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Against Wind and Tides:

**A Review of the Status of Women
and Gender Equality in the Arab Region
(Beijing +20)**

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AGAINST WIND AND TIDES:

A Review of the Status of Women and Gender Equality in the Arab Region 20 Years after the Adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action



United Nations
New York, 2016

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Acronyms

CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women
ESCWA	United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ICT	Information and Communication Technologies
ILO	International Labour Organization
IPU	Inter-Parliamentary Union
IUCN	International Union for Conservation of Nature
LDC	Least Developed Country (as per the decision of the United Nations General Assembly)
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SCR 1325	United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN Women	United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment

I. Introduction

As the international community marks the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, an analytical review of both progress and ongoing challenges in the implementation of this agenda for women's empowerment is important and timely. Taking stock of efforts that have been undertaken at the regional and national levels, such review will provide a basis for better understanding the ways of reaching gender equality. It will also be essential for deciding the best approaches to carry through other major initiatives, including the newly-adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.¹

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is one of the reference frameworks for the analysis of the situation of women around the world and for the assessment of States' efforts in support of women's empowerment. Adopted by consensus in 1995 following the mobilization of over 40,000 government delegates, experts and civil society representatives at the Fourth World Conference on Women,² the Beijing Platform embodies the commitment of the international community to achieve gender equality and to provide better opportunities for women and girls. Its key messages remain relevant today, affirming that women's rights are human rights and that equality between women and men benefits everyone.

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action does not only carry great symbolic value. It also offers a practical and action-oriented roadmap. By listing a number of 'measures that should result in fundamental changes,' it sets an agenda to safeguard women's rights and to ensure that a gender equality perspective is reflected in all policies and programmes at the national, regional and international levels. Actions taken by States to implement the Beijing Platform are reviewed every five years, through the following means:

- (a) National reports prepared by Governments following a unified format;
- (b) Regional synthesis reports drafted by the United Nations Regional Commissions, which draw from the relevant national reports;³
- (c) A global report submitted to the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) by the United Nations Secretary-General.⁴

For Arab countries, the twentieth-anniversary review of the implementation of the Beijing Platform comes at a time when the region stands at a major crossroads in the context of recent uprisings, political instability and protracted armed conflicts. Some remarkable progress has taken place in relation to the rights of women and girls, and overall, gender issues have gained significant momentum since 1995. New constitutions and legislation have enshrined women's rights and afforded better protection from gender-based violence and discrimination. Several States withdrew some or all of the reservations they had made upon ratification or accession to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and

¹ United Nations General Assembly, 2015b. See also ESCWA, 2015d, and ESCWA, 2015j.

² For more details about this context, see UN Women, 2015b.

³ As mandated by the United Nations General Assembly (Resolution A/RES/66/132), the Commission on the Status of Women (Agreed conclusions of the 58th session, E/2014/27) and the Committee on Women to the ESCWA Secretariat (E/ESCWA/ECW/2013/IG.1/7/Report), ESCWA led regional efforts to review the implementation of the Beijing Platform through a comprehensive programme that was delivered in 2014 and 2015 in coordination with UN Women and the League of Arab States. The initiative assisted in building the capacity of Government focal points and civil society to conduct national reviews. It also entailed a series of consultations which culminated with the endorsement of the *Arab Regional Synthesis Report on the Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Twenty Years Later*, and the adoption of the *Arab Declaration on Justice and Equality for Women in the Arab Region*, at a high-level ministerial conference held in Cairo in February 2015. Details of the programme and all national and regional review reports can be accessed at ESCWA's website dedicated to the twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration: <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/index.asp>.

⁴ United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2015.

all Arab States have now ratified or acceded to the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁵ Moreover, specialized governmental institutions entrusted with addressing women’s and gender issues have been created in most countries of the region. Arab States also adopted various national and regional strategies for the advancement of women, including female quotas in their national parliaments. The maternal mortality ratio in Arab countries has been nearly halved. Many States have reached or are close to reaching enrolment equality in primary education, and an increasing number of women are completing university studies, often in higher proportions than men.

Nonetheless, these positive developments sharply contrast with a reality in which discrimination against women and girls persists at all levels of society, and is often institutionalized by law. Newly established measures have not yet yielded a meaningful increase in women’s access to economic and financial resources and participation in decision-making. In many countries of the region, legal and institutional safeguards to protect women and girls from abuse have yet to materialize. Moreover, higher levels of education have not translated into an equivalent increase in access to formal work, keeping women at heightened risk of poverty and violence.

This mixed success in the advancement of gender equality in the Arab region in the last twenty years is complicated by ongoing political instability and armed conflicts. The region has witnessed a series of shocks and profound changes over the previous decades.⁶ Some countries have experienced revolutions and uprisings that prompted major constitutional changes, while others have engaged in more incremental transformation. A few States have been facing chronic institutional paralysis, which has prevented them from addressing any long-term issue, including gender-related reforms. Moreover, State fragmentation is a real concern in certain countries following the surge of regional movements and the increasing influence of non-State actors. In the meantime, internal strife, occupation and international conflict have resulted in a large number of casualties and taken a heavy toll on several Arab countries, wearing away the foundations for development and for the advancement of women.

The legacy of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action

“The fundamental transformation that took place in Beijing was the recognition of the need to shift the focus from women to the concept of gender, recognizing that the entire structure of society, and all relations between men and women within it, had to be re-evaluated. Only by such a fundamental restructuring of society and its institutions could women be fully empowered to take their rightful place as equal partners with men in all aspects of life. This change represented a strong reaffirmation that women’s rights were human rights and that gender equality was an issue of universal concern, benefiting all.” (United Nations Department for Public Information, 2000.)

A. OBJECTIVES AND RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the present study is to provide a thorough understanding of key achievements, remaining obstacles, and emerging threats to gender equality in the Arab region. As the Beijing Declaration and Platform

⁵ All Arab countries, with the exception of Somalia and the Sudan, have ratified or acceded to CEDAW. However, most of the States formulated extensive reservations and/or declarations regarding the applicability of particular treaty provisions that were deemed subject to compatibility with tenets of Islam and/or constitutional law. Comoros, Djibouti and Yemen are the only Arab States which acceded to CEDAW without any reservations. In May 2009, Jordan withdrew all of its reservations to CEDAW, but maintained a declaration with respect to articles 9 and 16. In April 2014, Tunisia also withdrew all of its reservations to CEDAW, keeping a general declaration on the applicability of CEDAW subject to compatibility with the national constitution. Egypt, Iraq, Kuwait and Morocco have partially withdrawn some of their reservations since the time they ratified or acceded to CEDAW. Information about the current reservations and declarations in relation to CEDAW can be found through the United Nations Office of Legal Affairs Treaty Collection, at <https://treaties.un.org/>.

⁶ See ESCWA, 2015e.

for Action reaches its twentieth anniversary, it is hoped that such research work may contribute to the Platform's continued visibility and the renewed commitment by Governments and stakeholders to its implementation.

This study aims to complement available literature by building on their findings, while striking a productive balance between general and specific analyses. A literature review showed that most existing research works on gender equality had a too broad geographical scope to enable in-depth understanding of the Arab context. Moreover, while various academic publications do offer detailed analysis of the situation of women in the Arab region, they are seldom concerned with policy issues, and are often rather theoretical in their approaches and conceptual references. Other available reports do provide insight on certain technical aspects of one or more of the 12 critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform, but without a systematic outlook on the web of regional priorities.

In this context, the following chapters will rely on detailed and current data to highlight the many positive developments that have taken place in recent years in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women in the Arab region. The study will also examine major remaining obstacles, persistent elements of discrimination, and the unprecedented challenges that the region is currently facing due to conflicts and their impact on women's rights, safety, and conditions. Such work takes on particular significance, not only in the context of the review of implementation of the Beijing Platform. It will be particularly relevant in the process of formulating strategies for the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which emphasizes the linkages between gender and development, and includes a Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 5) on 'Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women and Girls.' It is hoped that the present research and its findings will foster the elaboration of sound policies and scenarios for strategic directions and change in the years to come.

B. METHODOLOGICAL AND CONTEXTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

The Beijing Platform for Action serves as the guiding framework for this research. It consists of 12 'critical areas of concern,' each of which is broken down into a series of strategic objectives that include over 600 recommendations and proposed actions for governments, specialised entities, non-governmental organisations and the private sector.⁷ The present study does not purport to offer an exhaustive accounting of each of these recommendations in every Arab country; instead it provides a regional overview of progress and shortcomings, with special focus on high-priority issues for the advancement of women throughout the region.

In the following chapters, analysis is advanced along interconnected thematic clusters, emphasizing key actions that are expected from Governments. This is not to understate the importance of other stakeholders, in particular the members of civil society, who have played a significant role in the promotion of women's rights in the region by engaging in a range of activities that include the preparation of reports submitted to the CEDAW Committee and other treaty bodies, public advocacy for gender equality, and delivery of protection programmes and services to vulnerable women and girls. It should also be noted that while the

The twelve critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action

- ❖ Women and poverty
- ❖ Education and training of women
- ❖ Women and health
- ❖ Violence against women
- ❖ Women in armed conflict
- ❖ Women and the economy
- ❖ Women in power and decision-making
- ❖ Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
- ❖ Human rights of women
- ❖ Women and the media
- ❖ Women and the environment
- ❖ The girl child

⁷ The areas of concern and strategic objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action are listed in Annex I. The full text of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action can be consulted on the UN Women website, at <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>.

analysis in the study at times refers to the situation of ‘Arab women,’ this is merely a shorthand to describe the region’s many female inhabitants, which may come from various ethnic backgrounds, and include a sizeable group of migrant workers stemming from other countries around the world.⁸

The study has been prepared on the basis of comprehensive desk research, which examined analytical and programmatic reports from various United Nations agencies and international organisations, along with other related literature. Whenever possible, the study cites specific country examples and policies from national reports that were submitted in 2014 in the context of the twentieth anniversary review of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. In order to ensure the most rigorous and systematic analysis possible, this information is supplemented with quantitative and qualitative data from other international and national sources. The analysis also draws on key findings of other ESCWA publications and research projects, in particular those relating to women’s access to justice, gender-based violence, child marriage in times of conflict and displacement, and the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women, Peace and Security.

In terms of its contextual framework, the study situates its analysis of women’s rights and gender equality within the overall socioeconomic and political environment that has defined the Arab region during the last two decades. The Arab region encompasses 22 States, spanning from Oman in the east to Mauritania in the west, which all share similar historical, cultural and linguistic features.⁹ At the same time, there are stark contrasts among these countries in the economic, social and political realms. In particular, wide disparities exist among Arab States in terms of geographical size, population, level of urbanization and wealth. For example, the population of Egypt is almost one hundred times larger than that of Comoros.¹⁰ The majority of people in Comoros, Egypt, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen live in rural areas, whereas Lebanon and most of the countries that comprise the Gulf Cooperation Council are highly urbanized.¹¹ While the average gross domestic product per capita stands at \$7,574,¹² it ranges from \$128 in Somalia, which is one of the poorest countries in the world, to roughly \$94,000 in Qatar, which is one of the wealthiest.¹³

As a reflection of this diversity, some sections of this study will refer to sub-regional groups based on geography and per-capita income. These sub-regions include:

- (a) The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates;
- (b) The Maghreb: Algeria, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia;
- (c) The Mashreq: Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Palestine;
- (d) The Least Developed Countries (LDCs): Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan, and Yemen.

⁸ ESCWA, forthcoming/a, pp. 16-17.

⁹ ESCWA, 2014b.

¹⁰ ESCWA 2013a, p. 6; and ESCWA 2013g, p. 1.

¹¹ United Nations Population Division (2014). World urbanization prospects. Available from <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wup/CD-ROM/>.

¹² World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘GDP per capita (current US\$)’ indicator, 2014.

http://databank.worldbank.org/data/reports.aspx?Code=NY.GDP.PCAP.CD&id=af3ce82b&report_name=Popular_indicators&populartyp e=series&ispopular=y.

¹³ United Nations Statistics Division, 2014, pp. 159 and 181.

Figure 1: Map of the Arab region



Source: United Nations Department of Field Support, Geospatial Information Section, Map No. 3978, Rev 13.

The boundaries and names shown and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the UN.

These parameters have obvious implications on the status of women. For instance, revenues generated by oil in the countries of the Gulf have provided favourable conditions for investments in infrastructure and social safety nets. Therefore, Gulf States typically receive higher rankings in gender equality indices that include components linked to income.¹⁴ Most other Arab countries, in contrast, suffer from widespread poverty and unemployment, which have peaked in recent years as a result of the global financial crisis and political instability.¹⁵ While extreme poverty in the region had decreased from 5.5 per cent to 4.1 per cent from 1990 to 2010, it went up again to 7.4 per cent in 2012.¹⁶ This worrying trend is particularly noticeable in the Arab Least Developed Countries, where the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 a day rose from 13.9 per cent in the early

¹⁴ Annex II offers a brief analysis and commentary on gender equality indices.

¹⁵ ESCWA, 2013f, p. 10.

¹⁶ ESCWA, 2014f, p. 9.

1990s to 21.6 per cent in 2012.¹⁷ Statistics on poverty are even more striking in some national measurements, which call into question the adequacy of international poverty indicators.¹⁸

This difficult economic context has had profound repercussions on women. It contributes to high female unemployment, and has helped to maintain the traditional, gender-based division of labour unshaken in most Arab countries. It also reinforces inequalities at multiple levels. Rural women, in particular, remain at a significant disadvantage in accessing basic services such as health care, education and other social infrastructure. Meanwhile, poor urban dwellers are confronted by soaring housing prices and a lack of social safety nets.¹⁹

Rapid population growth represents an additional challenge for Arab countries. The number of people living in the region rose by 55 per cent between 1995 and 2015, from 253 million to 393 million.²⁰ Half of this population is under 25 years old, prompting some analysts to propose that the region is experiencing a ‘youth bulge.’²¹ When agricultural and industrial sectors are weak and economic policies do not support job-intensive growth, this demographic pattern may contribute to high unemployment rates. Youth unemployment in the Arab region is the highest in the world, with 29 per cent of people aged between 15 and 24 left without a job.²² The situation of young women is even worse, as nearly half of them are unemployed.²³ This overall context, marked by a lack of opportunities and limited rights, is often cited as one of the primary causes of the wave of unrest that has recently swept through the region.

In many Arab countries, armed conflict has resulted in significant damage to infrastructure. It has undermined the capacity of States to carry out their most fundamental functions, including the maintenance of the rule of law, and the provision of basic social services. Political instability has also had severe economic repercussions and affected Governments’ ability to implement needed reforms. In such volatile environments, gender equality is often relegated to a lower priority, while scarce economic resources may be diverted to the purchase of armaments.

Female casualties may be fewer than males in the official body counts of war; women and girls nevertheless pay a heavy price in the context of armed conflict.²⁴ At times, they may be instrumentalised through systematic rape, or they merely become the ‘collateral damage’ of widespread lawlessness and generalized violence. Decade-long efforts in support of universal education may become futile because of the destruction of schools and insecurity. Improvements in women’s access to sexual and reproductive health are reversed during emergencies. Meanwhile, internally displaced women and refugees become exposed to extreme poverty, and increasing numbers of women and underage girls are subjected to forced marriage.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ ESCWA, 2015i.

¹⁹ ESCWA, 2014f, pp. 17–18. See also ESCWA, 2011a.

²⁰ ESCWA calculation on the basis of data sourced from United Nations Population Division, 2015, World population prospects. Available from <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.

²¹ Ibid. See also United Nations Programme on Youth (2010).

²² World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘Unemployment, youth total (% of total labour force ages 15–24) modeled ILO estimate’ indicator, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.ZS>.

²³ Ibid. Statistics for ‘Unemployment, youth female (% of female labour force ages 15–24) modeled ILO estimate’.

²⁴ An analysis commissioned by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) documented 191,369 killings related to the conflict in Syria as of August 2014; 9.3 per cent of them were women (Price, Gohdes, and Ball, 2014, p. 1). The Iraq Body Count Project estimated that 174,000 Iraqis were killed between 2003 and 2013; a majority of them were civilian non-combatants (estimated between 112,000 and 123,000). The proportion of women was estimated at 8.7 per cent and the proportion of children at 8.4 per cent (Iraq Body Count, 2013). Another survey found that the number of deaths as a result of the Iraqi conflict was much higher, at about half a million between March 2003 and June 2011 (Hagopian et al., 2012). Finally, in Palestine, an OCHA Preliminary Assessment estimated that 187 girls and 257 women perished during the 2014 war on Gaza, making up, respectively, 8.8 and 12 per cent of casualties (ESCWA, 2015f, p. 3).

As of June 2015, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) estimates that over 43 million people are in need of humanitarian assistance across the Arab region.²⁵ About 20 million have become refugees or internally displaced.²⁶ Some Palestinian families who had previously fled to the Syrian Arab Republic in 1948 have actually become doubly displaced.²⁷ As a result, the Arab region has now come to be known as the most common place of origin of refugees worldwide.²⁸ Among the ten biggest refugee populations in the world, five stem from Arab countries (Iraq, Palestine, Somalia, the Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic).²⁹ Most of them have taken refuge in neighbouring States, putting additional strain on already fragile political and economic systems. Jordan and Lebanon, in particular, host the highest number of refugees per inhabitants in the world.³⁰

C. OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The present study is structured around four chapters, each of which analyses various interconnected dimensions and approaches to gender equality, as identified in the 12 areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action.

Chapter two addresses the issue of gender equality and women's empowerment in relation to two critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform: *institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women*, and *women in power and decision-making*. It examines, in particular, the nature and functions of national institutions dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and women's rights (commonly known as 'national women's machineries'), and provides some examples of their activities. Chapter two also introduces significant initiatives related to institutional gender mainstreaming, such as the adoption of data collection mechanisms and budgets disaggregated by sex. It then goes on to elaborate on the potential of quotas and other policies to support women's participation in decision-making and increase their visibility in public life, including in the specific policy areas of *women and the environment*, and *women and the media*.

Chapter three examines areas which constitute major achievements in the advancement of women and girls' conditions since the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action. It covers the critical issues of: *women and health*, *the education and training of women*, and *the girl child*. The first section of this chapter takes stock of

²⁵ OCHA, 2015.

²⁶ As of 3 November 2015, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimated that there are over 4.2 million registered Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2015). In general, the share of women and girls refugees from Syria was about the same as that of men, but females aged 18 to 59 represented a slightly larger share (23.8%) than males in the same age group (22.1%). There were also approximately 370,000 refugees from Iraq as at December 2014 and 3.2 million internally displaced within Iraq as at October 2015; 1.1 million registered refugees from Somalia as at December 2014 and 1.1 million internally displaced within Somalia as at November 2015; 666,000 refugees from the Sudan as at December 2014 and 3.1 million internally displaced within the Sudan as at October 2015; and 2.3 million internally displaced within Yemen as at October 2015. For the above-mentioned countries, data on the number of registered refugees was sourced from UNHCR Country Profiles, and data on the number of internally displaced people originates from OCHA Humanitarian Snapshots. According to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, 2014b), there were close to 5.1 registered Palestine refugees in the five UNRWA countries of operation as at 1 July 2014.

