

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

**ARAB REGIONAL TEN-YEAR REVIEW AND APPRAISAL
OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING
PLATFORM FOR ACTION**

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Introduction

1. Upon accepting the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the Arab States proceeded to develop national strategies, work plans and programmes for implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. On the occasion of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), national reports were submitted on achievements realized and major obstacles encountered in the implementation process since 1995. Over that same period, Arab States that had ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women also submitted reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women.
2. Nine years after the Beijing Conference, a review and appraisal process is under way to assess the extent to which the Beijing Platform for Action has been implemented, with a view to identifying obstacles, studying current challenges and developing forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls at the national, regional and international levels. In addition, a review and appraisal of progress achieved in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session will be undertaken at the forty-ninth session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which is to be held from 28 February to 11 March 2005.
3. This review and appraisal will enable the Commission to identify achievements, gaps and challenges, and to determine areas where new actions and initiatives are required in order to further implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.
4. To prepare for the review and appraisal, the United Nations Secretariat and the regional commissions will draw on a variety of sources of information and statistics. With the object of complementing these sources of information and facilitating the review and appraisal process at the regional and international levels, in September 2003 the United Nations and its five regional commissions prepared a questionnaire to Governments. ESCWA translated this questionnaire into Arabic and distributed it to the Arab States so that they could use it as a basis for preparing their reports.
5. The United Nations Secretariat urged States to provide the regional commissions, including ESCWA, with their responses not later than the end of April 2004, so that the commissions could prepare regional reports and forward them by the end of August 2004 to the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), thereby enabling the Division to take them into account in drafting a comprehensive document.
6. The United Nations identified twelve critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, and the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly identified a number of major issues, initiatives and actions. ESCWA, for its part, added the priorities for concentration outlined in the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, and asked States to include detailed analytic data on the Plan in their responses. Inasmuch as many of the States concerned had submitted their reports in the context of the twenty-third special session, the focus here was on data relating to the past five years.
7. ESCWA has prepared the Arab regional report on the ten-year review and appraisal of the Beijing Platform for Action on the basis of responses to the above-mentioned questionnaire received from 18 States out of a total of 22. A list of the States that provided ESCWA with their responses is appended to this report.
8. The purpose of this report is, in the first place, to review the accomplishments of Arab Governments and the measures that they have taken to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and to identify obstacles and challenges confronting them. The report seeks to appraise the results achieved by States in terms of promoting the advancement and empowerment of women, eliminating discrimination, and closing gender gaps. It also outlines the distinctive situation of Arab women in order to ensure that that aspect will be taken into account in the comprehensive document that the DAW is to prepare.

9. It is noteworthy that every Arab State is making efforts and undertaking commitments to the goal of the advancement and empowerment of women. Those efforts are undoubtedly characterized by a large measure of diversity in terms of initiatives, actions and objectives, but this report is concerned basically with surveying achievements at the level of individual countries, including, in so far as possible, achievements by civil society institutions.

10. This report is divided into two parts. Part I contains a review of Arab States' accomplishments in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), while Part II contains an appraisal of those accomplishments and a survey of current challenges and forward-looking measures for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls. The four-part questionnaire that was distributed to the several States is appended to the report.

PART ONE

REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION (1995) AND THE OUTCOME DOCUMENT OF THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2000)

11. Reflecting the methodology of the questionnaire to Governments, this part of the report contains four sections. The first of these is a summary overview of achievements and challenges in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The second section contains a review of progress to date in implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the further initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The third section looks at institutional arrangements, and the fourth and final section presents a survey of the main challenges and future action to address them.

I. SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

12. This section begins with a general overview of major achievements in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, followed by a brief survey of remaining gaps and challenges to the attainment of these goals.

A. MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

13. In most Arab States, the past five years have seen increasing concern with women's issues in all fields and sectors. Those issues have become fundamental and have been incorporated into basic development priorities. This concern is evident at both governmental and grassroots levels.

14. As a result, there have been some major achievements along the lines called for in the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session (Beijing + 5). One of the most noteworthy of these is the adoption of a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, with tangible results in the form of an evolving social situation and increasing participation by women in various sectors.

15. Concretely, new constitutions have been adopted or existing constitutions amended to include provisions making all citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties, with no gender-based discrimination in any area of political, social, cultural or economic life. Some constitutions expressly state that it is the duty of the State to support women's rights and to enact legislation on the protection of the family and all its members and on respect for human rights. In other cases, constitutions have now been amended to make provision for development, monitoring and follow-up mechanisms aimed at ensuring that other policies and programmes on the advancement of women which may be adopted, in addition to the provisions of the constitution itself, are duly implemented. Some States have decided that their national charter should explicitly prohibit any gender-based discrimination, as was recently recommended in a formal address by a country's highest authority to the Government, emphasizing once again the necessity of enlisting women as participants in the process of national development and enhancing their status.

16. In support of their policies of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, most Arab States have joined forces with the non-governmental sector to develop national action plans and strategies aimed at ensuring that the policy is implemented in all fields and sectors. By way of translating the outcomes of the Beijing Conference (crowned by the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action) into practical reality, Arab States have either established high-level national mechanisms or reconfigured the mandates of existing mechanisms to bring them into line with the Platform's recommendations on national mechanisms. These mechanisms, in their capacity as governmental authorities, have been entrusted with two functions: coordination among various public institutions and among them and civil society institutions, and

monitoring and tracking the work of all governmental agencies in addressing women's issues and promoting gender equality. The mechanisms in question may be either regulatory or advisory in nature.

17. The various actors responsible for implementing the policy are held accountable through a variety of mechanisms. Most States have established independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues. Various means to this end are used, notably the filing of formal complaints.

18. In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is clear that every State has its own high-level mechanism for monitoring implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, although those mechanisms may have different names and occupy different positions in the State administrative apparatus. In addition, some States have established analogous mechanisms mandated to provide follow-up to other global conferences. These have contributed usefully to policy development, planning, coordination, monitoring, the drafting of legislation and the like, as we shall see in due course.

19. In some Arab States, the national action plans that were put in place after the Beijing Conference have outlived their usefulness and been replaced by other plans covering the period 2000-2005, while some States have begun work on a third plan covering the period 2005-2010.

20. As for the remaining States, in some cases their governmental mechanisms have worked in cooperation with partners from both the governmental and non-governmental sectors to monitor the implementation of the first national action plan and the recommendations of the Beijing Conference concerning preparation of a national action programme for the advancement of women covering the five-year period 1998-2003. In other cases, a number of five-year projects have been developed and executed. Some of these States have developed, in addition to projects of this kind, a variety of sectoral plans, some of them with their own implementation budgets. Relatively few of these have been satisfactory, owing to various causes, obstacles and constraints that will be discussed later in this report. None the less, the national action plans and the various sectoral plans and strategies that have grown out of them have been a basic factor which has contributed to a noteworthy measure of success in the field of public policy, substantial achievements in many of the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action, and palpable progress toward the targets identified in the Millennium Development Goals, as we shall see.

21. Based on the commitments made in their national reports to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (Beijing + 5), the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women, the Millennium Development Goals and the 12 critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, a majority of Arab States have agreed to give top priority in their national action plans to the following areas and to concentrate on them: women and education, women in power structures and decision-making, women and poverty, and violence against women. Second priority has been given to women and health, women and the economy, the rights of the child, and women and the media. The other Beijing critical areas of concern follow these in order of importance. Another area that has been added to national plans is the women's coordination, monitoring and evaluation role.

22. Some Arab States have applied a non-discriminatory approach in some of these areas of concern, but have been prevented from doing the same in others by the persistence of various obstacles. Despite this, the concept of gender disparities has increasingly attracted attention, and has been incorporated into national plans and strategies. Indeed, some States have developed strategies to address gender disparities.

23. Most Arab States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, submitted their reports, and received the final comments of the Commission on the Status of Women on those reports. All this has contributed to the enactment of new legislation in some cases, and in other cases to the adoption of amendments to and revision of existing legislation to bring it into line with provisions of the Convention, except insofar as the State in question has expressed reservations to specific provisions. In still other cases, a variety of legislative measures have been drafted and are currently before national assemblies for consideration. In addition, some States have published the Convention in their official gazettes, thereby giving it force of law, and others are expected to follow suit before the end of the

year. Some States, moreover, have undertaken a review of their judicial systems to ensure that women's rights are safeguarded, and have gone to great lengths to eliminate gender discrimination from the judiciary.

24. We may note in this connection that some Arab States are currently studying the justifications given for their reservations to the Convention with a view to withdrawing them, in some cases because the actual situation of women has evolved to the point where those reservations no longer apply, and in others because there have been high-level policy orientations in favour of gender equality and safeguarding human rights for women.

25. There have thus been initiatives involving both new legislation and amendments to and revision of existing legislation, with a view to bringing national law into line with the Convention. One major achievement in this area has been the decision by some States to review their family law and ensure that it guarantees gender equality in private matters, namely, in the sphere of the family; in addition, a majority of Arab States have overhauled their laws to eliminate gender-based discrimination and ensure gender equality in public matters as well, including labour law, social insurance, education, elections and vital statistics. In some States, this review of law has gone even further to include passports, income tax and certain courtroom procedures that were formerly characterized by gender-based discrimination. For the first time, some Arab States have made some forms of violence against women criminal offences. It thus appears that women have made legislative gains as a result of these changes.

26. As regards financial and institutional measures, it is difficult for most Arab States to quantify the financial resources they have devoted to the advancement of women, or to determine precisely what percentage of total Government spending those resources represent, and hence are not in a position to measure their growth or shrinkage as a percentage of the national budget. However, a few States have indeed been able to quantify the costs of their various programme actions aimed at the advancement of women, thanks to their far-sighted action in establishing a financial tracking mechanism in good time.

27. Women's issues have come to account for a substantial fraction of debate in Governments and national parliaments in most Arab States, and the result has been important achievements in the field of legislation, as we have seen, with the elimination of gender-based discrimination. Those issues are also a prominent aspect of suggestions from national mechanisms, while some States have been prominent in discussing gender mainstreaming in intergovernmental forums. The result, as noted earlier, has been that those issues have been incorporated into sectoral plans and strategies that have subsequently been developed and mainstreamed in line ministries and their respective institutions and agencies. Some States have adopted a non-discriminatory approach in some of the Beijing critical areas of concern, and some, in addition, have developed gender-disaggregated databases as a springboard for planning and follow-up action. Some Arab States have established teams to monitor gender issues. These represent an important experiment in gender mainstreaming in sectoral policy and strategy development and analysis, and are a useful aid to decision-making in that connection, and to the various partners in the area of development and civil society. The overall objectives are to ensure that gender issues are adopted and mainstreamed in development programmes, to create a database on those issues, and to muster the necessary resources.

28. Increasing numbers of Arab women have been entering the information technology sector. In some Arab States, information technology is offered as a university programme for students interested in specializing as programmers and computer engineers. Women graduates have found jobs in both the public and private sectors. A sizable percentage of Arab families now own home computers, while Internet cafes have become a widespread phenomenon and are frequented by women and men on a footing of equality.

