



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

REPORT

EXPERT GROUP MEETING ON A STUDY ENTITLED POLICIES TO EMPOWER WOMEN IN THE ARAB REGION: COMBATING DOMESTIC VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS BEIRUT, 30-31 MAY 2013

Summary

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) held an expert group meeting to discuss a study entitled “Policies to empower women in the Arab region: combating domestic violence against women and girls”, at the United Nations House in Beirut on 30 and 31 May 2013. The study is under implementation in partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-WOMEN) and with support from the Embassy of Norway in Lebanon.

The objective of the meeting was to review the draft study prepared by an independent consultant, with contributions from four field researchers. The meeting brought together regional experts and specialists from civil society and international organizations who are active in the field of combating violence against women. It consisted of six sessions: four dedicated to discussing the chapters of the study and the last two sessions examined proposed policy recommendations and provided feedback on the overall structure and directions of the study.

The present report contains a brief overview of the discussions and the concluding recommendations.

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Introduction

1. ESCWA held an expert group meeting, in collaboration with UN-Women, at the United Nations House in Beirut, on 30 and 31 May 2013. The meeting was organized in the context of a tripartite initiative funded by ESCWA, UN-WOMEN, and the Norwegian Embassy in Lebanon and focused on the preparation of a study entitled "Policies to empower women in the Arab region: combating domestic violence against women and girls".
2. The purpose of the meeting was:
 - (a) To review the draft study;
 - (b) To provide comments and suggestions towards its finalization;
 - (c) To exchange good practices in combating violence against women and girls.

I. CONCLUSIONS AND PROPOSALS

3. The lead author gave presentations on the chapters of the study and their main findings. The ensuing discussions resulted in a set of recommendations, listed below, categorized as structural or substantive.

A. STRUCTURAL RECOMMENDATIONS

4. Participants commended the study and its methodology. However, they raised concerns over its length.
5. Participants suggested that the contents of chapter 4, entitled "Views and perspectives from the field", be integrated in other chapters, especially since the aim of the field work was to validate information on national legislation and policies.
6. Participants suggested that proposed policy recommendations should be:
 - (a) Prioritized and adapted according to their regional context;
 - (b) Categorized into thematic areas, namely, legislative reforms, policy reforms and institutional, socio-cultural and knowledge generation (production, availability and accessibility);
 - (c) Grouped along the five pillars of the Due Diligence Obligation to Prevent Violence Against Women: prevent, protect, prosecute, punish and provide.

B. SUBSTANTIVE RECOMMENDATIONS

7. Participants commended the wealth of useful information presented in the study. They expressed concerns, however, that some issues with immediate relevance to the current situation in the Arab region were not fully addressed, such as violence against women and girls in times of armed conflict.
8. Participants also welcomed the introduction in the study of a comprehensive and concise typology on domestic violence. They suggested, however, revising the typology to also include women and girls with disabilities.
9. Underscoring the fact that the Arab region was composed of both Muslims and non-Muslims, participants highlighted the lack of any documentation on or analysis of the issues in question with regard to non-Muslim communities.

