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**Rethinking barriers to women's economic participation  
in the Arab region****Summary**

Women's low participation in the labour force is a key obstacle to sustainable development and gender equality in the Arab region. Although the issue is multifaceted in nature, it is often approached from an exclusively economic perspective that fails to take the broader gender context in Arab countries into account. This gender context remains marked by stark inequalities between men and women in the legal, social, economic and political spheres. The failure to account for these factors reduces the effectiveness of policy interventions which can be seen in the overall stagnation of the rates of women's economic participation at the regional level.

The present document highlights missing links in the analysis of women's economic participation in the Arab region. It proposes ways to consider the economic impact of overlooked gender issues, such as unpaid care work and violence against women, in order to facilitate the development of holistic policy responses by Arab States. The Executive Committee of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) is invited to discuss the proposal and comment thereon.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS HOLDING WOMEN BACK?

1. Women's economic empowerment is at the heart of the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and underpins the achievement of several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In addition to being crucial to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women (Goal 5), women's economic participation is essential to end poverty in its all forms (Goal 1), ensure inclusive and equitable quality education for all (Goal 4) and promote sustained and inclusive economic growth (Goal 8). It is a key element in ensuring that women benefit equally from development in coherence with the principles of right to development and leaving no one behind, on which the 2030 Agenda is founded.

2. Increasing women's economic participation constitutes a potential boon for the economic and social development of Arab countries. A study published by the McKinsey Global Institute highlighted that countries in the Middle East and North Africa could increase their combined gross domestic product (GDP) by 47 per cent by 2025 through the equal participation of men and women in the economy.<sup>1</sup> Women's economic empowerment has been linked with a variety of positive outcomes, including reduced household poverty, improvements in health and education and greater environmental sustainability.<sup>2</sup> Economic empowerment is also an important driver of change towards gender justice, which is also a stated priority of the member States of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), as affirmed in the [Muscat Declaration: Towards the Achievement of Gender Justice in the Arab Region](#).

3. In practice, however, and even considering important national disparities, the Arab region as a whole continues to trail behind global averages on women's economic participation. According to modelled International Labour Organization (ILO) data published by the World Bank, the regional average rate of participation of women in the formal labour force reached 22.3 per cent in 2018, compared with the world average of 53.7 per cent and with the regional rate of 77.5 per cent for men.<sup>3</sup> Gender gaps also persist in job quality and average wages. The Arab region also displays the highest gender gap in vulnerable employment such as in the informal labour market, with women making up the majority of these workers. Women exit the labour market at faster rates than men and undertake more unpaid employment in family businesses. Although women with less education are less likely to enter the labour force and more at risk of entering the informal sector than women with higher levels of education, women with high educational attainment also face significant barriers, such as professional marginalization and high unemployment rates.<sup>4</sup>

4. Between 1990 and 2018, the average rate of women's participation in the formal economy in Arab countries rose by less than 1.9 percentage points, suggesting that the policy actions taken by Arab States to improve women's participation in the economy have been insufficient.<sup>5</sup> A key reason for this limitation has been the piecemeal approach pursued by most Governments. Although policy efforts to lift occupational restrictions, close educational gaps, develop the care economy, challenge stereotypes or facilitate women's

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<sup>1</sup> 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. 14.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Powerful Synergies: Gender Equality, Economic Development and Environmental Sustainability* (New York, 2012); and UNDP, *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone* (New York, 2016).

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15-64)", ILSOSTAT database. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.ACTI.FE.ZS?locations=1A> (accessed on 4 April 2019).

<sup>4</sup> Niels Spierings, Jeroen Smits and Mieke Verloo, "Micro- and macrolevel determinants of women's employment in six Arab countries", *Journal of Marriage and Family*, vol. 72, No. 5 (October 2010), pp. 1391-1407.