29. As regards globalization, some Arab States have adjusted to its impact, especially its economic aspect, embracing privatization, adopting the open market system and encouraging investment, with the result that high-technology industrial zones have been created, which have created important job openings for large numbers of women. However, there is an underlying fear that market liberalization and privatization will adversely affect women's employment (this was emphasized in a recent report published by an Arab organization on the impact of globalization on the economic situation of Arab women), especially in view of the fact that unemployment rates among women are high in most Arab countries. Other negative aspects are

foreign debt service on the one hand and, on the other hand, the difficult domestic economic situation and scarcity of resources in most Arab States.

30. Support for gender equality and the empowerment of women has been forthcoming from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) concerned with women's issues and human rights, which have worked actively in most Arab States to bring about changes to the laws and the implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the recommendations for action identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. These NGOs have also sought to promote the mainstreaming of gender issues in national plans and strategies.

31. A number of Arab States have sought to enlist these NGOs as partners in the tasks of preparing their national plans and related sectoral plans and strategies, and drafting their various national reports, including their reports to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. These NGOs have also been invited to participate as members of national mechanisms that have been founded to monitor the implementation of the Beijing critical areas of concern. These national mechanisms also provide coordination with all leading actors in the field of the advancement and empowerment of women, including not only NGOs but also the local and regional offices of United Nations bodies, and work to associate men, women, young people and adolescents with their programmes aimed at addressing women's issues.

32. In the light of these developments, it is clear that the cause of the advancement of women has made perceptible progress in most Arab States, despite the fact that women's issues have not yet been placed on the list of priorities in the case of many of them, political and economic problems being regarded as more urgent.

B. GAPS AND CHALLENGES

33. Most Arab States would like to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and to attain the Millennium Development Goals, but continue to be confronted by difficulties, obstacles and challenges which in some cases have prevented them from making the necessary radical changes in many of the Beijing critical areas of concern, or thwarted their efforts to expedite measures for the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. Some of the most important of these are as follows:

(a) Decision-makers are not strongly committed to serious, systematic follow-up to the implementation of policies, plans and strategies, despite the fact that Governments have officially accepted their requirements;

(b) States' commitment to gender mainstreaming has been translated only to a limited extent into public policy in the form of practical plans, programmes and projects with corresponding budget allocations, nor has it been incorporated into the organizational structures of the various State institutions;

(c) Coordination, observation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms are weak, not to say non-existent;

(d) The prevailing economic, cultural, social and political conditions are unsatisfactory;

(e) Financial resources are in short supply;

(f) Gender-disaggregated statistics and information in official documents and reports do not convey an accurate picture of the gender gap or reflect the true level of women's contributions to and roles in economic, cultural, social and political life.

34. Despite these difficulties and many others besides, there have been genuine achievements. Steps have been taken to implement the Beijing critical areas of concern and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and this suggests that there is an evolutionary process at work in Arab States. It is an indication of the extent to which women's issues have captured the attention of all

actors in society, including both governmental agencies and civil society institutions and organizations, and the fact that there is now a widespread concern to promote the empowerment of women and participation by women in various fields on a footing of equality with men.

II. PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN OF THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION AND THE FURTHER INITIATIVES AND ACTIONS IDENTIFIED IN THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

35. The Beijing Platform for Action calls for strengthening the status of women, eliminating all obstacles to their effective participation in all areas of public and private life and adopting the concepts of gender equality and the empowerment of women in order to achieve sustainable development. Committed as they are to the Platform for Action, Arab States have taken many actions and made considerable strides toward its implementation, but they continue to be confronted by difficulties, obstacles and challenges in many of its critical areas of concern.

36. This section will deal with Arab States' accomplishments and the resultant impacts, the fundamental, central obstacles, gaps and challenges remaining in each of the Beijing critical areas of concern, and, lastly, lessons learned. For the sake of clarity and an integrated approach to each of those areas, achievements and actions on the one hand and difficulties and obstacles on the other will be grouped together, with the difficulties and obstacles discussed immediately after the accomplishments for each area.

A. THE GROWING BURDEN OF PERMANENT POVERTY AFFECTING WOMEN

1. Actions and achievements

37. In a number of Arab States, the term "poverty" means relative poverty, since their societies enjoy high standards of living. At the same time the phenomenon of poverty is one of the most pressing issues confronting a majority of Arab countries. In some of them, indeed, growing numbers of people live below the upper and lower poverty lines, and the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty is becoming more widespread.

38. Endeavouring to eliminate poverty, address its root causes or mitigate its impact, most Arab States, including those for which poverty is a relative term, have taken various actions and implemented a wide variety of different programmes and projects. They regard these as some of their finest achievements in the area of protecting their citizens, male and female alike. In recent years, however, poverty has increased among women and families headed by women, and in an attempt to deal with this situation, Arab States have concentrated on programmes and projects targeting women in particular, pursuant to the commitments they undertook at the Beijing Conference, the objectives set forth in their own national action plans and the Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women up to the Year 2005, and the targets of the Millennium Development Goals.

39. To begin with, Arab States, in general, have taken a number of actions in the area of successful public policy and legislative change:

(a) Enactment of new legislation or activation of existing legislation and Government-issued executive orders;

(b) Enactment of a social insurance law with constitutional safeguards;

(c) Establishment of a commission for human rights with responsibility for combating poverty, with a view to preparing, executing and following up poverty elimination programmes;

(d) Upgrading institutional infrastructures in agencies concerned with poverty;

(e) Development of a national poverty elimination strategy at the dawn of this millennium;

(f) In some States, inclusion of a division concerned exclusively with women and poverty in the national strategy;

(g) Preparation of a social development strategy;

(h) Creation of a general budget item expressly to provide funding for training and retraining efforts essential to combating poverty;

(i) Establishment of monitoring and follow-up mechanisms to track the implementation of the national poverty elimination strategy. A majority of Arab States have accomplished all this by enlisting all government bodies and civil society institutions as partners in the fight against poverty.

40. National poverty elimination strategies are aimed at upgrading the socio-economic situation of poor people in general, in line with the Millennium Development Goals and Targets, especially Goal 1, which is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. While these strategies take the family as the basic unit, women are expressly targeted under programmes that have grown out of them or may do so in the future. These strategies have also devoted particular attention to women's education, explicitly noting its effectiveness as a means of reducing the incidence of poverty.

41. Women in poverty, in particular, have been included in national strategies through a wide variety of themes, orientations and actions. The unifying thread running through this diversity is that all of them begin by seeking to identify the needs of women in poverty with a view to the development of appropriate programmes and projects aimed at protecting them, enhancing their economic and educational status and improving their health.

42. Social development strategies, for their part, have been concerned with service delivery and development, and also the modernization of services in line with the objective of women's advancement.

43. Successful programmes and projects designed to eliminate poverty, address its root causes or mitigate its impact have included the following:

(a) Broadening the scope of the social safety net (insurance and financial assistance and support) through a national fund, known variously as the social development fund, social care fund, national assistance fund or the like, established expressly for that purpose;

(b) Enhancing the situation of families and improving living standards by raising the minimum wage;

(c) Providing support for basic food items;

(d) Increasing employment opportunities through training, retraining and employment programmes for citizens of both sexes;

(e) Encouraging persons of both sexes to participate in the development process, and adopting projects aimed at encouraging individuals to set up their own businesses by making microcredit available and supporting their small and mid-sized projects;

(f) Increasing the number of productive families, especially families in poverty and families headed by women, with preference given to divorced women and widows under financial assistance benefit programmes;

(g) Enabling families receiving government assistance to hold shares in and be entitled to profits from State-owned companies;

(h) Encouraging private-sector companies and institutions to employ young persons of both sexes;

(i) Designing non-discriminatory programmes aimed at empowering women heads of businesses and contractors;

(j) Lastly, with a view to enhancing women's living conditions by providing financial and organizational support for the development of income-generating activities, line ministries responsible for women's issues in some Arab States have set up savings and loan funds for women, known by such names as women's savings and loan association or women's bank.

2. *Obstacles, gaps and challenges*

44. Confronted as they are with a host of difficulties, gaps and challenges, some Arab States have been unable to fulfil the commitments they undertook at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Available indicators suggest that poverty is likely to be one of the most serious challenges for these States during the coming decade. The problems faced by many of them include:

(a) Inadequate precise statistical data on women;

(b) Inadequate precise statistical data and indicators on poverty;

(c) Lack of analytical statistical methods incorporating a gender perspective, with the result that the level of poverty among women is subject to a wide range of estimates or even guesswork.

45. Furthermore, the programmes developed by most Arab States in an effort to meet their obligations have been afflicted with fundamental gaps and difficulties. Some of the most serious of these are:

(a) Inadequate financial resources;

(b) The continued growth of poverty among women in recent years, and the spread of the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty;

(c) The fact that an increasing proportion of the population consists of people living below the upper and lower poverty lines in some States;

(d) Few economic opportunities for women;

(e) Limited availability of loans and the burden of interest;

(f) The impact of globalization, economic difficulties and occupation on the socio-economic situation of women.

46. None the less, a majority of Arab States say that they are determined to continue implementing the programmes referred to above, evaluate delivery methods for maximum effectiveness, meet basic needs, and pursue their efforts to raise living standards for all citizens of both sexes. They also emphasize their determination to urge the world of finance and business to encourage participation by women in economic activity, thereby achieving further socio-economic benefits for women in poverty, especially women who are responsible for supporting families or who have special needs (disabled women).

B. EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

47. The issue of education and training is of great relevance for all the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, and consequently all Arab States have devoted particular attention to it, with considerable success in both quantitative and qualitative terms. They have many remarkable achievements to their credit in the fields of public policy, legislation, and practical actions, programmes and projects.

48. In the fields of public policy and legislative change, Arab States have sought to activate and strengthen gender equality. Many of them have adopted a meaningful, intensive political orientation in favour of qualitative upgrading of the education and training available to women, development of their education systems and enhancement of their internal efficiency with attention to gender perspectives. In general terms, these States' accomplishments may be summarized as follows:

(a) A new constitution stating expressly that education is a right of every citizen, that the State guarantees educational services for all its citizens, and that education is free and compulsory at the initial levels;

(b) A national literacy plan;

(c) A number of strategies affirming the importance of developing and broadening education and training, and narrowing the existing gap between men and women in that area. Prominent among these are girls' education strategies, basic education development strategies, literacy and adult education strategies, and strategies aimed at ensuring that information and communication technologies are included in primary and secondary school curricula. The strategies adopted by some Arab States have paid particular attention to these aspects. An anti-poverty strategy, for example, may focus on the importance of women's education and closing the gender gap. In many cases, national strategies on women have included an item on achieving objectives of this kind in their sections on human and social security.

49. Seeking to meet their commitments and implement the Millennium Goals and Targets, especially Goal 3, which is the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, Arab States have, in general, directed their efforts in this area to the elimination of gender disparity at all levels of education, and the development of an education system that incorporates a gender perspective and is sensitive to all relevant contemporary concepts and practices.

50. Other actions taken by these States include:

(a) Increased spending on education and larger education budgets;

(b) Activation of the role of education in achieving sustainable development;

(c) Reducing illiteracy and school dropout rates;

(d) Opening new colleges and building new schools, especially in villages and remote areas, and upgrading existing school buildings;

(e) Establishing more kindergartens;

(f) Increasing school attendance rates;

(g) Increasing the length of compulsory school attendance;

(h) Integrating pupils with special needs, both boys and girls, into government-operated schools;

(i) Employing more educational support and guidance personnel.

