

# **Leaving no women behind: addressing gender intersectionality in the Arab region**

## **Concept note for an Expert Group Meeting on gender intersectionality in the Arab region**

### ***The Arab region lags behind in achieving sustainable and inclusive development***

The Arab region faces a multitude of socio-economic development challenges that are intensified by political instability and recurrent conflicts spread all over the region.

Generally, the unemployment rate in Arab countries is one of the highest in the world.<sup>1</sup> The scrutiny of the labor market dynamics across the region reflects a stagnation of the labor force participation rate at the lowest levels worldwide, with this struggle being intensified for youth. Furthermore, the nature of jobs created is questionable given that a significant proportion of the jobs created annually are mainly in the informal sector<sup>2</sup>. According to findings of recent research, nearly two thirds of the Arab population are either poor or vulnerable to poverty and more than four in ten households and children are being affected by poverty in the region.<sup>3</sup> Poverty remains an important major barrier to education adding to the instability and conflict and resulting in deteriorating and stagnating enrolment rates. The quality of education remains also a key developmental challenge. The social security coverage is tailored majorly for public and private sector workers with regular contracts, leading to a low social protection coverage in the region.

The above depicted overall socio-economic situation hide many sub-regional, national and sub-national disparities. These disparities intertwine with rooted religious and ethnic affiliations and divides that characterize the region as many of the sectarian groups are divided between several states and maintain different relations with the sites of power depending on the country in which they are. This make the inequality related challenges in the region more acute.

Gender cuts across all challenges witnessed in the region, which makes women and girls bear further hardship than men and boys. The complex socio-economic and political factors shaping the Arab region, namely the on-going conflicts and movement of people, the governance and institutional deficits and the unstable economic growth, which compound social norms and power structures, have led to the rise of intersecting gender-based inequalities in a region that is home to complex identities.

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<sup>1</sup> International Labour Organization (ILO) – United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) (2012). *Rethinking Economic Growth: Towards Productive and Inclusive Arab Societies*. Available from: [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms\\_208346.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_208346.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> ESCWA (2013). Short-and medium-term economic challenges of the Arab transition: a review, page 17 E/ESCWA/ECRI/2013/1

<sup>3</sup> ESCWA (2017). Arab Multidimensional Poverty report. E/ESCWA/EDID/2017/2

## ***Situation is worsened when scrutinizing women's rights and gender issues***

Women rights and gender equality have been high on the development agenda of Arab states since 1995. There has been important progress on many fronts, namely an increased compliance to international conventions that address women's rights, reforms to legal frameworks to better account for women's protection and the development of policy frameworks to promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.

Commitment to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and compliance with its obligations have been increasing since several States withdrew some or all of the reservations made upon ratification or accession. The Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified or acceded to by all Arab States. New constitutions have enshrined women's rights and many legal frameworks have been reformed to ensure greater protection from gender-based violence and discrimination and greater participation of women in the public sphere. 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 the 1980s and this pattern is expected to continue in the coming years. Life expectancy at birth for women increased from 62 years in 1980 to 72 years in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The maternal mortality ratio is considerably shrinking. As examples, in Egypt it decreased from 106 in 1995 to 33 in 2015, from 110 to 58 in the same period in Jordan, and from 131 to 62 in Tunisia. Similar trends are observed in countries where this ratio is still relatively high such as Sudan and Yemen.<sup>5</sup> On the education front, the gender gap in education is closing in the Arab region and women outnumber men in pursuing tertiary education in most Arab states.<sup>6</sup>

However, these development gains prove to be insufficient to redress the bleak reality of women and gender inequalities in the region.

The role of women is still generally perceived as majorly and intimately linked to their families and households, and women still face daunting challenges when accessing job markets and participating in political processes. According to a survey conducted in four Arab countries, a majority of men "support mostly inequitable views when it comes to women's roles. (...) Women often internalize these same inequitable views: about half or more of women across the four countries support the same idea".<sup>7</sup> Gains in education attainments for girls has not translated into a significant increase of female participation in the labour force, which remains extremely low in Arab countries. The highest female labour force participation rate is registered in some Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, World Population Prospects: The 2015 Revision (New York, 2015, DVD Edition).