<sup>5</sup> World Bank, "Labor force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+)", ILSOSTAT database. Available at <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS?locations=1A> (accessed on 4 April 2019).

entry into specific industries should not be discarded, such efforts rarely fit into a comprehensive and sustained approach to women's economic empowerment.<sup>6</sup>

5. There is increasing recognition among researchers and policymakers that the “puzzle” of women's low economic participation cannot be solved without taking into account the broader state of gender equality in the Arab region.<sup>7</sup> Drawing a complete analytical picture on which policy solutions should be based requires a precise identification of the missing links between women's low rates of economic participation and other forms of gender-based inequalities in Arab societies. Women in the region face diverse, multidimensional and intersecting forms of discrimination in the legal, social, economic and political spheres, which result in gender inequalities across many indicators.<sup>8</sup> These gender inequalities are compounded and mutually reinforcing. Taken as a whole, they lower the status of women in Arab societies and negatively impact their ability to participate in the formal economy.

6. There are several illustrative examples of the impact of women's lower status on their economic participation. Women's lower status may ascribe a lower value to women's economic contribution, in line with globally observed phenomena such as the gender pay gap for work of equal value and the decrease in average pay when women enter formerly masculine occupations in greater number.<sup>9</sup> It may also diminish women's agency and capability, thereby impacting their ability to practice an economic activity. Typically, women's lower status restricts their ability to take independent decisions regarding their education and their employment, as well as the use of their own earnings. This can result in all too familiar scenarios, such as families encouraging their son, rather than daughter, to pursue higher and further education and enter higher-paying occupations. Similarly, women are comparatively much more likely to be discouraged from working by their husbands, notably to take care of children and the household. This holds true across all socioeconomic classes: in cases where the family is not in need of a second income, women generally stay at home, whether it is their choice or not.

7. The examples above illustrate that the women's low labour force participation in the Arab region cannot be understood in isolation from the broader picture of gender dynamics. The present document suggests how these missing links could be bridged in theory and practice in the context of Arab States, with the overall objective of developing a fuller understanding of the barriers to women's economic participation, on the one hand, and the design of more effective policy solutions to address these barriers, on the other. It does so by using the example of two hitherto underexamined issues, namely the uneven distribution of unpaid care work and endemic violence against women. The two issues have been chosen for the purpose of this document for two main reasons: (a) their impact on women's economic participation is inversely proportional to the attention

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<sup>6</sup> For a list of initiatives and best practices in the region, see Ergon Associates, *The Business Case for Women's Economic Empowerment in the Arab States Region* (United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women), October 2016).

<sup>7</sup> For example, legal discrimination has been convincingly linked to women's economic empowerment in recent research by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). See OECD, *Women's Economic Empowerment in Selected MENA Countries: The Impact of Legal Frameworks in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia – Key Findings* (2017). Some Arab States have undertaken constitutional and legal reform, including provisions for gender equality in the new constitutions of Morocco (2011), Egypt (2014) and Tunisia (2014), and the removal of discriminatory laws in several Arab States. Assessing the impact of such reforms on women's economic participation should be high on the agenda of future research. All Arab States, however, maintain at least some form of legal and/or discrimination. See UNDP and others, *Gender Justice & the Law: Assessment of Laws Affecting Gender Equality in the Arab States Region* (New York, 2018).

<sup>8</sup> For an overview of forms of discriminations faced by women, see [E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/4](#).

<sup>9</sup> For a comprehensive discussion, see Francine D. Blau and Lawrence M. Kahn. "The gender wage gap: extent, trends, and explanations", *Journal of Economic Literature*, vol. 55, No. 3 (2017), pp. 789-865; and Asaf Levanon, Paula England and Paul Allison, "Occupational feminization and pay: assessing causal dynamics using 1950-2000 U.S. census data", *Social Forces*, vol. 88, No. 2 (December 2009), pp. 865-891. Women's economic marginalization is self-perpetuating: with fewer women able to exercise and demonstrate their talents in any field of economic activity, societal prejudices regarding the value of women's contribution are more difficult to challenge.

that they have received in policy discourse and practice in the Arab region; and (b) they have been the focus of recent initiatives by ESCWA.

