmes in the Arab region.
7. Closing session.

E. DOCUMENTS

37. The list of documents presented at the meeting is contained in annex II to this report.

Annex I*

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. ESCWA MEMBER STATES

Bahrain

Ms. Bahja Al Dailami
Assistant to the Secretary-General
Supreme Council for Women

Iraq

Ms. Taghrid Al Tlibawy
Public Relations Officer
Ministry of Women Affairs

Jordan

Ms. Amal Haddadin
Lawyer
Jordanian National Commission for Women

Kuwait

Ms. Hissa Al Shaheen
President's Adviser
Women's Affairs Committee

Lebanon

Ms. Joumana Moufarege
Director
National Council for Lebanese Women

Oman

Ms. Hanan Al Busaidi
Head of programming department in the women's
affairs section
Ministry of Social Development

Palestine

Mr. Youssef Oudeh
Public Relations Officer
Ministry of Women's Affairs

The Sudan

Ms. Mawahib El Hag
Vice-president of the General Directorate of
Women and Family
President of the directorate of projects
Ministry of Social Welfare, Women
and Child Affairs

Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Insaaf Hamad
University Professor and gender expert
Syrian Commission for Family Affairs

United Arab Emirates

Mr. Mohammad Al Mansoori
Adviser
General Women's Union

Yemen

Ms. Hana Huwaidi
Director of Development
National Commission for Women

B. EXPERTS

Ms. Zahira Kamal
Expert
Palestine

Ms. Benita Sharma
Expert
India

Ms. Simel Esim
Expert
International Labour Organization

* Issued as submitted.

C. ORGANIZERS

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Ms. Afaf Omer
Chief
Centre for Women

Ms. Rania Al Jazairi
Social Affairs Officer
Centre for Women

Ms. Kendra Knoebl
Associate Social Affairs Officer
Centre for Women

Ms. Carla Moussa
Administrative Assistant
Centre for Women

Annex II

LIST OF DOCUMENTS

Title	Symbol
Provisional agenda	
Proposed organization of work	
Information note	
Guidelines for enhancing the effectiveness of mechanisms for the advancement of women for mainstreaming gender issues in policies and programmes in the Arab region	
Expert Group Meeting report	