51. Successful programmes and projects in this area have included:

(a) Elimination from school books of illustrations showing discrimination against women and textual matter demeaning to women;

(b) Revision of curricula to include some of the issues addressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and population and environmental education concepts;

- (c) Provision and distribution of school books free of charge in some States;
- (d) Availability of loans to enable girls to attend school;
- (e) Universal school health service coverage;
- (f) Development of new educational models, including one-room schools, distance learning, teleconferencing, and travelling schools for Bedouin areas, the latter being a major experiment that will enable girls to attend school while leading a nomadic life;
- (g) A transition from traditional education to electronic education;
- (h) Preparation of a project for the schools of the future, which will seek to develop both male and female pupils' skills in the field of modern electronic media;
- (i) Organization of specialized training courses for persons of both sexes in the field of adult education;
- (j) Founding of a number of centres and clubs, including centres for the gifted, measurement and assessment centres and students' clubs;
- (k) Utilization of information and communication technology to raise pupils' knowledge acquisition levels at the primary level;
- (l) Achievement of a high level of technical skill and implementation of a computer laboratory project in primary and intermediate schools for pupils of both sexes;
- (m) Provision of nourishing meals for female pupils;
- (n) Introduction of psychological and educational guidance programmes in schools;
- (o) Appointment of women as presidents and deans at a number of universities, presidents of teachers' unions, directors of departments within ministries of education, university instructors and heads of educational agencies. It thus appears that Arab States have addressed the issue of women's education and training both quantitatively and qualitatively.

52. Many NGOs in these States are providing coordination with ministries of education and working in partnership with international organizations to implement women's literacy programmes and hold training courses on the gender concept and many other issues associated with the advancement and empowerment of women.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

53. Despite these important actions and impressive accomplishments in the field of education, illiteracy rates for women continue to be higher than those for men. There is a clear-cut gap in educational levels, especially in rural areas. Consequently, there are many obstacles, gaps and challenges remaining in this area, including those listed below:

- (a) Limited budget allocations for education in most Arab States;
- (b) The prevailing cultural climate, which is opposed to education for girls, especially in Bedouin areas and villages, and in favour of early marriage;
- (c) The fact that girls are kept busy with agricultural tasks and thus unable to attend school;
- (d) The need for training for men and women to keep up with the rapid pace of technological change;

- (e) Weak monitoring structures;
- (f) Continuing disparities between urban women and women in rural areas as regards available choices and vocational training;
- (g) The question of how universal education is to be maintained in the face of incessant population growth;
- (h) A substantial gap between the content of education on the one hand and the labour market and socio-economic development needs on the other.

54. In an effort to address these various factors, Arab States generally are committing to increasing their education budgets, activating compulsory school-attendance legislation at the primary level, reducing illiteracy rates, closing the gender gap, modernizing their education systems to bring them into line with the knowledge economy, developing school infrastructures, and reviewing curricula with a view to upgrading them and making them more relevant. They are also committing to overhauling their vocational and technical education programmes to take account of scientific and technological innovation, the requirements of development and labour market needs, broadening computer education, activating the role of education in achieving sustainable development, developing programmes designed to support the elimination of direct fees in order to ease financial pressures on students' families, integrating the concept of gender disparities in school curricula, addressing the situation of teachers of both sexes and enabling them to deal with gender issues, and establishing committees to supervise curricula and writers of school books.

C. WOMEN AND HEALTH

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

55. In some Arab States, the health sector is regarded as a developmental service priority aimed at ensuring that all citizens of both sexes may enjoy access to comprehensive health care. Successful measures in terms of public policy and legislative change in this area include the enactment of laws guaranteeing health care on a gender-equal basis. Some States have adopted legislation regulating the marketing of mother's-milk substitutes, adopting the standards of the *Codex Alimentarius* in the matter, in order to preserve infants' health and ensure that they are properly nourished. Another measure is requiring fast-food restaurants to serve nutritionally desirable drinks such as milk or fruit juice with children's meals, instead of soft drinks, and yet another is the use of iron-enriched flour. The legislatures of some Arab States are currently debating draft legislation making a premarital medical examination compulsory, and draft legislation on health insurance for non-citizens. Public-health services, preventive measures and treatment are free in some States, while in others they are provided free only to those who are unable to pay for them. All children of both sexes under the age of six are entitled to free comprehensive health care.

56. As a means to the implementation of these legislation-based policies, Arab States in general have created gender-disaggregated databases in the field of health statistics. They have also developed a variety of plans and strategies, including population strategies, national reproductive health strategies, and school health strategies through which nutrition and vaccination services are made available to girls, and they are taught health awareness and how to care for their teeth. In addition, anti-poverty strategies include many components of relevance to health, such as greater use of family planning measures, measures to reduce maternal and infant mortality rates and plans for the elimination of chronic diseases and their causative factors, such as obesity, hypertension and diabetes. Some States are now developing an integrated family health strategy as a framework within which Millennium Development Goals 6, 7 and 8 (combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development) can be implemented. These various development strategies include plans for ensuring that all citizens of both sexes enjoy access to comprehensive health care services. Moreover, Arab States have established a number of national mechanisms, such as committees to address the issues of AIDS, the elderly, the use of narcotics and children's welfare, typically working in cooperation with relevant ministerial agencies, international organizations and the private sector.

57. A wide variety of successful programmes in this area have been implemented in all Arab States. Some of the most noteworthy of them have been:

- (a) Family planning and reproductive health;
- (b) Comprehensive free premarital medical examinations in some States;
- (c) Early detection of cancer;
- (d) Foundation of a clinic for women who have had repeated miscarriages, the first of its kind in the Middle East;
- (e) Prevention of unlicensed persons from practising medicine;
- (f) Iron deficiency anaemia, sickle-cell anaemia and hereditary blood disorders;
- (g) Foundation of a molecular genetics laboratory to investigate the causes of repeated miscarriages;
- (h) Reduced maternal mortality rates;
- (i) Increased life expectancy;
- (j) Integration of reproductive health concepts into school curricula and courses of study at colleges of medicine;
- (k) Various educational programmes in the field of health awareness;
- (l) Provision of safe drinking water;
- (m) Capacity-building in the field of reproductive health by sending many doctors and midwives abroad to take training courses in state-of-the-art reproductive health and family planning techniques;
- (n) Establishment of new hospitals and health institutions and centres, and establishment of family medicine centres;
- (o) Establishment of computer networks linking hospitals and government-run health centres;
- (p) Restructuring of the health sector;
- (q) Primary health care;
- (r) Homes for the care of the elderly;
- (s) Development of institutional efficiency and health monitoring;
- (t) Postpartum care;
- (u) "Healthy villages" project, in-clinic services, home visits, and natural childbirth centres. Other programmes that have been implemented in some States include allowing women who have become pregnant as a result of rape to have abortions, and combating the phenomenon of female genital mutilation.

58. We may note at this point that one Arab State has appointed a women Minister of Health, for the first time ever, that growing numbers of women are holding senior executive posts in various fields of specialization, and that female nurses are being appointed in government-run schools.

59. These various programmes have been implemented either by the relevant line ministries themselves or by them in partnership with national mechanisms or national and international bodies, and in coordination with NGOs working in the area of women's and children's health.

60. As a result of these policies and programmes, tangible progress has been achieved in women's overall health situation. By way of illustration, we may mention, *inter alia*, higher life expectancy at birth, lower total per capita fertility rates, lower infant and maternal mortality rates, increased use of family planning, perinatal care, detection and treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, early detection of breast and cervical cancer, and widespread health education, including consultation services for adolescent girls.

2. *Remaining obstacles, gaps and challenges*

61. Obstacles and challenges remaining in this area may be summarized as follows:

- (a) The high cost of health care services;
- (b) Inadequate budgets and scarce resources;
- (c) Early marriage;
- (d) Incidence of hereditary blood disorders;
- (e) Incidence of iron-deficiency anaemia in children, adolescents and adults, especially women;
- (f) Inadequate educational programmes targeting health awareness;
- (g) Infrequent periodic medical examinations for women;
- (h) Requirement for premarital medical examinations seldom enforced in practice;
- (i) Inadequate service infrastructure;
- (j) Inadequacy of statistics, and no statistics at all for abortion, which continues to be unlawful.

62. In some States, while progress has been made, the health situation of women continues to give cause for concern. For example, maternal, infant and child mortality rates are still high, HIV/AIDS is increasingly prevalent, and access to health care facilities in rural areas is inadequate.

63. Arab States are committed to increase health care budgets, establish more mother and child health units, strengthen family planning and reproductive health care programmes, and use the media to heighten awareness of health issues.

D. VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

64. The phenomenon of violence against women is not a taboo subject in most Arab countries; on the contrary, it has been brought out into the open and has become a matter for discussion, scrutiny, demands for accountability and condemnation. It has been discussed by Governments and parliaments, and various public policy and legislative measures aimed at addressing it have been adopted to good effect. In recent years, a number of Arab States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and have undertaken reviews of the provisions of some of their own laws with a view to abrogating any gender-based discrimination and thereby eliminating legal violence against women. Some States have added new provisions to their criminal law, making some types of violence against women criminal offences, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence, and amended other provisions, notably those dealing with honour killings.

65. The subject of violence against women has been added to the national strategies of a number of Arab States, and as a result has become a fundamental, official issue for society. Governments have committed to developing numerous programmes aimed at eliminating this phenomenon.

66. Successful programmes and model projects implemented by these States have included, in general terms, the preparation of reports and studies on the subject of violence against women and children and the formulation of national plans and strategies for its elimination, and the organization of national awareness campaigns and practical activities on the various forms of violence against women, often in partnership with

women's groups and human rights institutions. In the same context of partnership with these organizations, States have established shelters for battered women and family protection centres, and have created directorates expressly to deal with the issue within the Government's public safety administration. They have also set up distress telephone lines for the use of women who are at risk of various forms of violence, and have provided legal guidance and psychological reassurance services. Some States have established an office expressly to receive complaints from women about gender-based discrimination.

67. The phenomenon of so-called honour killings in some Arab countries has regressed substantially in recent years. Criminal codes have been amended to provide for punishment of these crimes, and special programmes have been organized to enhance awareness of how serious they are and how important it is to eliminate them. Some institutions now offer a variety of services for threatened victims of honour killings. The phenomena of female genital mutilation and the fattening of women are also being addressed, and palpable progress has been made, as is apparent from States' efforts to disseminate awareness of how harmful these practices are, often with the support of religious leaders. Scientific seminars have been held on these sensitive issues.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

68. The efforts of Governments in the area of violence against women have encountered a number of obstacles, difficulties, gaps and challenges. Perhaps the most important of these is the prevailing socio-cultural climate: women continue to be subject to various kinds of physical, psychological and sexual abuse and violence, such as verbal abuse from husbands and relatives, compulsory childbearing, exclusion from decision-making within the family, restrictions on movement outside the home, genital mutilation of girls, fattening by means of overfeeding or by the use of chemicals, exclusion from inheritance, and unpaid farm work. Some of the remaining obstacles may be summarized as follows:

(a) The laws of most Arab States, which at present are unable to punish or deter perpetrators of violence;

(b) Reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which are still in effect, and failure to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention and the Declaration on Violence against Women;

(c) Reluctance of the courts to convict perpetrators of acts of violence against women in some States that have made such acts criminal offences, and difficulty in obtaining judicial reviews in other States;

(d) Scarcity of statistics and studies on the extent to which women are at risk of violence, especially within the family;

(e) Failure of victims to report incidents of violence, and limited ability of police and health facilities to shelter them;

(f) Inadequate awareness on the part of those responsible for following up cases of violence of how these issues should be dealt with;

(g) Increasing incidence of violence against women because of psychological pressure on men in situations of armed conflict or economic deterioration.