## II. UNEVEN DISTRIBUTION OF UNPAID CARE WORK

8. The Arab region maintains the world's largest gender gap in the distribution of unpaid care work.<sup>10</sup> In five out of seven Arab countries for which data are available, women spend five times the amount of time spent by men doing unpaid care work. In Morocco, the ratio approaches seven to one. The gender gap is less pronounced in Oman and Qatar (due to widespread reliance on paid household workers), although women still spend twice as much time as men on unpaid care work.<sup>11</sup> All in all, it is estimated that women undertake as much as 80 to 90 per cent of all unpaid care work in the Arab countries.<sup>12</sup>

9. The uneven distribution of unpaid care work reflects dominant gender norms and expectations in patriarchal societies, which define the respective role of women as primary caregivers and of men as main breadwinners. Nevertheless, this clear delineation does not necessarily reflect the individual preferences of Arab women and, to a lesser degree, men. A 2017 ILO-Gallup survey found that a majority of women in the Arab countries would prefer to be either working at paid jobs or in situations in which they could both work and take care of their families.<sup>13</sup>

10. The gender gap in unpaid care work constitutes a direct barrier to women's ability to participate in the labour force and prevents them from pursuing job opportunities. Women who work outside the home face a so-called "double burden" of responsibilities at the professional and household level, which is likely to be detrimental to their career progression.<sup>14</sup> In many cases, the uneven distribution of unpaid care work makes it simply impossible for women to couple their care duties with the pursuit of a professional career. Compared with other regions, the impact of the uneven distribution of unpaid care work is further accentuated in the Arab region by the lack of appropriate public services and infrastructure, and the underdevelopment of the care economy.

11. There has been an increasing recognition at the global level that the unfair distribution of unpaid care work is not only social a social issue, but an economic issue as well. The gender gap in the distribution of unpaid care work has been identified as a "missing link" in the analysis of labour force participation.<sup>15</sup> Contemporary research has sought to examine the effects of unpaid care work at a structural level; a substantial body of research highlights that the distribution of unpaid care work strongly determines the respective ability of men and women to participate in the formal economy.

12. The gender gap in unpaid care work results in a stratification of labour markets based on gender, rather than individual characteristics. Women are presumed to be less able to participate in paid work owing to assumptions over their capacities, both in terms of skills and in term of time availability. Firms may for example be less likely to offer "good" jobs or career advancement to women based on higher expectations of them having to perform unpaid care work compared with male candidates. Women are also more likely

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<sup>10</sup> Unpaid care work refers to services provided without remuneration within a household for its members, including care of persons and domestic chores, and to voluntary community work.

<sup>11</sup> Jacques Charmes, "[Time use across the world: findings of a world compilation of time use surveys](#)", Background Paper for the 2015 UNDP Human Development Report (New York, UNDP, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Woetzel, *The power of Parity*, p. 29.

<sup>13</sup> The opinion was shared by half of men surveyed. See ILO and Gallup, *Towards a Better Future for Women and Work: Voices of women and men* (Geneva and Washington, D.C., 2017).

<sup>14</sup> For example, in the ILO-Gallup survey mentioned above, the biggest challenges identified by both women and men for women who work at paid jobs was work-family balance.

<sup>15</sup> For a discussion of the issue, see Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka, "[Unpaid care work: the missing link in the analysis of gender gaps in labour outcomes](#)", OECD Issues Paper (OECD Development Centre, December 2014).

to be seen as “secondary” wage earners, more appropriately suited to labour-intensive, low-skill or high-turnover jobs.<sup>16</sup>

13. The relationship is dynamic: the stratified labour market itself perpetuates gender inequalities in the economic sphere, as it leads to the devaluation of women’s economic contribution. Typically, the structural importance of unpaid care work in the good functioning of the economy is overlooked. An economy cannot run if workers are not educated, fed and generally cared for, all of which require tasks that are overwhelmingly performed by women. Given the structuring role of economic activity, the gender-based stratification of labour markets is one of the main drivers of women’s lower status within society as a whole. This emphasizes the importance of highlighting linkages between various forms of inequality in the economic, social and other spheres.

14. Gender-based discrimination in labour markets is rarely explicit, however. The gender-based stratification of labour markets is implicitly bolstered by political and social institutions as well as norms and stereotypes.<sup>17</sup> For example, restrictive laws and legislations may reflect patriarchal views on the appropriate types of employment for women.<sup>18</sup> Lack of provision of childcare infrastructure stems from the notion that it is unnecessary as women will provide such care within their families. Other commonly cited examples include restrictions on women’s personal and financial autonomy and curtailed access to education, training and health services.