²⁷ For more details, see UNRWA, 2014a, pp. 5–6; and UNRWA, 2015.

²⁸ United High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2014), *Mid-Year Trends 2014*, p. 4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 5, and United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, 2015), *UNRWA in Figures*, p. 1.

³⁰ UNHCR, 2014a, p. 6. The number of registered refugees in Jordan and Lebanon may be as large as 40 per cent of their respective populations. According to the most recent data from UNHCR and UNRWA, there are 1.2 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, in addition to approximately 500,000 Palestine refugees and 6,500 registered refugees from other countries. Large numbers of refugees may not be registered and are therefore not accounted for in this calculation. There are 630,000 registered Syrian refugees in Jordan, in addition to over 2 million Palestine refugees and 60,000 refugees from other countries. For comparison, the entire population living Lebanon was estimated at 4.5 million by the United Nations Population Department in 2014, while the household survey of 2007 referred to approximately 3.8 million inhabitants excluding Palestine refugees and immigrants. The Jordan Department of Statistics estimated the total Jordanian population (including Jordanian citizens of Palestinian descent) to be 6.53 million in 2013.

progress that has been made towards key international targets pertaining to maternal and child mortality. It also identifies remaining barriers to women's access to health care, as well as outstanding challenges in the field of sexual and reproductive health care and information. In a second section, the chapter provides a summary of women and girls' access to education, taking into account intersecting inequalities such those resulting from disparities of income, as well as the challenges of accessing education during conflict and displacement.

The findings related to education invite an examination of one of the paradoxes of the Arab region, which is that higher levels of educational attainment have not led to significant increases in women's access to formal work. These issues are considered in chapter four, where analysis is provided in relation to patterns of female labour force participation in Arab States, efforts to increase women's access to finance, and the role of laws and institutional measures in either supporting or undermining women's employment. This chapter addresses two critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform, namely: *women and the economy* and *women and poverty*.

Finally, chapter five reflects on the safety and security of women and girls in times of both peace and war, addressing the themes of *violence against women* and *women in armed conflict*. In particular, this chapter examines States' efforts to prevent and combat violence against women, as well as the numerous social, legal, and institutional barriers that women and girls continue to face when seeking redress and protection.

As war, humanitarian emergencies, and instability have a strong bearing on all the thematic areas discussed in this study, the topic of *women and armed conflict* will also be addressed as a cross-cutting issue in all chapters. Likewise, actions recommended in the Beijing Platform in connection with *the human rights of women* and *the girl child* will be included throughout the study under various sections. The study concludes with a summary of findings and a series of key policy recommendations for the years to come.

II. THE POLITICAL AND INSTITUTIONAL DIMENSION: GENDER STRATEGIES AND WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Women's full and equal participation in society lies at the core of the Beijing Platform for Action which, according to its mission statement, aims at "removing all the obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making."³¹ This vision goes beyond the elimination of discriminatory laws and policies. It requires that women are empowered to take an active part in the development of laws, economic systems and policies that will govern themselves and society as a whole, in accordance with Article 21 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Within this context, this chapter explores institutional mechanisms and tools that are designed to support women's advancement and to ensure that a gender perspective is systematically taken into account. It also discusses women's participation in political decision-making as both an intrinsic objective and a lever for the adoption of gender-sensitive policies.

A. REVIEW OF STATE MECHANISMS AND TOOLS FOR WOMEN'S ADVANCEMENT

The adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action came with the recognition that gender equality will only be achieved through a profound transformation in societies. A key element of the Platform's strategy is the establishment of 'institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women' as a means of ensuring systematic attention to gender issues. Such mechanisms tend to be closely associated with the creation of 'national women's machineries,' a term used to designate Government bodies responsible for gender-related strategies and gender mainstreaming.³² National women's machineries are usually a specialized department within the executive branch of government, but in a broad sense, the term may also describe any national body that is in charge of promoting gender equality, such as inter-ministerial commissions, advisory groups and councils, gender observatories, parliamentary committees, and gender units within various public institutions.³³ Important institutional tools adopted by national women's machineries to promote gender equality include the development of national strategies and action plans for gender equality, gender mainstreaming, systematic gender analysis of government policies, the collection of data disaggregated by sex, and the adoption of gender-sensitive budgets.

1. *National women's machineries: Nature, functions and areas of work*

In the Arab region, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action served as a driving force for establishing and expanding national women's machineries. Some Arab Governments had already set up rudimentary women's divisions under various ministries, typically those for social and family affairs, in the late 1960s and 1970s.³⁴ With the adoption of the Beijing Platform, those institutions became more formalized. They took a leading role in advocating for women's issues and moving gender discourse into the halls of government. Twenty years later, the mere fact that the majority of Arab countries have established their own national women's machinery can be considered a great achievement, as well as a foundation for effectively mainstreaming gender in government policies.³⁵

³¹ Paragraph 1 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

³² According to the Beijing Platform for Action, paragraph 201, "a national machinery for the advancement of women is the central policy-coordinating unit inside government. Its main task is to support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas."

³³ ESCWA, 2010a, p. 7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

³⁵ The concept of gender mainstreaming appears throughout the Beijing Platform for Action, where it is defined as the integration of a gender perspective into all areas of policy-making. Paragraph 57 of the Beijing Platform, for example, notes that "the success of policies and measures aimed at supporting or strengthening the promotion of gender equality and the improvement of the status of women should be based on the integration of a gender perspective in general policies relating to all spheres of society." The strategy of gender

National women’s machineries in Arab States are usually situated within the highest executive branch of Government, in accordance with the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action.³⁶ They come in many forms (see Table 1), but are most often a unit or a department within a ministry with a broader portfolio. In Palestine and Somalia, full-fledged ministries solely dedicated to women’s affairs have been set up, signalling a strong commitment to gender equality. However, only a careful examination of the human and financial resources allocated to such ministries, as well as their prerogatives and level of autonomy, can ascertain their actual ability to advocate for women’s rights.³⁷ Arab national women’s machineries appear to be particularly vulnerable to shifts in priorities and budget reshuffles in comparison with other ministries. Almost all of them report significant funding constraints, which have driven some of these institutions to seek grants from international donors.³⁸

Table 1
Overview of national women’s machineries in Arab States

	Type	National women’s machinery title
Algeria	Combined ministry	Ministry of National Solidarity, Family and Women’s Affairs
Bahrain	Council under the authority of the King	Supreme Council for Women
Comoros	Combined ministry	Ministry of Health, Solidarity, Social Cohesion and Gender Promotion
Djibouti	Combined ministry	Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Family Planning
Egypt	Council under the authority of the President	National Council for Women
Iraq	Full-fledged ministry*	Ministry of State for Women’s Affairs*
Jordan	Inter-ministerial committee	Jordanian National Commission for Women
Kuwait	Committee under the authority of the Prime Minister	Women’s Affairs Committee

mainstreaming was further defined by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in its Agreed Conclusions 1997/2 as follows: “Mainstreaming a gender perspective is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality.” (United Nations General Assembly, 1997, ch. IV.4.)

³⁶ Paragraph 201(a) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

³⁷ Paragraph 201 of the Beijing Platform for Action states that, “The necessary conditions for an effective functioning of such national machineries include: (a) location at the highest possible level in the Government, falling under the responsibility of a Cabinet minister; (b) institutional mechanisms or processes that facilitates, as appropriate, decentralised planning, implementation and monitoring with a view to involving non-governmental organisations and community organisations from the grass-roots upwards, (c) sufficient resources in terms of budget and professional capacity; (d) opportunity to influence development of all government policies.” In addition, paragraph 203(b) recommends that national women’s machineries “have clearly defined mandates and authority; critical elements would be adequate resources and the ability and competence to influence policy and formulate and review legislation.”

³⁸ ESCWA, 2010a, pp. 28, 30, and 47.

Lebanon	Commission under the authority of the Prime Minister	National Commission for Lebanese Women
Libya	Unit within ministry	Ministry of Social Affairs
Mauritania	Unit within ministry	Ministry of Social, Child and Family Affairs
Morocco	Combined ministry	Ministry of Solidarity, Women, Family and Social Development
Oman	Unit within ministry	Ministry of Social Development
Palestine	Full-fledged Ministry	Ministry of Women's Affairs
Qatar	Council under the authority of the Emir	Supreme Council for Family Affairs
Saudi Arabia	Unit within ministry	Ministry of Social Affairs
Somalia	Combined ministry	Ministry of Women and Family Affairs
The Sudan	Unit within ministry	Ministry of Welfare and Social Security
Syrian Arab Republic	Commission led by the Ministry of Social Affairs	Syrian Commission for Family Affairs
Tunisia	Combined ministry	Ministry of Women, Family and Childhood
United Arab Emirates	Union	General Women's Union
Yemen	Committee under the authority of the Prime Minister	Women National Committee

Source: ESCWA compilation (2015).

* At the time of publication, the Prime Minister of Iraq had announced a government reshuffle which would abolish the Ministry of State for Women's Affairs that had been created in 2004, and keep gender issues under the purview of a gender advisor and a committee under the authority of the Prime Minister.

The formal status of national women's machineries in the Arab region says little about their actual influence. While some of these institutions may be absent from Governments' organisational charts and cabinet meetings, their political clout can be bolstered by the direct or indirect support from first ladies or members of royal families.³⁹ Their ability to advocate for gender mainstreaming in governmental policies also depends on their staff's training and advocacy skills, as well as the overall political will demonstrated by policy makers.⁴⁰ Moreover, a formal status as 'Commission' or 'Council' does not necessarily mean that the role of a national women's machinery is limited to the provision of advisory services. Many of these institutions actually engage in a full range of research and operational activities, as is described in detail below.

The main function of national women's machineries, as envisaged in the Beijing Platform for Action, is to "support government-wide mainstreaming of a gender-equality perspective in all policy areas."⁴¹ National

³⁹ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁰ ESCWA, 2010b, p. 5; ESCWA, 2013e, p. 24.

⁴¹ Paragraphs 201 and 205 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

women's machineries have made great strides in fulfilling this role in the Arab region. They have contributed to the design of both general and sectoral plans for the advancement of women, covering a range of themes from women's health and education to the linkages between gender and the environment (see box below). They have also assumed the important function of coordinating programmatic interventions and facilitating decision-making on contentious issues, such as violence against women. The Women National Committee of Yemen, for example, gathers over 150 specialists from various governmental and non-governmental organisations to provide consultation and mainstream a gender perspective in various areas of policy.⁴² In addition to their role as gender focal points, some Arab national women's machineries have spearheaded projects to establish gender sections within various ministries. One example of this can be seen in Palestine, where the Ministry of Women's Affairs has helped to build gender-focused units within 18 different ministries.⁴³ Such efforts have been complemented by the creation of gender committees in the parliaments of various Arab countries, as is the case in Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon and Libya.⁴⁴

Over the years, Arab national women's machineries have engaged in public advocacy for legal reform and the establishment of female quotas. They have also conducted a variety of research projects pertaining to the status of women and girls. For instance, the National Commission for Lebanese Women initiated a campaign to lobby for legal reform in the field of economic rights and published a study on women's rights in Lebanese law.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, an Ombudsman Office was established within the Egyptian National Council for Women to receive complaints and to facilitate the resolution of personal status cases and instances of discrimination in public life.⁴⁶ National women's machineries have also been increasingly involved in providing direct services to specific groups of women through micro-credit lending, literacy projects, and training programmes to encourage women to join the workforce.⁴⁷ The Jordanian National Commission for Women, for example, created a 15,000-dinar (approximately \$22,000) revolving credit programme, which has so far benefitted 120 women of the Karak Governorate and is being replicated in other regions.⁴⁸ The National Commission for Lebanese Women and the United Arab Emirates' General Women's Union entered into partnerships with the banking sector to facilitate the award of interest-free or low-interest loans to micro, small and medium-size projects led by women.⁴⁹ The Egyptian National Council for Women has built a centre with branches in 16 local provinces to offer training, research, marketing and accounting support for female small-business entrepreneurs.⁵⁰

To ensure that government expenditure reflects engagements for gender equality in a systematic way, Arab States have increasingly integrated gender perspectives into the development and execution of national and local budgets. Morocco is often cited for its commitment to gender-responsive budgeting. It releases an annual budgetary report that provides all details about its spending disaggregated by sex, and recently went a step further with an Organic Law of Finance (2014) that enshrines gender equality as a key principle in the objectives and performance indicators of the Moroccan national budget.⁵¹ Moreover, Egypt has created an Equal Opportunities Unit within its Ministry of Finance, and Palestine has formed a National Committee to oversee the development of more gender-responsive budgets in the future. Bahrain, Jordan, the Sudan, and Yemen have also taken steps towards the development of gender-responsive budgets.⁵²

⁴² ESCWA, 2010a, p. 41.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 17.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 24, and Jordanian National Commission for Women, 2015, p. 15.

⁴⁵ National Commission for Lebanese Women, 2013.

⁴⁶ NCW Egypt, 2012.

⁴⁷ ESCWA, 2010a, p. 29.

⁴⁸ National report of the Kingdom of Jordan on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, annex 25, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

⁴⁹ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ For more details, see UN Women, 2014, and the website of the Moroccan Ministry of Finance, http://www.finances.gov.ma/fr/Pages/BSG/Accueil_all.aspx.

⁵² ESCWA, 2015a, p. 51.

The collection of data disaggregated by sex is an important means to acquire up-to-date information about women's conditions. It is essential for effective advocacy, planning, and policy development. Several Arab countries have recently carried out programmes aimed at closing gaps in data.⁵³ In Palestine and Tunisia, those efforts have translated into the establishment of semi-autonomous statistical centers that are responsible for collecting national data on gender-related topics, while Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia have created research units within their national women's machineries' offices.⁵⁴ These initiatives constitute an important step towards more systematic gender-impact analyses and a better evaluation of the effectiveness of governmental policies against gender-related indicators, as is called for in the Beijing Platform for Action.⁵⁵

Mainstreaming a gender perspective in sectoral strategies: The example of women and the environment

'Women and the environment' is one of the 12 critical areas of concern identified in the Beijing Platform for Action, which calls for women's full participation in environmental decision-making and the development of gender-sensitive environmental policies and programmes. In the Arab region, newly adopted policies and institutional mechanisms testify to an increased awareness of the gendered impact of environmental issues and the need to include women in decisions concerning the environment. For example, Jordan has developed a dedicated "Plan of Action on Gender and Climate Change."⁵⁶ Likewise, Palestine has launched a "Strategy on Gender and the Environment" focusing on water management and solid waste disposal, and the Tunisian National Committee for the Environment and Sustainable Development has identified a specific set of objectives pertaining to women and the environment.⁵⁷ These efforts are concrete steps towards a stronger integration of gender equality and women's concerns in a field that tends to be heavily dominated by men.⁵⁸

2. Engagement with civil society organisations

The Beijing Platform for Action lays particular emphasis on the value of partnerships between national women's machineries and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). It highlights the role that members of civil society can play in the identification of priority needs and in the monitoring and implementation of governmental programmes. Therefore, it calls on Governments to "encourage and promote the active involvement of the broad and diverse range of institutional actors in the public, private and voluntary sectors to work for equality between men and women."⁵⁹ This outlook is based on the understanding that some degree of coordination with civil society entities, such as community organisations, human rights groups, and women's studies centres, is necessary for national women's machineries to carry out their mandates effectively.

The nature and level of cooperation between governmental institutions and NGOs largely depend on the actual existence of a vibrant and independent civil society, and on the overall political context of its relationships with the government. In the Arab region, NGOs have often been involved in the development of national strategies and action plans for the advancement of women. Cooperation between national women's machineries and civil society organisations has been strongest in countries where women's movements have a long history and a substantial public presence, such as in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco and Palestine.⁶⁰ The

⁵³ Ibid., pp. 63–65.

⁵⁴ ESCWA, 2010a, p. 35.

⁵⁵ See, in particular, Strategic objective H.2., "Integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies programmes and projects," and Strategic Objective H.3, "Generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation."

⁵⁶ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 58; and IUCN, 2010, p. 2.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ For an opinion on the challenges of mainstreaming gender in rural development and agriculture, see Vargas-Lundius and Ypeij, 2007.

⁵⁹ Paragraph 203 (f) of the Beijing Platform for Action. See also paragraphs 201 (b) and 205 (b) of the Beijing Platform, as well as paragraph 20 of the Beijing Declaration.

⁶⁰ ESCWA, 2010a, p. 42.

Palestinian Ministry of Women's Affairs actually has in its mission the goal of promoting "the establishment of an active civil society governed by national, cultural, civil, human, and equity values."⁶¹

The relationship between national women's machineries and civil society organisations may sometimes be tainted by ideological differences. As government entities, national women's machineries tend to be perceived as prioritizing loyalty to State institutions over unequivocal advocacy for women's rights. Civil society organisations have sometimes voiced concerns that their mission and integrity could be undermined through partnerships with national women's machineries in circumstances where the State is committing what they consider to be human rights violations.⁶² They also fear that 'State-led feminism' and the appropriation of public discourse about women's rights by governmental institutions can lead to unforeseen consequences if the cause of gender equality becomes closely associated with ruling regimes.⁶³

B. MEASURES TO ENHANCE WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL DECISION-MAKING

Female participation in political decision-making is both an intrinsic goal and a primary means to ensure that public policies take into account women's needs and aspirations. As the Beijing Platform for Action summarizes, "Equality in political decision-making performs a leverage function without which it is highly unlikely that a real integration of the equality dimension in government policy-making is feasible... Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interests to be taken into account."⁶⁴ Within this context, the Beijing Platform identifies 'women in power and decision-making' as one of its twelve critical areas of concern. It also includes separate strategic objectives related to women's political participation in the section pertaining to armed conflict (see box below).

1. *Recent developments in support of women's participation in politics*

Women have long been marginalized from the centres of political decision-making in the Arab region. Although many Arab States granted suffrage rights to women in the 1950s and 1960s, women have been systematically underrepresented in government, and it is only recently that they were able to vote and to stand for elections in some GCC countries.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, recent years have been marked by positive trends in this area. There has been a growing recognition of the importance of women's participation in politics. The United Arab Emirates' Parliament became in 2015 the first Arab country to appoint a woman as speaker of Parliament, and women have obtained positions in the top ranks of political parties in Algeria and Palestine.⁶⁶ Women's dynamic participation in the protests that swept through the region beginning in late 2010 has also been widely noted as a testimony of women's willingness to join in civic and political engagements.⁶⁷ This activism may be a precursor to more women assuming political roles in the Arab region in the future.

⁶¹ Ministry of Women's Affairs of the State of Palestine, 2011, p. 31.

⁶² *Ibid.*, pp. 9–10.

⁶³ ESCWA, 2013d, p. 2.

