

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Arab region
Paving ways and speeding path

Concept note for an Expert Group Meeting on *women's economic empowerment in the Arab region*

BACKGROUND

Unchanged narrative on women's empowerment and economic participation in the Arab region

The 2020 Global Gender Gap Report¹ continues to reflect a bleak situation for women in the region, owing to the weak performance of Arab States in strengthening women economic participation and political empowerment. These two sub-indices are responsible for pulling the region backwards since performance is much better for the two other sub-indices, namely education attainment and health. All Arab States are below the global average and most countries rank very low.

The narrative regarding women's empowerment and participation in the Arab region witnessed little changes over the last four decades. The region has seen unprecedented progress in women's education and health. Young women enjoy better education than their predecessors and the advances are notable, as the literacy rate for the females aged 25-64 doubled between 1990 (32.6 per cent) and 2017 (65 per cent). The average years of schooling for women increased significantly in almost all Arab countries. The gender gap in primary and secondary enrolment in the Arab States is almost closed and gender parity has been reached in tertiary education. Health indicators have followed a similar path.

However, this progress is not mirrored in the political and economic spheres. The percentage of women in parliament in all Arab States, despite progress shown in the last four decades, is still below global averages and below the 30 per cent target for women in decision-making set by the Beijing Platform for Action (1995). According to the Inter-Parliamentary Union's global ranking, based on the percentage of women in parliament in 2019, almost all Arab countries rank below 100², except for UAE in the 4th position (50 per cent of women in parliament), Iraq in the 69th position (26.44 per cent of women in parliament), Djibouti and Algeria respectively in the 70th and 71st positions with 26.15 and 25.76 per cent of women in parliament, and finally Somalia in the 79th position (24.36 per cent of women in parliament).

¹ The Global Gender Gap Report-2020-World Economic Forum – Available from:
http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2020.pdf

² <https://data.ipu.org/women-ranking?month=5&year=2020>

On the one hand, women political participation is witnessing some progress, particularly with the introduction of measures, such as electoral quotas, that have resulted in increased political participation of women in the last four decades, despite national disparities. On the other hand, the Arab region as a whole trails behind global averages on women's economic participation. In 2018, female labour force participation stood at the low level of 18.4 per cent in the Arab States compared to 77.2 per cent of male labour force participation.³

Between 1990 and 2018, the average rate of women's participation in the formal economy in Arab countries rose by less than 2 points, suggesting that the policy actions taken by governments to improve women's economic participation in the economy have been insufficient.⁴ The emerging developments related to the outbreak of COVID-19 and its profound impact on social and economic structures is likely to further enlarge this gap and harden the challenge of closing the gender economic gap.

The unfair distribution of unpaid care work in Arab States has been increasingly identified as a key barrier to women's economic participation. Women carry out 80 to 90 of all unpaid care tasks in the MENA region⁵, and spend, on average, 4.7 times more time on unpaid care tasks than men. The care work generally lacks formalization and there is an insufficient provision of appropriate public and private care infrastructure and services compared to other global regions. The public provision of care services, including long-term care for the elderly and the disabled, remains extremely limited.⁶ Similarly, only a few countries have put in place public services related to Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE).⁷ Public or subsidized childcare facilities, such as kindergartens or creches are virtually inexistent. While the care-related private sector is expanding in many Arab States, it is generally expensive and available only to the wealthiest segments of the population in the absence of appropriate subsidy systems. As a result, the provision of care is largely reliant on unpaid care work provided by family members, who tend to be overwhelmingly female, thus negatively influencing women's participation in the economy.

On another front, the structures of the economies shaping the demand for paid female labor in public and private sectors highly influence women's economic participation. Looking at these structures with the specific objective of analyzing their ability and potentiality to promote or hinder women's economic participation and empowerment is key. Some analysis suggests that economies and female labour participation are not evolving along the same pathways. Scrutiny of the evolution of the structure of the economies in the Arab States and the situation related to female labour participation suggests that national economies are not favorable to the employment of women.

³ www.ilo.org

⁴ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=IA>

⁵ Jonathan Woetzel and others, *The power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015), p.29

⁶ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5569126/>; <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/disability-arab-region-2018>;

⁷ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/new-vision-early-childhood-education-mena>

OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

A study to address the different facets of women's economic empowerment in the Arab region

In light of the above context, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), in partnership with the International Labour Organization (ILO), are developing a study that will focus on women's economic empowerment in the Arab region.

The study's assumptions behind the observed situation in women's participation in paid work and unpaid care work are that various efforts including policies, programmes and social services exerted by government and non-government actors to empower all women are embedding gendered norms and stereotypes which reduces their impact and their ability to achieve their ultimate goal.