10. Suggestions were made on the need to elaborate on the passive (and often negative) role of the media in addressing violence against women, in perpetuating negative images of women and in failing to properly engage society in debates on the root causes of such violence. A suggestion was also made to include social media in the analysis and to elaborate on its role and impact in the process of combating violence against women.
11. Participants suggested adding more reflections and analysis regarding how social norms and cultural practices in the region perpetuated violence against women and girls. Suggestions were also made to elaborate specifically on the issue of “burden of proof” and how women are often unjustly implicated.
12. It was suggested that cases where there had been definite reversals in women’s rights in countries that had witnessed uprising should be discussed and supported with evidence.
13. Suggestions were also made regarding the need to elaborate further on the impact of Arab uprisings on women and girls in terms of domestic violence, especially within the context of increasing insecurity and the spread of sexual violence.
14. Participants pointed to the need to pay more attention in the study to women’s education in the region and requested more detailed analyses of why the significant increase in female education had not necessarily led to women’s empowerment. Greater analysis of why women in the region were outnumbering men in higher education was also needed.
15. Suggestions were made for the study to include reference to the Due Diligence Obligation to Prevent Violence Against Women and to elaborate on its five pillars as a major framework to monitor the efforts of States in ending violence against women and girls.
16. There was agreement that the study needed to reflect on the elements of an enabling environment that would curtail and end violence against women and girls within the current context of political transition in the region.
17. Participants expressed their concern that the study focused on “good practices” - a judgmental term given the different views on what was considered as good practices in the field.
18. Participants agreed on the need to reformulate the proposed recommendations as follows:
 - (a) Recommendations for the media sector should reflect the following three elements:
 - (i) Mobilizing public opinion;
 - (ii) Ensuring the inclusion of all stakeholders;
 - (iii) Encouraging constructive public discourse;
 - (b) The public service delivery chain should mainly shed light on the following issues: health, legal, psycho-social, shelters and rehabilitation;
 - (c) A gender accountability system should be integrated in current budget allocations and national programmes;
 - (d) An integrated approach should be adopted for all relevant institutions dealing with the issue of domestic violence;
 - (e) Authorities should monitor policies and programmes led by the private sector to ensure their compliance with the principles of gender equality.

C. PROPOSALS

19. Participants commended the study as timely and valuable. They provided various suggestions to enhance its arguments and findings. The ESCWA Centre for Women, UN-WOMEN and the lead author thanked the participants for their invaluable contributions and agreed to integrate their suggestions in the final draft of the study.

II. TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

A. SESSION I: BACKGROUND, SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY (MODERATOR: MS. MAGDA EL-SANOUSI)

20. Ms. Camillia El-Solh, lead author of the study, began her first presentation with an overview of the background and objectives of the study. She indicated that the ultimate aim was to generate evidence-based policy recommendations addressed to Arab member States to scale up their commitment to combat violence against girls and women, in particular in the domestic sphere. She tackled the research questions behind the study and its methodology, consisting of desk research along with field missions carried out in eight Arab countries, namely Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Tunisia, and Yemen.

21. Ms. El-Solh also presented the conceptual framework adopted in the study and the different types of domestic violence. She concluded with an overview of the challenge of defining violence against women and girls within the socio-cultural context of the Arab region, especially the difficulty associated with translating into Arabic commonly used English terms such as gender, violence, abuse and honour.

22. In their interventions, participants praised the study for its timely focus on an extremely important subject in the Arab region at present. They pointed out that, while violence against women and girls was a global issue, some social norms and cultural practices in the region perpetuated violence. They suggested that the study should discuss the culture of impunity further and reflect how much it was rooted in Arab societies.

23. There was a general agreement that the issue of violence against women and girls was immense in scope and therefore carried with it tremendous challenges as a topic of research. Suggestions were made that the first chapter should clearly indicate in its introduction the magnitude of the issue and spell out the limitations it posed on research and methodology.

24. In discussing the conceptual framework of violence against women and girls, it was suggested that reference should be made to the recent detailed study of the United Nations General-Secretary on violence against women and that a brief description of the Due Diligence Obligation to Prevent Violence Against Women and the Plan of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development should be included, which recognized gender-based violence as a human rights issue. Moreover, it was suggested that definitions of general recommendation No.19 of the Convention to Eliminate All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and article 29 of the Beijing Platform for Action to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls should also be included.

25. Concerns were raised about the nature of the field missions and how their research was reflected in the study. Some participants suggested that chapter 4 (on field missions) should be removed and that its findings should be instead reflected in the introduction, under the section on methodology.

26. Suggestions were also made to expand the typology to include additional categories, such as women and girls with disabilities, women refugees and foster girls who have not been legally adopted. Particular reference was made to the current situation of Syrian women refugees and the need to alert all concerned Governments to the degree of violence against them.