⁶⁴ Paragraph 181 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁶⁵ In the Syrian Arab Republic, women gained the right to vote (subject to certain conditions) as early as 1949, and several Arab States, including Comoros, Egypt, Lebanon, Somalia and Tunisia, followed suit in the 1950s. Most recently, women have been allowed to stand for municipal elections in Oman since 2011 (Royal Decree No. 116/2011) and have been granted the right to vote and run for a seat at the Shura Council since 2013 (Royal Decree No. 58/2013). In Saudi Arabia, the late King Abdullah declared in a speech held in 2011 that women will be allowed to vote and stand for municipal elections in 2015. Saudi Arabia's Royal Decree 44 (A) of 2013 regarding the amendment of Article 3 of the Statute of the Shura Council also helps to guarantee a certain amount of female representation. Women's right to vote and to run for elections was also established (or re-established) in Bahrain, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates between 2002 and 2006. For more information see Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015c, as well as the national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform in ESCWA, 2015b.

⁶⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015a; ESCWA, 2015a, p. 46.

⁶⁷ ESCWA, 2013h.

Women's role in conflict prevention and resolution

When war rages and people are fighting for survival, gender equality is often perceived as being a second-order priority. Yet, women can bring a significant contribution to conflict resolution by promoting peace, both within individual families and in society at large. This role is recognized in the Beijing Platform for Action, which emphasizes the participation of women in conflict prevention and resolution at the decision-making level.⁶⁸ A similar message was subsequently brought forward in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (SCR 1325), which few Arab States have undertaken to implement through the adoption of a Regional Strategy and specific National Action Plans.⁶⁹

Several Arab women have become known for their commitment to peace and justice.⁷⁰ In 2011, Ms. Tawakkol Karman, a female human rights activist of Yemen, became the first Arab woman to receive a Nobel Prize, which was awarded on the basis of her “non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.”⁷¹ However, women’s participation in peace and transitional processes in the Arab region remains limited and uneven. The Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (2013–2014) included an unprecedented share of female participants.⁷² In Tunisia, women comprise one third of the members of the Truth and Dignity Commission that was established following the ouster of former president Zine Ben Ali, and which also has specific mandates pertaining to women’s rights.⁷³ Syrian women, however, were largely sidelined from the Geneva peace talks (2012–2014).⁷⁴

To promote women’s participation in political decision-making, many Arab States have recently instituted female quotas in parliaments and other elected assemblies in the past few years, in accordance with CEDAW and the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action.⁷⁵ In some countries, the objective of female

⁶⁸ Strategic Objective E.1 of the Beijing Platform for Action: “Increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protect women living in situations of armed and other conflicts or under foreign occupation”.

⁶⁹ The Regional Strategy for the Protection of Arab Women: Peace and Security was formulated under the auspices of the League of Arab States. At the country level, Iraq and Palestine adopted National Action Plans for the implementation of SCR 1325. The National Action Plan of Palestine was endorsed further to Decision No. 01/54/17 of 9 May 2015 of the Council of Ministers. The National Action Plan for Iraq (in Arabic) can be accessed from the website of the United Nations Global Compact initiative,

[https://www.unglobalcompact.org/system/attachments/cop_2014/123511/original/1325_Security_\(1\)_1.pdf?1416783240](https://www.unglobalcompact.org/system/attachments/cop_2014/123511/original/1325_Security_(1)_1.pdf?1416783240). In addition, the Sudan established a Committee for Women and Peace within its General Directorate for Women and the Family.

⁷⁰ ESCWA, 2013h.

⁷¹ Nobel Media, 2015.

⁷² See, for example, Gaston, 2014, pp. 3, 6, and 7.

⁷³ The Commission is mandated by law to “take into account the specific impact of abuses committed against women” and to propose “measures that could be taken in order to encourage national reconciliation and to protect individual rights, in particular the rights of women, children, people with special needs and vulnerable social categories.” (Articles 4 and 43 of the Tunisian Republic’s *Loi organique relative à l’instauration de la justice transitionnelle et à son organisation* [Organic law pertaining to the establishment of transitional justice and its organisation], available from <http://www.ihej.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/Loi-justice-transitionnelle-Tunisie.pdf>.)

⁷⁴ Villellas, 2015, pp. 2–3.

⁷⁵ According to paragraph 190 (a) of the Beijing Platform for Action, Governments should “commit themselves to establishing the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including, inter alia, setting specific targets and implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women and men, if necessary through positive action, in all governmental and public administration positions.” Article 4, para. 1 of CEDAW states that, “Adoption by States parties of temporary special measures aimed at accelerating de facto equality between men and women shall not be considered discrimination as defined in the present Convention, but shall in no way entail as a consequence the maintenance of unequal or separate standards; these measures shall be discontinued when the objectives of equality of opportunity and treatment have been achieved.” The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women later adopted General Recommendation No. 25, which more fully clarifies the purpose and scope of these ‘temporary special measures’. The text of this Recommendation can be accessed at [http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/General%20recommendation%2025%20\(English\).pdf](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/recommendations/General%20recommendation%2025%20(English).pdf).

representation has even been reflected at the constitutional level, paving the way for the adoption of new electoral laws in Algeria, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, the Sudan and Tunisia.⁷⁶ The share of women in parliaments in the Arab region has generally increased since 1995 (Table 2). It has reached above 25 per cent in Algeria, Iraq, Mauritania, the Sudan and Tunisia, showing a significant rise after the adoption of gender quotas in these countries. However, there remain large disparities in women's participation throughout the region, and women's presence in parliament is close to zero in at least seven countries (Comoros, Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar and Yemen). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) estimates that, overall, women constitute only 19 per cent of members of single or lower houses of parliament in Arab States, and 8.9 per cent of upper houses or senates. This is well below world averages, which currently stand at 22.9 per cent and 20.6 per cent, respectively.⁷⁷

Quotas are just one of many vehicles for the promotion of women's participation in political decision-making. A series of supportive measures may also be adopted ahead of elections, by focusing on the mechanisms through which candidates are selected within political parties. Algeria, Djibouti, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco and Tunisia have adopted laws or executive decrees that create incentives or sanctions encouraging political parties to include a certain proportion of women on their list of candidates.⁷⁸

Initiatives to promote the participation of female candidates in local elections also serve an important function, by encouraging women to acquire relevant experience and to partake in decision-making. Women may find local positions more accessible than national offices, due to the ready availability of family and community networks. Those positions also tend to require less travel away from the candidates' homes and thus enable women to balance their political involvements with family responsibilities, a factor that is critical in the absence of supportive mechanisms for child care. In Mauritania, for example, very few women have managed to become elected to parliament outside of the quota system, but many others have succeeded at the local level, making up 35 per cent of municipal councils on average.⁷⁹ Likewise, women represented 35.9 per cent of municipal council representatives in Jordan as of 2014. While the majority of Jordanian representatives (297 women) entered local assemblies thanks to quotas, a significant number (51 women) won their seats through open competition against men.⁸⁰ Lebanon and Morocco have recently launched projects geared at strengthening women's involvement in local governance.⁸¹ Initiatives such as this can be usefully combined with quotas in regional institutions and municipalities (as shown in Table 3). It should be noted that women presently hold the position of mayor in several cities of the region, including Baghdad (Iraq) and Nouakchott (Mauritania).⁸²

⁷⁶ Article 31 bis of the Constitution of Algeria; Article 49, para. 4, of the Constitution of Iraq; Article 3 of the Constitution of Mauritania; Articles 7 and 30 of the Constitution of Morocco; Article 26 of the Basic Law of the Palestinian National Authority; Article 15 of the Interim National Constitution of the Republic of Sudan; and Articles 34 and 46 of the Constitution of Tunisia. The constitutions of Egypt (Article 11) and Somalia (Article 3, para. 5) also spell out the objectives of female political representation but have not yet been accompanied by laws and regulations to implement these goals. This information is sourced from the UN Women Constitutional Database, <http://constitutions.unwomen.org/en>, with the exception of Egypt, Iraq and Tunisia. An informal English translation of the Egyptian Constitution is available on the website of Egypt's State Information Service, <http://www.sis.gov.eg/Newvr/Dustor-en001.pdf>. An informal English translation of the Iraqi Constitution can be consulted on the website of the Iraqi Ministry of Interior, http://www.iraqinationality.gov.iq/attach/iraqi_constitution.pdf. An informal English translation of the Constitution of Tunisia is available from UNDP, http://www.constitutionnet.org/files/2014.01.26_-_final_constitution_english_idea_final.pdf.

⁷⁷ As at September 2015. More details can be found in Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015b.

⁷⁸ Quota Project, 2015.

⁷⁹ National report of the Islamic Republic of Mauritania on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (2014), p. 37, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

⁸⁰ National report of the Kingdom of Jordan on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 59, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

⁸¹ USAID's Building Alliance for Local Advancement, Development and Investment (BALADI) in Lebanon, and the Programme de la Gouvernance Locale (PGL-Maroc) in Morocco, have sought to build the capacities of women leaders in local government.

⁸² Ms. Thikra Alwash (sometimes spelt Zekra Alwach) made headlines upon ascending to the post of mayor of Baghdad in 2015; see *Al Arabiya News*, 2015. Ms. Maty Mint Hamady's election as mayor of Nouakchott, Mauritania, was reported in *Jeune Afrique*, 2014.

Table 2
Women's representation in the single/lower chamber of national parliaments or equivalent body (percentage of total membership)

Country	1997 ^a	2005 ^b	2015 ^c	Special Measure ^d	Details
Algeria	6.6	6.2	31.6	Yes	20–50% quota, depending on the number of seats in each electoral district.
Bahrain	-	0	7.5	No	
Comoros	0	3	3	No	In its National Report (p. 27), Comoros indicated that a draft law has been put forward to establish a 30% female quota in the future.
Djibouti	0	10.8	12.7	Yes	10% quota
Egypt	2	2.9	2.2 ^e	Yes	While the former quota system was abandoned, parties currently have to nominate at least one woman as part of their district candidate lists. A law adopting measures “to ensure appropriate female representation” (in accordance with Article 11 of the new Constitution) is yet to be adopted.
Iraq	0	-	26.5	Yes	25% quota according to Article 49 of the Constitution.
Jordan	1.3	5.5	12	Yes	15 reserved seats in the House of Representatives (10% quota)
Kuwait	0	0	1.5	No	
Lebanon	2.3	2.3	3.1	No	As indicated in Lebanon's National Report, a provision aiming at establishing a female quota in parliament was included in an early version of the 2013 Electoral Bill but did not gather enough support.
Libya	0	-	16	Yes	Parties are required to submit lists alternating female and male names.
Mauritania	1.3	3.7	25.2	Yes	20% quota
Morocco	0.6	10.8	17	Yes	60 reserved seats (approx. 15% quota)
Oman	-	2.4	1.2	No	
Palestine	-	-	13 ^f	Yes	At least 20% of candidates in elections should be women. This is achieved through a complex method described in law.
Qatar	-	-	0	No	
Saudi Arabia	-	0	19.9	Yes	20% reserved seats in the Consultative Council (<i>Majlis Ash-Shura</i>), appointed by the King.
Somalia	-	-	13.8	No	Initial political commitments for 30% reserved seats for women have not materialized since the passing of the new Constitution.
The Sudan	5.3	9.7	30.5	Yes	25% reserved seats

Syrian Arab Republic	9.6	12	12.4	No	
Tunisia	6.7	43	31.3	Yes	Parties are required to submit lists alternating female and male names.
United Arab Emirates	0	0	17.5	No	
Yemen	0.7	0.3	0	No	The Yemeni National Dialogue Conference (NDC) has recommended the establishment of a 30% quota for women in all branches of government (prior to the eruption of the 2015 armed conflict).

^a As of 1 January 1997 (earliest date available). Data sourced from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015b.

^b As of 31 January 2005. Data sourced from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015b.

^c As of 1 September 2015. Data sourced from Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2015b, except when noted otherwise.

^d Data sourced from Quota Project, 2015.

^e Data sourced from Quota Project, 2015, pending availability of the final results of the parliamentary elections held at the end of 2015.

^f Data sourced from Quota Project, 2015. Seventeen women were elected in 2006. Elections were not held since, disrupting the functioning of the Palestinian Legislative Council.

Table 3
Countries which adopted female quotas in local elected councils

Country	Details*
Algeria	30–35% quota in regional councils, depending on the number of seats in each electoral district, and 30% quota in municipal councils.
Comoros	According to the law, women and men should be equally represented in the lists of candidates running for municipal elections.
Egypt	25% quota in local elected councils according to Article 180 of the Constitution.
Iraq	33% quota in provincial, district and sub-district elections.
Jordan	25% quota in municipal councils.
Libya	Quotas in municipal elections are mentioned by law but no specific percentage or other means of calculation is provided.
Mauritania	20% quota in municipal councils.
Morocco	33% quota in regional councils and 12% quota in municipal councils.
Palestine	Approximately 15% quota in local councils, calculated on the basis of a complex method of seat-allocation specified in law.

* Data sourced from Quota Project, 2015, except for Comoros and Jordan, which are sourced from those countries' national reports in ESCWA, 2015b.

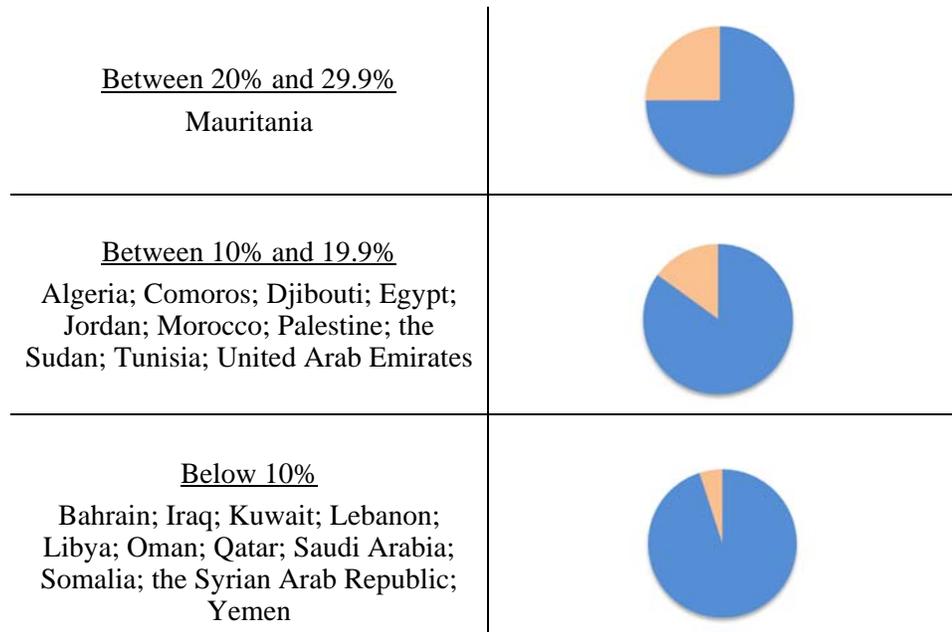
Within the executive branch, an increasing number of women have become ministers, deputy ministers and State secretaries, though their share in national governments remains very modest in most Arab countries (see Figure 2). Women who obtain these positions often hold portfolios that reflect traditional gender roles, such as education, family, and social affairs. Nonetheless, in some countries, women have succeeded in entering other spheres of government that are typically perceived as male domains, such as ministries of labour, commerce or foreign affairs. Recent measures to promote the representation of women in public administration, such as the adoption of a 20 per cent female quota for high civil service positions in Djibouti,⁸³ may help to sustain this trend and give rise to a new generation of women leaders.

The examples discussed in this section illustrate how women have been slowly gaining ground in governments of the Arab region. It remains to be seen whether these encouraging trends will be consolidated in the future, but the current situation gives reason for hope. Arab countries have sought to assist female political candidates through programmes designed to build women's knowledge and capacity to engage in politics. Palestine has created a series of training manuals to promote practical political education among women, and Egypt has initiated a capacity-building programme that teaches women skills such as legislative drafting, strategic analysis, budgetary oversight, and partnership development. Bahrain, Comoros, and Oman have developed similar

⁸³ National report of Djibouti on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 7, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

programmes.⁸⁴ Other countries in the region have created women’s support groups with an emphasis on political participation, ranging from the establishment of female-only ‘diwans’⁸⁵ to national and international women’s alliances.⁸⁶

Figure 2: Percentage of government members who are women



Source: ESCWA compilation (2015). For the purpose of this figure, government members are defined as ministers, deputy ministers and State secretaries.

2. Public perceptions of women and other remaining challenges for women’s meaningful representation

While recent initiatives lend hope for stronger female representation in political decision-making in the Arab region, a number of important questions and challenges remain. First, there is little evidence so far of a correlation between the increasing number of female ministers and parliamentarians, and the adoption of more gender-sensitive laws and policies in the Arab region. Some female members of parliament have indeed become prominent advocates for legislative reforms in favour of women’s rights, but these individuals rarely form a homogenous group, and female legislators certainly do not share the same political views simply by virtue of their sex. Moreover, women who attain office do not always advocate for reform and women’s rights. In Egypt,

⁸⁴ This information is sourced from the relevant countries’ national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

⁸⁵ A diwan is a political salon or social club. These organisations traditionally have been the sole domain of men, and have served as a primary venue for informal discussion, networking and decision-making. The challenges encountered by women as a result of their exclusion from these circles, as well as the initiatives to create women-only diwans in Kuwait, are described in Gonzáles, 2014, p. 133.

⁸⁶ According to national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (ESCWA, 2015b), national networks of women ministers and parliamentarians have been set up in Comoros and Mauritania. At the regional level, the Arab Institute for Parliamentary Training and Legislative Studies and the Westminster Foundation for Democracy have developed a regional support network for women in politics and implemented related capacity-building activities. At the international level, a Coordinating Committee of Women Parliamentarians (including an Arab Group led by representatives from Iraq, Jordan, Oman and Tunisia) has been established within the Inter-Parliamentary Union.

for example, female parliamentarians have expressed opinions in favour of child marriage, and called to revoke a law that enables women to seek divorce without the burden of proof ('khula'). The Moroccan Female Parliamentarians Forum also encountered major internal disagreement in relation to proposed revisions of personal status law and the law on citizenship.⁸⁷

Second, the focus on the numerical share of women in government offices may be diverting attention from the more crucial question of whether women have become a constituency of their own, or in other terms, an electorate which would receive the full attention of politicians and other policy-makers. In the absence of true and functioning democracy, and given the inferior position usually attributed to women in the management of public affairs, the creation of female quotas could become just a token measure. Female parliamentarians, like their male counterparts, often stem from political families. As such, their election to assemblies or their appointments to assimilated councils with limited legislative powers is not necessarily a sign of empowerment or increased attention to women's issues. It may just as often be a manifestation of their husband's or clan's sphere of influence.