69. Arab States have undertaken various commitments in this connection: to overhaul their legislation, to foster a culture of law and to provide psychological and guidance services, among other things.

E. WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

1. Policies, actions and achievements

70. Among the most important actions and accomplishments to the credit of Arab States in this area have been ratification of the four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I, the Convention on the Prohibition of the

Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental Modification Techniques, and the establishment of national committees to apply the principles of international humanitarian law to national legislation.

71. Successful programmes and projects have included, in general terms, the establishment of a social development office and a “martyrs’ office”, in both cases to provide care services for persons who have been psychologically damaged as a result of occupation, invasion and captivity, the organization of training courses on international humanitarian law for police officers, and the integration of international humanitarian law into the courses taught in colleges of law.

72. Many public welfare associations have sought to mitigate the suffering caused by war and have established various committees to monitor and care for the families of missing persons, make it easier for students to attend their courses, to continue to pay the salaries of employees and workers who have been dismissed by the occupying power, and lastly, to try to resolve conflict before it leads to war.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

73. The Israeli occupation and the war on Iraq are the main difficulties confronting Arab States as they attempt to raise their peoples’ morale and provide them with acceptable services. Another difficulty is the frequent practice of detaining women and holding them as hostages to be exchanged for their husbands and sons, with all the psychological and physical harm that that entails.

74. Arab States are committing to the development of programmes targeting young people of both sexes that are designed to enhance their social awareness of the destructive effects of armed conflict on women and children, programmes on the concepts of citizenship, justice, peace, the principles of international law and the content of international conventions on the protection of women. They are also committing to increased participation by women in the machinery of peace-making operations, and to efforts to induce the media to give prominence to the role assumed by women in situations of armed conflict.

F. WOMEN AND THE ECONOMY

1. Policies, actions and achievements

75. The economic empowerment of women is considered a fundamental priority by some Arab States, which have made it an important theme in their national plans and strategies. A number of successful measures have been taken to this end, including the enactment of new laws or the revision of existing laws to protect women’s economic rights. Some new national constitutions state explicitly that the State guarantees equality between the sexes in various areas of life, including social and economic matters. Arab States’ labour laws are also based on gender equality, although they confer some additional rights on women in order to help them manage both their family duties and their responsibilities in the workplace; these rights include maternity leave, nursing breaks, leave without pay to care for children, leave during the waiting period following the husband’s death, and the like. Furthermore, Arab States apply the provisions of international instruments to which they have acceded in their domestic legislation; for example, women may not be required to do work that is dangerous or injurious to their health, or to work at night. Apart from provisions of this kind, most labour codes do not discriminate between men and women.

76. Arab States are increasingly vulnerable to the impact of globalization, especially from an economic standpoint, and with a view to mitigating that impact, some of them have sought to expedite economic and administrative reform by enacting new legislation aimed at providing incentives for investment and creating a business-friendly institutional climate. In addition, many an Arab State has prepared a plan for use as a forecasting tool and an organizational framework for economic activity in general, and has taken action to activate the role played by employment offices and launch a project for an agency designed to combat unemployment.

77. By way of enforcing women's right to work, most Arab States have executed many successful programmes and projects, notably by founding institutions aimed at promoting the development and activation of women's participation in the economic development process and setting up funds for such purposes as rural development, fostering rural development associations and supporting employment and social protection. They have also established councils and other bodies to oversee training courses and organize training programmes.

78. Successful programmes and initiatives in this area include:

- (a) Creation of a database and pursuit of the necessary research;
- (b) Women now account for a larger proportion of the total work force in both the public and private sectors and also in various industrial sectors, including trade;
- (c) Women workers are now promoted and given incentive bonuses on an equal footing with men;
- (d) Microloans for projects run by women and for market and social insurance services;
- (e) Broadening of productive family programmes and retraining to meet labour market requirements;
- (f) Enhancement of economic and social productivity within the social insurance package, and encouragement for small investment projects for women;
- (g) Establishment of more care facilities for the children of women workers;
- (h) Establishment of a rural knowledge network to transmit knowledge about information and communication technology to inhabitants of rural areas;
- (i) Provision of various social services that help women workers, and creation of more training opportunities for women in both the public and private sectors;
- (j) Establishment of businesswomen's committees in many States;
- (k) Opening of a women's stock market in some States;
- (l) Enlistment of NGOs and the private sector as partners in many programmes, and funding or support from the private sector for new private projects initiated by women;
- (m) Participation by Arab women on the boards of directors of chambers of commerce and industry, and larger numbers of women in trade unions.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

79. Difficulties and obstacles in this area include the difficult economic circumstances currently affecting most Arab States, the continuing occupation and confiscation of their land, infrastructure weaknesses, and inadequate enforcement of labour legislation, especially in the private sector, in which some provisions of that legislation are not respected. Challenges include a lack of statistics on economic participation by women, especially in the private sector, the difficulty experienced by women in obtaining credit and high interest rates, and the continuing cultural bias against employing women, paying them the same wages as men, promoting them and providing them with vocational training. In addition, much of the work done by women in the agricultural sector is unpaid, and women's work within the home is invisible. Women also find it difficult to market their products, few of the factories and offices where women work have child care facilities, there are few training or vocational development courses for women, women tend to be unaware of their rights, there is little coordination among various economic projects, and in some countries women must secure the assistance of male representatives in order to conduct their economic affairs.

80. Arab States are committing to reviewing their economic policies to accommodate women's work more satisfactorily, and to that end they are undertaking various actions, including the following:

(a) Creation of a legislative environment that is receptive to greater participation by women in economic activity and guarantees equal employment opportunity for persons of both sexes;

(b) Effective enforcement of existing labour legislation in the private sector;

(c) Greater efforts to increase the numbers of gainfully employed women;

(d) Larger budgets for projects aimed at promoting the employment of women and making credit available for productive families and women as a means of encouraging them to set up in business on their own account;

(e) Establishment of adequate industrial incubators by providing advice and training for businesswomen;

(f) Enlistment of women and non-governmental associations as partners in economic planning;

(g) Upgrading women's capacities through training and education, and encouraging them to participate more fully in trade union activity.

G. WOMEN IN POWER AND DECISION-MAKING

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

81. One of the most important successful actions taken by Arab States in the area of public policy and legislative change has been, in general terms, the recognition—for the first time ever in some cases—that women have political rights. New constitutions have enshrined women's right to participate in politics and public affairs on the same footing as men, and laws have been enacted affirming that right and specifying that women have the right to stand as candidates for public office, to exercise the franchise, and to be appointed to advisory assemblies and the like without discrimination. States in which those rights had previously been recognized have organized training courses designed to enable women to exercise them effectively. In some Arab countries a new line ministry for political development has been established, with the task of fostering effective participation by women in political life. Most States have adopted a quota system for women in their national assemblies, and some, in addition, have instituted a positive discrimination mechanism for appointing women as members. These are temporary measures designed to enhance the political situation of women. Some States have recently adopted policy development plans aimed at addressing the issue of achieving a meaningful presence by women in decision-making processes.

82. A point that is particularly noteworthy in this connection is that Arab States have implemented programmes aimed at encouraging women to exercise their political rights, including the right to stand as candidates at local and national elections, and Arab women have indeed been participating in such elections in growing numbers. In addition, more and more women are holding important positions that allow them to participate in public decision-making, whether as members of Governments, as members of legislative assemblies, as municipal councillors, as members of the judiciary, as members of the diplomatic corps, or even as advisors to high-level State authorities or permanent delegates or heads of mission at the United Nations.

83. As a result, in most Arab States women are now present in all sectors. The list (which is not exclusive) includes, for example, the government sector (women occupy posts as cabinet ministers and directors of government departments and agencies), the judiciary (women serve as presiding magistrates and deputy public prosecutors), the education sector (women are university presidents and deans), and the banking sector (women chair boards of directors). In addition, they head departments and divisions of many organizations, sit on national policy development committees and, in growing numbers, occupy senior posts in political parties and trade unions. Women also serve on other committees of various kinds, including a

committee established to develop and implement a national labour covenant, legal and legislative committees, a committee responsible for following up a study on the privatization of several public sectors, a committee to review complaints in connection with commercial transactions, and national committees with authority to assess scientific qualifications. Arab women are now, for the first time, holding various posts from which they were formerly excluded.

84. Support for women's participation in decision-making processes has been forthcoming, in several States, in the form of experimental national mechanisms featuring a gender perspective with a view to enhancing participation by women in comprehensive national planning processes and more women in senior administrative posts in State institutions. There have been a number of pioneering experiments along these lines.

2. Remaining obstacles, gaps and challenges

85. While participation by women in most sectors is undoubtedly increasing, in some Arab States they are still marginalized in decision-making centres. Consequently, despite the clear-cut gains that have been achieved in this area in Arab States generally, there are still various obstacles and difficulties. These include:

(a) A lack of effective commitment on the part of decision-makers to closing the gender gap in political life and decision-making: official rhetoric in support of equality and equal opportunity is not matched by practical action to that end;

(b) The socio-cultural heritage and stereotyping of the roles of both sexes in society;

(c) The small percentage of women in policy-making posts, and the fact that women are not extensively represented in political parties, especially their upper echelons, and the fact that political parties tend to be biased against women;

(d) The application of a quota system in favour of women, even as a temporary measure, continues to encounter difficulties and challenges;

(e) Women continue to be excluded from certain posts;

(f) High illiteracy rates among women;

(g) Difficulty of reconciling family and outside responsibilities.

86. Arab States generally have committed to greater support for women's efforts to accede to decision-making posts and enhanced participation by instituting proportional representation and quota systems. They have also committed to creating a social culture receptive to the presence of women in senior posts, enforcing constitutional provisions guaranteeing equality for women, greater participation by women in paid employment and resource ownership and management with a view to enhancing their impact on decision-making, amending electoral laws, upgrading the cultural and political situation of women, raising their awareness of the importance of their role in decision-making centres, eliminating factionalism and altering the traditional political mentality.

H. INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

1. Policies, actions and achievements

87. Most Arab States have joined forces with NGOs and women active in the field of women's rights to develop national plans and strategies, as well as a wide variety of sectoral plans, aimed at promoting the advancement of women and solving problems confronting them in all areas. These include plans for the integration of women into the development process and plans for the elimination of violence against women. Some States have appointed focal points for gender equality in a number of line ministries, as we have seen. Strategies have focused on amendments to legislation, increased participation by women in public life, the

importance of access to and control of economic resources, and equality of opportunity in various fields. A number of Arab States have undertaken reviews of those strategies and their implementation mechanisms in the light of new political and economic developments and trends in the area of the status of women over the past decade, and also in the light of studies on implementation, outcomes and achievements to date in that area. This has led to important accomplishments, notably the incipient application of models characterized by a gender perspective and women's empowerment in public-sector institutions and agencies.

