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

**REPORT**

**EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON PROGRESS IN THE ACHIEVEMENT  
OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE  
ESCWA REGION: A GENDER LENS  
BEIRUT, 25-26 JANUARY 2011**

**Summary**

The Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held an Expert Group Meeting on Progress in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens, at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 25 and 26 January 2011.

The meeting included presentations on how to integrate a gender perspective and a rights-based approach in Millennium Development Goal reporting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. A draft report prepared by ESCWA on *Progress in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens* was presented to the group of experts for their substantive comments and input. The necessary amendments will be integrated into the study before sending it back to the member countries.

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

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## **Introduction**

1. In the context of efforts exerted by the United Nations to follow up on the implementation of international conferences, conventions and declarations, including internationally agreed development goals and Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), ESCWA held an Expert Group Meeting on Progress in Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens, at the United Nations House, Beirut, on 25 and 26 January 2011.

2. The purpose of the meeting was for participants:

(a) To review best practices and methodologies in integrating a gender perspective into MDG reporting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes;

(b) To better understand how to integrate a rights-based approach in MDG reporting and implementation in the ESCWA region;

(c) To review and provide comments on the ESCWA draft report entitled *Progress in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens*.

## **I. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS**

3. Round table discussions following certain presentations concluded with concerns, requests and recommendations:

### **A. INTEGRATING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN MDG REPORTING, IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES**

4. Participants commended the valuable information they were provided with. However, most of them raised the issue of contradictory statistics and the fact that several sources within a Government are compiling data. They also discussed the fact that certain reports portray a rosy picture rather than depict the real situation on the ground.

5. Therefore, participants proposed the following actions:

(a) Upgrading MDG indicators beyond 2015 to capture qualitative aspects, for example, as in the area of education, where indicators should focus on the quality of education and areas of specialization;

(b) Disseminating Millennium Development Goal Reports to local communities and to institutions at the national level, including to parliaments, since these reports constitute policymaking tools and should be used as such; member countries should not be content to merely draft reports and submit them periodically to the United Nations in order to fulfil an international obligation, rather they should be used to identify gaps in policy formulation, including gender-sensitive policy formulation, at the national level;

(c) Nationalizing MDGs, taking into consideration the specificity of each country;

(d) Creating “equal opportunity” units in each ministry, following the example of Egypt, in order to facilitate the collection of gender-related data, as well as institutionalize gender-sensitive budgeting processes;

(e) Collecting data at the municipal level in order to identify discrepancies at the subnational level in MDG implementation. The rise in maternal mortality rates in Northern Iraq, due to the practice of female genital mutilation in certain Kurdish communities, was cited as an example.

## **B. MDG REPORTING IN THE ESCWA REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH**

6. Participants thanked the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights for briefing them on the rights-based approach in MDG monitoring and implementation. No discussions took place following the presentation because the session was interrupted due to security reasons and was adjourned.

## **C. REVIEW OF ESCWA DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED PROGRESS IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE ESCWA REGION: A GENDER LENS**

7. Participants commended the report and made proposals on amending it; they also pledged to submit written contributions by 15 February 2011. Suggestions were noted by ESCWA staff members in order to add them to the report. Participants raised certain recommendations and general demands including:

(a) Producing all ESCWA publications in Arabic;

(b) Including marginalized groups such as women refugees, the disabled and migrant women workers in analysis when assessing MDG implementation;

(c) Ensuring that United Nations organizations, academia and civil society organizations give greater importance to qualitative studies;

(d) Ensuring that United Nations reports correctly portray the region as heterogeneous (rather than as one homogeneous entity) which would affect the quality of studies and the relevance of issued policy recommendations;

(e) Using the report to build the capacity of member countries in introducing a gender perspective into MDG reporting and implementation and linking this normative activity to operational missions to member countries.