<sup>5</sup> Global Health Observatory (GHO) data available from [www.who.int](http://www.who.int)

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) available from <http://data.uis.unesco.org>

<sup>7</sup> El Feki, S., Heilman, B. and Barker, G., Eds. (2017) Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey (IMAGES) – Middle East and North Africa: Executive Summary. Cairo and Washington, DC: UN Women and Promundo-US.

where it did not exceed 30 percent in 2016. This percentage is lower than 10 percent in countries such as Iraq, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.<sup>8</sup>

The prevalence of violence against women is high in the Arab region where 1 out of 3 ever-married women in the region have experienced physical or sexual violence,<sup>9</sup> and female genital mutilation and child marriage still constitute serious problems in several countries. Conflict further exacerbates this phenomenon since violence against women is also used as a weapon of war.

As to women's political representation, although progress has been witnessed in the region since 2010, it remains low when compared to the global average at various governance levels. Around 15 percent of the parliament seats were held by women in Egypt in 2015 and in Jordan in 2016. This figure increases to almost 20 percent in Morocco (2016) and 25 percent in Iraq (2014) and Mauritania (2013). Only two Arab countries, Tunisia and Sudan, have attained the 30 percent female political representation level advised by the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>10</sup>

### ***Gender intersects with various identities and statuses and increases women's hardship***

Disentangling the above overall situation uncovers further inequalities related to gender and specific marginalized groups and sheds light on the compounded hardship of women pertaining to certain groups when compared to men or to other women.

As noted earlier, women in the Arab region have a lower labor participation rate in the formal job market than men. Additionally, it is less likely that migrant women can access the formal job market compared to native-born women; thus, migrant women suffer double marginalization based on their migrant and gender statuses. Likewise, it is likely that older women are more vulnerable than older men to poverty because of the structure of the job markets and its relation to social security. It is most likely that older women living in urban slums and rural areas are even more vulnerable to poverty and deprivation compared to those living in cities. The proportion of women with disabilities that are literate is much less than the men whether in the rural and in the urban areas. It appears more difficult for women with disabilities to participate in public spheres than men with disabilities. And it is even less probable for rural women with disabilities to access and participate in these spheres. It is most likely that urban women have more chances to participate in and run and win any elections than rural women. Women experiencing extreme living conditions whether related to poverty or conflict are more exposed to violence being perpetrated by their intimate partners that are jobless, socially excluded or affected by war and conflicts. Minority women may suffer even greater compounded hardship. Religious belonging, coupled with social norms, often leads to further gender discrimination and inequalities.

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<sup>8</sup> ILO Key Indicators of the Labour Market (KLIM) database available from: [www.ilo.org/ilostat](http://www.ilo.org/ilostat)

<sup>9</sup> WHO stat

<sup>10</sup> E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/Brochure 1

It clearly appears that the impact of exerted development efforts in the Arab region so far has not been effective in creating substantial changes in the life of all women and girls.

### ***Intersecting inequalities makes it more challenging to realize the SDGs***

Against this backdrop, serious questions raised about the prospects of achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including SDG5 that aims at realizing gender equality and empowering all women and girls and living up to the commitments of leaving no one behind by 2030. It calls for a scrutiny of the vulnerable that are at a higher risk of being left behind and to examine existing gender inequalities with the objective of reducing them and alleviating their impact. Most importantly, it creates an urgency to question the relevance of the approaches to development followed so far and advocate for more appropriate ones to undertake the needed scrutiny of inequalities. In this context, intersectionality approach is of pertinence as it explains the interplay of inequalities faced by specific groups that might be excluded from the analysis, and thus from the development outcomes, when using a single inequality framework.

Research and literature focusing on the Arab region suggest that multiple factors related either to identities such as religion and ethnicity or status such social or economic position, age and disability intersect either to boost or to obstruct the promotion of gender equality. Certain contexts such as conflict and war exacerbate witnessed inequalities deriving from the intersection of specific identities and status. It is thus important to identify and unpack the multiple layers of inequality and oppression faced by women in different contexts in the Arab region given that differences in identities, statuses and living situations lead to different experiences.

Intersectionality approach is therefore of significant relevance in this context as it highlights marginalised groups who may otherwise be left out of development initiatives and as it offers a more complex understanding of social life and social categories. Such an approach can be particularly timely and appropriate in times of instability, conflict, or rapid political change as it allows for an in-depth understanding of intersecting continuously changing groups.