### III. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

15. Violence against women is widespread globally and in the Arab region. According to the World Health Organization, more than one in three women in the region have experienced at least one form of physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner.<sup>19</sup> Although nationally representative data on violence against women in the Arab region are rare, available studies hint at the breadth and severity of the problem. In a survey carried out in Tunisia, almost half of women aged 18-64 reported that they had experienced some form of violence, with physical and psychological violence being the most common forms.<sup>20</sup> In Jordan, more than one quarter of ever-married women aged 15-49 have experienced emotional, physical, and/or sexual violence from their spouse at least once in their life.<sup>21</sup> Studies in Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and the State of Palestine have produced similar findings.<sup>22</sup> Forms of violence including child and early marriage and female genital

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<sup>16</sup> United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), “[The gender dynamics of inclusion and exclusion: a macro perspective on employment](#)”, in *Trade and Development Report 2017: Beyond Austerity: Towards a Global New Deal* (New York and Geneva, 2017). The approach helps to explain the “Arab paradox” of women’s economic participation: the closing of gender gaps in formal skills and education has not resulted in a significant growth in women’s formal economic participation because gender, rather than education or skills, limits women’s ability to access all and every position.

<sup>17</sup> For a further discussion, see William A. Darity, Jr., “Stratification economics: the role of intergroup inequality”, *Journal of Economics and Finance*, vol. 29, No. 2 (Summer 2005), pp. 144-153.

<sup>18</sup> For an overview of restrictions in labour laws, see UNDP and others, [Gender Justice & the Law](#).

<sup>19</sup> Latest available data, from the World Health Organization (WHO), London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and South African Medical Research Council, [Global and Regional Estimates of Violence against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and Non-partner Sexual Violence](#) (Geneva, WHO, 2013).

<sup>20</sup> Tunisie, Office National de la Famille et de la Population and Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional para el Desarrollo, [Enquête nationale sur la violence à l’égard des femmes en Tunisie : rapport de l’enquête](#) (Tunis, 2010).

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, Department of Statistics and ICF International, [Jordan Population and Family Health Survey 2017-2018](#) (March 2019).

<sup>22</sup> Central Agency for Public Mobilization and Statistics (CAPMAS), National Council for Women (NCW) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), [The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey](#) (2015); Usta, J. and others, “Domestic violence: the Lebanese experience”, *Journal of Public Health*, vol. 121, No. 3 (April 2007); Maroc, Ministère de la solidarité, de la femme, de la famille et du développement social, [Premier rapport annuel sur la violence à l’égard des femmes 2015](#) (Rabat, 2015); State of Palestine, Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, “[Press Release: Main findings of violence survey in the Palestinian society, 2011](#)”, December 2011.

mutilation are widespread in some Arab countries. Armed conflict has also exacerbated the phenomenon in several countries, with women in refugee and displaced populations being particularly at risk.<sup>23</sup>

16. Violence against women and girls is recognized as a fundamental human rights violation by numerous international frameworks. Violence prevents women from living a life free from harm; it compromises their dignity, security and autonomy; and it can bear grave health consequences in terms of physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health. Violence against women takes multiple forms; it is most usefully conceptualized as a continuum of violence experienced by women in the private and public sphere throughout their entire life. The phenomenon negatively impacts women's ability to get an education, work and participate in political life, thereby maintaining them in a subordinate status compared to men.

17. Violence has a well-documented impact on women's economic empowerment. Studies in advanced and developing countries have highlighted that exposure to any type of gender-based violence (be it physical, sexual, psychological or economic) at home, in public spaces, in school or in the workplace has a marked negative effect on women's ability to seek education and perform well at their job.<sup>24</sup> Violence against women also markedly affects women's attendance, productivity and performance in the workplace, thereby reducing their income earning capabilities, limiting their opportunities for professional advancement and potentially jeopardizing their ability to retain their jobs.<sup>25</sup>

18. A 2015 national survey costing gender-based violence in Egypt (the first of its kind in the Arab region) showed the magnitude of the phenomenon and its impact on women's ability to participate in the Egyptian economy. The survey estimated that, in a single year, 5.6 million women experienced violence from their intimate partner; 1.7 million were subjected to harassment in public transportation; and 2.5 million experienced a form of gender-based violence in the streets. In addition to the physical and psychological impact of violence against women, the survey also highlighted its negative effect on women's ability to participate in the formal economy. Survivors of violence at home, in the public sphere or the workplace were less able to work and more likely to lose motivation and display greater absenteeism, leading to lost productivity at work, as well as resignations and job losses.<sup>26</sup>