27. Discussions also emphasized the importance of psychological abuse, an aspect of violence against women and girls that was very often neglected in the region. It was suggested that it be included in the typology indicating that domestic violence went beyond just spousal relationships. Accordingly, suggestions were also made to use the “family” rather than the “household” as a unit of analysis, to draw attention to the fact that violence was also committed by members of an extended family, as opposed to a nuclear one.

28. Participants also welcomed the development of a comprehensive and concise typology on domestic violence in the study and praised it as a step of significant added value for the region by ESCWA and UN-WOMEN.

B. SESSION II: SOCIO-CULTURAL DYNAMICS AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN
IN THE ARAB REGION: CONTEXT AND REALITY
(MODERATOR: MR. YOUSRI MOUSTAFA)

29. Ms. El-Solh started her presentation on chapters 2 and 3 of the study by reviewing the socio-cultural dynamics of Arab societies, including the effects of political instability in countries that had recently experienced uprisings. She tackled the issue of contradictory sources of legislation, which hindered addressing cases of domestic violence, in particular in the context of prevalent social taboos. She also pointed out the key challenge in the Arab region of harmonizing national legislation with international human rights instruments relevant to promoting gender equality.

30. Ms. El-Solh also presented various national strategic interventions adopted by Arab countries to combat violence against women and discussed the disconnected nature of public service delivery chains. Moreover, she highlighted the important role of civil society in combating domestic violence and the need for Arab media to make violence against women more visible and to advocate against impunity for perpetrators of violence. In this regard, she stressed the importance of mobilizing male engagement as part of the solution rather than confining them as part of the problem.

31. Ms. El-Solh underscored the absence or limitations of national databases on violence against women in the Arab region. She also stressed the need to ensure that such violence was addressed as a cross-cutting human rights issue. Moreover, she reiterated the need to promote the application of both quantitative and qualitative indicators as means of evaluating policies and monitoring progress in combating domestic violence. Finally, she proposed that Arab countries develop generic indicators to measure the impact of violence against women and of domestic violence.

32. With regard to chapter 3, suggestions were made to review the accuracy of the reservation status of various member States on CEDAW, such as Morocco. It was noted that Somalia should be added as a non-signatory of the Convention.

33. It was also suggested that chapter 3 should clarify that, although the State of Palestine had a non-official status and was therefore not party to CEDAW, it nevertheless had pledged compliance with its provisions.

34. Participants remarked that many but not all Arab countries use Shari’a (Islamic law) as a basis for their reluctance to remove reservations on CEDAW provisions. They also commented that the inheritance law of Christians in Jordan was taken from Islamic law.

35. Underscoring the fact that the Arab region was comprised of both Muslims and non-Muslims, participants highlighted the lack of any documentation on or analysis of the issues in question in relation to non-Muslim communities.

36. There was a general agreement among the participants that Arab media did not address violence against women appropriately, as it still treated the issue as a private matter and ignored the responsibilities of

the State. References were made to audiovisual media programmes that portrayed negative images of women. In addition, newspapers were criticized for tending to merely report isolated incidents of violence against women and girls, without properly engaging readers in debates on the root causes of such violence in society. A suggestion was made to include social media in the analysis and to elaborate on its role and impact in combating violence against women.

37. Concerns were raised that Governments often tended to sign conventions without necessarily being persuaded by their provisions, resulting in major gaps in implementing conventions or treaties to protect the rights of women and girls.

38. Discussions emphasized the need to add more reflection and analysis in the study on how social norms and cultural practices in the region perpetuated violence against women and girls. Suggestions were made to elaborate specifically on the issue of “burden of proof” and how women were often unjustly implicated. Concerns were raised that chapter 2 should be more specific in assessing the situation of women in countries that experienced uprising, pointing to the fact that women had not necessarily lost their socio-economic and political rights (as the study seemed to imply), but were rather “at risk” of losing them. It was suggested that cases where there had been indeed definite reversal in rights should be discussed in the chapter with supporting evidence.