## **II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION**

8. Ms. Afaf Omer, Chief of the Centre for Women, reviewed the agenda items. Each session was followed by general discussion on issues raised and participants shared their observations, opinions and suggestions. The main themes of the sessions were as follows:

### **A. INTEGRATING A GENDER PERSPECTIVE IN MDG REPORTING, IMPLEMENTATION, MONITORING AND EVALUATION PROCESSES**

9. The adoption of the agenda was followed by a presentation by Ms. Rania Al Jazairi from the ESCWA Centre for Women on best practices and methodologies for integrating a gender perspective into MDG reporting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.

10. Ms. Al Jazairi started her presentation by stating that since their adoption in 2000, gender experts have criticized MDGs for their failure to adequately include a gender component in their goals, targets and indicators. In addition to reducing gender equality to one goal, the target of goal 3, in promoting gender equality and empowering women, is limited to eliminating gender disparity in primary education, preferably by 2005 and at all levels of education by 2015. This target ignores the fact that gender equality can only be attained if women are empowered in all economic, social and political spheres of life. In Arab countries where gender equality has almost been attained in enrolment levels, the advancement of women in education has not been matched with higher and adequate representation in the labour force and Government, which suggests that gender parity in education will not necessarily translate into economic and political empowerment for women.

11. Ms. Al Jazairi declared that only a holistic approach can lead to the eradication of gender imbalances and contribute to the alleviation of poverty and the attainment of the other MDGs. Gender equality and the empowerment of women are at the core of all MDGs, from improving health and fighting disease to reducing poverty and mitigating hunger, expanding education and lowering child mortality, increasing access to safe water and ensuring environmental sustainability. Therefore, in 2005, several United Nations agencies, including United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) introduced a goal by goal approach for including a gender perspective in all eight goals. Furthermore, a United Nations Task Force on MDG3 was recently formed in order to identify additional indicators that could adequately capture the gender gap in many areas and, ultimately, to propose appropriate gender-sensitive policies.

12. In her presentation, Ms. Al Jazairi highlighted gender issues in all eight goals, including going beyond the common definition of poverty and adopting a multidimensional approach to its reduction that takes into account economic growth, opportunity, capacity, security and empowerment. Furthermore, she highlighted the need to analyse intra-household dynamics and power relations as well as the unequal distribution of resources within both the private and public spheres. According to her, member countries should identify the linkages of gender issues across the eight goals in order to formulate appropriate policies that would lead to the attainment of MDGs. The adoption of a simple gender-sensitive policy on raising the minimum age of marriage, for example, can reduce maternal mortality (goal 5), reduce child mortality (goal 4) and contribute directly to the achievement of the two other goals on education (goal 2), by reducing teenage dropout rates and gender equality and the empowerment of women (goal 3).

13. Ms. Al Jazairi concluded that MDGs have not been linked to other international instruments, mechanisms, and processes such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (PfA). In that context, there is a need to undertake the following: (a) use CEDAW and the Beijing PfA as means for better understanding gender concerns present in MDGs; (b) adopt previously developed gender-sensitive indicators in order to support CEDAW and the Beijing PfA; (c) consult with gender experts when drafting national MDG reports and draw upon CEDAW national reports, non-governmental organization shadow reports and the Beijing+5, + 10 and + 15 assessment reports in order to conduct a situational analysis for national MDG reports.

#### B. MDG REPORTING IN THE ESCWA REGION IN THE CONTEXT OF A RIGHTS-BASED APPROACH

14. The session was presented by Mr. Renauld Detalle from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. Mr. Detalle demonstrated how to integrate a rights-based approach in MDG reporting and implementation.

15. Mr. Detalle noted that there is a need to refer to the minimum human rights standards as enshrined in international instruments such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, when reporting on progress made in the achievement of MDGs in the ESCWA region. In this context integrating a right-based approach for all eight goals should prompt decision makers to inquire about marginalized and excluded groups when discussing any of them. In the area of education for example, if a given member country has a 90 per cent enrolment rate in primary education, policymakers should inquire why 10 per cent are out of school. Reasons behind their exclusion could be related to discrimination due to their legal or physical status as refugees, minorities, or disabled persons.