19. Violent relationships often include financial abuse (also referred to as economic abuse), which further restricts and denies women's freedom to pursue economic opportunities.<sup>27</sup> Abusers might seek to control the type and modalities of work or education pursued by their partner, stalk or harass them in the workplace, or prevent them from working altogether. Abusers may also seek to limit women's movements, further restricting their potential for economic empowerment. Perpetrators often limit women's control over assets and their own income. Financial abuse might lock women in abusive relationships, by limiting their access to independent resources that would enable them to extract themselves and to seek protection or redress.<sup>28</sup> For example, the Egyptian survey showed that men exercised their power within the home to forbid women from work or to choose the type of work they perform, which initiates a new cycle of violence since financially dependent women are more at risk of domestic violence.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> [E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/2](#).

<sup>24</sup> Economic estimates of the impact of violence against women have been conducted in almost 60 countries, albeit largely in advanced economies. For a complete list, see Sinead Ashe and others, "[Costs of violence against women: an examination of the evidence](#)", WhatWorks to Prevent Violence Working Paper, No. 2 (2016).

<sup>25</sup> [E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/2](#).

<sup>26</sup> NCW, CAPMAS and UNFPA, *The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey*.

<sup>27</sup> Anna-Karin Jatfors, "[Violence against women and women's economic empowerment](#)", presentation made on 23 February 2017.

<sup>28</sup> National Network to End Domestic Violence, "[Financial abuse fact sheet](#)" (n.d.).

<sup>29</sup> NCW, CAPMAS and UNFPA, *The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey*.

20. Violence against women contributes to the perpetuation of deeply unequal gender relations. Unequal gender relations are themselves a key driver of violence against women, demonstrating the circular nature of the phenomenon. Nevertheless, the negative impact of violence against women on women's status and ability to enjoy their rights remains largely ignored in research, policy practices and political discourse in the Arab region, perhaps owing to a societal taboo. Failure to acknowledge the phenomenon, its scale and implications, contributes to the marginalization of women in Arab societies.

#### **IV. RETHINKING THE DETERMINANTS OF WOMEN'S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN ARAB STATES**

21. As the examples above have shown, the analysis of the drivers of women's low rates of economic participation in Arab States remains incomplete. Salient issues affecting women's condition in the region are insufficiently integrated in the analysis of the drivers of and barriers to women's economic participation. This results in inadequate policy responses, reflecting the marginalization of women's status and voices in Arab States. The section below suggests practical steps to expand the analysis of the determinants of women's economic participation in Arab States to better consider the two salient issues highlighted above (namely the uneven distribution of unpaid care work and violence against women), based on ongoing ESCWA projects and research.

##### **A. MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: MEASURING UNPAID CARE WORK**

22. Research at the global level has established a strong correlation between gender inequality in unpaid care work on the one hand, and gender gaps in labour force participation rates, quality of employment, and wages on the other hand.<sup>30</sup>

23. In the Arab region, there have been few attempts to assess the impact of unpaid care work on women's economic participation, despite the regular identification of the issue in the literature and by women themselves. In turn, this missing link has hindered the development of appropriate policy responses by Arab Governments. Global experience shows that in order to be effective, State policies should not only aim to alleviate the immediate burden of unpaid care work placed on women (for example, by expanding care infrastructure and flexible working modalities), but also recognize the value of such work and bridge the gender gap in its distribution.<sup>31</sup>

24. Reframing unpaid care work as a determinant of women's economic participation entails three steps. First, women's contribution to the economy in terms of unpaid care work should be made visible. Second, the impact of the uneven distribution of such work on women's ability to participate in the economy should be measured. Third, the structuring role of the gender gap in unpaid care work in Arab labour markets should be analysed. A common requirement for implementing these steps is the availability of good data on the magnitude, distribution and typology of unpaid care work. The availability of such data is limited in the Arab region and their collection should therefore constitute a priority.

25. Data on unpaid care work are typically collected through time-use surveys, which record the daily activities of individuals (generally through the use of a diary-based approach). The findings of such surveys can highlight the extent of women's crucial contribution to economic activity, through their undertaking of most unpaid care work tasks, and reveal the gender gap in the distribution of such tasks.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> For a review of global evidence, see Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka, "[Unpaid care work](#)".