39. Remarks were made about the need to elaborate further on the impact of Arab uprisings on women and girls in terms of domestic violence, especially in the context of increasing insecurity and widespread sexual violence.

40. Discussions on the topic of “Female Gender Roles: Contested Discourses” contained in chapter 2 pointed to the need to pay more attention to women’s education in the region and suggested more detailed analysis of the causes behind the fact that a significant increase in female education had not necessarily led to women’s empowerment. More analysis was also needed on why women in the region outnumbered men in higher education.

41. Some participants put forward arguments in favour of developing an ecological model that featured all elements of the service provider chain in support of an integrated understanding of the dynamics of violence against women. On the basis of that model, institutions and their services would be more interrelated as opposed to remaining fragmented and disconnected in their efforts to find solutions. In the discussion, non-governmental organizations responsible for organizing shelters in the State of Palestine were recognized as a good example that illustrated a comprehensive referral system built in cooperation between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders working on combating violence against women.

42. Participants were pleased to see that the study framed the scope of violence against women and girls in a global context, where such issues still threatened even the most developed Western societies. They also indicated their preference to acknowledge its presence in the Arab region as an issue and not merely as a phenomenon.

43. Participants discussed the United Nations Due Diligence Obligation to Prevent Violence against Women and suggested that the analysis elaborated on its 5 pillars as a major reference tool to monitor the efforts of States to end violence against women and girls.

44. There was agreement that the study needed to reflect on the necessary elements of an enabling environment that would curtail and end violence against women and girls within the context of current political transitions. Moreover, the discussion pointed to the need to highlight the plight of the most vulnerable groups of women, such as women refugees, who in times of war or instability become more susceptible to intensified social violence. In this regard, it was remarked that the recent uprisings and their aftermath should be given more prominence in the introduction so as to alert Governments to their

responsibilities towards protecting female refugees from other countries and to expand relevant legislation to become more inclusive of the rights of all residents regardless of their national (or refugee) status.

C. SESSION III: PERCEPTIONS AND VIEWS FROM THE FIELD
(MODERATOR: MS. ZOYA ROUHANA)

45. Ms. El-Solh presented the research findings from the field missions undertaken in eight selected Arab countries, with the objective to validate and update the information collected as part of the desk research. She said that all consulted stakeholders (government representatives, social groups, members of the judiciary, media professionals and academics) underscored the difficulties and challenges of dealing with domestic violence, especially in the context of (a) post-conflict dynamics; (b) the general belief in the sanctity of private/domestic spheres; (c) cultural attitudes privileging men, their status as heads of family and their disciplinary roles.

46. Ms. El-Solh added that there was a consensus among state officials that Governments were indeed the duty-bearers. They also recognized civil society as an important driver for change. Moreover, some non-governmental organizations consulted during the field missions had pointed out that a key impediment in tackling domestic violence was limited (if not lack of) political will and due diligence, and the overlap between judiciary systems and religious authorities. Finally, both media and academic stakeholders admitted the significance of their own roles in tackling the culture of shame and silence surrounding discussions of domestic violence. They also acknowledged the linkage between violence against women and negative stereotyping of Arab women in audiovisual and print media.

47. All participants recognized that academia had the potential to provide entry points for public discussions and indicated that the issue of violence against women may be addressed indirectly in medical journals, for example, as had been the case in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain.

48. Participants pointed out that the chapter needed to elaborate more on the blurred lines between official and personal views and to highlight the criteria for determining “victims” as opposed to “survivors”. The chapter should also give more visibility to the issue of “mistrust” of victims of violence against women, even among non-governmental organizations and the authorities. In this regard, the analysis should acknowledge the limited impact of non-governmental organizations, considering their dwindling financial resources and the high cost of protection measures.

49. Participants questioned the value of shelters in Arab societies and discussed their many imperfections. Some participants, for example, considered existing shelters in Egypt as insignificant, since in real terms informal social mediation played a far more central role in the management of family disputes. Women in Yemen also had restricted access to justice, since police departments were not safe enough for them; in fact, some police officers attacked victimized women instead of protecting them. In addition, shelters were still socially stigmatized in the region. There had also been instances when victimized women were discouraged from pressing charges by shelter officials on the grounds that they may not afford the high cost of the process.