Opinion surveys carried out in several countries of the region confirm that politics is still widely perceived as a male prerogative. Large proportions of women and men (especially young, educated and urban populations) do support women's presence in the political arena (see Figures 3 and 4), but there is also a sizeable share who object to female political participation. It is estimated that over one third of Egyptian, Tunisian and Yemeni men are opposed to women's presence in parliament or service as government ministers.⁸⁸ Furthermore, a majority of men, and a significant share of women, continue to doubt women's leadership capacities and prefer male representatives over female ones. In a survey conducted by the Status of Women in the Middle East and North Africa Project (SWMENA), when respondents were asked "if a man legislator and a woman legislator were equally qualified, would you prefer to have a woman or a man represent you in parliament?" 83 per cent of Egyptian men and 68 per cent of Egyptian women said that they would prefer a male legislator.⁸⁹

Survey results also reveal the continuing difficulties that women face in their efforts to be heard, even after they have attained prominent positions. For instance, a regional research project found that women were very rarely interviewed for the prime-time news in Arab countries, especially in relation to themes pertaining to politics or the economy (see box below). Their contributions to the public debate are often seen as illegitimate or unworthy of attention. Sadly, women who are deemed too outspoken may risk far more than being overlooked. Some female activists have been insulted or targeted by smear campaigns; others have faced sexual violence during political gatherings and protests.⁹⁰ In some countries, female public figures increasingly live under threats of violence emerging from radical movements, and in recent years, several Arab women have paid with their lives for their public outspokenness.⁹¹

⁸⁷ El Aymouni, 2012.

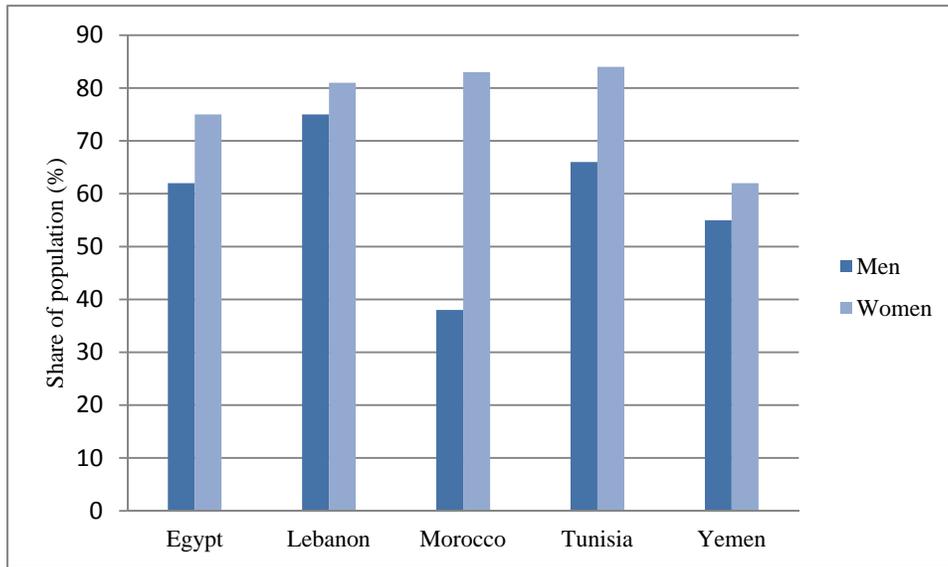
⁸⁸ SWMENA, 2010d, 2011a, and 2011b.

⁸⁹ SWMENA, 2011a, pp. 4–5. In the context of national surveys conducted by the SWMENA project between 2009 and 2011, a sample of men and women were further asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that, "On the whole, men make better political leaders than women." The results were as follows: Lebanon: 60% of men and 46% of women agree; Morocco: 67% of men and 34% of women agree; and Yemen: 88% of men and 85% of women agree. (SWMENA, 2010a, 2010c, 2010d.)

⁹⁰ ESCWA, 2013d, p. 2. For a detailed analysis of women's participation in the Arab uprisings and portraits of female activists, see ESCWA, 2013h.

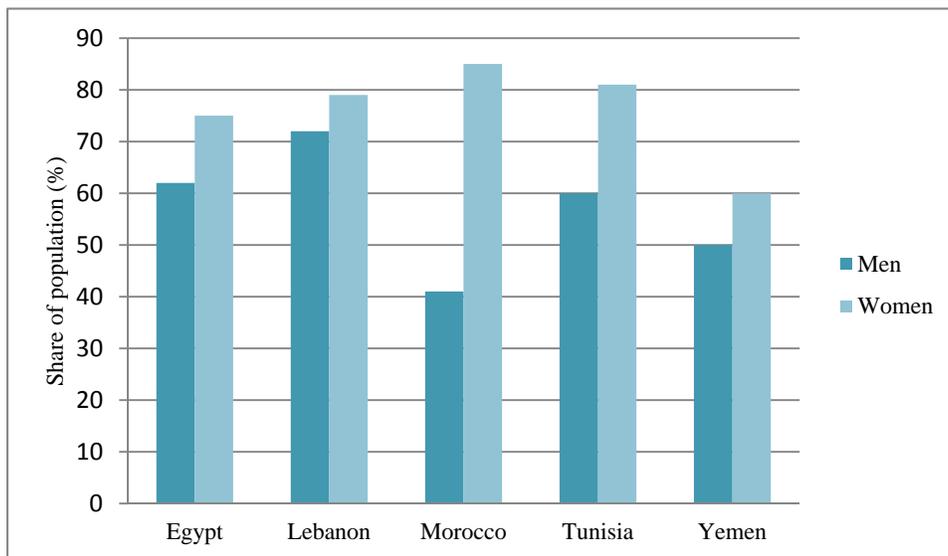
⁹¹ See, for example, United Nations News and Media, 2014.

Figure 3: Share of the population which supports women as members of parliament, by sex



Sources: SWMENA, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2011a, and 2011b.

Figure 4: Share of the population which supports women as ministers, by sex



Sources: SWMENA, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2011a, and 2011b.

Women's representation in the media

A research project was conducted in 2010 to analyse prime-time news shows on public TV channels in eight Arab countries. The study was commissioned by the Panos Institute (a network of NGOs working in the field of media studies) and the Mediterranean Observatory of Communication.⁹² The results were dazzling; on average, women comprised only 6 per cent of the speakers interviewed on the evening news in Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine. They represented 18 and 23 per cent of interviewees in Morocco and Tunisia, respectively. A closer look reveals that female experts were mostly absent from the news segments that received the greatest coverage, including politics (only 7 per cent women speakers) and the economy (only 11 per cent women speakers). When their views were solicited, it was usually to comment on themes associated with stereotypical female roles, such as education or health, though popular programmes on international affairs are already directed by female journalists.

As the media is increasingly becoming an agent of socialization and a way for the youth and adults alike to acquire knowledge about accepted behaviours and valued cultural attributes, such misrepresentation of the diversity of the women's lives contributes, indirectly yet forcefully, to the reinforcement of gender bias. The Beijing Platform for Action calls for the development of legislation and self-regulatory mechanisms within the media and advertising industry to promote a more balanced representation of women and to limit violent or degrading materials.⁹³ Unfortunately, despite the existence of media laws and State regulatory bodies in several countries of the Arab region, there is little evidence of the implementation of those recommendations beyond mechanisms to censor pornography.

Recent initiatives might constitute steps in the right direction. Bahrain and Morocco have indicated that they are planning to revise their legislative frameworks to address discrimination and degrading images of women in the media. Both of these countries have developed codes of ethics and guidelines for the media industry. Palestine has crafted a National Strategy for Gender-Sensitive Information. The Egyptian National Council for Women has created a Media Watch Unit to monitor content pertaining to women. Several countries, including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic, and Yemen, have also reported efforts to build capacities for gender-sensitive reporting.⁹⁴ UNESCO has meanwhile implemented a comprehensive programme to promote gender-sensitive media in the Maghreb, through the delivery of training workshops on a wide range of topics and the development of guides and toolkits for journalism institutes and civil society.⁹⁵ These programmes offer valuable opportunities for media representatives and journalists in the Arab region to reassess and improve the portrayals of women on their networks, thereby offering a more complete representation of women's capacities and experiences.

⁹² The project reviewed prime-time news shows on nine public TV channels over the course of 14 consecutive days (May 12–25, 2010). The TV channels examined were ENTV (Algeria), Al Masriya (Egypt), Jordan TV, Télé Liban (Lebanon), 2M and Al Aoula (Morocco), Palestine TV, Syrian TV's 1st channel, and Tunisie 7. The review of Télé Liban took place during a slightly different time period in 2010 due to the organisation of municipal elections in the country during the initial review period. (Panos Paris Institute and Mediterranean Observatory of Communication, 2012, pp. 119–120.)

⁹³ Paragraph 244 (a) and (b) and paragraph 129 (d) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁹⁴ The information in this paragraph is sourced from the relevant countries' national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

⁹⁵ See UNESCO project on "Building the educational capacity of the Institut Supérieur de Journalisme et de la Communication (ISIC) to integrate gender perspectives in journalism curricula," <http://www.unesco-ci.org/ipdcprojects/sites/default/files/ipdc-project-descriptions/Morocco%20-%20Building%20the%20Educational%20Capacity%20of%20ISIC.pdf> and UNESCO, 2009a, 2009b, 2013.

IV. THE SOCIAL DIMENSION: PROGRESS AND SHORTCOMINGS IN THE FIELDS OF HEALTH AND EDUCATION

Health and education are key aspects of human development which have significant implications for women and girls' well-being. They are also important levers for women's advancement and the realization of their human rights. As the Beijing Platform summarizes, women's right to health is "vital to their life and well-being and their ability to participate in all areas of public and private life."⁹⁶ Likewise, "equality of access to and attainment of educational qualifications is necessary if more women are to become agents of change."⁹⁷ This chapter reviews the significant advances made by Arab States in providing women and girls with access to health care and education. Successes in these areas are in fact one of the highlights of the region's efforts to implement the recommendations of the Beijing Platform for Action. This chapter also describes some remaining challenges in the region, including obstacles that are still encountered by women and girls in obtaining access to comprehensive and high-quality health care and education.

A. WOMEN AND GIRLS' ACCESS TO HEALTH CARE AND HEALTH INFORMATION

1. *Progress in life expectancy and in maternal and child health*

With high life expectancy and low maternal and child mortality rates, the Arab region has a commendable record when it comes to women's health, making it one of the key areas of success in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action over the last twenty years. Female life expectancy at birth has increased in all countries of the Arab region, rising from an average of 68 years in 1995 to an average of 72.5 years in 2015, which is also the world average for female life expectancy.⁹⁸ Over the same period, male life expectancy has risen at about the same rate, from 64.5 years to 68 years. Non-communicable diseases have replaced nutritional disorders and communicable diseases as major causes of women's death and disability. Whereas diarrhea was the top cause of disability-adjusted life-years (DALYs) for women in the Arab region in 1990, standing at 10.7 per cent, it represented only 4.2 per cent of DALYs in 2010. Similarly, lower respiratory infections declined from 10.5 to 6.1 per cent of DALYs, while ischaemic heart disease, major depressive disorders and diabetes became more widespread.⁹⁹ These trends reflect the region's economic development and an overall improvement in health systems over the last twenty years.

The Arab region has also generally performed very well with respect to maternal and child health, which are key markers of women and girls' access to essential health services. Major investments in health care and infrastructure in the 1980's and the 1990's have contributed to a significant reduction in child and maternal mortality, both of which have sharply decreased since the adoption of the Millennium Development Goals in 1990. Under-five mortality has dropped almost by half from 1990 to today, from 67 deaths to only 35 deaths per 1,000 live births, and nearly all Arab countries (with the exception of five LDCs) have reached the objective set in the Beijing Platform for Action of an under-five mortality rate below 45 per 1,000 by 2015.¹⁰⁰ Among them, eight countries have also reached the target set in Millennium Development Goal #4, which calls for the

⁹⁶ Paragraph 89 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁹⁷ Paragraph 69 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

⁹⁸ ESCWA calculation on the basis of data from United Nations Population Division, 2015, World population prospects. Available from <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>.

⁹⁹ Mokhad, et al., 2014, pp. 309 and 312. The Disability-Adjusted Life Year (DALY) is the most commonly used unit to measure amounts of health lost due to disease or medical conditions.

¹⁰⁰ Paragraph 106 (l) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

reduction of under-five child mortality by two thirds of 1990 levels by 2015.¹⁰¹ However, it is to be noted that this target may not be applicable to some Arab States which already had low child mortality rates in 1990, as it may be difficult to further decrease this ratio by two-thirds. While the Arab LDCs (with the notable exception of Yemen) fell short of reaching those targets, they too have made significant progress in reducing child mortality and providing immunization against infectious childhood diseases.¹⁰²

With respect to maternal mortality, the Mashreq and Maghreb sub-regions registered a decline in maternal deaths of approximately 45 per cent since 1995, while maternal mortality ratios in the GCC countries are among the lowest in the world (see Figure 5 and Table 4). As of 2015, Lebanon and Libya have achieved the target set by both the Millennium Development Goals and the Beijing Platform to reduce maternal mortality ratios by three quarters of their 1990 levels, while several other Arab countries are considered as ‘making progress’ towards this target.¹⁰³ Overall, countries of the region have maternal mortality ratios that are considered to be low.¹⁰⁴ Such improvements can be attributed to several key interventions. In almost all Arab countries, over 80 per cent of births are assisted by a skilled attendant,¹⁰⁵ ensuring safe deliveries and preventing many causes of neonatal and maternal mortality. Antenatal care coverage has also significantly improved, with 81 per cent of women attended at least once during their pregnancy by skilled health personnel in 2011, as opposed to 65 per cent in 2000.¹⁰⁶ In the GCC countries, the proportion of women benefitting from antenatal care has reached, or is close to reaching, 100 per cent.

These encouraging figures do conceal some significant disparities both across and within countries. In Egypt, for example, skilled health personnel only attend 55 per cent of births in the poorest households, in contrast to 97 per cent in the richest households. Similar levels of inequality in the rate of birth attendance exist within the Sudan and Yemen.¹⁰⁷ Furthermore, the least developed countries of the region continue to face a range of challenges in ensuring mothers’ access to health care. Somalia has one of the highest maternal mortality ratios in the world (732 deaths per 100,000 live births), followed by Mauritania (602), Yemen (385) the Sudan (311), and Djibouti (229).¹⁰⁸

¹⁰¹ The eight Arab States which have reached the child mortality target set in Millennium Development Goal #4 include Bahrain, Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and Yemen. (UNICEF, 2015b, pp. 18–27).

¹⁰² ESCWA, forthcoming/b.

¹⁰³ WHO, 2015e, Annex 19. The targets on maternal mortality are set out in the Beijing Platform for Action under para. 106 (i) and in the Millennium Development Goals under target 5.A.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 18.

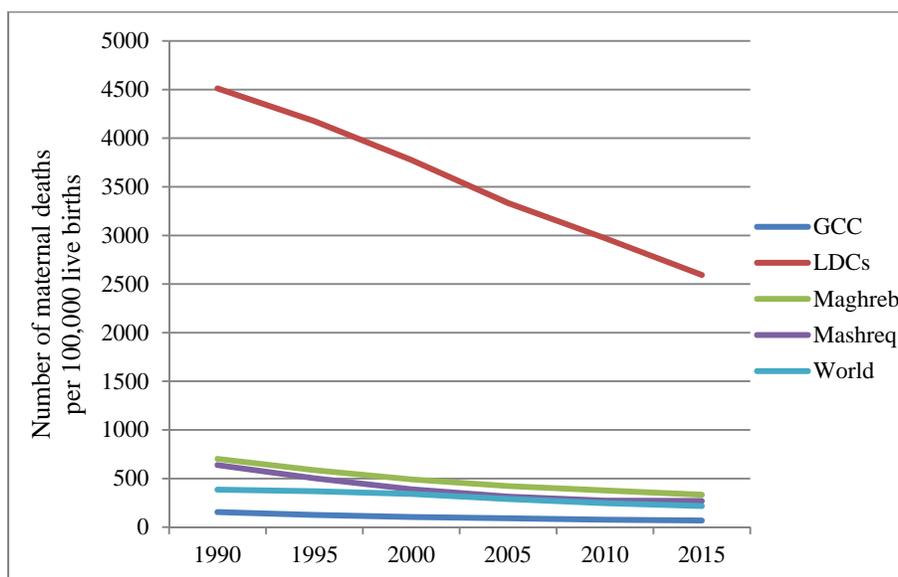
¹⁰⁵ World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘Births attended by skilled health staff (% of total)’ indicator, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.BRTC.ZS>.

¹⁰⁶ World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘Pregnant women receiving prenatal care (%)’ indicator, years 2000 and 2011, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.STA.ANVC.ZS>

¹⁰⁷ ESCWA, 2013f, pp. 31–32.

¹⁰⁸ WHO, 2015e, Annex 19.

Figure 5
Trends in estimates of maternal mortality ratios in the Arab region (1990–2015)



Source: WHO, 2015e, Annex 19.

Table 4
Maternal mortality ratios in Arab States

Country	Number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births (WHO) ^a
Algeria	140
Bahrain	15
Comoros	335
Djibouti	229
Egypt	33
Iraq	50
Jordan	58
Kuwait	4
Lebanon	15
Libya	9
Mauritania	602
Morocco	121

Oman	17
Palestine	45
Saudi Arabia	12
Somalia	732
The Sudan	311
Syrian Arab Republic	68
Tunisia	62
United Arab Emirates	6
Yemen	385
World average	216

^a Data from WHO refers to the most recent estimates compiled by the World Health Organization, in coordination with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), World Bank Group, and United Nations Population Division (WHO, 2015e, Annex 19).

2. Barriers to women and girls’ access to health care

Despite the significant advances highlighted above, women and girls living in the Arab region continue to face many barriers in obtaining necessary care. Some of the most frequently cited obstacles include long travel distances to health-care facilities and challenges related to transportation, as well as a lack of female health providers and concerns about entering health-care facilities alone (Table 5). Aggregate statistics about access to health care can conceal significant differences in coverage at the sub-national level. In the Midlands region of Yemen, for example, about 80 per cent of women report having access to health care, while in the Northern region of the country less than 25 percent of women report having such access.¹⁰⁹

The lack of financial resources is another major barrier. Indeed, public health insurance in the Arab region usually covers only between 30 and 40 per cent of the population, leaving the remaining individuals or their employers to subscribe to private insurance schemes.¹¹⁰ For example, according to a national survey conducted in 2010, only 45 per cent of Lebanese women could afford regular medical visits and medication when they did not receive health insurance benefits through their work.¹¹¹ This is indicative of the extent to which women may be at greater risk from limited social security coverage, as the regional female participation in the formal labour market is as low as 23 per cent.¹¹²

Out-of-pocket health expenditures are usually high for women in the Arab region (see Table 6), with the exception of some countries that provide free health care, most notably those in the GCC region.¹¹³ Stagnating or declining State investment in the health sector has exacerbated this problem in some cases (Table 7). On average, Arab countries spend about 2.5 per cent of their GDPs on health care, in contrast with 6 per cent

¹⁰⁹ SWMENA, 2010d, p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Alami, 2014, pp. 15–16.

¹¹¹ SWMENA, 2010a, p. 4.

¹¹² World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘Labour force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) modeled ILO estimate’ indicator, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>.