<sup>31</sup> Gaëlle Ferrant, Luca Maria Pesando and Keiko Nowacka, "[Unpaid care work](#)".

<sup>32</sup> The reliance on time-use surveys as the primary measurement of unpaid care work is not without its critics. Feminist economists, in particular, have challenged the overreliance on a quantitative approach. The suitability of the method for analysis in the Global South has also been questioned. Nevertheless, such shortcomings can be tackled by the incorporation of a subjective element to time-use surveys and the adoption of a capability approach. See Julian Walker, Nana Berekashvili and Nino Lomidze, "[Valuing time: time use survey, the capability approach, and gender analysis](#)", *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, vol. 15, No. 1 (2014); and Valeria Esquivel and others, "[Explorations: time-use surveys in the South](#)", *Feminist Economics*, vol. 14, No. 3 (2008).



26. Well-conducted surveys provide reliable information on the relative weight of each type of task (such as cooking, cleaning, child care, elderly care, movement between various locations). When completed by a subjective component (such as questions regarding motivations), time-use surveys can offer a clearer picture of intrahousehold bargaining or the degree of women's freedom in choosing their own activities, including whether they are able to participate in the formal economy. Time-use surveys are also a means to assess the impact of various types of social and other types of institutions, including norms and stereotypes, that govern the distribution of unpaid care work, and therefore the segregation of labour markets.

27. Most importantly, time-use surveys recognize women's economic contribution and its broader social value. The implementation of time-use surveys can also significantly augment the quality of policy interventions, and therefore support women's economic participation. Time-use surveys may, for example, enable the implementation of targeted policy solutions ranging from a redistribution of unpaid care work to the provision of childcare facilities and public transport to improved access to clean water and electrification.<sup>33</sup>

28. Few quality time-use surveys have been conducted in the Arab region. In the period 2000-2018, only 7 Arab States implemented such surveys, out of a total of 90 countries that conducted the exercise globally.<sup>34</sup> The inclusion of unpaid care work in the Sustainable Development Goals (in SDG 5.4) provides an opportunity for Arab States to bridge the data gap regarding unpaid care work, with support from international development partners. Joint efforts to improve and harmonize methodologies for the implementation of time-use surveys have led to the development of the International Classification of Activities for Time Use Statistics 2016 (ICATUS 2016). Guidelines for the operationalization of ICATUS 2016 in Arab States are also being developed in this framework.<sup>35</sup>

#### B. ESTIMATING THE COST OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

29. The impact of gender-based violence on Arab women's ability to freely seek, choose and pursue economic opportunities remains largely undocumented. The link between financial abuse and women's economic empowerment has also received limited attention. In addition, the broader impact of violence on women's status and its relationship with broader gender inequalities in the economic, social, legal and political spheres need to be better understood in the context of Arab States.

30. The most commonly used approach to measure the economic impact of violence against women are so-called costing studies. Such studies aim to estimate the direct and/or indirect costs of violence against women at various levels, including for survivors themselves, households, service providers, the State budget and businesses.<sup>36</sup> For example, costing studies can estimate the indirect cost of violence that results from absenteeism, productivity and job turnover, therefore providing indications on the impact of violence on women's ability to participate in the labour market. Prevalence questionnaires that may be implemented prior to or as part of costing exercises also give a clearer indication on the forms of violence faced by women, including the scale and effects of financial abuse.

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<sup>33</sup> In addition, a varied and representative sample of respondents also ensures that policy actions truly respond to the specific needs of various groups of women, distinguishing for example the requirements of those living in urban and rural settings. The repetition of time-use surveys also makes it possible to monitor the impact of strategies and policies that aim to alleviate barriers to women's economic empowerment by reducing the burden of unpaid care work.

<sup>34</sup> In some Arab States, the usefulness of the surveys is curtailed by methodological issues, including uneven adherence to international standards regarding the breakdown and classification of various activities as well as regarding the recording of motivations. Such methodological issues can be symptomatic of a poor understanding of care work, care givers and the relationships that govern such work. See Neetha N., "Estimating unpaid care work: methodological issues in time use surveys", *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 45, No. 44-45 (2010).