50. Participants pointed out that the chapter should clearly describe the various stakeholders involved and provide an argument on the validity of different perspectives and approaches, with an indication (where evident) of the ones working best on issues of domestic violence.

51. Concerning the section on “structural causes of violence”, participants raised the following points that warrant further analysis: (a) linkages between low self-esteem and low educational levels among women and girls; (b) women’s economic dependence; and (c) women’s exclusion from decision-making processes.

52. Finally, participants stressed that the chapter should include a discussion of the significance of rehabilitation; a remedy that was indeed as important as protection, but often neglected in the region.

D. SESSION IV: OVERVIEW AND KEY FINDINGS: LESSONS LEARNED AND GOOD PRACTICES
(MODERATOR: MS. NADA DARWAZEH)

53. Ms. El-Solh made the case that good practices were emerging in the region in different modalities (some were still at pilot stage, others were full and comprehensive). They covered areas such as strategic approaches, legal reform and the rule of law, protection services and resources, capturing manifestations of domestic violence, awareness-raising and advocacy, media and accountability and engagement of men and boys as part of the solution for combating domestic violence.

54. Ms. El-Solh said that there was a need to build and develop recommendations founded on such good practices; however, the fact remained that interventions were implemented unsystematically and addressed the symptoms rather than the root causes of violence against women of different age groups.

55. She specified that gaps were reflected in areas such as uncoordinated strategic objectives and public service delivery chains; inadequate budget allocation; limitations of political will; legal loopholes; limited State protection services; restrictions on civil society; and polarization of public opinion.

56. Participants expressed their concern that the study focused on “good practices”; a term that was judgmental given that people held different views on the nature of good practices in the field. Caution should therefore be exercised in promoting shelters as a best practice or as the ultimate solution, rather than addressing the root causes and trying to resolve them. They added that some non-governmental organizations that provided shelters operated in a fragmented manner and outside the framework of an efficient monitoring system.

57. Participants emphasized that, given that the study targeted Governments, it should therefore seek to explore realistic prospects for change within existing governmental structures.

E. SESSION V: WORKING GROUPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR EVIDENCE-BASED POLICIES

58. In the last two sessions of the meeting, participants were divided into four working groups tasked with the identification of concrete general and specific suggestions and comments. The ensuing general comments revolved around the following points:

(a) Policy recommendations should be:

- (i) Prioritized and adopted according to national contexts;
- (ii) Categorized into thematic areas, namely legislative and policy reforms and institutional, socio-cultural and knowledge generation (production, availability and accessibility);
- (iii) Grouped along the five pillars of the Due Diligence Policy (prevent, protect, prosecute, punish and provide);

(b) Recommendations for the media should reflect the following three elements:

- (i) Mobilizing public opinion;
- (ii) Ensuring the inclusion of all stakeholders;
- (iii) Encouraging constructive discourse.

(c) Recommendations on public service delivery should mainly shed light on the following issues: health, legal, psycho-social, shelters and rehabilitation;

- (d) Strategies should be formulated based on specified recommendations;
- (e) Terminology of violence should be unified (e.g. violence against women versus domestic violence);
- (f) Regional international organizations, such as the League of Arab States, should be highlighted in the study as one of the key stakeholders;
- (g) An integrated approach should be adopted for all relevant institutions dealing with domestic violence;
- (h) National observatory data should be shared with all stakeholders;
- (i) The role of civil society organizations as key actors, not as mere mediators, should be emphasized;
- (j) The following policy recommendations should be added to the advanced recommendations in the study:
 - (i) The gender accountability system (gender marker) should be integrated in national budget allocations and programmes;
 - (ii) Independent national commissions on domestic violence should be established to generate policy recommendations and budget estimations for Governments and civil society;
 - (iii) Current mechanisms for implementing laws and court decrees should be assessed and transitional justice should be promoted as an alternative mechanism;
 - (iv) Comparative sex-disaggregated data should be provided in all sectors in compliance with international standards;
 - (v) Authorities should monitor private sector policies and programmes and their compliance with principles of gender equality.