¹¹³ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 12. Additional information about health care in Bahrain can also be found on the website of that country’s Economic Development Board, <http://www.bahrain.com/en/bi/key-investment-sectors/Pages/Healthcare.aspx#.Va48hvmeDRY>.

globally.¹¹⁴ This is of particular concern, as deficiencies in health care and social programmes may result in an increased burden on women, who usually assume the responsibility of caring for relatives.¹¹⁵

Finally, mental health services remain extremely limited in the region, despite a steady increase in mental health disorders. In Arab States, mental conditions affect women disproportionately, with major depressive disorders reaching 5.2 per cent of DALYs for women in 2010, as opposed to only 2.9 per cent of DALYs for men. This type of condition is even more prevalent in the countries of the GCC, accounting for 9.1 per cent of DALYs for women.¹¹⁶ Mental health is also of particular concern in conflict settings, as violence and insecurity can greatly increase the prevalence of depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress. In most countries of the region, the number of psychiatric facilities and psychologists is very low. Only Bahrain, Kuwait and Qatar have over 3 psychiatrists per 100,000 people. Psychologists are equally scarce, with Algeria and Kuwait having the highest amount at 3.4 and 2.1 per 100,000 people, respectively.¹¹⁷

Table 5
Perceived challenges in accessing health care, as identified by women in selected Arab countries*

	Getting money for treatment	Distance to health facility	Using means of transportation	Not wanting to go alone	No female provider available
Comoros	67.0	44.6	-	43.5	-
Egypt	10.5	18.2	20.9	31.3	28.9
Jordan	22.5	26.4	28.6	28.8	29.5
Yemen	56.1	58.8	-	80.2	62.9

* This table shows percentages of women aged 15–49 who reported serious problems in accessing health care for themselves when they are sick, in countries for which recent data was available. It is organised by the type of problems that they reported. In the case of Egypt and Jordan, the sample is limited to women who are married or have been previously married. Data sourced from DOS (The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan Department of Statistics) and ICF International (2013); Ministry of Health and Population of the Arab Republic of Egypt, El-Zanaty and Associates, and ICF International (2015); MOPHP (Ministry of Public Health and Population of the Republic of Yemen), The Pan Arab Program for Family Health (PAPFAM), ICF International (2015); and Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement de l'Union des Comores, Commissariat Général au Plan, DGSP (Direction Générale de la Statistique et de la Prospective de l'Union des Comores) and ICF International (2014).

¹¹⁴ World Bank Development Indicators Database, 'Health expenditure, public (% of GDP)' indicator, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SH.XPD.PUBL.ZS>.

¹¹⁵ Paragraph 107 (h) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹¹⁶ Mokhad, 2014, pp. 312 and 316.

¹¹⁷ WHO Global Health Observatory Data Repository, statistics for 2014 for indicators on 'psychiatrists working in mental health sector (per 100,000)' and 'psychologists working in mental health sector (per 100,000).' <http://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.MHHR?lang=en>.

Table 6
Out-of-pocket health expenditures

Country	Share of health expenses that are paid out of pocket (2013 data)
Algeria	25%
Bahrain	15%
Comoros	45%
Djibouti	40%
Egypt	58%
Iraq	37%
Jordan	24%
Kuwait	16%
Lebanon	34%
Libya	30%
Morocco	58%
Oman	12%
Palestine	–
Qatar	8%
Saudi Arabia	20%
The Sudan	76%
Syrian Arab Republic	54%
Tunisia	35%
United Arab Emirates	19%
Yemen	74%
Regional average	32%
World average	19%

Source: WHO Global Health Expenditure Database, <http://apps.who.int/nha/database>, statistic for out-of-pocket expenditure as a percentage of total health expenditure.

Table 7
Total government expenditure on health as a percentage of GDP in 1995 and 2013

Country	1995	2013
Algeria	2.7	4.9
Bahrain	2.9	–
Comoros	2.9	1.9
Djibouti	2.4	5.3
Egypt	1.8	2.1
Iraq	–	3.3
Jordan	5.3	4.8
Kuwait	3.1	2.4
Lebanon	4.2	3.6
Libya	1.5	3.0
Mauritania	2.2	1.8
Morocco	1.3	2.0
Oman	3.1	2.1
Palestine	–	–
Qatar	2.3	1.8
Saudi Arabia	1.5	2.0
Somalia	1.2	–
The Sudan	0.7	1.4
Syrian Arab Republic	2.2	1.5
Tunisia	2.9	4.2
United Arab Emirates	2.1	2.3
Yemen	1.3	1.3
Regional average	2.4	2.7
World average	3.0	4.0

Source: WHO Global Health Expenditure Database, <http://apps.who.int/nha/database>, statistic for general Government expenditure on health as a percentage of gross domestic product.

3. *The impact of armed conflict on women's access to health care*

In many countries of the Arab region, recent armed conflicts have had an unprecedented impact on women and girls' access to health care resources, threatening their lives and undermining decade-long investments. In Syria, a recent assessment found that only 43 per cent of public hospitals were fully functioning. Thirty-two per cent were considered partially operational with shortages in equipment, supplies, or staff, while the remaining 25 per cent were not functioning at all. In addition, 22 per cent of health care facilities in that country was deemed inaccessible.¹¹⁸

With regard to maternal health, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimated in May 2015 that about half a million pregnant Syrian women were in need of urgent assistance within and outside of the country.¹¹⁹ Child immunization rates, which were once close to 100 per cent throughout the Syrian Arab Republic, have decreased markedly and currently stand as low as 50 per cent in certain governorates due to a shortage in vaccines and limited access to services.¹²⁰ As a result of disruptions in child health care, an outbreak in polio was reported in Syria in 2013, though transmission of the disease had been stopped more than a decade before.¹²¹

In Gaza, health infrastructure has been seriously affected by Israel's frequent military operations. At least 15 out of 32 hospitals in that area were damaged during the July-August 2014 war, putting additional strain on remaining health facilities. As a result, an estimated 40,000 pregnant women could not access basic reproductive health care, leading to a surge in neonatal mortality from 7 to 14 per cent in the wake of the conflict.¹²² Moreover, years of blockade have led to a chronic shortage of essential medical supplies,¹²³ and there are countless reports of patients from Gaza being delayed or denied access to hospitals at military checkpoints.¹²⁴ Those dire circumstances are compounded by the lack of access to safe drinking water, leading to a high incidence of 'blue baby syndrome.'¹²⁵

Armed conflicts have also significantly undermined food security in the region.¹²⁶ Over 250,000 people are estimated to have died as a result of severe food insecurity and famine in Somalia between 2010 and 2012.¹²⁷ According to the World Food Programme, over 6.8 million people were in critical need of food assistance in Syria at the beginning of 2015.¹²⁸ Moreover, 22.8 per cent of the population of Iraq and 26.1 per cent of the population of Yemen are presently considered undernourished.¹²⁹ Chronic malnutrition, as measured by stunted growth, affected 47 per cent of children in Yemen, 42 per cent in Somalia and 35 per cent in the Sudan.¹³⁰

¹¹⁸ WHO, 2015c, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ ESCWA, 2014d, p. 32.

¹²¹ WHO, 2015d.

¹²² ESCWA, 2015f, p. 3.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 17.

¹²⁴ WHO, 2014b, p. 2.

¹²⁵ Methaemoglobinaemia, commonly known as the 'blue baby syndrome,' arises when blood cannot sufficiently carry vital oxygen around the body, typically because of high levels of nitrate in drinking water. It mostly affects infants who, as a result, may have trouble breathing and become prone to vomiting and diarrhea. In some acute cases, babies suffering from this syndrome may lose consciousness or die. See World Bank, 2009.

¹²⁶ FAO, et al., 2015, p. 16.

¹²⁷ Checchi and Robinson, 2013), p. 8.

¹²⁸ Based on data from the World Food Programme's Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping website, http://vam.wfp.org/CountryPage_overview.aspx?iso3=SYR.

¹²⁹ FAO, et al., 2015, p. 46.

¹³⁰ United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the World Bank and the World Health Organization (WHO), Joint Malnutrition Dataset, indicator on 'Stunting', <http://data.unicef.org/nutrition/malnutrition.html>.

4. Challenges in the fields of sexual and reproductive health and women's autonomy

The Beijing Platform for Action affirms that “the right of all women to control all aspects of their health, in particular their own fertility, is basic to their empowerment.”¹³¹ Such right is closely linked to women's right to reproductive health services, as well as to women's autonomy in family planning and their ability to influence decision-making at the household level. A lack of choice regarding the number, spacing and timing of children can affect nearly all dimensions of women's empowerment, in particular women and girls' right to education and their ability to participate in formal work. Unfortunately, in some Arab countries, women's right to access reproductive health information and contraception can be directly at odds with prevailing social and cultural norms, as well as with pronatalist objectives promoted by the State.¹³²

Across the Arab region, it is estimated that about 40 per cent of married women use modern contraceptives. The disparities between countries are important, with the prevalence of contraceptive use ranging from as low as 9 per cent in the Sudan and 11 per cent in Mauritania, to as high as 61 per cent in Jordan, 63 per cent in Tunisia and 67 per cent in Morocco.¹³³ In this respect, Yemen has reported significant efforts in expanding access to reproductive health services, with the establishment of 1,880 additional facilities between 2009 and 2012.¹³⁴ Despite such efforts, the region as whole has significant unmet needs for family planning.¹³⁵ In the Arab LDCs, almost one third of women who are fecund and sexually active are not using any method of contraception, though they report not wanting children or wanting to delay the next child.¹³⁶ A significant share of women in Arab countries continues to lack knowledge about methods of fertility regulation and HIV/AIDS prevention.¹³⁷ In Egypt, for example, only 4.8 per cent of women aged 15-24 have a comprehensive knowledge of HIV/AIDS, as opposed to 18.3 per cent of men in the same age group.¹³⁸

Surveys conducted in Arab States suggest that women have limited levels of autonomy when it comes to their health. For example, 48.1 per cent of Comorian women and 36.6 of Yemeni women interviewed for the purpose of demographic and health surveys (DHS) stressed the problem of needing the informal permission of male relatives to access health care.¹³⁹ In Yemen, 42.2 per cent of married women indicated that it was mainly their husbands who made decisions about their health care, while another 45.2 per cent took those decisions jointly.¹⁴⁰ A separate survey conducted in Yemen found that only one in ten women felt that they were able to attend medical appointments by themselves.¹⁴¹ However, it is important to note that there may be significant variations in women's situations depending on their country of residence and their individual level of education and income. In Egypt, only 7.3 per cent of women identified the need to get permission for treatment as an issue.¹⁴² Meanwhile, in Morocco, women who did not earn wages were found to be three times more likely to feel restricted in their ability to go and see a doctor by themselves as compared to women who earned wages. This

¹³¹ Paragraph 92 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹³² ESCWA, 2011b, p. 6.

¹³³ United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators. Statistics for ‘percentage of women using at least one method of contraception among those aged 15 to 49 who are married or in union’ sourced from national surveys conducted between 2010 and 2014, <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx>.

¹³⁴ Yemen reported that the number of health facilities providing reproductive health services increased from 586 in 2009 to 2466 in 2012. (National report of Yemen on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 16, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.)

¹³⁵ UNFPA, et al. 2012.

¹³⁶ United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators, 2015. Statistics for ‘Unmet need for family planning, total, percentage,’ <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx>.

¹³⁷ UNAIDS, 2014, pp. 76 and A8.

¹³⁸ United Nations Statistics Division, Millennium Development Goals Indicators, 2015. Statistics for ‘Women and Men 15–24 years old with comprehensive correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS,’ <http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Default.aspx>.

¹³⁹ Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement de l'Union des Comores and ICF International, 2014, p. 113; and MOPHP, et al., 2015, p. 103.

¹⁴⁰ MOPHP, et al., 2015, p. 179. The survey pertained to married women aged 15–49.

¹⁴¹ SWMENA, 2010d, p. 10.

¹⁴² Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, et al., 2015, p. 130.

correlation is indicative of the mutually reinforcing ways in which women achieve autonomy in different aspects of their lives.¹⁴³

B. THE EDUCATION OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

Women who are empowered with knowledge are in a better position to make their own decisions, to benefit from economic opportunities, and to participate in public decision-making. Educated girls also become educated mothers, who are more likely to encourage and invest in their children's education and health.¹⁴⁴ Therefore, the Beijing Platform for Action places significant emphasis on the 'education and training of women,' which is addressed from multiple angles including equal access to education, technology, vocational training and life-long education; the eradication of female literacy; and the creation of gender-responsive educational systems.

Since 1995, Arab countries have made significant progress toward expanding girls' educational access and retention, as is shown by improvements in indicators of school enrolment and literacy. This is impressive in view of the current demographic pressures and high population growth in most countries of the region,¹⁴⁵ although there is some concern that the high number of students and crowded classrooms may have a negative impact on the quality of education.¹⁴⁶ An increasing number of women are also completing university studies, often in higher proportions than men. Thus, the education of women and girls is usually considered to be a key area of success in the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action in the Arab region.

1. *Milestones in improving equal access to education and combating female illiteracy*

Gender gaps in primary school enrolment have been significantly reduced throughout the Arab region since 1995, and notable gender disparities in access to primary education remain only in some LDCs (Djibouti and Yemen) as well as in conflict-stricken countries such as Iraq (see Tables 8 and 9). In fact, a number of countries, including Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Oman, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, have achieved or are close to achieving the target of universal primary school enrolment established in paragraph 80 (b) of the Beijing Platform for Action. This accomplishment is the result of multi-dimensional efforts focusing on the reduction of female drop-out rates, particularly in rural areas; laws to establish basic compulsory education; measures to extend the age for which compulsory education is required; and clear sanctioning mechanisms for parents who fail to enrol their children in school.¹⁴⁷ The progress in girls' net enrolment rates in primary school has been particularly striking in Morocco, where it increased from 54 per cent in 1995 to 98 per cent in 2014.¹⁴⁸ As for secondary school, enrolment rates remain generally low for both sexes (see Table 9). In about one third of the countries in the region, more girls than boys attend secondary school, in part because young men tend to join the labour market before completing their secondary education (see box below). This trend continues in higher education, where women now surpass men in university enrolment in most States for which data is regularly collected, including Algeria, Bahrain, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴³ SWMENA, 2010c, pp. 8–9.

¹⁴⁴ UNESCO, 2013b.

¹⁴⁵ For more details on demographic trends, see chapter 1 above.

¹⁴⁶ According to UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, the pupil-teacher ratio in primary education is as high as 33 in Djibouti (2014), 46 in the Sudan (2012) and 30 in Yemen (2011).

¹⁴⁷ ESCWA, 2015a, pp. 10–11 and 24–25.

¹⁴⁸ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. Statistic for 'Net enrolment ratio, primary, female'. For comparison purposes, the male primary school net enrolment rate in Morocco rose from 71 per cent in 1995 to 99 per cent in 2014.

¹⁴⁹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>. Statistics for 'Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, female' and 'Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, male'.

Table 8
Net enrolment rates in primary and secondary education
in the Arab region in 1994/1995 and in 2013*

Net enrolment rates in primary education		
	1994	2013
Female	68.97 %	85.88 %
Male	80.53 %	89.06 %

Net enrolment rates in secondary education		
	1995	2013
Female	43.54 %	63.02 %
Male	51.65 %	67.53 %

* The year 1994 is used as the baseline for primary education rates because no data on this indicator was available for the entire Arab region in 1995. All information sourced from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

Table 9
Closing gender gaps in access to education in Arab States

	<i>Primary school</i>			<i>Secondary school</i>	
	Net enrolment rate, female (National reports)	Net enrolment rate, female (UNESCO)	Net enrolment rate, male (UNESCO)	Net enrolment rate, female (UNESCO)	Net enrolment rate, male (UNESCO)
Algeria	97.9	94.5	96.5	–	–
Bahrain	100.0	–	–	92.0	94.5
Comoros	72.3	79.2	83.6	48.9	45.8
Djibouti	47.0	54.5	62.8	21.0	29.1
Egypt	94.3	–	–	85.2	85.6
Iraq	–	86.0	97.2	39.6	49.1
Jordan	99.0	96.3	97.9	89.4	86.5
Kuwait	–	91.3	92.9	87.9	85.5
Lebanon	–	90.4	96.5	67.6	67.4
Libya	–	–	–	–	–
Mauritania	100.0	75.2	70.5	20.1	23.1
Morocco	99.1	98.0	98.6	53.0	58.8

Oman	100.0	94.5	93.0	90.9	76.6
Palestine	93.8	92.0	90.5	83.8	76.6
Qatar	–	–	–	100.0	90.6
Saudi Arabia	–	97.8	95.3	100.0	99.3
Somalia	–	–	–	–	–
The Sudan	82.3	55.87	53.1	–	–
Syrian Arab Republic	70.6	61.1	62.4	43.8	44.3
Tunisia	94.6	97.7	98.5	–	–
United Arab Emirates	95.4	90.1	92.3	–	–
Yemen	75.3	80.7	94.9	33.7	50.6
Regional average	88.1	84.4	86.9	66.1	66.5
World average	-	88.3	89.8	64.6	67.3

Sources: For columns marked 'UNESCO', data was sourced from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, using the most recent available information (2007–2014). For columns marked 'National reports,' figures are dated between 2010 and 2013 and originate from national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (ESCWA, 2015a, p. 27).

Child labour and the rights of the girl child

Child labour refers to work carried out by children below the minimum legal working age that is harmful to their health and development and interferes with their schooling.¹⁵⁰ It is prohibited under various international conventions, including the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Beijing Platform for Action calls on Governments to prohibit child labour and to set specific target dates for eliminating all forms of child labour.¹⁵¹

In the Arab region, 13.4 million children, or roughly 15 per cent of the child population, have been identified as child labourers,¹⁵² but their actual numbers may be much higher as children's work in the informal sector is difficult to measure. Child labour is most common in seasonal agriculture, domestic work, and the informal urban sector.¹⁵³ In recent years, poverty and displacement resulting from armed conflict have also provided fertile environments for child trafficking and exploitation.¹⁵⁴ As shown in Table 10, boys are generally more likely to be involved in child labour in comparison to girls, at least in the countries for which recent data is available. The figures are nonetheless striking for both sexes, and the pervasiveness of child labour in the region raises major concern regarding the impact of such work on girls' schooling, especially in view of the disproportionate amount of domestic labour that is already expected of young girls.