<sup>35</sup> For a complete list of resources regarding the implementation of time-use surveys in Arab States, see documents available at <https://www.unescwa.org/events/sustainable-development-goals-violence-against-women>.

<sup>36</sup> An in-depth exploration of various methodologies and their respective advantages and drawbacks is available in [E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/Technical Paper.4](https://www.unescwa.org/2017/Technical-Paper-4).

31. Given the high prevalence of violence against women in the Arab region, the lack of examination of its impact on women's economic empowerment constitutes a key knowledge gap. Costing studies can be conducted on a local, regional or national scale, although lessons learned at the global level suggest that it is most comprehensive when the exercise is conducted on a national scale, thereby warranting leadership from the State. The findings of a national costing can catalyse State action by reframing violence against women not only as a critical human rights variation, but also as an urgent public health and economic issue. The evidence base built through economic costing also contributes to enhancing the efficiency of policy responses to tackling violence against women by highlighting priority areas for policy action and the need for a holistic approach.<sup>37</sup>

32. Egypt is the only Arab State to have concluded a study to estimate direct and indirect costs of violence against women for society as a whole, in collaboration with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The survey estimated that survivors of violence against women missed around half a million working days throughout 2015, with a total cost of 27 million Egyptian pounds (the total impact on productivity was not measured).<sup>38</sup> Comparable studies are currently being conducted in other Arab States, based on an operational model developed by ESCWA in partnership with UN Women to take into account specificities of the Arab region.<sup>39</sup>

## V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

33. Tackling women's low economic participation in the Arab region requires a comprehensive assessment of its causes. Such analysis cannot be conducted in isolation from the broader gender context in Arab countries, which is defined by multidimensional and intersecting forms of inequality in the economic, legal, social and political spheres. The present document highlighted two missing links in the analysis of women's economic participation, namely the uneven distribution of unpaid care work and endemic violence against women. Showcasing recent ESCWA activities and projects, the present document suggests incorporating the two issues in the analysis of women's economic participation through, respectively, the implementation of time-use surveys and economic costings of violence against women. The list of missing links is by no means exhaustive, and it is evident that the impact of other forms of discrimination against women needs to be assessed in order to develop a complete understanding of the drivers of and barriers to women's economic participation in Arab countries.

34. Bridging missing links supports a holistic approach to the challenges of gender equality and women's empowerment, in coherence with the interlinked nature of the SDGs and the right to development and the principles of "leaving no one behind" that underpin the 2030 Agenda. It also supports Arab States in meeting their international commitments, including under the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the SDGs. Most importantly, the incorporation of missing links reflects a broader recognition of the multifaceted barriers women face in the Arab countries, on the one hand, and of the value of their contribution to Arab societies and economies, on the other hand.

35. Based on the findings of the present document, the following policy interventions are proposed to Arab States and development partners:

(a) With regards to women's economic participation:

- Support the development of further research towards a comprehensive assessment of the drivers of and barriers to women's economic participation, including the impact of gender inequalities in the legal, economic, social and political spheres;

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<sup>37</sup> ESCWA and UN Women, "[Estimating the cost of violence against women in the Arab region](#)".

<sup>38</sup> NCW, CAPMAS and UNFPA, *The Egypt Economic Cost of Gender-Based Violence Survey*.

<sup>39</sup> [E/ESCWA/ECW/2017/Technical Paper.4](#).

(b) With regards to unpaid care work:

- Conduct nationally representative and regular time-use surveys in line with the ICATUS 2016 methodology and the guidelines for its implementation in Arab countries;
- Implement appropriate measures to tackle the uneven distribution of unpaid care work, including through investment in care infrastructure, encouraging the development of work-life balance measures in the public and private sector, introducing and/or expanding maternal and paternal leave; challenging gender stereotypes in media and public discourse, and any other measure that is relevant in the national context;

(c) With regards to violence against women:

- Conduct a regular national estimate of the prevalence of violence against women and the associated costs;
- Implement appropriate measures toward the elimination of violence against women in all of its forms, including through reforming constitutional, legal and policy frameworks to enhance protection, prevention and prosecution, strengthening of accountability and coordination mechanisms, investment in relevant support services, organization of national advocacy campaigns, and any other measure that is relevant in the national context.

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