88. These mechanisms, in cooperation with the competent national institutions and experts, are providing training in the area of capacity-building, report-writing, ways and means of implementing integration plans and ensuring that they continue to be applied, and gender issues. We may note at this point that as yet most Arab States have had little experience with the inclusion of a gender perspective, but even so, experience to date with national institutions and local experts has yielded promising results.

89. Many monitoring and tracking mechanisms to measure progress in implementation have been established in Arab States. National plans for integrating a gender perspective into public institutions invariably include a monitoring component and appropriate mechanisms for effective action in that connection. This subject has been discussed in more detail earlier in this report.

90. As regards data and statistics, every State has identified critical areas of concern, based on its priorities. In general, it may be said that in all those areas, gender-disaggregated data remain a persistent problem. With the exception of statistics produced by national statistical offices, the annual and periodic reports issued by many—even, in some States, all—governmental institutions do not contain gender-disaggregated statistical data. This has led some national mechanisms and their partners to attribute particular importance to this issue.

91. Turning to civil society institutions, NGOs concerned with women's issues are playing a key role in tracking and monitoring progress toward mainstreaming a gender perspective, achieving gender equality and empowering women in all areas. In some Arab States, these NGOs constitute an advocacy group, a pressure group and a source of proposals in that connection. Some Governments have sought to enlist NGOs officially as participants in most of the mechanisms they have established to monitor the implementation of Beijing objectives.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

92. The main fundamental obstacles and difficulties may be summarized as follows:

(a) Despite substantial progress in promoting the advancement of women, the issue has not yet been incorporated into the action programmes of most Arab Governments, nor placed on their lists of priorities;

(b) Inadequate resources and support for specialized studies to survey gender issues;

(c) The weakness of coordination mechanisms and their lack of adequately trained personnel;

(d) Lack of an institutional framework in most States for coordination among various sectors and partnership with civil society and the private sector;

(e) Inadequacy of local resources and fundamental reliance on foreign assistance;

(f) Gender-disaggregated statistical data on the critical areas of concern continue to be a persistent problem in these States. In most areas, data generally, and gender-disaggregated data in particular, on such matters as the environment, poverty and violence are in short supply;

(g) Both official and grassroots institutions are still in need of greater awareness of the importance of planning that takes account of women's participation at all stages of the development process;

(h) It is crucially important to strengthen the capacities of individuals of both sexes and enhance their awareness of gender disparities in the interests of a better understanding of gender issues and ensuring that all programmes accommodate them.

I. HUMAN RIGHTS OF WOMEN

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

93. One major new achievement in the area of policy development and legislative change in some Arab States has been the creation of a new authority to enforce gender equality and justice in rights and duties. As a first step, new provisions have been added to family law at the instigation of this authority to safeguard certain fundamental human rights for women, in some cases after change along those lines had been resisted for several decades. These innovations have been accompanied by training both for newly appointed judges and for experienced judges, to ensure that the revised law will be effectively enforced. At the same time, a variety of education and information programmes designed to generate awareness of the new provisions have been introduced, and family courts have been instituted. Some Arab States have enshrined provisions on respect for internationally recognized human rights in their constitutions, and, as we have seen, most constitutions guarantee equality between men and women before the law in respect of rights and duties. Some States have established ministries and commissions with responsibility for human rights and the rights of women, children, and persons of both sexes with special needs, while some have created additional mechanisms supplementing their previous national mechanisms, such as advisory councils and national human rights centres. These function as independent national institutions serving to organize action on behalf of human rights, monitor the enforcement of the law, submit proposals for amendments in line with the provisions of the constitution and the contents of international instruments, and receive complaints from individuals and institutions. Human-rights NGOs and institutions are also active.

94. In recent years, some Arab States have ratified a number of international instruments, including conventions on women, and a majority of them have amended their domestic legislation to bring it into line with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, except provisions to which they have entered reservations. Women have thus scored additional legislative gains, and most forms of discrimination have been eliminated. Some particularly noteworthy gains have been the right of a married woman to obtain a passport without being required to secure her husband's permission in advance, the right of a married or divorced woman or widow to obtain a separate family record book, the extension of maternity leave to 90 days with pay, and the right of a working woman to bequeath her retirement pension to her legal heirs.

95. We may note at this point that some Arab parliamentary assemblies are currently discussing proposals relating to the human rights of women and various legislative provisions in that connection, such as the matter of citizenship and a mother's right to transmit her citizenship automatically to her children, a wife's right to transmit her citizenship to her foreign husband (one national assembly recently concluded its discussion of this issue and enacted a new citizenship law), and other provisions of family law. Some Arab States are currently studying their reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women with a view to withdrawing them. This would clear the way for them to bring their domestic legislation into line with the provisions of the Convention.

96. Successful actions by Arab States in this area include the founding of academic Chairs in women's rights within colleges, training and awareness courses for officials in various agencies on the rights of women as set forth in international instruments, notably the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, training courses for officials of ministries for which the Convention is relevant with a view to informing them how to draft national reports for submission to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, association of NGOs concerned with women's human rights with the task of writing such reports, action to promote the rights of women with special needs, and action to make particular categories of women, notably battered women, aware of their rights.

2. Remaining obstacles, gaps and challenges

97. Major obstacles, difficulties and gaps in this area include interpretations of Islamic law that involve gender discrimination and deny women some human rights to which, however, the Islamic religion actually entitles them. This has given rise to a gap between the human-rights provisions of the law and their practical application. Moreover, women are frequently unaware of their rights or do not know how to go about enjoying them and exercising them. The cultural heritage, with its customs and traditions, continues to affect society's view of women, as do the behavioural patterns that are prevalent in the social milieu and are imbued with a culture of gender inequality.

98. Arab States are committing to continue their action to amend and reform their laws to ensure gender equality and give women their human rights, enforce internationally recognized rights, and apply gender equality in practice.

J. WOMEN AND THE MEDIA

1. Policies, actions and achievements

99. Under this heading, successful actions by Arab States in the area of public policy and legislative change include, in general terms, the enactment of new legislation, amendments to existing legislation, the development of media-related strategies, programmes and agreements, the organization of training plans for persons employed in the field of the media with a view to enhancing their awareness of gender issues and disparities, restructuring Ministries of Information, and establishing media councils in partnership with civil society.

100. Some examples of successful programmes and projects in the field of the media have been the following:

(a) Discussion of women's issues in the various media, either through special weekly sections in newspapers or through television and radio programming on the subject;

(b) Use of media channels to instil favourable interest in the use of family planning;

(c) Urging individual members of society to participate in elections;

(d) Use of women participants in discussions of public issues that are presented to television viewers, and improving the content of programming aimed at women;

(e) Special programmes oriented toward rural women;

(f) Planning and developing programmes designed to encourage prominent persons of both sexes to be innovative in the various fields of culture and the arts;

(g) Action to upgrade the status of women in the field of media work and develop women's participation in and contribution to that field in tangible fashion at the level of the Ministry of Information and audio-visual media and print media institutions;

(h) Action to enable isolated population groups to obtain information via solar-powered radios.

101. In addition, some NGOs have produced documentary films that address various women's issues, such as violence, divorce and citizenship.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

102. Despite the growing proportion of women among the graduates of media colleges and the progressively larger numbers of women working in television and news agencies, in most Arab States

women continue to be largely unrepresented in decision-making and planning posts in all fields. They are also present only in very small numbers in political journals, owing to bias in staffing. To make matters worse, most media programming shows women in traditional roles and presents a stereotyped image of them; important topics of relevance to women are not addressed, and women are not brought in when political issues, including decision-making, are under discussion. Furthermore, women are exploited for purposes of advertising, quite legally, since there are no laws prohibiting this. Other difficulties and challenges are high unemployment rates among women graduates of media colleges and the fact that illiterate women cannot benefit from print media, and neither can women who live in remote areas, since newspapers are distributed in urban areas only. In addition, electricity is by no means universally available in rural areas, with the result that many groups of persons of both sexes do not have access to audio-visual media services.

103. Arab States are committing to reinforcement of the media's role in supporting women's issues, emphasizing their intellectual capacities, disseminating the idea of gender equality, eliminating stereotyped images of women and encouraging women to undertake media production so that that field does not remain an exclusive men's preserve.

K. WOMEN AND THE ENVIRONMENT

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

104. Under this heading, successful actions by Arab States in the area of public policy and legislative change include, in general terms, the enactment of environmental legislation aimed at protecting women from environmental hazards, the establishment of environment protection councils in partnership with civil society, and the inclusion of an environmental component in all the policies comprising the national strategy.

105. Some examples of successful programmes and projects in this field include an "environmental choices" project aimed at underlining women's role in society in terms of the upgrading of the environmental situation, strengthening every citizen's role in protecting the environment and adopting rational patterns of consumption, and reinforcing the role of grassroots institutions in supporting environmental and health awareness projects. Other successful programmes have been national and local campaigns for a healthy environment aimed at raising environmental awareness among persons of both sexes, waste recycling, the establishment of volunteer environmental protection committees, the designation of refuges for plants and some animals, inclusion of an environmental dimension in project planning on women's issues, scientific research in support of major project planning, the enlistment of women as partners in environmental affairs management, and encouragement for grassroots associations to execute projects of benefit to the environment and to women.

106. Most of these programmes have been implemented in partnership with governmental institutions responsible for supporting environment-related projects and NGOs. NGOs have had many of their staff members working on environmental issues in recent years, and have executed a number of environmental projects involving a variety of activities. These organizations also track and monitor legislation and regulations with a bearing on the environment, endeavour to heighten ordinary people's awareness of environmental issues, and disseminate concepts relating to the conservation of natural resources and means of eliminating environmental pollution.

2. *Obstacles, gaps and challenges*

107. Obstacles and difficulties in this area include the impact of the Israeli occupation, the Gulf War and the war against Iraq, the fact that most women do not possess the skills needed for environmental management purposes, lack of water resources, and loss of plant cover and other phenomena resulting from the degradation of natural resources that compel both women and men to abandon income-producing activities, thereby converting environmental problems into one of a number of reasons why increasing numbers of people, notably women, are living in poverty. Another challenge is the disparity between cities and villages, combined with the fact that many rural women are not aware of all their rights, especially in the matter of inheritance, and consequently seldom obtain the resources, notably land and credit, that would

enable them to enjoy higher standards of living. In addition, there is little concern to empower women and provide them with vocational and social training, and this acts as a barrier to their advancement and awareness in this area. This situation has left women devoid of influence and excluded from decision-making in all fields.

108. Arab States are committing to an effort to mitigate adverse environmental impacts on women by enabling women to participate in the development and monitoring of environmental policies, providing a healthy environment, disseminating environmental awareness, especially among women, originating and planning projects, and developing educational programmes on environmental protection.

L. THE GIRL CHILD

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

109. Arab States have devoted great attention to this issue in recent years. Some successful actions that they have taken in the area of public policy and legislative change have included:

(a) New constitutions that enshrine the principle of gender equality and the importance of providing children with protection and social care;

(b) Ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the enactment of new legislation dealing with children that more clearly defines the role of the State in ensuring that children are cared for, providing the conditions that will enable them to grow up in a healthy environment, and respecting their dignity and youth;

(c) Revising existing laws on the basis of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and some States have also included provisions dealing expressly with children in their family law;

(d) Affirmation of every girl child's right to education and training, and her right to life, physical and psychological health, nurturing, maintenance, shelter, identity, citizenship and entry in a family record book;

(e) Action to ensure that every child whose father is unknown is given a name and not recorded as a foundling, action to raise the age of marriage, and action to make it unlawful to employ young girl children;

(f) Implementation of the International Labour Organization Convention concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour;

(g) Establishment of Ministries of State;

(h) Preparation of a comprehensive national plan for protection of the rights of children, enhancing their situation, their development and their future, and drafting of a national strategy on early childhood development, complete with an action plan;

(i) Establishment of a monitoring agency or council on childhood and formation of national committees on childhood, with particular attention to girl children with special needs.