Table 10
Share of children aged 5–14 involved in child labour (%)

	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>
Comoros	20	24
Egypt	14	4
Iraq	5	4
Mauritania	14	15
Palestine	7	4
Tunisia	3	2

Source: UNICEF Global Database on Child Labour 2010-2012, countries for which recent data is available <http://data.unicef.org/child-protection/child-labour.html>

Arab States have taken steps to address child labour by ratifying relevant conventions and developing national legislation that explicitly criminalizes various forms of child trafficking.¹⁵⁵ However, many States still lack adequate legislative and institutional measures to effectively combat child labour, including the human resources and means to carry out regular labour inspections. The Egyptian, Jordanian, Lebanese and Yemeni Governments are currently collaborating with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to develop and implement national plans to eliminate the worst forms of child labour in their countries by 2016.¹⁵⁶

Thanks to significant efforts and investments, the Arab region has also made remarkable advances in eradicating female illiteracy, which is a key objective of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.¹⁵⁷ For populations aged 15 to 24, the gender gap in literacy has been significantly reduced, and female youth literacy rates are now close to 100 per cent in most countries in the region. The performance of some of the countries with the lowest

¹⁵⁰ ILO, 2015d. According to ILO Convention 138 on the minimum age for admission to employment and work, the minimum working age should not be below the age for finishing compulsory schooling. It should generally not be less than 15, though it could be reduced to 14 in exceptional circumstances in the case of developing countries. Moreover, further to Article 7 of the Convention, children aged between 13 to 15 years may do light work, as long as (a) it does not harm their health or development, and (b) it does not prejudice their attendance to school, or their participation in vocational orientation or training programmes.

¹⁵¹ Paragraphs 166 (l) and 178 (m). Strategic objective L.6. of the Beijing Platform for Action also calls for States to "Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labour and protect young girls at work."

¹⁵² ILO, 2015a.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ See, for example, ILO, et al., 2015; and Save the Children, 2015.

¹⁵⁵ ILO, 2015g; and UNODC, 2015, Sharing electronic resources and laws on crime: Database of legislation, http://www.unodc.org/cld/search-sherloc-leg.jsp?f=en%23_el.legislation.crimeTypees_s%3aTrafficking%5c+in%5c+persons.

¹⁵⁶ ILO, 2015a.

¹⁵⁷ Strategic objective B.2 of the Beijing Platform for Action: 'Eradicate illiteracy among women.' Education constitutes a sizeable share of government expenditures in several Arab countries, comprising over 29% of total government expenditures in Comoros (2008 data), 17% in Morocco (2012), 18% in Saudi Arabia (2008), and 21% in Tunisia (2012). (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, statistics for 'Expenditure on education as % of total government expenditure, all sectors'.)

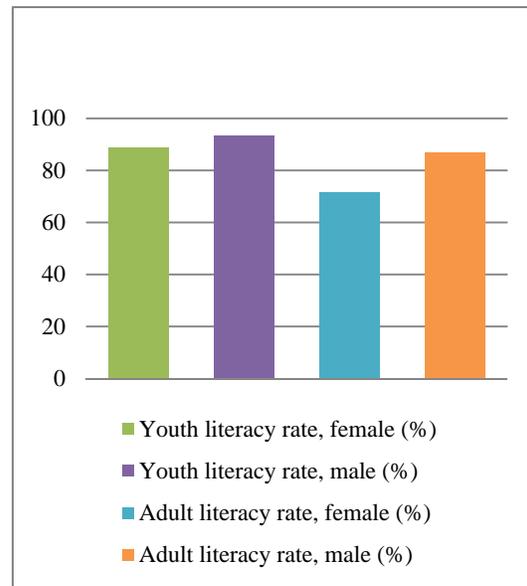
measured rates of female youth literacy is also worth noting. In Morocco and Yemen, the share of young women who can read and write has increased by 47 percentage points during the last twenty years.¹⁵⁸ However, there has been no progress in female youth literacy in Iraq and Mauritania since 2000, and no data was available for Somalia.¹⁵⁹ There remains important differences across generations (see Figure 6). About half of the adult female population in Mauritania and Yemen still cannot read and write; and when all ages are considered, it is estimated that over 34.2 million women are still illiterate throughout the Arab region.¹⁶⁰

Table 11
Average literacy rates in the Arab region

	1995	2015
Youth (age 15–24) literacy rate		
Female	77.41 %	88.70 %
Male	88.53 %	93.50 %
Adult (age 15+) literacy rate		
Female	56.05 %	71.80%
Male	77.25 %	87.10 %

Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

Figure 6: Generational literacy in the Arab region (2015)



Source: UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

2. The challenges of education provision in conditions of conflict and displacement

In recent years, armed conflicts in several Arab countries have significantly undermined girls’ access to education by disrupting school cycles, threatening students’ and teachers’ safety, destroying infrastructure, and prompting the conversion of schools into temporary shelters. In Syria, for example, 889 schools were reported as fully (379) or partially (510) damaged at the end of 2014.¹⁶¹ The educational institutions that remain active tend to be seriously short-staffed, as over 52,500 teachers (22 per cent) have left their positions since the start of the

¹⁵⁸ According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, the female youth literacy rate in Yemen went up from 35.4 per cent in 1994 to 82.7 per cent in 2015, while the female adult literacy rate rose from 17.1 to 55 per cent over the same period. In Morocco, the female youth literacy rate rose from 46 per cent in 1994 to 93.5 per cent in 2015, whereas the female adult literacy rate increased from 29 to 62.5 per cent over the same period.

¹⁵⁹ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, ‘youth literacy rate, population 15–24 years, female (%)’ indicator.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., statistics for ‘Adult literacy rate, population +15 years, female (%)’ and ‘adult illiterate population, 15+ years, female (number)’. As indicated in the Data Centre’s glossary, these measurements define literacy as, “Ability to read and write with understanding a simple statement related to one’s daily life. It involves a continuum of reading and writing skills, and often includes basic arithmetic skills (numeracy).”

¹⁶¹ United Nations General Assembly, 2015a, p. 33.

conflict.¹⁶² In Gaza, at least 262 schools and 274 kindergartens were destroyed by Israeli air strikes in less than two months during the summer 2014.¹⁶³ Meanwhile, 67 attacks on schools and 10 incidents of assault or threats of assault on teachers by the so-called ‘Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant’ (ISIL) were reported in 2014 in Iraq.¹⁶⁴ That same year, 17 educational institutions in Somalia were subjected to attacks by Al-Shabaab, the national army, or other armed elements.¹⁶⁵

Against this background, it is estimated that three million Syrian children aged between 5 and 17 years were out of school in 2014.¹⁶⁶ In other words, 35 per cent of primary school age girls and 45 per cent of lower secondary school age girls were out of school in Syria in 2013; and the female net enrolment rate in primary school dropped from 92 per cent in 2009, before the conflict erupted, to 61 per cent in 2013.¹⁶⁷ This low enrolment ratio, which is equivalent to that of the 1970s, points at the major risk of rolling back gains that have been achieved in the area of girls’ education over the past decades. Similar consequences of conflict have also been felt in Iraq, where adolescent girls are twice more likely to be out of school than their male counterparts.¹⁶⁸

Access to education is also a challenge for populations which have fled from conflict, despite commendable local and international efforts. Only half of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, attend primary school.¹⁶⁹ Moreover, according to a 2014 assessment, 94 per cent of Syrian youths in Lebanon (aged 15–24) were not enrolled in school.¹⁷⁰ Many of them had already completed their schooling or had left to seek employment, but roughly 35 per cent of them dropped out due to reasons related directly to their displacement, including the lack of financial resources and difficulties in adjusting to a new school system.¹⁷¹

3. Gender-sensitive education

Encouraging girls to enrol in school is only the first step toward mainstreaming gender in education systems. As the Beijing Platform for Action emphasizes, “gender-biased educational processes, including curricula, educational material, teachers’ attitudes and classroom interaction, reinforce existing gender inequalities.”¹⁷² Strategic objective B.4 of the Beijing Platform provides an elaborate list of recommendations to Governments, educational authorities, and other educational and academic institutions for fostering non-discriminatory education and training. Unfortunately, though most Arab countries have established institutions that are responsible for education strategies, the promotion of gender equality through school curricula and learning environments has not been a strong priority. Stereotyped images that portray women as mothers and domestic workers, and men as professionals and breadwinners, persist in many of the region’s textbooks. These

¹⁶² OCHA, 2013, p. 27.

¹⁶³ United Nations General Assembly, 2015a, p. 17.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

¹⁶⁶ Save the Children, 2014, p. 3. According to estimates available from the UNESCO Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, 715,000 children of primary school age and 1,111,725 adolescents of lower secondary school age were out of school in Syria in 2013.

¹⁶⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, statistics for ‘Rate of out-of-school children of primary school age, female (%)’, ‘Rate of out-of-school adolescents of lower secondary school age, female (%)’ and ‘Net enrolment rate, primary, female (%)’.

¹⁶⁸ World Inequality Database on Education (WIDE), Iraq country profile, <http://www.education-inequalities.org/countries/iraq/#?dimension=all&group=all&year=latest>.

¹⁶⁹ Preliminary data received from UNHCR in November 2015 (private communication) shows that 160,000 Syrian refugee children were enrolled in primary school in Lebanon, corresponding to approximately half of the estimated Syrian children refugee population in the country. This is consistent with an earlier survey, which found that the gross enrolment rate of Syrian refugees in primary school in Lebanon was only 56 per cent (boys) and 54 per cent (girls) for the 2012–2013 school year. (ILO, 2014a, p. 20)

¹⁷⁰ UNFPA, et al., 2014, p. 33.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 84–87.

¹⁷² Paragraph 261 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

representations undermine efforts for female empowerment by limiting the contribution of women to their traditionally assigned roles.

In an effort to address these shortcomings, Jordan and Morocco have developed plans for gender-sensitive education systems, and Egypt has created pilot projects to establish ‘girl-friendly schools.’¹⁷³ Another way of combating gender discrimination is the appointment of well-trained female teachers, who can provide positive examples of women in leadership roles, and are able to understand the specific challenges faced by female students. In the Arab region, female teachers are prominent in the lower levels of education, comprising 62 per cent of primary school teachers on average, but they tend to be underrepresented in universities and in most secondary schools.¹⁷⁴ Nonetheless, great strides have been made in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, where women now constitute over 40 per cent of lecturers and university professors.¹⁷⁵

4. Intersecting inequalities in women and girls’ education

The juxtaposition of different forms of inequality has received increasing attention in the contemporary international development agenda. In the Arab region, gender inequalities in access to education are often compounded by differences in income and geographic location. In Egypt, for example, rural women are twice as likely to be illiterate as urban women. Half of the women in the poorest households have never attended school, whereas more than eight in ten women in the highest wealth quintile completed secondary school.¹⁷⁶

Economic determinants are particularly important to consider, as a large proportion of educational programmes in the Arab region are financed individually, though the relative importance of private schools varies among countries and at different levels of education. For example, in Lebanon, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, half of children attend a private primary and secondary school.¹⁷⁷ Those institutions typically target wealthy urban populations who are seeking better educational standards than those offered in public institutions. In some countries, the recourse to private tutors is also widespread, leaving those who lack financial resources at significant disadvantage. UNESCO found, for example, that sixty per cent of secondary school students in Egypt relied on private tutoring to pass their exams, an extracurricular activity which accounted for more than 40 per cent of household spending on education across the country.¹⁷⁸

Likewise, options for early childhood education are usually costly private programmes, and therefore only accessible to children of wealthy families. In 2011, UNESCO estimated that 71 per cent of children enrolled in pre-primary education in the Arab region were attending private institutions,¹⁷⁹ with the highest share of children attending private programmes in Bahrain (100 per cent), Palestine (99.7 per cent) and Morocco (91 per cent).¹⁸⁰ The high fees for enrolling children in private kindergartens is considered to be one of the main reasons for the very low gross enrolment ratios in pre-primary education in the region, which stood at an average of 25 per cent

¹⁷³ National report of the Arab Republic of Egypt on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 19; National report of the Kingdom of Jordan on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 29; National report of the Kingdom of Morocco on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, p. 21. All available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

¹⁷⁴ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, statistics covering the period 2011–2013 ‘Percentage of teachers in primary education who are female (%)’.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., statistics for ‘Percentage of teachers in primary education who are female (%)’, ‘Percentage of teachers in upper secondary education who are female (%)’ and ‘Percentage of teachers in tertiary education who are female (%)’.

¹⁷⁶ Ministry of Health and Population of the Arab Republic of Egypt, El-Zanaty and Associates, and ICF International. (2015), pp. 28-31.

¹⁷⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, statistics for 2013 for the indicators on ‘Percentage of enrolment in primary education in private institutions (%)’ and ‘Percentage of enrolment in secondary education in private institutions (%)’, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>.

¹⁷⁸ UNESCO, 2014, p. 272.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁸⁰ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, statistics for 2013–2014 on ‘Percentage of enrolment in pre-primary education in private institutions (%)’, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>

in 2012, in contrast with 54 per cent globally.¹⁸¹ While the Beijing Platform for Action does not explicitly mention early childhood education, the development of high-quality and accessible pre-primary education programmes is one of the key recommendations of the 2015 Education for All review for Arab States.¹⁸² It is particularly important to lay the foundation for children's education and to help shape a balanced perception of gender roles.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ UNESCO, 2015a, pp. 27–28.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 28–30.

¹⁸³ For a detailed analysis, see ESCWA, 2012a, pp. 16–17.

IV. THE ECONOMIC DIMENSION: WOMEN'S ACCESS TO FORMAL WORK

Access to employment is an essential aspect of women's financial autonomy and their ability to influence economic structures within their societies.¹⁸⁴ The Beijing Platform for Action calls for States to “promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources,” and to “eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.”¹⁸⁵ Women's participation in the labour force has also been one of three key indicators for measuring gender equality under Millennium Development Goal #3 (“Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women”), and it is further emphasized in the newly-adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which dedicates significant attention to women's employment and economic assets under Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5 and 8.¹⁸⁶

This chapter reviews recent progress and remaining challenges in promoting women's access to formal work in the Arab region. The first section examines patterns and trends of female participation and retention in the labour force. It also looks at the nature of the positions that women tend to occupy in the labour market and various aspects of the gender gap in unemployment. The second section highlights the role of legislative and institutional frameworks in supporting or limiting women's access to employment, including provisions on maternity leave and discriminatory laws. It also discusses the promotion of women's entrepreneurship, which has gained particular momentum in recent years as a strategy to alleviate female poverty and support women's access to gainful employment.

A. PATTERNS OF FEMALE ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION IN THE ARAB REGION

1. *The share of women participating in the labour force*

Despite major progress in women's educational attainment (which was highlighted in chapter three), the share of women participating in the labour force in the Arab region remains strikingly low. This situation defies the commonly held view that higher female education predictably leads to more numerous and better employment opportunities for women. The share of the female working-age population that engages actively in the labour market in the Arab region, either by working or by looking for work, is just 23 per cent on average.¹⁸⁷ This is the lowest rate of female labour force participation in the world, and is far below the global average of 50 per cent.¹⁸⁸ Progress in this measure of women's autonomy has been very limited since the adoption of the Beijing Platform, with an improvement of just 3 percentage points since 1995.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Paragraphs 150 and 156 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹⁸⁵ Strategic objectives F.1, F.2, F.3 and F5 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹⁸⁶ See, in particular, Target 8.5, “By 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value”; Target 1.4, “By 2030, ensure that all men and women, in particular the poor and the vulnerable, have equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to basic services, ownership and control over land and other forms of property, inheritance, natural resources, appropriate new technology and financial services, including microfinance”; and Target 5.a, “Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.”

¹⁸⁷ World Bank Development Indicators Database, ‘Labour force participation rate, female (% of female population ages 15+) modeled ILO estimate’ indicator, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>. The labour force participation rate is defined by the ILO as “a measure of the proportion of a country's working-age population engaged actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work.” Persons excluded from the calculation include students, those engaged in household duties, the retired, and the disabled.

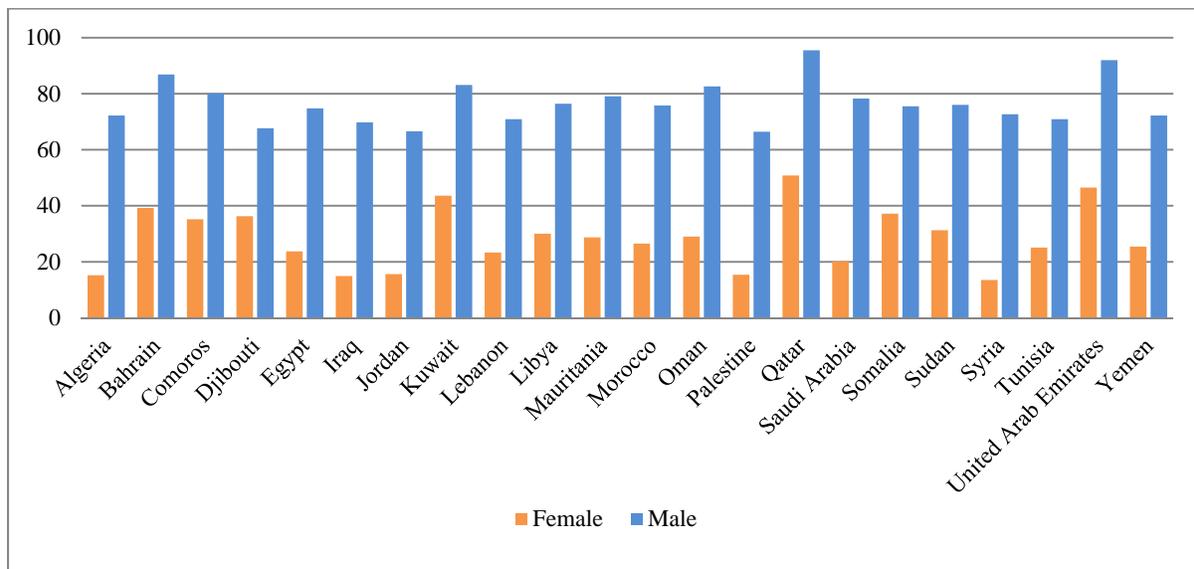
¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

Such low female labour participation rate suggests a broad gender gap in the Arab workforce, as well as significant disparities in access to economic resources. This is not to say that women in the Arab region do not perform any work. On the contrary, they are heavily involved in the informal sector as well as in activities such as unpaid housework and care work, which rarely appear in official statistics and tend to be undervalued and under-recorded. The Beijing Platform for Action acknowledges women’s valuable yet unpaid contributions to development. It emphasizes the need to better take into account women’s unremunerated work in the formulation of economic and social policies. In particular, the Beijing Platform calls on Governments to “examine the relationship of women’s unremunerated work to the incidence of and their vulnerability to poverty” and “to develop a more comprehensive knowledge of work and employment through, inter alia, efforts to measure and better understand the type, extent and distribution of unremunerated work, particularly work in caring for dependents and unremunerated work done for family farms and businesses.”¹⁹⁰

A closer look reveals variations in female labour force participation rates among different countries in the Arab region (see Figure 7). Most GCC States, in particular, have witnessed a significant increase in the share of women in the workforce in recent decades, with Qatar and the United Arab Emirates currently having the highest female labour force participation rate in the region. However, these figures might be misleading because they involve a large number of female migrants.¹⁹¹ The share of women participating in the workforce is also relatively high in some of the Arab LDCs, reaching over one third in Comoros, Djibouti, and Somalia.

Figure 7: Labour force participation rates (%), by country and by sex (2013)



Source: International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market Database, ‘Labour force participation rate’ indicator.