16. After presenting an overview of relevant human rights instruments such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the United Nations Declaration on the Right to Development (1986) in the context of MDG implementation; Mr. Detalle emphasized the necessity for reconciling the needs of the intended beneficiaries of MDGs with human rights standards. When addressing, for example, the goal on environmental sustainability and reducing the number of slum dwellers by 2020, policymakers should ensure

that their policies are in line with international human rights law, particularly the right to adequate housing and the prohibition of unlawful eviction.

17. Mr. Detalle concluded that MDG reports should be translated into Arabic so that they are accessible to civil society institutions. He added that these reports should additionally be discussed in parliament since they represent a unique policymaking tool that could highlight gaps in legislation.

#### C. REVIEW OF ESCWA DRAFT REPORT ENTITLED PROGRESS IN THE ACHIEVEMENT OF THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE ESCWA REGION: A GENDER LENS

18. The session was chaired by Mr. Adib Neame, ESCWA Regional Advisor on the Millennium Development Goals.

19. Mr. Abdul Aziz Farah presented the draft report that he prepared on *Progress in the Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens* to the group of experts. Mr. Farah stated that gender equality is at the heart of all MDGs. He went on to explain that there are, however, several structural determinants underlying sociocultural, political and economic policies and politics that have important bearings on the outcomes of Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (GEEW) in the ESCWA region.

20. Certain of these determinants operate directly on shaping the levels and trends of these outcomes (such as gender-responsive economic and social policies and programmes), while others operate indirectly (through social norms and traditions). Many of such determinants of gender equality as war and conflict, globalization, global economic recession and climate change are externally reinforced. Others, influenced by the current political, legislative, regulatory and normative processes, procedures and policy responses to macro human development issues (population and development policies, economic and administrative reforms, good governance, democratization and human rights enunciation issues) originate and are nurtured internally.

21. Mr. Farah stressed that the Arab region still suffers from a lack of consistent and cohesive positions on gender-related matters. Many countries claimed to adopt proactive gender equality policies or strategies, through improving the education of girls, for example, while ignoring the importance of expanding employment opportunities for women and linking their potential with overall societal development. Other countries occasionally documented rapid progress in building national institutions, but continued to register setbacks in areas of legislation, laws, regulations and social conduct underpinning GEEW. For example, certain national parliaments stopped advocating a minimum age for first marriage, arguing, instead, that there is no need to enact a law on this issue.

22. Mr. Farah stated that MDGs give a special importance to health, since four of the eight MDGs are directly related to it: goal 4 (reduction of child mortality), goal 5 (improvement of maternal health), goal 6 (combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases) and goal 7 (ensuring environmental sustainability, including reducing the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by half). Two other MDGs are closely related to health: goal 1 (eradicate extreme poverty and hunger) and goal 8 (develop a global partnership for development). Both of the remaining goals have a direct impact on health: goal 2 (achieving universal primary education) and goal 3 (improving gender equality and empowering women). In that context, the health of women is more than just a goal, but is recognized as an individual human right.

23. According to Mr. Farah, most health systems in the Arab region still face major challenges of: (a) poor professional capabilities and underfunding; (b) increasing health risks from infectious diseases; (c) models of care which focus on the treatment of disease rather than preventative and promotional care services; (d) lack of intersectoral linkages that could bring about vital indirect health benefits, particularly for the most vulnerable groups in societies; (e) embedded shortfalls pertaining to accessibility, acceptability and affordability of services.

24. Following an overview of the progress achieved in attaining the eight goals from a perspective sensitive to issues of gender, Mr. Farah highlighted some of the general constraints related to MDG reporting. These include: (a) the non-availability of standardized definitions, data gathering methods and techniques of measurements; (b) inherent ambiguity of several indicators and identification of the unit of analysis, whether it be the community, household, or individual; (c) weakness and fragmentation of information systems as a reflection of the continuous underinvestment in this sector by Governments of the region; (d) lack of time series data on poverty, an impediment to the tracking of poverty reduction; and (e) a lack of sex-disaggregated income data and the inability of this indicator to capture the intrinsic human capabilities of a woman or a man, limiting the effectiveness of reporting on income poverty from a gender-responsive viewpoint.