110. Some examples of successful actions, programmes and projects undertaken by Arab States have been the formation of working committees within various line ministries to study the provisions of the Convention on the Rights of the Child that are applicable in each case, the opening of child care facilities attached to ministries that accept only children of staff members of the ministry concerned, opening of child care facilities at literacy centres to look after the children of women attending courses, monthly financial assistance provided by some ministries to orphan children, children of detained persons and children of disabled persons, in-depth studies on and development of various programmes for the development of children's talents and caring for their cultural and health needs, organization of workshops and science outings, and a children's parliament designed to enhance children's awareness of gender in social, political

and economic life. In an effort to protect girl children from violence, some governments have organized campaigns against the sexual exploitation of children, while NGOs have established children's shelters.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

111. Typical obstacles, difficulties and gaps in this area include non-enforcement of relevant laws, failure to develop a national strategy on children, not enough kindergartens and even fewer that are free of charge, the continued prevalence of female genital mutilation in some States, the gender gap in education, the cultural factor, especially in rural areas, the traditional family upbringing, early marriage, few programmes on the rights of the girl child, juvenile delinquency, violence against children in both public life and private life, the use of children as beggars, homelessness resulting from family breakup or exclusion from family protection, the sexual exploitation of children, the fate of children who are experiencing difficult situations, and disabled children confronted with a lack of adapted facilities.

112. In general, Arab States have committed to amend their legislation as required for the benefit of the girl child, to provide her with education, to provide staff members of various institutions with training in the rights of the girl child, accommodation of girl pupils in one-room schools, and elimination of discriminatory material from school books.

III. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

113. Arab States have sought to promote gender equality as guaranteed in most of their constitutions and laws and realize it in all areas, support the empowerment and advancement of women with a view to enabling them to contribute more extensively and comprehensively to the development process as full citizens in constructive partnership, support the monitoring and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In pursuit of these ends, they have devoted substantial efforts to the task of developing an institutional framework, establishing numerous mechanisms and taking a variety of institutional measures. The result has been tangible progress for women, although gaps and challenges still remain.

A. NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

114. The Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Platform for Action that was one of its outcomes, recommended action to establish national bodies and mechanisms for the advancement of women, granting them authority to plan and advocate progress toward that end and monitor the achievement of such progress (Beijing Platform for Action, paragraph 217). Pursuant to that recommendation, and in order to translate constitutional provisions relating to gender equality into institutional, sectoral and legislative policy, most Arab States, generally speaking, have established new ministries with responsibility for women and children, or else ministries with responsibilities including women's issues, such as ministries of human rights or ministries of political development. Some States have both a ministry of women's affairs and a ministry of human rights. In addition, a number of States have set up units for women's affairs within various ministries with a view to eliminating gender-based discrimination.

115. At the same time, Arab States have established national committees, agencies, councils and the like to implement programmes, provide coordination, serve in an advisory capacity and so on. The tasks for which these various bodies are responsible include:

- (a) Development of public policy in the area of women's issues;
- (b) Reviewing all current laws relating to women and redrafting or replacing any provisions with wording indicative of gender-based discrimination, or taking any other necessary action to implement the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action;
- (c) Participating in the drafting of national development plans and sectoral development plans with a bearing on women's affairs. Some States have not stopped there, but have gone on to mandate these bodies

to prepare national plans and strategies, update and develop them in response to changing circumstances and situations, monitor their implementation, and also monitor public policy actions relating to women's issues;

(d) Setting up communication networks, in some cases between these national bodies and the various relevant ministries and institutions, in others between the national bodies and non-governmental associations and organizations, and in still others between the national bodies and the local and regional offices of international organizations;

(e) Organizing educational meetings and training programmes on women and on international instruments relating to women;

(f) Conducting any necessary studies;

(g) Integrating a gender perspective into policy development and planning. The monitoring teams established by governmental institutions in some Arab States represent an important experiment in gender mainstreaming in sectoral policy and strategy development and analysis. Their members include focal points in various departments within Ministries and civil society institutions;

(h) Providing assistance to decision-makers in this area, development partners and civil society with a view to adopting and maintaining a gender approach in development programmes;

(i) Creating a gender-disaggregated database and mustering the necessary resources for that purpose.

116. Along with all this, some Arab States have established parliamentary committees on women and children, mandated either to propose amendments to existing legislation or to draft new law on the status of women. Another function of these committees is to discuss proposed legislation and resolutions on women drafted by other authorities before it is laid before the country's legislative body.

117. At the implementation level, the main partners of these various bodies are directorates, departments and sectors within ministries whose responsibilities include the advancement of women. They work together in national agencies such as central statistics offices that are interested in maintaining gender-disaggregated statistics, join forces to support government bureaux by using optimal information technology, and cooperate with civil society institutions, especially women's associations and human-rights groups.

118. Some of these national mechanisms have substantial human resources at their disposal in the form of senior administrators, women experts and women specialists on gender issues. They also have the necessary office equipment and facilities and financial resources supplied directly by the government. In addition, they solicit financial resources to perform their missions and fund their programmes and activities from local and foreign sources, notably the local and regional offices of international organizations. These mechanisms enjoy direct links with the highest decision-making levels in the State, and they tend to operate on a cross-cutting basis, working with directorates or departments of women's affairs in a number of different ministries and many development sectors.

B. FUTURE ACTIONS RELATING TO INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN

119. In general terms, Arab States are committing to a variety of future actions in the area of institutional mechanisms. National action programmes and strategies for the advancement of women, for example, are currently being prepared in a number of States, and mechanisms to track gender-based discrimination in both official and popular institutions are being set up. Partnerships between ministries and their relevant agencies are being established for purposes of opening up channels of cooperation and fostering coordination between the agencies in question and national institutional mechanisms, and the latter are being enlisted as participants in the action programmes of ministries with responsibilities in the area of the advancement of women.

IV. MAIN CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

A. MAIN CHALLENGES

120. Excellent progress has been made in some of the Beijing critical areas of concern, such as education and health, while in others, such as women's human rights and violence against women, comparatively less progress has been achieved owing to the fact that their targets and objectives relating to the advancement of women are at variance with the dominant socio-cultural situation, and consequently the work of implementation has proceeded haltingly.

121. Accordingly, despite the programmes and projects that have been carried out to implement some areas of concern, further efforts and additional programmes, projects and measures are essential, indicating that future action will be required, depending on individual States' priorities as determined by their economic, social and political situations. Some areas of concern are more urgently in need of attention than others, notably women and poverty, women and the economy, human rights of women and violence against women. The task of implementing these areas will ultimately require more than addressing the main challenges.

122. In general, the main challenges may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Limited institutional capacities of national agencies and mechanisms;
- (b) Difficult economic circumstances, unstable political situations and inadequate financial resources;
- (c) Not enough gender mainstreaming machinery, and not enough gender awareness and training programmes;
- (d) Socio-cultural factors and extensive overlapping among the objectives of various critical areas of concern, with the result that they require an integrated approach in a multidimensional context rather than in isolation;
- (e) The nature of the international framework for addressing the situation of women, which has concentrated on shared international aspects, neglecting local and regional characteristics and the complexities of the actual situation, which are of the utmost importance in the Arab region, especially as regards the sphere of legislation.

B. ACTION TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

123. To address the challenges outlined above, a number of Arab States have developed action programmes covering areas deemed to warrant priority and containing an array of measures, actions and initiatives that they intend to take after 2005.

124. In the light of their economic, social and political situations, a number of fields deemed to warrant priority for Arab States have been identified, and those fields have been singled out for special attention over the next five years. They are women and poverty, women and the economy, women's human rights and violence against women, with concentration on basic lines of emphasis which at the same time represent urgent priorities for women. The most important of these are as follows:

- (a) Amendments to legislation for the benefit of women, with particular concentration on their family rights, civil rights and political rights, through application of the requirements of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;
- (b) Economic empowerment;
- (c) Social protection;
- (d) Institutional mechanisms.

125. In support of the implementation process, programmes and projects will focus on activating gender equality provisions enshrined in constitutions and other laws, revising the provisions of laws dealing with women's issues to bring them into line with international instruments that the State concerned has ratified, organizing awareness and education programmes for women, integration of gender issues in national plans and institutions, developing detailed gender-disaggregated statistics and precise indicators, promoting economic opportunities for women in poverty, providing continued training and vocational development for women to enable them to acquire modern technological skills and thereby join the labour market and upgrade their economic level, providing incentives for the development of various national mechanisms, and seeking to change the stereotyped image of women presented in the media.

PART TWO

AN APPRAISAL OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS, AND CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FORWARD-LOOKING MEASURES IN THAT CONNECTION

126. Part I of this report has presented a review of Arab States' efforts to implement the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the other initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Part II contains a summary of those efforts, an appraisal of achievements to date, and an overview of current challenges, followed by a set of proposed forward-looking measures aimed at enhancing and strengthening the implementation process during the coming five years, with a view to the advancement and empowerment of women and girls.

I. SUMMARY OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS

A. ACHIEVEMENTS

127. Arab States have some remarkable achievements to their credit. Some of the most important of these are outlined below.

128. Arab States have adopted a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, with tangible results in the form of social evolution and increasing participation by women in various sectors. Some of the most noteworthy results of this policy are described in the following paragraphs.

(a) *Institutional achievements*

129. Arab States have devoted substantial efforts to the task of promoting the development of the institutional context. Those efforts have featured the establishment of a host of national mechanisms and bodies and a wide variety of institutional measures, including: (1) the introduction of new ministries responsible for women, human rights and political development; (2) the creation of units within ministries that are dedicated to women's issues, for the purpose of applying a non-discriminatory approach; (3) the establishment of high-level national mechanisms or reconfiguration of the mandates of existing mechanisms to bring them into line with the recommendations on national mechanisms in the Beijing Platform for Action.

130. These mechanisms have been entrusted with responsibility for a broad range of implementational, coordinative and advisory tasks. Some of the most important of those tasks include the development of public policy in the field of women's issues; conducting a complete review of legislation currently in force relating to women; formulating proposals for remedial action in the event that gender-based discrimination in existing legislation is found, or recommendations for the adoption of new legislation designed to implement the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action; participation in the drafting of national development plans addressing every aspect of women's issues; direct action to prepare, update and develop national plans and strategies as changing circumstances and situations may require, tracking their implementation and monitoring the adoption of public policies relating to women's issues; the establishment of communication networks; organizing cultural meetings and training programmes; conducting essential studies; developing a gender-disaggregated database as a springboard for planning and follow-up action; and incorporating a gender perspective into the preparation of national policies, plans and strategies.

131. These various bodies are directly linked to the highest policy-making levels in the States concerned, and work on women's issues through ministries. They may take the form of a directorate or division for women's issues in ministries with responsibility for many development sectors. These national bodies and agencies include key executive-level representatives from directorates, divisions and sectors of ministries concerned with all aspects of the status of women.