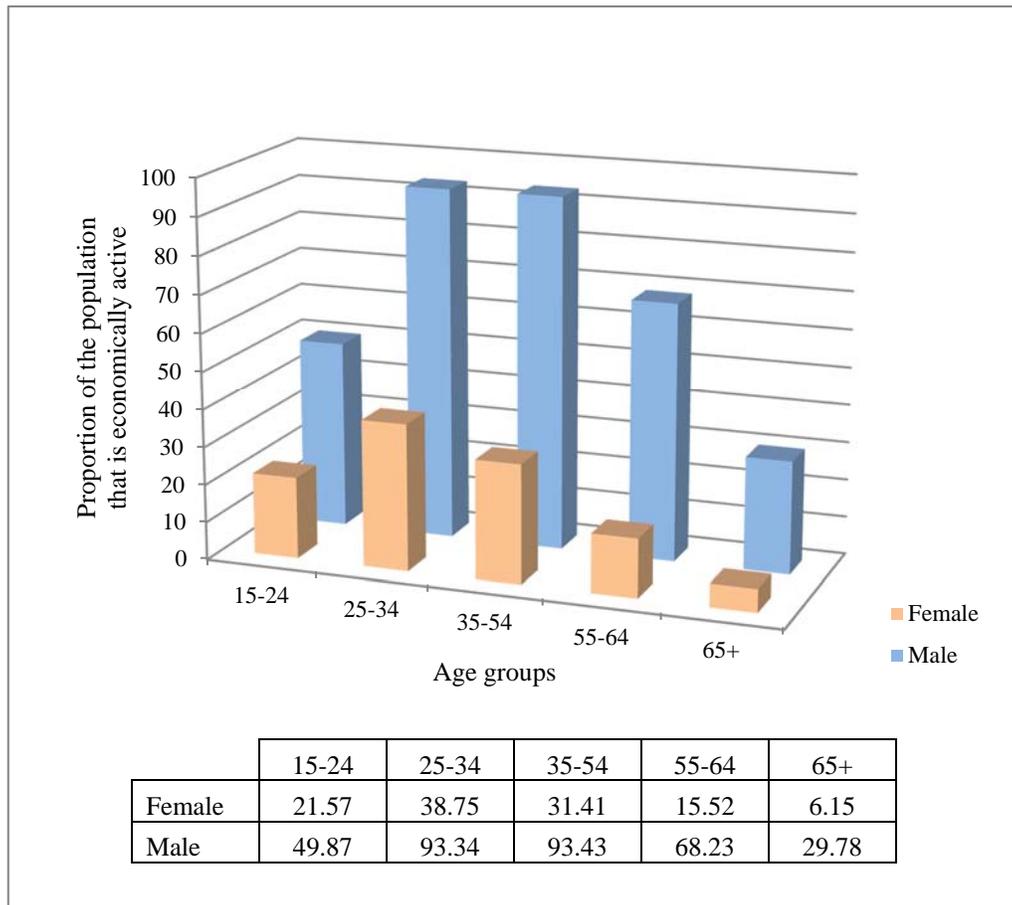
An examination of female labour force participation by age group shows important gender-specific trends in employment. As can be seen in Figure 8, young women enter the labour market at lower rates than males. This is partly explained by the fact that many women aged 18–24 are still pursuing university education and are not yet

¹⁹⁰ Paragraphs 68(b) and 165 (g) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

¹⁹¹ ESCWA, 2012b, pp. 7, 8, and 27.

looking for work, while many men of the same age group leave school to seek employment.¹⁹² In poor and conflict-stricken countries, women also tend to marry and start having children at an early age, which leads to early school drop-out and limited participation in the formal economy due to women’s responsibilities within the family.

Figure 8: Average labour force participation rates in the Arab region (%), by age and sex (2013)



Source: International Labour Organization, Key Indicators of the Labour Market Database, ‘Labour force participation rate’ indicator.

In the 25–34 age bracket, labour force participation increases significantly for both women and men. From ages 35 to 54, however, women’s participation undergoes a drop that is not seen in male participation rates. One possible explanation for this trend is that women tend to withdraw from the labour market upon getting married and having children, without re-entering the workforce afterward. Throughout the Arab region, women tend to be seen as the principal home-makers (i.e. assuming reproductive functions), while men are considered to be the primary breadwinners (i.e. assuming productive functions). Surveys on women’s time use confirm that women spend far more time doing household chores and caring for children. Women who work are thus under great

¹⁹² The gender parity index in gross enrolment ratios in tertiary education is in favour of women in at least half of Arab countries. It is particularly high in the GCC countries, reaching 6.7 in Qatar (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, ‘Gross enrolment ratio, tertiary, gender parity index’ indicator, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>).

pressure to combine both productive and reproductive functions, despite the lack of institutional support for maternity leave and child care (as discussed in more detail below). These circumstances push women to abandon employment after they marry and have children.

Several studies have found that marriage is negatively correlated with women's engagement in the labour force in the Arab region. One survey carried out in three capital cities (Amman, Cairo and Sana'a) estimated that married women in these urban areas were 13 to 24 per cent less likely to participate in the labour market than single women. Furthermore, marriage was found to be a more decisive criterion for women's lack of participation in the labour force than was having children. The same study also interviewed men to ascertain their perspectives on female participation in the workforce, and found that over one third of the male respondents expressed their explicit objections to women seeking formal work.¹⁹³ It should be noted, though, that such findings vary greatly depending on the country and the methodology used. Another study conducted in Lebanon, for example, found that 92 per cent of men interviewed were "very comfortable" or "somewhat comfortable" with the idea of their wives working full-time for pay.¹⁹⁴

2. Economic sectors of employment and occupational segregation

In the Arab region, the labour market is highly segmented by sex, meaning that women do not usually do the same types of jobs as men (horizontal segregation), and that women tend to have lower status than men when they do find employment in the same professions (vertical segregation).¹⁹⁵ In GCC States, women tend to be concentrated in the education sector, while in the Maghreb and Mashreq women are mostly found in agriculture and services. Men, in contrast, are represented in nearly all professions throughout the region, but certain sectors, such as fishing, mining, construction, and transport, are almost exclusively male.¹⁹⁶ Female participation in administrative and managerial positions is minimal in all areas of the economy. A recent survey by the World Economic Forum has shown that the highest share of women in managerial positions was found in Bahrain (22 per cent), followed by Kuwait, Morocco, Egypt, the Syrian Arab Republic and United Arab Emirates (10 to 14 per cent).

Gender-based occupational segregation in the Arab region is often justified by exaggerated accounts of differences between men and women in relation to education, training, work experience and innate capabilities. Gender stereotyping is very influential and provides the conceptual basis for women's representation in care-oriented positions such as nurses, teachers and social workers. Men, in contrast, tend to be over-represented in positions associated with physical strength, risk-taking or decision-making. Such gender segregation has significant implications for women in the Arab region as it limits their professional choices, and constitutes a major obstacle for equality of opportunity and treatment in the workplace. Occupational segregation also has an impact on organisational practices, and is associated with large gaps between women and men's salaries.¹⁹⁷

Agriculture is a major sector of employment for women in many countries of the Arab region. Overall, women's share of agricultural jobs is larger than that of males, and it has been increasing since the early 1990s as more men migrated in search for better work opportunities. Employment in the agricultural sector represents a particularly large share of women's jobs in Morocco (59 per cent) and Iraq (51 per cent).¹⁹⁸ Women in the agricultural sector typically work on a daily or seasonal basis for a very low pay. They rarely have formal work arrangements and are therefore denied the benefits of social insurance.¹⁹⁹ These trends can be observed in

¹⁹³ Chamlou and Karshenas, 2015, pp. 66–72.

¹⁹⁴ SWMENA, 2010b, p. 10.

¹⁹⁵ ILO, 2012.

¹⁹⁶ ESCWA, 2012b, p. 39.

¹⁹⁷ ILO, 2012.

¹⁹⁸ World Bank Development Indicators Database, statistics regarding 'Employment in agriculture, female (% of female employment)' corresponding to the year 2008 for Iraq and 2012 for Morocco, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.AGR.EMPL.FE.ZS>

¹⁹⁹ ILO, 2015c, p. 8.

statistics on vulnerable employment, which refers to the precarious situation of own-account workers and contributing family workers.²⁰⁰ While the overall share of workers in vulnerable employment is generally low and has declined in the Arab region during the last two decades, the proportion of women in this form of employment has increased and is currently the highest in the world. The ratio is particularly high in the Maghreb, mainly due to the large share of women employed in the agricultural field in the sub-region.²⁰¹

The public sector is also a major employer for women in the Arab region, though significant variations exist among countries. In GCC countries, public sector employment accounts for 80 per cent of overall employment of national citizens, and female employees comprise between 40 and 50 per cent of public employees in Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, 26 per cent in Egypt (2010), 35 per cent in Jordan (2009) and 22 per cent in Palestine (2010).²⁰² Women who work in the public sector are most commonly employed as administrative staff, teachers and nurses. One possible explanation for the extensive presence of women in this field is the emphasis on job stability, relatively good salary, and suitable working hours which allow them to balance their paid work with their family responsibilities. These features make jobs in the public administration particularly attractive to the increasing cadre of educated women in the Arab region, though several countries have initiated reforms to downsize or limit the growth of the public sector.

3. The gender gap in unemployment

Unemployment rates are high in most countries of the region for both men and women, but women are disproportionately affected. The average female unemployment rate exceeds males' by about 13 percentage points, resulting in the largest gender gap between male and female unemployment rates in the world.²⁰³ The share of women in the Arab region who were actively looking for work but did not have any job, stood at 21.5 per cent in 2013, in contrast with the 8.5 per cent of their male counterparts who were unemployed.

With an average of 29 per cent of the population aged between 15 and 24 looking for jobs, youth unemployment is of particular concern.²⁰⁴ Figure 9 shows that there are marked differences in unemployment rates for female youths and male youths in the Arab region. Nearly half of women between the ages of 15 and 24 are unable to find a job, a rate that is more than twice that of their male counterparts. Female youth unemployment reaches up to 77 per cent in Libya, and 71 per cent in Egypt.²⁰⁵ This trend likely contributes to low rates of female workforce participation, as women who have been unable to find a position may get discouraged and give up on employment.

²⁰⁰ ILO, 2015f.

²⁰¹ ILO, 2015c, p. 8.

²⁰² ILO, 2015e, statistics for 'Public Sector Employment (Thousands)'.

²⁰³ ESCWA calculations based on data sourced from the World Bank Development Indicators Database, statistics for 2013 regarding the indicators on 'Unemployment, female (% of female labour force) modeled ILO estimate' and 'Unemployment, male (% of male labour force) modeled ILO estimate', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.FE.ZS> and <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TOTL.MA.ZS>.

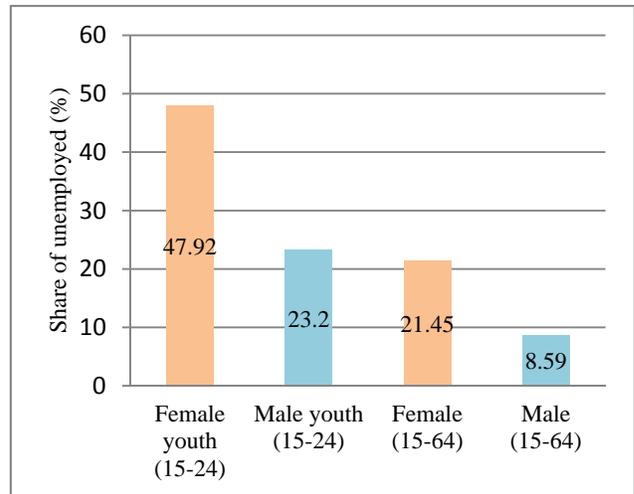
²⁰⁴ World Bank Development Indicators Database, statistics for 2013 regarding the indicators on 'Unemployment, youth female (% of female labour force ages 15-24) modeled ILO estimate' and 'Unemployment, youth male (% of male labour force ages 15-24) modeled ILO estimate', <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.FE.ZS> and <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.1524.MA.ZS>.

²⁰⁵ Ibid.

There are several possible explanations for this broad gender gap in youth unemployment. In the professional realm, fields of study that are more likely to be chosen by young women, such as humanities and social sciences, may not be as appealing to employers as the male-dominated technical and scientific disciplines. College graduates make up 70 per cent of female job seekers in Jordan, 52 per cent in Algeria, 46 per cent in Qatar and 41 per cent in Egypt.²⁰⁶ A lack of scientific knowledge is not, however, a sufficient explanation for the overall trends in unemployment, and women do comprise as much as 20 per cent of technical graduates in some Arab countries.²⁰⁷ Jobs demanding advanced technical skills actually make up only a small portion of the overall workforce, and most women who are seeking employment in the Arab region have reached levels of education that far surpass the requirements of the positions they seek to obtain. Thus, their skills are seldom the primary barrier to their participation in the economy.²⁰⁸

High unemployment among women can be attributed in part to the overall lack of job creation in the region, where many countries are torn by conflict and inequality. At the same time that the youth population has expanded and become more educated, domestic and foreign companies have expressed an increasing unwillingness to invest in the region.²⁰⁹ The overall scarcity of jobs can exacerbate traditional barriers faced by women in the workplace. The World Values Survey, for example, found that a majority of respondents from Arab countries believed that men should be given priority in hiring in times of economic hardship, presumably due to their traditional role as bread-winners.²¹⁰ Legal frameworks in most Arab countries that require employers to bear the costs of maternity leave (discussed in more detail below) may also act as strong disincentives to the hiring of young women.

Figure 9: Average unemployment rates in the Arab region, by age and sex (2013)



Source: World Bank Development Indicators Database, <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>.

B. LEGISLATIVE AND INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORKS AND THEIR IMPACT ON WOMEN’S ECONOMIC PARTICIPATION

Laws and institutional measures play an important role in either supporting or undermining women’s access to employment. Many Arab States have been successful at enacting laws which guarantee equal rights between men and women in the labour market.²¹¹ The principle of equal pay for equal work, which has recently received attention as a key measure of women’s access to resources in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has

²⁰⁶ World Bank Development Indicators Database, statistics for the 2011–2012 period regarding ‘Unemployment with tertiary education, female (% of female unemployment)’, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.UEM.TERT.FE.ZS>.

²⁰⁷ UNESCO Institute for Statistics Data Centre, <http://data.uis.unesco.org/>, ‘Percentage of female graduates from tertiary education graduating from Science programmes, female (%)’ indicator.

²⁰⁸ ESCWA, 2012a, pp. viii and 9–15.

²⁰⁹ ILO and UNDP, 2012.

²¹⁰ This information is sourced from the World Values Survey website, <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp>.

²¹¹ ESCWA, 2015g, p. 34.

been enshrined in Egyptian, Moroccan and Saudi legislation.²¹² However, there are several areas in which legislative frameworks in the Arab region continue to pose difficulties for women’s access to formal work.

1. Provisions on maternity leave

The most significant legislative gap relates to provisions on maternity leave. Only a handful of Arab countries currently meet the international standard of ensuring a minimum of 14 weeks of maternity leave,²¹³ and the duration of maternity leave established by the law falls below this mark in most Arab States (see Table 12). The challenges faced by women who are contending with short maternity leave are further compounded by the limited availability and costly nature of early child care and education services in the region, which leave many women with limited options to care for their children until they reach primary school age.²¹⁴ Another important consideration is that the costs of maternity leave are borne by the employer in the majority of Arab countries. These current provisions indirectly reinforce gender discrimination in employment, because they create additional costs which strongly discourage employers from recruiting women of child-bearing age. Several countries have established safeguards that prohibit the dismissal of women during maternity leave,²¹⁵ but this does little to alleviate the disincentive in the initial hiring process. Jordan has recently initiated a reform in social insurance, which finances maternity benefits through payroll contributions mandatory for all workers. Many other countries in the region, however, lag behind on this issue.

Table 12
Maternity leave duration and source of funding in the Arab region

	Duration of paid maternity leave (as stated in national legislation)	Duration of paid maternity leave (approximate equivalent in weeks)	Amount of cash benefits during maternity leave (% of Previous Earnings)	Source of funding for cash benefits during maternity leave
Algeria	14 weeks	14 weeks	100%	Social Insurance
Bahrain	60 days	9 weeks	100% for 45 days	Employer Liability
Comoros	14 weeks	14 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Djibouti	14 weeks	14 weeks	100%	50% Social Insurance 50% Employer
Egypt	3 months	13 weeks	100%	75% Social Insurance 25% Employer
Iraq	62 days	9 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Jordan	10 weeks	10 weeks	100%	Social Insurance

²¹² Ibid. According to target 8.5 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, countries are expected to “achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including for young people and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value” by 2030.

²¹³ Article 4 of the Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183 of 2000), http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C183.

²¹⁴ UNESCO, 2015a, pp. 27–30.

²¹⁵ ESCWA, 2015g, p. 34.

Kuwait	70 days	10 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Lebanon	7 weeks	7 weeks	100% ^a	Employer Liability
Libya	14 weeks	14 weeks	50% in general 100% for self- employed women for 13 weeks ^b	Employer Liability as a general rule Social Insurance for self-employed women
Mauritania	14 weeks	14 weeks	100%	Social Insurance
Morocco	14 weeks	14 weeks	100%	Social Insurance
Oman	50 days	7 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Palestine	70 days	10 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Qatar	50 days	7 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Saudi Arabia	10 weeks	10 weeks	50%–100% ^c	Employer Liability
Somalia	14 weeks	14 weeks	50%	Employer Liability
The Sudan	8 weeks	8 weeks	100%	Employer Liability
Syrian Arab Republic	120 days ^d	17 weeks ^d	100%	Employer Liability
Tunisia	30 days	4 weeks	66.7%	Social Insurance
United Arab Emirates	45 days	6 weeks	50%–100% ^e	Employer Liability
Yemen	60 days	9 weeks	100%	Employer Liability

Source: International Labour Organization, 2014b, pp. 133–140.

^a Although cash benefits are provided by the Social Security Act in Lebanon, the International Social Security Association (ISSA) reports that they are not currently implemented in practice.

^b Self-employed women in Libya receive 100 per cent of their presumptive income as cash benefits from social insurance, for a period of 13 weeks.

^c Women in Saudi Arabia receive 50 per cent of their salaries during maternity leave if they have completed between one and three years of service before the commencement of maternity leave. They receive 100 per cent of their salaries if they have over three years of service.

^d In the Syrian Arab Republic, women are entitled to 120 days of paid maternity leave for the birth of their first child. The duration of paid maternity leave is shorter for other children.

^e In the United Arab Emirates, women who go on maternity leave before completing one year of continuous employment receive only 50 per cent of their salaries in cash benefits, otherwise they receive 100 per cent.

2. Gender discrimination in the workplace

In the Arab region, women encounter a range of discrimination at work, in particular in relation to hiring and conditions of employment. Many Arab countries have adopted laws against discrimination in the workplace, but there are very few mechanisms to ensure their actual application and they do not systematically cover all groups

of women, especially foreign workers who are at particular risk of abuse (see box below). The broad gender gap in salaries, in particular, exemplifies gender discrimination in employment and, more generally, differentiated access to resources. The equal pay provisions that do exist in the region remain largely unenforced and undermined in practice. Inequalities in non-wage benefits, such as pension schemes, housing allowances and child subsidies, remain largely unaddressed. These benefits can represent significant amounts of money and are typically only paid to men in their capacity as head of household.²¹⁶ Women also rarely have the same right as men to pass on their pension benefits to their families.