25. The presentation was followed by discussion, in which participants commented on data related to the countries in the report, in order to update and correct any inaccurate or incomplete information. Certain countries requested the modification or addition of their data in tables and paragraphs. Participants additionally agreed to send written comments that ESCWA staff would later incorporate into the final draft of the report.

#### D. CLOSING SESSION

26. At the end of the meeting, Ms. Afaf Omer thanked the experts and the organizers of the meeting for their useful and valuable participation.

### III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

#### A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING

27. The meeting was held on 25 and 26 January 2011 at the United Nations House in Beirut.

#### B. OPENING

28. Ms. Afaf Omer, Chief of the Centre for Women, made the opening speech. She welcomed experts and participants and stressed the importance of integrating a gender perspective into MDG reporting and implementation. She also highlighted the need to adhere to the minimum standards found in international instruments. Ms. Omer thanked the participants in advance for providing comments and input with respect to the ESCWA draft study on *Progress in Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens*, noting that the study would be enriched by their contributions.

29. Ms. Afaf Omer offered her wishes that the meeting be successful and that participating delegates have a pleasant stay in Lebanon.

#### C. ATTENDANCE

30. The meeting brought together experts from national machineries for women in member countries, as well as experts in the field of integrating women's issues in development policies. The annex to this report contains the list of participants.

#### D. AGENDA

31. Experts covered the items of the agenda as presented below:

1. Opening.
2. Adoption of the agenda.

3. Proposed organization of work.
4. Integrating a gender perspective in MDG reporting, implementation, monitoring and evaluation processes.
5. MDG reporting in the ESCWA region in the context of a rights-based approach.
6. Review of ESCWA draft report entitled *Progress in Achievement of the Millennium Development Goals in the ESCWA Region: A Gender Lens*.
7. Closing session.



## LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

### A. ESCWA MEMBER COUNTRIES

#### Bahrain

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

#### Egypt

Ms. Safa El Baz  
Director of the Regional Centre for Training  
(RCT)  
Member of the National Council for Women

Ms. Hanaa Rifaat  
General Manager  
National Council for Women

#### Iraq

Mr. Kasim Jasim  
Consultant  
Women's Affairs Ministry

#### Jordan

Ms. Asma Khader  
Secretary-General  
Jordanian National Commission for Women

#### Saudi Arabia

Mr. Bandar Bin Abdel Aziz El Wayli  
Under-Secretary of the Ministry for Planning  
Ministry of Economy and Planning

Mr. Abdallah Al Marwani  
Head of Research and Studies Department  
Ministry of Economy and Planning

Mr. Abdul Aziz Alateek  
Ministry of Social Affairs

#### Lebanon

Ms. Aida Naaman  
Chair of Research and Studies Committee  
National Commission for Lebanese Women

#### Palestine

Mr. Amin Assi  
Head of Research Department  
Ministry of Women's Affairs

#### The Sudan

Ms. Sit El Nafar Badi  
Professor, Secretary-General  
National Population Council

#### Syrian Arab Republic

Ms. Duha Khaddam  
National Coordination for Gender  
Syrian Commission for Family Affairs

#### United Arab Emirates

Mr. Mohamad Al Mansoori  
Advisor  
General Women's Council

#### Yemen

Ms. Hana Huwaidi  
General Director of Development  
Women's Affairs Committee

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\* Issued as submitted.

## B. EXPERTS

Mr. Abdul Aziz Farah  
Expert

Mr. Renaud Detalle  
Human Rights Officer  
Office of the High Commissioner of Human  
Rights

## C. ORGANIZERS

Economic and Social Commission for Western  
Asia (ESCWA)

Ms. Carla Moussa  
Team Assistant  
Centre for Women

Ms. Afaf Omer  
Chief  
Centre for Women

Ms. Rania Al Jazairi  
Social Affairs Officer  
Centre for Women