132. Furthermore, some Arab States have established parliamentary committees on women and children, mandated either to propose amendments to existing legislation or to draft new law on the status of women. Another function of these committees is to discuss proposed legislation and resolutions on women drafted by other authorities before it is presented to the country's legislative body.

133. Many monitoring and tracking mechanisms to measure progress in implementation have been established in Arab States. National plans for incorporating a gender perspective into public institutions invariably include a monitoring component and appropriate mechanisms for effective action in that connection.

134. These States have also established independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues. Various means to this end are used, notably the filing of formal complaints.

135. A majority of Arab States have joined forces with NGOs to develop national plans and strategies aimed at strengthening the monitoring of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, as well as many sectoral plans addressing various aspects of the advancement and empowerment of women, and solving any problems that arise in that connection. They include plans for the integration of women into the development process and plans for the elimination of violence against women. The national plans of action that were put in place after the Beijing Conference have now been replaced by other plans covering the subsequent period, and some Arab States have begun work on the next phase, namely, plans for the period 2005-2010.

136. The national plans, and the various sectoral plans and strategies that were spun off from them, played a basic role in realizing a noteworthy measure of success in the area of public policy, scoring achievements in many of the critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action, and making tangible progress toward attainment of the Millennium Development Goals.

137. Strategies have focussed on amendments to legislation, increased participation by women in public life, the importance of access to and control of economic resources, and equality of opportunity in various fields. A number of Arab States have undertaken reviews of those strategies and their implementation mechanisms in the light of new political and economic developments and trends in the area of the status of women over the past decade, and also in the light of studies on implementation, outcomes and achievements to date in that area.

138. In addition, some Arab States have established teams to monitor gender issues. These represent an important experiment in gender mainstreaming in sectoral policy and strategy development and analysis. Their members include focal points in various departments within Ministries and civil society institutions. A number of Arab States have been able to adopt a non-discriminatory approach in some of the critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action.

139. As regards data and statistics, every State has identified critical areas of concern, based on its priorities. In general, it may be said that in all those areas, gender-disaggregated data remain a persistent problem. With the exception of statistics produced by national statistical offices, the annual and periodic reports issued by many—even, in some States, all—governmental institutions do not contain gender-disaggregated statistical data. This has led some national mechanisms to attribute particular importance to this issue.

140. Turning to civil society institutions, NGOs concerned with women's issues are playing a key role in tracking and monitoring progress toward mainstreaming a gender perspective, achieving gender equality and empowering women in all areas. In some Arab States, these NGOs constitute an advocacy group, a pressure group and a source of proposals in that connection. Some Governments have sought to enlist NGOs officially as participants in most of the mechanisms they have established to monitor the implementation of Beijing objectives.

(b) *Legislative achievements*

141. These achievements include the adoption of new constitutions or the amendment of existing constitutions to include provisions making all citizens equal before the law in rights and duties, with no gender-based discrimination in any area of political, social, cultural or economic life. Some constitutions expressly state that it is the duty of the State to support women's rights and to enact legislation on the protection of the family and all its members and on respect for human rights.

142. Other accomplishments in the area of legislation include the adoption of new laws and the amendment and revision of existing laws to bring them into line with provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, except where the State in question has expressed reservations to specific provisions. Various items of draft legislation are currently before legislative assemblies. One major achievement in this area has been the decision by some States to review their family law and ensure that it guarantees gender equality in private matters; in addition, a majority of Arab States have overhauled their laws, eliminating gender-based discrimination and ensuring gender equality in public matters as well. Clearly, women have made legislative gains as a result of these changes.

143. In recent years, some Arab States have ratified a number of international instruments, including conventions on women and children; they have published the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in their official gazettes and given it force of law. Other States are expected to follow suit within the year. Some Arab States are currently studying the justifications given for their reservations to the Convention with a view to withdrawing them, in some cases because the actual situation of women has evolved to the point where those reservations have become obsolete, in others because there have been high-level policy orientations in favour of gender equality and human rights for women.

144. Women's issues have come to account for a substantial fraction of public debate in Governments and national assemblies and are a prominent aspect of suggestions from national mechanisms, while gender mainstreaming is now discussed at the intergovernmental level.

145. Indeed, all the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and all the initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly have been the object of Arab States' attention. Their efforts have included a broad range of measures, actions, programmes, projects and mechanisms in a variety of fields, many of which have been highly successful. In addition, tangible progress has been made toward the Millennium Development Goals. All Arab States have focussed on certain fields in particular, such as the welfare of children and education, and in these they have achieved success in both quantitative and qualitative terms.

B. OBSTACLES AND GAPS

146. In their implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, most Arab States have undeniably been confronted with difficulties, obstacles, gaps and challenges which continue to stand in the way of the empowerment of women and the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination. The basic, fundamental obstacles and difficulties are summarized in the paragraphs below.

(a) Inadequate financial resources: funding is a key factor in the establishment and implementation of various projects, programmes and actions, especially those relating to women, while outside funding for national projects encounters challenges in addition to possible internal difficulties;

(b) The current economic, cultural, social and political situation and the impacts of occupation and wars: all these play a fundamental role in the determination of national priorities;

(c) The regional political situation: the regional situation is directly reflected in the internal situation of some States, and hence is a crucial factor in the identification of issues requiring action, suitable mechanisms to that end, and appropriation of the necessary funding. As a result, national priorities are subject to constant change, and this makes it difficult to focus consistently on women's issues in particular fields. In the case of some States, economic difficulties and occupation aggravate matters further;

(d) The abuse of religious teachings: the publication of interpretations characterized by gender-based discrimination in the matter of rights and denial of women's human rights, to which they are actually entitled by their religion, makes it difficult to enforce legislation and broadens the gap between the provisions of the law and its practical application;

(e) The weakness of coordination, observation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and their lack of adequately trained personnel;

(f) The commitment of States to gender mainstreaming has been translated only to a limited extent into public policy in the form of practical plans, programmes and projects with corresponding budget allocations, and has not been properly incorporated into the organizational structures of the various State institutions;

(g) Gender-disaggregated statistical data on the critical areas of concern continue to be a persistent problem in these States. In most areas, data generally, and gender-disaggregated data in particular, on such matters as the environment, poverty and violence are in short supply. Gender-disaggregated statistics and information in official documents and reports do not convey an accurate picture of the gender gap or reflect the true level of women's contributions to and roles in economic, cultural, social and political life;

(h) Both official and grassroots institutions are still in need of greater awareness of the importance of planning that takes account of women's participation at all stages of the development process. Furthermore, it is crucially important to strengthen the capacities of individuals of both sexes and enhance their awareness in the interests of a better understanding of gender issues and ensuring that all programmes accommodate them;

(i) Weakness of institutional structures, the impact of globalization on the socio-economic situation of women, and gender gaps in all fields together constitute a fundamental challenge to the task of achieving equality;

(j) The socio-cultural heritage continues to constitute a fundamental obstacle to gender equality and hence to full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action's critical areas of concern and the Millennium Development Goals.

II. APPRAISAL OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS

147. In the first place, it is essential to note that in appraising Arab States' efforts to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly and evaluating progress to date, we should, *inter alia*, recall the situation as it was in former days before passing judgement on what is happening now. A summary appraisal of Arab States' accomplishments will be found in the paragraphs below.

A. TANGIBLE BASIC ACHIEVEMENTS

148. Arab States' achievements may be summarized as follows:

(a) Adoption of a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women. This would not have been feasible in the absence of high-level political determination on the part of a number of Arab States to enlist women as participants in comprehensive national development, enhance their status, empower them, and achieve gender equality. This has led to growing concern with women's issues in all fields and sectors, and consequently those issues have become fundamental and have been incorporated into basic development priorities. This concern is evident at both official and grassroots levels;

(b) Development of national work plans and strategies to support implementation of this policy;

(c) Establishment of a high-level national mechanism or reconfiguration of the mandates of existing mechanisms to ensure the implementation of this policy in all sectoral fields. In particular, this mechanism,

in its capacity as a governmental authority, has been entrusted with coordination, monitoring and follow-up functions;

(d) Establishment of independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues;

(e) Preparation of a national programme of action for the advancement of women, or development of a number of projects in pursuit of that objective over a five-year period in a framework of follow-up to the implementation of national work plans. In addition to this, some Arab States have developed a variety of sectoral plans;

(f) Preparation of a second national plan covering the next five years, and a number of States have begun work on a third plan for the period 2005-2010;

(g) The national plans, and the various sectoral plans and strategies that have been spun off from them, have played a basic role in realizing a noteworthy measure of success in the area of public policy, scoring achievements in many of the critical areas of concern from the Beijing Platform for Action, and making tangible progress toward attainment of the Millennium Development Goals;

(h) Most Arab States have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, submitted their reports, and received the final comments of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. All this has contributed to the enactment of new legislation in some cases, the adoption of amendments to existing legislation in other cases, and in still others the drafting of a variety of legislative measures which are currently before national assemblies for consideration. Some States have published the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in their official gazettes, thereby giving it force of law, and some are currently studying the justifications given for their reservations to provisions of the Convention with a view to withdrawing them;

(i) One major achievement in the area of legislation has been the decision by some States to review their family law and ensure that it guarantees gender equality in private matters; in addition, a majority of Arab States have overhauled their laws to eliminate gender-based discrimination and ensure gender equality in public matters as well;

(j) Women's issues have come to account for a substantial fraction of public debate in Governments and national assemblies, while gender balance is now discussed at the intergovernmental level, with the result that it has been mainstreamed in various sectoral strategies and plans that have been developed in recent years, and also in line with ministries and their respective institutions and agencies;

(k) Teams have been established to monitor gender issues. These represent an important experiment in gender mainstreaming in sectoral policies and strategies;

(l) There have been substantial efforts to develop an institutional framework, as exemplified in the establishment of a host of national mechanisms and agencies and the implementation of various institutional measures.

B. PROGRESS TO DATE

149. Progress made to date is summarized in the following paragraphs.

(a) Adoption of a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and the empowerment of women;

(b) Enlistment of women as participants in comprehensive national development and enhancement of their status;

(c) Application of a non-discriminatory approach in some of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action;

(d) Execution of programmes and projects, implementation of numerous actions, and achievements in many of the Beijing critical areas of concern;

(e) Fulfilment of many of the commitments undertaken by Arab States at the Beijing Conference and in national work plans;

(f) Preparation of a variety of sectoral strategies and plans;

(g) Reforms in the area of public policy;

(h) Attainment of a number of the Millennium Development Goals and targets;

(i) Ratification of international instruments dealing with the status of women, including in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

(j) Enactment of new legislation and amendment and revision of existing legislation to ensure gender equality in both public and private life;

(k) Gender mainstreaming and incorporation of a gender perspective into national plans and strategies and within ministries and State institutions and agencies.