F. SESSION VI: CLOSING SESSION

59. At the end of the meeting, Ms. Samira Atallah thanked the participants for their valuable feedback and active engagement towards enhancing the draft study. She expressed her appreciation to the UN-WOMEN team for their fruitful partnership and to the lead author of the study and the research team for their collaborative and productive efforts. She briefed the participants on the next steps towards completing the draft study, including the validation process and integration of all received comments. She reiterated the joint commitment of ESCWA and UN-WOMEN to build on the initiative as a starting point for future activities geared towards enhancing gender equality in the region and the urgent need to end all forms of violence against women.

60. Mr. Naciri emphasized that violence against women and girls was a comprehensive issue that required a multi-pronged and holistic approach from Governments and civil society. He called on Governments to honour their international commitments related to ending violence against women, to allocate gender budgets and to adopt an integrated and human rights based approach across all relevant sectors and institutions dealing with the issue. He finally underscored the need to coordinate all efforts, especially within the United Nations system, and indicated that the upcoming task of UN-WOMEN was to develop a comprehensive action plan to combat violence against women in the Arab region.

III. ORGANIZATION OF WORK

A. DATE AND VENUE OF THE MEETING

61. The meeting was held at the United Nations House in Beirut on 30 and 31 May 2013.

B. OPENING

62. Ms. Atallah, Director of the ESCWA Centre for Women made an opening speech, welcoming all the experts and participants. She commended the successful partnership between ESCWA and UN-WOMEN to implement the important regional study and the valuable funding contribution from the Norwegian Embassy in Lebanon. She expressed her deep appreciation for the collaboration of Ms. Sameera Al Tuwaijri, Director of the UN-WOMEN Regional Office for Arab States, and the UN-WOMEN team in Cairo, especially Mr. Mohamad el-Naciri and Ms. Sarah Brun. She also welcomed and thanked the implementing team of the study, led by Ms. El-Solh as the lead author and four field researchers, Ms. Mabrouka Gasmi, Ms. Asma Al-Ghanem (not present at the meeting), Ms. Najat Sayem Khalil and Ms. Anna Rita Ronzoni, for their efforts and dedication in preparing the study.

63. Ms. Atallah highlighted the key message of the fifty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women that accorded society as a whole - and not the State alone - collective responsibility for protecting women and girls from violence and called on Governments not to use religion or culture to justify inaction towards ending violence against women. She also outlined the Centre's current programme of work, focusing on assisting member States to address violence against women. The Centre's other relevant activities for the biennium 2012-2013 included, other than the present joint ESCWA/UN-WOMEN study, two studies entitled "Multi-sectoral efforts and partnerships to address violence against women in the ESCWA region" and "Trafficking in women and children in the Arab region."

64. Ms. Atallah thanked all participants for their presence and said that she looked forward to their frank comments and invaluable suggestions on the study so as to enrich it and enhance its value. She emphasised that their success depended on the consolidated efforts of all stakeholders and hoped that the current meeting (indeed the study) would open further opportunities for more effective collaboration to end violence against women and girls in the region.

65. Mr. Mohamad Al Naciri, Deputy Director of the UN-WOMEN Regional Office for Arab States, delivered opening remarks thanking the ESCWA Centre for Women for its collaboration in implementing the study under the lead of Ms. Camillia El-Solh. He briefed participants about the work of UN-WOMEN in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, specifically in the context of the recent opening of the Regional Centre for Arab States in Cairo. He confirmed that violence against women was a priority issue on the Centre's agenda in its first year of operation. Mr. Al-Naciri anticipated that the joint study would feed into the preparation of a UN-WOMEN regional strategy on combating violence against women in the Arab region.

