

## **Expert Group Meeting on Gender Intersectionality in the Arab Region**

### ***Session I: Intersectionality approach and the rationale behind advocating for its use in the Arab region***

#### **Key note speech on Women's situation in the Arab region**

Ms. Mehrinaz El Awady, *Director ESCWA Centre for Women*

Women rights and gender issues have been high on the development agenda of Arab countries in the last few decades namely since the adoption of Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PfA) in 1995. There has been important progress on many fronts. However, the progress made does not live up to the expectations since it did not succeed to entirely redress the situation of women in the region and achieve gender equality.

Many institutions and actors have been exerting considerable efforts to achieve gender equality in the region. The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action served as a driving force for putting in place and strengthening the role and functions of National Women's Machineries (NWMs) as necessary institutional mechanisms entrusted with the advancement of women. Since their establishment, NWMs played a leading role in advocating for women's issues and triggering gender mainstreaming initiatives in the various ministries. Governmental efforts in developing national policies and strategies for the advancement of women, designing and implementing numerous programmes, and providing a wide range of services through several line ministries resulted in key achievements. Similarly, civil society organizations and women's

movements have been, to various degrees, active and vibrant in advocating for women's rights and in participating in the development processes of national policies and strategies.

Cumulative progress has been achieved on many fronts. Commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and States' compliance with their obligations increased over the last decade with many States withdrawing some or all of their reservations on different articles. Convention on the Rights of the Child is now ratified or acceded by all Arab States. Few Arab countries are not party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (and /or the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. However, several States still have reservations that limit the application of the treaties, which defeats the purpose and the object of the treaties.

Constitutions in many Arab States have at least some reference to equal rights for all citizens. However, this reference remains broad, more as a guiding principle without any clear obligation on the States. New constitutions namely in Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have enshrined women's rights and stipulated that the State should take active role in working towards the realization of parity between men and women. Few of the new constitutions have explicitly protected women from violence and supported this with progressive legislations, which is central to addressing this salient phenomenon.

In most Arab countries, national legislations including personal status laws, fall short from adhering to gender equality principles given that they are based on patriarchal power relations, creating an environment that favors discrimination. It is worth mentioning that while Morocco and

Tunisia are witnessing significant advances in their family laws that are to be commended, women still face several barriers in national labor laws namely in what relate to the early retirement age, parental policies and their related benefits; in addition to some restrictions on positions women that can hold. Although criminalization of domestic and intimate partner violence is gaining momentum in the region, the legal reforms are not yet up to the expectations and remain inadequate to ensure the protection of all women.

Arab States developed and adopted a myriad of policies and strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women. This has reflected on the improvement of women's situation in different development areas namely health and education. Life expectancy is improving for both men and women in the Arab region since 1980s and this pattern is expected to continue in the coming years. On the education front, gender gap in education is closing in the region and women outnumber men in pursuing tertiary education in most Arab countries. Yet this success did not translate into better engagement in the workforce.

On the other side of the medal, gender gap is still highest in the World. The region ranks last globally on the global gender gap index, which captures the magnitude of gender-based disparities in four thematic dimensions: economic participation and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival and political empowerment. The role of women is still generally perceived as intimately linked to their families and households. Women still face daunting challenges to access job markets and to participate in the political processes. According to a regional survey, about half or more of women across four countries “support mostly inequitable views when it comes to women's roles.

(...)Gains in education attainments for girls and increased access to health do not translate into women's economic or political participation.

### *Where did we go wrong?*

Why are we not succeeding to further reduce gender inequalities despite all the efforts exerted? Why are we failing to transform gains made over the past years into realities and equal opportunities and empowerment of women. ESCWA is keen on addressing these questions and learn from past experiences.

Previously, in December 2016, During the Committee on Women 8<sup>th</sup> session, ESCWA successfully advocated for the adoption a broad concept of gender justice as a formal process and a substantive outcome: the formal process of seeking gender justice focuses mainly on accountability, while the ultimate substantive income is achieving gender equality. This allowed us to start working on strengthening the existing accountability mechanisms, an aspect that is often missed in Arab countries. But this alone is still not sufficient. There is a need for an approach that captures all women and ensure leaving no one behind.

Since the start of the Arab uprising in 2011, the region witnessed massive changes that are currently reshaping the face, boundaries and power relation of the Arab region at the political level and in its social fabric. What was previously recognized as Arab Nationalism that absorbs all other identities is no longer a suitable framework to aspire for. Emerging identities including religious identities, sectarian, tribal, regional, class are all but few of the most visible additions to gender identity, race and ethnicity.

Individuals, organizations and political institutions in the region are now reflecting on these emerging realities and identities that were once inhibited and suppressed. However, the awakening and recognition of identities brought with it different forms of discriminatory behaviors that may also jeopardize the small gains made before for women. Lasting and emerging conflicts, which have touched nearly all countries in the region either because these countries are party to the conflict or because of their geographic proximity to the conflict, further exacerbate this austere situation and ring alarms about the possibility, ability and likelihood of redress. It is managing a thin line between acknowledging new realities while maintaining gains.

Our meeting in this forum would allow us to have in-depth discussions on all these intersecting elements and we expect to better understand where we, as a region, went wrong and whether assumptions that women belong to a homogenous group may have mis-guided much of our interventions and influenced results. Any future policy recommendation may require a deeper understanding of the new landscape in the region and entail a solid analysis of the intersectionality between gender, religious, sectarian, tribal, regional, ethnic, racial, nationality, class and refugee status.