C. INITIATIVES AND INDICATORS

150. Initiatives and indicators of progress in the advancement of women include:

(a) Reintroduction of scope for independent judgement in religious matters, and adoption of equality as an authoritative standard, with the result that new family law has been drafted;

(b) Addition of new provisions to criminal law, making some acts of violence against women criminal offences, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence; amendments to existing provisions of criminal law relating to crimes of honour, among other things;

(c) Establishment of institutions concerned with human rights;

(d) Allocation of funds for training and rehabilitation in general budgets;

(e) Broadening the scope of the social safety net (insurance and assistance benefits), raising the minimum wage and providing more opportunities for employment;

(f) Development of the education system and upgrading of internal capacities, being mindful to the concept of gender balance, and elimination from school books of illustrations indicating discrimination against women and textual matter demeaning to women;

(g) Reduction of existing gender gaps in all fields, promotion of family planning, reduced mortality rates among children and women, increased life expectancy at birth, increased average age of elderly women, lower total fertility rates, birth rates, infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates, upgraded perinatal care, encouragement for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and early detection of breast cancer and cervical cancer;

(h) The presence of women in all sectors, including, for example, the government sector (women occupy posts as cabinet ministers and directors of government departments and agencies), the judiciary (women serve as presiding magistrates and public prosecutors), the education sector (women are university presidents and deans and directors of educational institutions, occupy senior positions in Ministries of

Education and pursue academic careers), the banking sector (women chair boards of directors), and other sectors (women head departments and divisions of many organizations, sit on policy development committees, and occupy senior posts in political parties and trade unions).

D. SHORTFALLS AND GAPS

151. While tangible progress in the matter of the status of women has unquestionably been made, there are still shortfalls: a number of Arab States have not yet been able to innovate radically and effectively in many of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, and in others action aimed at expediting measures designed to empower women and promote gender equality has remained a dead letter. The most important of these shortfalls are outlined in the paragraphs below.

(a) Women's issues have not yet been incorporated into the programmes of work of some Arab Governments, nor placed on their lists of priorities, possibly because political and economic problems tend to be regarded as more urgent;

(b) Decision-makers are not strongly committed to serious, systematic follow-up to the implementation of policies, plans and strategies, despite the fact that Governments have officially accepted their requirements;

(c) States' commitment to gender mainstreaming has been translated only to a limited extent into public policy in the form of practical plans, programmes and projects with corresponding budget allocations, nor has it been incorporated into the organizational structures of the various State institutions;

(d) Many programmes have been designed in a manner that involves many or most Government ministries and agencies; indeed, some of them may have implications for economic and political aspects of foreign relations;

(e) The weakness of coordination, observation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, and their lack of adequately trained personnel;

(f) Gender-disaggregated statistical data on the critical areas of concern continue to be a persistent problem in these States. In most areas, data generally, and gender-disaggregated data in particular, are inadequate;

(g) The abuse of religious teachings through the publication of interpretations characterized by gender-based discrimination in the matter of rights and denial of women's human rights, to which their religion actually entitles them;

(h) Non-enforcement of legislation and the gap between the provisions of the law and its practical application;

(i) A lack of effective commitment on the part of decision-makers to closing the gender gap in political life: official rhetoric in support of equality and equal opportunity is not matched by practical action to that end. Consequently, while participation by women in most sectors is undoubtedly increasing, in some Arab States they are still marginalized in decision-making centres and excluded from certain posts, and the idea of a quota system in favour of women, even as a temporary measure, continues to encounter difficulties and challenges;

(j) The phenomenon of the feminization of poverty has begun to appear;

(k) The women's health situation continues to be a source of concern, illiteracy rates among women are high compared to the corresponding rates for men, and there is a definite gap in educational levels, especially in rural areas. Furthermore, women are at risk of various forms of abuse and physical, psychological and sexual violence, the culture of prejudice against women persists in the fields of

employment, wages, promotion and occupational training, and women are exploited for advertising and publicity purposes;

(l) Such phenomena as female circumcision, early marriage, juvenile delinquency and violence against children still persist;

(m) Various disparities also persist, including disparities in development opportunities between one Arab country and another, and disparities between the situations of urban and rural women, wealthy and poor women, and healthy women and women with special needs;

(n) Gender gaps persist in all fields, presenting a fundamental challenge to the task of achieving equality. The quality of education, for example, is still a basic problem, and unemployment among women is a very real problem as well. The gap in political participation is still a reality at all decision-making levels. Violence against women is increasing, and discriminatory laws constitute a basic challenge confronting those working to address women's issues. The socio-cultural heritage is a fundamental stumbling-block to gender equality, and hence to full implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals and targets.

E. SUMMARY APPRAISAL

152. Despite the shortfalls outlined above, and many others besides, there have been genuine achievements, and steps have been taken to implement the Beijing critical areas of concern and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and this suggests that there is a dynamic process at work in Arab States. It is an indication of the extent to which women's issues have captured the attention of all actors in society, including both governmental agencies and civil society institutions and organizations, and the fact that there is now a widespread concern to promote the empowerment of women and participation by women in various fields on a footing of equality with men.

153. As a result of the efforts that have been devoted to the advancement of women and the results that have been achieved, Arab women have made substantial gains in many fields. These important accomplishments are indicative of the advent of new societies in Arab States with characteristics, features and distinctive aspects that are already clear.

154. At the same time, a number of questions remain unanswered. If the political will is there and the objective is clear, what are the challenges that have impeded full implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly? How much potential is there for change in the situation of Arab women by the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century in the light of the distinctive characteristics of the emerging new societies?

III. CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FORWARD-LOOKING ACTION TO ADDRESS THEM

155. As we saw in the introduction to this report, the Commission on the Status of Women will be considering two themes: a review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and current challenges and forward-looking strategies for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls. This will enable the Commission to identify achievements, gaps and challenges and provide an indication of areas where new actions and initiatives are needed for further implementation of the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the special session.

156. The function of this report is essentially the same: the first theme is covered in part I, while part II is devoted to the second, namely a review of current challenges and future action to address them.

A. MAIN CURRENT CHALLENGES

157. As noted earlier, substantial progress has been achieved in some of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, slighter progress in others, but there are still formidable challenges that have

impeded implementation in the remaining areas, and most Arab States have been unable to fulfil their obligations with respect to them because of the number and variety of those challenges.

158. Prior to the feasibility of making progress in implementing any of these remaining critical areas of concern, therefore, the main current challenges must be overcome. Otherwise, the obligations of States in that connection will remain a dead letter, and matters will remain at an impasse.

159. The paragraphs below present a survey of some of the main challenges that have become apparent from our review of Arab States' efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.

(a) All human rights, civil, cultural, economic, political and social, are interrelated, interdependent and complementary, and all are essential for the realization of gender equality. This presents a challenge in that the various critical areas of concern must be addressed in an integrated, multidimensional framework, and not in isolation;

(b) There are many government agencies and NGOs that are concerned with the status of women, and there are a host of programmes involving many or most government ministries and agencies. This results in fragmentation and duplication of programmes and projects, making them less effective and less beneficial; there has been too much diversity and not enough integration. This is a challenge that impedes the task of mustering resources and capabilities, and has a negative impact on the work of coordination and closing gaps;

(c) Gender gaps persist in all fields, presenting a fundamental challenge to the task of achieving equality. The quality of education, for example, is still a basic problem, and unemployment among women is a very real problem as well. The gap in political participation is still a reality at all decision-making levels;

(d) Discriminatory laws and reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women are still a fundamental challenge confronting those working to address women's issues;

(e) The socio-cultural heritage remains a fundamental stumbling-block to gender equality;

(f) Privatization is presenting women with fresh challenges, for the reason that they are the first to fall victim to job cuts;

(g) Technological innovation and migration are also presenting women with challenges;

(h) The limited institutional capacities of national agencies and mechanisms, and the absence of specialized gender mainstreaming mechanisms, are presenting women with further challenges;

(i) Globalization, and the social, economic and political damage it has wrought, have confronted Arab States with fresh challenges in their efforts to fulfil the commitments they undertook at the Beijing Conference and meet their objectives in that connection. The damage they have sustained as a result of globalization includes financial crises and economic instability, which have hindered their implementation of economic policies in some cases, and foreign debt service costs, which have weakened their ability to provide a social safety net and other services. In general, there has been an adverse impact on the availability of the resources required to implement programmes and projects in the various critical areas of concern, and this has been reflected in cuts in budget allocations for such fields as education and health. The phenomenon of the feminization of poverty has appeared or become more acute, working conditions have deteriorated, wage increases have not been forthcoming, and consequently living standards have not risen, jobs have disappeared, unemployment has increased, and many previously existing disparities have persisted or become even wider.

B. FUTURE ACTION

160. Any change unquestionably brings specific challenges with it, and it is always advisable to prepare for those challenges by undertaking future-oriented action. In an effort to address the main challenges facing them, a group of Arab States have developed a work programme covering areas deemed to warrant priority. The programme contains an array of actions, measures and initiatives that they propose to take after 2005, and new commitments that they have undertaken with a view to supporting the implementation process.

161. In the light of the present economic, social and political situation, a number of fields deemed to warrant priority for Arab States have been identified, and those fields have been singled out for special attention over the next five years, consisting of: women and poverty, women and the economy, women's human rights and violence against women, with concentration on basic lines of emphasis which at the same time represent urgent priorities for women.

162. From our appraisal of Arab States' efforts, our consideration of the progress they have made in the past decade in implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, and also our consideration of the challenges currently affecting the implementation process, it is clear that full implementation will call for political, legislative and institutional initiatives, action and measures at all levels, as well as better statistics and indicators and more resources in order to overcome the various obstacles and difficulties and address current challenges.

163. Political initiatives head the list of priorities, followed by legislative initiatives, because in the absence of action in these areas, full implementation will not be feasible, and it will not be possible to overcome the obstacles or address the challenges.

164. Political initiatives must include:

(a) Summoning the political resolve to achieve gender equality at all levels in order to implement the Platform for Action in full;

(b) Taking a political decision to promote participation by women in the comprehensive, sustainable development process;

(c) Taking a political decision to incorporate the issue of the status of women into the work programmes of governments, and to place it on their lists of priorities;

(d) Commitment on the part of decision-makers to seriously and systematically follow up the implementation of policies, plans and strategies whose requirements have been officially accepted;

(e) Translation of States' commitment to gender mainstreaming into public policy in the form of practical plans, programmes and projects with corresponding budget allocations, and its incorporation into the organizational structures of the various State institutions;

(f) Effective political commitment on the part of decision-makers to closing the gaps in all fields which at present constitute a fundamental challenge to the realization of gender equality;

(g) Effective political commitment on the part of decision-makers to closing the gender gap in political life, and a conscious political decision to ensure that there is no gap between official rhetoric in support of equality and equal opportunity and practical action to that end;

(h) Development of policies ensuring equality of opportunity between men and women;

(i) Gender equality and the empowerment of women must both be fundamental principles, included in all policies, programmes and projects.

165. Legislative initiatives must include:

(a) Creation of a non-discriminatory legal environment by taking action to ensure that all laws are consistent with the provisions of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This will require prior ratification of the Conventions in question, or, in the case of States that have already ratified them, withdrawal of their reservations. The same applies to the Optional Protocol to the latter Convention;

(b) Effective enforcement of all laws and the creation of an enforcement monitoring and follow-up mechanism.

166. In conclusion, this survey of Arab States' achievements and progress and the challenges they are currently facing suggests that it would be desirable to conduct a more detailed review of their efforts to promote greater equality and justice for Arab women since the Fourth World Conference on Women, with a view to obtaining a clearer picture of necessary action up to the year 2010 in pursuit of that objective.