C. ATTENDANCE

66. The meeting brought together renowned gender experts and specialists active in the field of gender-based violence. The participants included the research team and the lead author tasked by ESCWA and UN-WOMEN with the preparation of a joint study entitled "Policies to empower women in the Arab region: combating domestic violence against women and girls". (The annex to the present report sets out the list of participants).

D. AGENDA

67. Participants covered the following agenda items:

1. Opening.
2. Introduction of participants.
3. Adoption of the agenda and organization of work.
4. Session I: overview of the study: background and objectives.
5. Session II: violence against women in the Arab region: context and reality.
6. Session III: perceptions and views from the field.
7. Session IV: overview and key findings: lessons learnt and good practices.
8. Session V: working groups.
9. Session VI: conclusion.
10. Closing session.

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

A. CONSULTANTS

Ms. Camillia El-Solh
Socio-Economist/Independent Consultant
Telephone: +44 1865515621
Fax: +44 1865515621
E-mail: celsolh@aol.com
Address: 24 Wentworth Road,
Oxford, Oxz 7th
United Kingdom

Ms. Mabrouka Gasm
Free Lance Consultant
Telephone: +216 24581341
E-mail: mabgasm@yahoo.fr
Address: Tunisia

Ms. Najat Sayem Khalil
University Professor/Researcher
University of Sana'a
Telephone: +967 7779039
Fax: +967 3730499
E-mail: najatsayem@gmail.com,
Address: Arab University Street, Sana'a, Yemen

Ms. Anna Rita Ronzoni
CIBU Expert
Italian Cooperation Office in Jerusalem
Telephone: +972 549813819
E-mail: annarita.ronzoni@gmail.com
Address: Sheik Jarrah, Jerusalem

B. PARTICIPANTS

Ms. Jocelyne Talbot
Ex-UNDP (Regional Office for Arab States and
Balkans) Independent Consultant/Policy Advisor
Telephone: +202 5083518
E-mail: jocelynetalbot@hotmail.com
Address: Cairo, Egypt

Ms. Fatma Hassan El-Zenaty
Professor, Faculty of Economics
Cairo University
Telephone: +201 222174055
E-mail: fzanaty@elzanaty.com
Address: Mena Garden City, B7,6 of October,
Giza, Egypt

Ms. Manal Abu Helou
Legal Advisor
Women's Center for Legal Aid and Counselling
Telephone: +970 598919816
Fax: +970 2975566
E-mail: manaljube@yahoo.com
Address: P.O. Box 21818,
West Bank, Jerusalem

Ms. Zoya Rohanna
Director
KAFA (Enough Violence and Exploitation)
Telephone: +961 1392220
Fax: +961 1392221
E-mail: kafa@kafa.org.lb
Address: 43 Badaro Street,
Beydoun Bldg, Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Azza Baydoun Charara
Professor
Lebanese University
E-mail: azzabaydoun@gmail.com
Address: Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Hamida Al-Bour
CAWTAR
Telephone: +216 71773511
Fax: +216 71773611
E-mail: info@cawtar.org
Address: P.O. Box 105, Cite El-Khadra,
Tunis, Tunisia

Ms. Magda El Sanousi
Director, OXFAM
Telephone: +44 01865473727
E-mail: melsanousi@oxfam.org.uk
Address: John Smith Drive,
Oxford, OX4 2JY
United Kingdom

Mr. Moulay Mustafa El Kacimi
Lawyer
ANARVL
Telephone: 06 69626238
Fax: 05 355700300
E-mail: elkacimi0664@gmail.com
Address: 110 Tajziat bou Talmine,
Al-Rashidiye, Morocco

Mr. Yousry Moustafa Hussien
Project Manager
GIZ - Women's Rights Program
Telephone: +201 280056615
E-mail: yousrymoustafa@gmail.com
Address: Al Khalifa, Emile Nashed, Haram, Giza,
Egypt