### ***How to identify, address and reduce intersecting inequalities in the Arab region?***

Unpacking the multiple layers of intersecting inequalities remains generally an uncertain process as related research and literature reflect many methodological gaps and queries on “how does one pay attention to the points of intersection? How many intersections are there” (Chang and Culp, 2002)<sup>11</sup>. This methodological lack might be related to the fact that intersectionality paradigm strives to understand social life and to describe “both the simultaneity of multiple oppressions and the complexity of identity” (Nash, 2008)<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> Chang, Robert S., Culp Jerome MC Jr (2002) After Intersectionality, UKMC Law Review, Vol 71, No.2.

<sup>12</sup> Nash, Jennifer C. (2008) Re-thinking intersectionality, feminist Review, 89.

Despite the murkiness of methodologies to tackle intersectionality, three approaches were identified “in terms of their stance toward categories, that is, how they understand and use analytical categories to explore the complexity of intersectionality in social life”:

- Anti-categorical complexity: building on the assumption that categories are too simplistic to seize live experience, this approach rejects analytical categories. Methodologies used to analyze intersectionality and the complex social relations cut across “the disciplinary divide between the social sciences and the humanities” (history, literature, anthropology) and challenge the composition of a group. Gender as a category is not anymore understood as comprising women and men but countless other elements such as women of color, women from certain nationality in certain contexts, women from a certain class;
- Intra-categorical complexity: though it questions the boundaries-defining process, this approach focuses on a specific social group and examine the complexity of the experiences of this group’s constituents;
- Inter-categorical complexity: this approach uses provisionally the categories to scrutinize the inequality relations among the group constituents and “the changing configurations of inequality along multiple and conflicting dimensions” (McCall, 2005)<sup>13</sup>.

Intersectionality remains an understudied field in the Arab region as it has not been used as an approach to identify and scrutinize inequalities. Therefore, there is a need to set the basis for a research agenda for the years to come and identify a suitable approach for the region that development practitioners can follow in their endeavors to promote inclusive development.

Such an approach is expected to answer few of the following questions:

*Who is intersectional in the Arab region?*

*Are all women in a disadvantaged position given their womanhood that intersect with multiple other dimensions? What are the dimensions of intersectionality?*

*Are the dimensions related to identities or embedded in statuses and external factors? What kind of factors?*

*And how to identify the intersections and the various groups?*

*What are the inequalities facing each group?*

Providing insights to these questions would allow a better focus on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged suffering from multiple inequalities so efforts can be geared to advocate for relevant changes in the legal frameworks, policies, strategies and programmes to reduce these inequalities.

### ***Why ESCWA Center for Women (ECW) is now addressing gender intersectionality?***

As a regional commission, ESCWA plays a key role at the regional level to support the efforts of its Member States to foster the implementation and ensure proper follow-up and review on the progress

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<sup>13</sup> McCall, L. (2005) The complexity of intersectionality, *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol 30, No.3.

of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) and its related SDGs. ESCWA Center for Women (ECW) is dedicated to promoting gender equality and women's empowerment and living up to the commitment of "leaving no one behind".

The development process that is expected to lead to "leave no one behind" commences with a founding phase to identify and acquire an in-depth understanding of the those that are at higher risk for being excluded from the development outcomes.

ECW is thus committed to produce the knowledge required to boost the capacity of its Member States that have embarked on the process of adapting and implementing the 2030 Agenda. The Centre will initiate this discussion on gender equality and intersectionality in the Arab region to feed into an analytical framework that would allow for better understanding of the context and challenges. This will eventually lead to better advising countries on how national policies can benefit from multiple-inequality framework analysis to achieve inclusive development.

***What process is ECW proposing to set the stage for a knowledge base on gender intersectionality?***

Against the above context, ECW will organize an Expert Group Meeting to initiate the discussion on gender intersectionality in the Arab region and attempt to address few of the questions raised.

The debates around intersectionality have been largely focused on theoretical points, and these have often happened in academic spaces. Therefore, ESCWA proposes to provide a space for in-depth experts' discussions on how to create a framework through which intersectionality approach can be applied in the field for development purposes.

The discussions and the recommendations of the expert group meeting will feed into a technical paper that ECW intends to develop with the ultimate objective of setting the foundations of a knowledge base for the Arab region to reduce gender inequalities. The inputs and discussions of the first day will focus on the regional situation while the second day will be more oriented towards methodological issues related to the use intersectionality as an approach to address gender inequalities in the region as well as the way forward.

The expert group meeting will bring together international experts on gender intersectionality, regional experts on topics of relevance including labor migration, refugees, older persons, persons with disabilities, poverty, violence against women and representatives of UN agencies that focus on these topics. It will take place on 25 and 26 July 2018 at the United Nations House in Beirut.

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