Therefore, the present study addresses women's economic empowerment by focusing on both the demands for female paid work and unpaid care work and the systems in place or being developed to shape these demands and support women's answering them. Taking into consideration the gendered norms prevailing in the Arab States, the study looks at the structures of the economies and the policies influencing these structures from a gender lens. It also examines the actions and efforts exerted to promote women's economic empowerment either by increasing the demand for paid work or reducing the unpaid care burden.

PROPOSED STRUCTURE OF THE STUDY

Women's Economic Empowerment in the Arab region: Paving ways and speeding path

It is suggested that the publication is organized around five main chapters.

Executive summary

Introduction

The publication will look at the policies, programmes and services shaping the demand for female paid work and unpaid care work in Arab States from a gender lens.

Chapter One – Persistent gender gap in economic participation

Chapter one sheds light on the persistent gender gap in women's economic participation in the region. It then demonstrates the low and unequal women's economic participation in the labour markets highlighting some characteristics related to their participation including the high unemployment rates; the unequal participation in economic sectors as women are concentrated in sectors that generally contribute less to the economies when compared to other sectors; and their limited mobility across sectors when compared to men particularly from decreasing to growing sectors. This chapter also identifies the potential consequences of COVID-19 outbreak and ensuing results on women's economic participation taken into consideration the difference among various economic sectors. It looks at how these consequences overlap/exacerbate existing challenges

- I. Women's high unemployment rate
- II. Concentration of women in defined sectors
- III. Limited mobility of women among economic sectors
- IV COVID-19 pandemic potential impact on women's economic participation

Chapter Two –Care economy in the Arab region

Chapter two focuses mainly on care economy in the Arab region. It starts by showing the scope of women's involvement in unpaid care work. It highlights the increase in the unpaid care work burden on women subsequent to the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing measures of containment. It examines the scope and limitations of care policies in the region including social protection benefits related to care; leave policies; family-friendly working arrangements; and care-relevant infrastructure. Building on two cases studies, one on children's day care in Lebanon and one on the care for elderly in Morocco, it describes the characteristics including, accessibility, affordability and quality, of the available care services. It seeks to shed light on the principles underpinning and governing the development and provision of care services in the Arab region.

- I. Care economy in the Arab region
- II. COVID-19 pandemic: an increase in unpaid care burden
- II. Gendered norms/principles governing the approach to care economy

Chapter three - Disabling environment impeding women's economic empowerment

Chapter three analyzes the interlinked elements that lead to creating a disabling institutional environment impeding women's economic participation. It examines the gendered norms prevailing in a context of economic stagnation. The chapter also scrutinizes the policies shaping the demand for female paid work from a gender perspective. It argues that for long women's economic participation has been instrumentalized by politics and structured around the work of men without being articulated around a clear vision that could have led to inclusive policies acknowledging and addressing inequalities. It relies on the VNRs and Beijing + 25 national reviews as entry points to select the policies to review.

- I. Disabling environment marked by gendered norms and economic stagnation
- II. Scattered efforts and lack for structured vision
- III. Lack for enforcement and dynamization of women's associations
- IV. Lack for inclusive policies

Chapter Four - Institutionalizing gendered norms and ignoring intersecting inequalities

Chapter four expands the argument developed in the previous chapter and scrutinizes the features of the programmes targeting women's economic empowerment as well as the gender-related characteristics of programmes aiming generally at economic empowerment in the region. It also relies on the VNRs and Beijing + 25 national reviews as entry points to select programmes to review.

- I. Women as homogeneous group
- II. Efforts structures around gendered norms and stereotypes
- III. Focus on women and not gender equality

Chapter five - Looking forward: revisit gender mainstreaming and gender budgeting

This chapter argues the relevance and importance of mainstreaming gender in policies that shape and influence the demand for female paid work. It also argues the relevance and importance of gender responsive budgeting to re-shape the care economy with the objective of boosting women's economic empowerment.

Conclusions and recommendations

OBJECTIVE AND ORGANIZATION OF THE EXPERT GROUP MEETING

An external expert's eye on the concept, structure and proposed content

An Expert Group Meeting (EGM) is organized with the aim of deliberating on and discussing the concept, structure, proposed methodology and proposed content of the study. The discussion is expected to inform the development of the study and support its finalization. It is also expected to contribute to informing future actions to lay the foundation and contribute to enabling the environment to implement the recommendations of the study.

The EGM will be organized in four virtual three-hour sessions in July 2020. Three /four experts will participate in each of the session.