Ms. Sultana Nasser Al-Jeham
Executive Director
Civic Democratic Initiatives Support Foundation
(CDF)
Women Affairs Support Center (WASC)
Telephone: +967 1414700
Fax: +967 1428993
E-mail: cdf_ye@yahoo.com,
sultana_pdc_cdf@yahoo.com
Address: P.O. Box 22257,
Sana'a, Yemen

Ms. Nada Darwazeh
Regional Gender Advisor
Human Rights Officer
Office of the United Nations
High Commissioner for Human Rights (UN-
OHCHR)
Regional Office for the Middle East
Telephone: +961 70119101
Fax: +961 1962555
E-mail: ndarwazeh@ohchr.org
Address: Arab African International Bank Bldg,
Banks street, P.O. Box 11-3216,
Riad El Solh,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Emmanuelle Sarah Compingt
SGBV Task Force Coordinator
UNHCR
Telephone: +961 71911384
E-mail: compingt@unhcr.org
Address: Khater Bldg, Dr. Philippe Hitti Street,
P.O. Box 11-7332, Ramlet El Baida, Beirut,
Lebanon

Ms. Enshrah Mohamed Ahmed
Regional Advisor
UNFPA Regional Office - Gender Human Rights
and Culture,
Telephone: +201 1094775058
E-mail: enahmed@unfpa.org
Address: UNFPA Regional Office,
Cairo, Egypt

Ms. Sandra Willis
Assistant Professor
Zayed University
Telephone: +971 505976545
E-mail: sandra.willis@zu.ac.ae
Address: P.O. Box: 19282
Dubai, UAE

Ms. Karima El Korri
Chief Population and Social Development
Section, SDD
UN-ESCWA
Telephone: +961 1978408
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: elkorri@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575,
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Rola El-Husseini
Research Assistant Professor
City University of New York – Graduate Center
Telephone: +203 5008405
E-mail: rhusseini@gc.cuny.edu
Address: 2007 Elventcing Ct,
Bryan TX 77807
USA

C. UN WOMEN

Mr. Mohamed Al Naciri
Deputy Director
Arab States Regional Office
Telephone: +202 5748494
Fax: +202 5759472
E-mail: mohammad.naciri@unwomen.org
Address: 7 Golf Street, Maadi,
Cairo, Egypt

Ms. Marina Mancinelli
Policy Specialist
UN Women - New York
Telephone: +1646 7814400
Fax: +1646 7814444
E-mail: marina.mancinelli@unwomen.org
Address : 405 East 42nd Street,
New York, NY 10017
USA

Ms. Sarah Brun
Arab States Regional Office
Telephone: +202 5748494
Fax: +202 5759472
E-mail: sarah.brun@unwomen.org
Address: 7 Golf Street, Maadi,
Cairo, Egypt

D. UN-ESCWA CENTRE FOR WOMEN (ORGANIZERS)

Ms. Samira Atallah
Director
Telephone: +961 1 978658
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: atallahs@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Naeem Almutawakel
Social Affairs Officer
Telephone: +961 1 978635
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: almutawakel@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Lana Baydas
First Social Affairs Officer
Telephone: +961 1 978651
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: baydas@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square, Beirut
Lebanon

Ms. Menan Hattab
Social Affairs Officer
Telephone: +961 1 978655
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: hattab@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Rania Al-Jazairi
First Social Affairs Officer
Telephone: +961 1 981301
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: al-jazairi@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Sukaina Nasrawi
Associate Social Affairs Officer
Telephone: +961 1 978551
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: al-nasrawi@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Ghya Baccar
Research Assistant
Telephone: +961 1 978753
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: baccar@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Nada Moudallal
Research Assistant
Telephone: +961 1 978376
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: moudallaln@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Sadika Hassan
Administrative Assistant
Telephone: +961 1 978728
Fax: +961 1 981510
E-mail: hassan10@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon

Ms. Iman Bakkar
Administrative Assistant
Telephone: +961 1 978812
Fax: + 961 1 981510
E-mail: bakkari@un.org
Address: P.O. Box 11-8575
Riad el-Solh Square,
Beirut, Lebanon