In several Arab States, discriminatory labour laws continue to restrain women's access to employment. This includes rules imposed by the 'guardianship system' in place in some countries of the GCC. Combined with overall social attitudes about gender norms, this legislation may seriously limit some women's ability to work outside of the home. There are laws in place in most Arab countries that formally limit women's access to certain professions as well as their ability to work at night, which is a particularly important factor in tourism-related industries. Labour laws in some Arab countries also place particular burdens on employers who wish to hire women, for example by requiring employers to guarantee female workers' protection and to provide them with transportation.²¹⁷

3. Women's access to economic resources and finance

A series of actions listed in the Beijing Platform under the critical areas of 'women and poverty' and 'women and the economy' require Governments to provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms, and to promote women's self-employment.²¹⁸ In the Arab region, the promotion of women's entrepreneurship has gained great traction over the past decade, and it is often seen as a valuable strategy for creating jobs for women within a generally discriminatory economic environment. Entrepreneurship can also contribute to diversifying women's economic participation away from their traditional employment sectors, and studies have found that women-owned enterprises in the Arab region tend to be knowledge-driven and export-oriented.²¹⁹

To help foster female entrepreneurship, several Arab States have created lending facilities that provide services to specific groups of women (such facilities exist in Algeria, Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Oman and the United Arab Emirates).²²⁰ There has also been a surge in microfinancing for women throughout the region. For instance, the number of Yemeni women who received microfinance doubled between 2009 and 2012, and was estimated at around 6,379 in 2012. Women now comprise more than half of the beneficiaries of microcredit in Comoros and Djibouti. In Jordan, the share of female borrowers has increased from 49.5 to 78 per cent from 2009 to 2012, while the proportion of women-led agricultural projects financed by the Development and Employment Fund had risen to about 37 per cent in 2013. In the Syrian Arab Republic, a National Project to Reduce Poverty and Empower Women had provided 524 loans to women from 508 different villages as of 2011. In the Sudan there has been a strong increase in the number of banks focusing on the poorer segments of the country, and major commercial banks have established dedicated branches specializing in lending to women. The Sudan has also facilitated the entry of female graduates to the job market by providing loans to finance 12,000 individual projects led by women. In most countries, however, the programmes remain heavily urban,

²¹⁶ World Bank, 2013.

²¹⁷ Article 89 of the Egyptian Labour Code. For more details, see ESCWA, 2015g, p. 34.

²¹⁸ See, in particular, Strategic objective A.3 and paragraph 166 (a) of the Beijing Platform for Action, which requires Governments to "promote and support women's self-employment and the development of small enterprises, and strengthen women's access to credit and capital on appropriate terms equal to those of men through the scaling-up of institutions dedicated to promoting women's entrepreneurship, including, as appropriate, non-traditional and mutual credit schemes, as well as innovative linkages with financial institutions."

²¹⁹ World Bank, 2007b.

²²⁰ All the information in this paragraph is sourced from ESCWA, 2015a, as well as the relevant national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

with only one-quarter of the clients from rural areas. Tunisia, though, has succeeded to reach out to rural areas, which account for about 57 percent of the total number of active borrowers.

Limited rights of female migrant workers in the Arab region hinders progress toward the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform emphasizes the situation of female migrant workers, who are considered highly vulnerable to violence and abuse. It calls on governments to “ensure the full realization of the human rights of all women migrants.”²²¹ Migrant workers constitute an important part of the population of some Arab countries. They comprise 83.7 per cent of the inhabitants of the United Arab Emirates, 73.8 per cent in Qatar and 60.2 per cent in Kuwait.²²² Although the majority of labour migration in the Arab region is in male-dominated industries such as construction, female migrants are also numerous. They typically seek employment in domestic work, education, hospitality, leisure and health care. The ILO estimates that there are 2.1 million domestic workers across the Arab region, mostly from Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia and Ethiopia, constituting one in five women in the labour force.²²³

Considerable attention has been given to the exploitative conditions and physical and sexual abuse experienced by female migrant domestic workers in the Arab region. The ‘kafala’ system, whereby migrant workers’ visas are sponsored by their employer, leaves female domestic labourers vulnerable to situations of exploitation and contract slavery, since their visa and continued presence in the country is subject to the will of their employer. Female foreign workers are rarely afforded protection by labour laws, which often explicitly exclude migrant workers from their scope of application.²²⁴

Ensuring adequate protection for migrant workers, and particularly for female domestic workers, requires State-level reforms that guarantee the basic human rights of all residents, regardless of their nationality. A certain degree of cooperation between labour-sending and labour-receiving countries is also necessary. One milestone in this area was the adoption of the ILO Domestic Workers Convention No. 189, which is yet to be ratified by Arab States. Many Arab countries, including Bahrain, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, have recently taken action to protect migrant domestic workers with new laws, regulations and policies. These provisions laid the groundwork for improving domestic workers’ access to a minimum wage, labour dispute settlements mechanisms, social security and health insurance.²²⁵ However, with the ongoing constellation of factors that severely limit female migrant workers’ empowerment and human rights, further efforts are still needed to safeguard the rights and ensure adequate protection to this vulnerable group of women.

Though microfinance can successfully contribute to female entrepreneurship, it is important to note that it is in essence a temporary poverty-alleviation mechanism whose primary aim is to help poor and unskilled women gain access to financial services and maintain some level of subsistence. Microfinance alone is not sufficient to promote female entrepreneurship, which entails growing an enterprise over time, and eventually employing other individuals. Several countries in the region, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and the Syrian Arab Republic, have addressed this issue by establishing training centres to support women in their business

²²¹ Paragraph 58 (k) of the Beijing Platform for Action. See also paragraphs 125 (c) and 126 (d).

²²² ESCWA (2015, forthcoming), *2015 Situation Report on International Migration: Migration, Displacement and Development in a Changing Arab Region*.

²²³ ILO, “Domestic workers”.

²²⁴ ESCWA, forthcoming/a.

²²⁵ Ibid.

initiatives. These programs help women to gain a variety of business-related skills in the areas of management, technical knowledge, and marketing and distribution techniques.²²⁶

Despite advances in this area, there is much work that still needs to be done in supporting female entrepreneurship. According to the World Bank, women were among the principal owners of only 20 per cent of firms in the Arab region in 2013, in comparison to 32.5 per cent in Europe and Central Asia, 55 per cent in East Asia, and 40 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean.²²⁷ While both male and female entrepreneurs face significant economic barriers in the challenging business environment of the Arab region, women are confronted with additional gender-specific obstacles. One of the most important factors for female entrepreneurs is their lack of access to networks and information within the male-dominated business environment. Additionally, a recent survey conducted in Egypt indicated that female-owned firms had greater difficulty obtaining leased space and that it took them more time (on average, eight months longer) to resolve court disputes regarding overdue payments. The survey also indicated that female entrepreneurs had greater difficulty in obtaining loans, mostly due to a lack of collateral.

One step to move forward is to acknowledge the complexity of factors that affect the status of women in the labour markets of the Arab region. Increasing the number of women in employment and their incomes is only part of the equation and will not, on its own, overcome the various gender related constraints that have curtailed women's ability to take advantage of existing employment opportunities on fair terms.

Understanding the benefits of female economic participation to the national economy is crucial and allows to move away from treating women as victims and, instead, to start looking at them as full citizens. Women's employment can act as a powerful multiplier on the economy. Women who work outside their homes need to procure a range of services, including child care, cooking or tailoring, that they would otherwise most likely carry out as non-paying tasks. This new demand for services results in job creation and economic opportunities for others. Meanwhile, female employment also leads to an increase in household purchasing power and broadens the available talent pool in the economy.²²⁸ Therefore, facilitating women's formal entry in the economy as workers, consumers and investors raises potential economic outputs and wealth.²²⁹ A study covering 18 Arab countries found that GDP losses due to the gender gap amounted to 27 per cent.²³⁰ Moreover, resources in women's hands entail a range of positive outcomes for human capital and capabilities within the household, and can be used for improving the health and education of their children.

²²⁶ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 40.

²²⁷ World Bank Development Indicators Database, indicator measuring 'Firms with female participation in ownership (% of firms),' 2013. <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IC.FRM.FEMO.ZS>.

²²⁸ Loko and Diouf, 2009.

²²⁹ Some research indicates that, at low levels of education, there are little welfare losses, and the traditional division of labor between husband and wives (i.e., men doing the higher wage outside work, and women doing the nonwage in-house work) increases the welfare of the family. At higher levels of education, however, the same research shows that the division of labor is inefficient and leads to welfare loss. (Chichilnisky, 2008.)

²³⁰ Cuberes and Teigner-Baké, 2011.

Female poverty as seen through the challenges faced by female-headed households

Data on female poverty in the Arab region is scarce because surveys rarely measure intra-household poverty. It is therefore difficult to establish the gender-related dimensions and the determinants of poverty accurately. The Beijing Platform for Action includes an entire Strategic Objective (H.3) on the collection and dissemination of data disaggregated by sex. With regards to poverty, it specifically calls national, regional and international statistical services and relevant governmental agencies to “improve concepts and methods of data collection on the measurement of poverty among women and men, including their access to resources.”²³¹

In the absence of robust, region-wide data on female poverty, studies on the harsh circumstances faced by many female-headed households reveal the linkages between gender discrimination and economic hardship. The notion of female-headed household refers to situations in which a woman is the main breadwinner, either because her husband is not in a position to provide for his family, or because she is widowed, divorced, or a single parent. Female-headed households are among the poorest families in the Arab region, and women in this position are at great risk of discrimination and harassment. Some female heads of households must go to extremes to make ends meet, as was the case for one Egyptian widow who passed as a man for decades in order to work and provide for her daughter.²³²

The absence of social protection floors contributes to maintain vulnerable groups of women in poverty. Moreover, as a large proportion of social assistance in the Arab region flows through private religious charities which tend to endorse traditional values, the particular circumstances of female-headed households play an important role in determining the degree of the support that they receive from the community. The image of a deserving female-headed household is typically a widow with young children, and divorced women may be seen as less worthy of external help, as they had the option to leave under the protection of a man.

The number of female-headed households in the Arab region has increased in recent years due to armed conflict. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, for instance, estimates that over 145,000 Syrian refugee households are currently headed by women, making up over a quarter of all refugee households.²³³ As men are away fighting, detained, or killed in battle, large numbers of families have been left without their traditional breadwinners, and many women are now confronting the heavy burden of assuming multiple roles as breadwinners, sole parents, and caregivers for injured combatants and elderly relatives. They are also at greater risk being sexually harassed and assaulted at home.

The Beijing Platform for Action recommends that Governments “formulate and implement, when necessary, specific economic, social, agricultural and related policies in support of female-headed households.”²³⁴ A number of Arab States have reported efforts to provide assistance to divorced women and widows through special programmes (Egypt and the Sudan), funds and subsidies (Kuwait and Morocco) and providing free accommodation (Iraq).²³⁵

²³¹ Paragraph 206 (h) of the Beijing Platform for Action. See also paragraph 68 (a), which calls on national and international statistical organisations to “collect gender and age-disaggregated data on poverty and all aspects of economic activity and develop qualitative and quantitative statistical indicators to facilitate the assessment of economic performance from a gender perspective.”

²³² The story of Ms. Sisa Abu Daooh became famous around the world after she was awarded the Motherhood Award by Egypt’s President in March 2015. See Malsin, 2015.

²³³ UNHCR, 2014b, p. 8.

²³⁴ Paragraph 58 (i) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

²³⁵ These programmes are detailed in the relevant countries’ national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

IV. THE SAFETY, SECURITY AND PROTECTION OF WOMEN IN TIMES OF WAR AND PEACE

The level of violence that women continue to face twenty years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action is striking. Terrible crimes are being committed against them, especially in the war-torn countries of the region. Yet, it is in the false safety of their own homes that women are most likely to suffer from abuses and violence, even in times of peace.

The Beijing Platform for Action relies on a widely accepted definition of violence against women that was crafted in the context of the General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993), and according to which violence against women consists in “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.”²³⁶ The Beijing Platform lays particular emphasis on this ‘critical area of action’ because such violence is generally considered gender-based, meaning that those acts are committed against women expressly because they are women, or as a result of an imbalance in power relations between the genders. As such, violence against women is described in the Beijing Platform as “one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.”²³⁷

This chapter reviews legislative and institutional measures adopted by Arab States to prevent and combat violence against women. It analyses outstanding gaps in the protection of female survivors of violence, including social and institutional barriers faced by women seeking assistance and redress. It also examines the specific security threats faced by women in situations of conflict and displacement, a reality for a growing number of women across the Arab region.

A. PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN IN TIMES OF PEACE

1. *Estimates of the prevalence of violence against women in the Arab region*

There is little reliable statistical information about the prevalence and trends in violence against women in the Arab region, because this kind of abuse tends to be largely underreported. However, surveys about women’s experience of violence illustrate the magnitude of the problem (see Table 13). It is important to acknowledge the immense physical and psychological pain confronted by survivors of such violence, and the far-reaching consequences not only for the victim but also for her entire family. In the face of abuse, women often suffer from isolation and a limited ability to work and care for themselves and their children. Children who grow up in families where there is violence encounter a range of behavioural and emotional disturbances, which are associated with committing or experiencing violence later in life, thus perpetuating a continuous cycle of abuse.²³⁸

²³⁶ Paragraph 113 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

²³⁷ Paragraph 117 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

²³⁸ WHO, 2014c.

Table 13
Estimates of the prevalence and frequency of violence against women
(based on the percentage of women who indicated experiences of abuse)

Spousal abuse							
Country	Year	Physical		Sexual		Physical and/or sexual	
		Last 12 months	Lifetime	Last 12 months	Lifetime	Last 12 months	Lifetime
Egypt	2014	13.5	25.2	2.7	4.1	14.0	25.6
Jordan	2012	11.2	21.1	6.0	8.6	14.1	24.3
Tunisia	2010	7.2	20.3	9	14.2		

Abuse by spouse or any other individual							
Country	Year	Physical		Sexual		Physical and/or sexual	
		Last 12 months	Lifetime	Last 12 months	Lifetime	Last 12 months	Lifetime
Comoros	2012	6.0	14.0	1.0	6.0		
Egypt	2014	14.4	35.5				
Jordan	2012	12.6	34.3	6.0	9.2	18.6	43.5
Tunisia	2010	7.3	31.7	7.4	15.7		

Sources: Jordan Department of Statistics and ICF International (2013); Egyptian Ministry of Health and Population, et al. (2015); Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement de l'Union des Comores, et. Al (2014); and ONFP (2010).

2. Political commitments and legal reforms

Violence against women has increasingly entered into public debate in the Arab region, and political statements and declarations of intent to combat this kind of abuse have abounded in recent years. This is in itself a sign of progress. Most recently, ESCWA Member States adopted the Kuwait Declaration, in which they collectively condemned all forms of violence against women, and solemnly declared their commitment to enhance efforts to monitor and combat gender-based violence, including through the development of “clear rules and procedures that determine liabilities [...] and limit cases of impunity.”²³⁹ Many Arab countries have also elaborated national strategies to combat violence against women, including Algeria, Iraq, Mauritania, Oman, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Tunisia.²⁴⁰ These efforts have often been accompanied by institutional measures, including the creation of specific departments (typically within the Ministry of Health) or inter-ministerial committees and working groups.

²³⁹ Kuwait Declaration on Combating Violence against Women, in particular operative paragraphs 2 and 4. The text of this Declaration is included in ESCWA, 2014e.

²⁴⁰ These efforts are detailed in the relevant countries' national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

Arab countries have also initiated important legal reforms. In particular, Egypt and Tunisia added explicit references to the State's obligation to combat violence against women in their recently adopted constitutions.²⁴¹ Beyond their high symbolic value, such provisions may augur the amendment of existing discriminatory laws through constitutional review, and prevent the adoption of new laws that are contradictory to women's rights. In recent years, Algeria, Bahrain, Iraq (Kurdistan), Jordan, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia have also passed specific laws aimed at preventing and combating violence against women and/or domestic violence.²⁴²

Arab countries which do not have legislation expressly addressing violence against women can engage prosecutions on the basis of other offences, such as physical or sexual assault. However, laws that are specifically dedicated to gender-based violence are important, because they draw the attention of the public, as well as justice and law enforcement specialists, to the peculiar nature of these abuses. They can reinforce the principle of accountability for these crimes, which are typically committed in the private sphere, and which may therefore be overlooked, or considered beyond the reach of law. The passing of legislation on gender-based violence is also usually an occasion to adopt new measures to ensure better protection and access to services by women survivors. Finally, in a region where legal systems tend to be complex and divided along sectarian lines, legislation dedicated to combating violence against women may contribute to the simplification and unification of bodies of law that are often contradictory.²⁴³

Recently passed laws to combat violence against women should therefore be seen as an important and positive development, although those laws might not be perfect, and may fall short of addressing key issues such as marital rape. They represent the culmination of lengthy consultations, in national contexts that are marked by strong and antagonistic views. In many Arab countries, efforts to protect women from domestic violence tend to be seen as undermining men's authority as heads of the family, and the fact that new laws emphasize women's individual human rights apart from the influence and control of male family members, have sparked controversy from conservative groups. This may be one of the reasons why draft laws on violence against women or domestic violence have been left pending in many countries, including Bahrain, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Tunisia and Yemen.

Despite the challenges of initiating legislation to support women's rights, some Arab States have succeeded in introducing key legal reforms in recent years. Lebanon, Palestine and the Syrian Arab Republic, in particular, have abrogated laws which granted extenuating circumstances to murderers in cases of so-called 'honour crimes.'²⁴⁴ Egypt, Jordan and Morocco have amended provisions which once enabled rapists to escape

²⁴¹ Article 46 of the Constitution of Tunisia, adopted in January 2014, stresses that "the State shall take all necessary measures to eliminate violence against women". Article 11 of the Constitution of Egypt, also adopted in January 2014, foresees that "The State commits to the protection of women against all forms of violence."

²⁴² ESCWA, 2015g, p. 35. For further reference in this context, UN Women (2012a) recently developed a handbook which aims to provide detailed guidance for the adoption and effective implementation of legislation to combat violence against women. Another useful reference is United Nations General Assembly Resolution 65/228, which includes model strategies and practical measures on the elimination of violence against women in the field of crime prevention and criminal justice.

²⁴³ In most States of the Arab region, family and personal status is governed by Islamic Shari'a, while other matters may be determined by civil law. In some countries with a diverse religious make-up, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and the Sudan, each community has its own personal status code based on its own religious standards. This complex legal framework is reflected in the dual organisation of the judiciary, which is split between State and religious courts that represent various sects. In Bahrain and Kuwait, for example, separate hearings take place for the members of the Sunni and Shiite communities. This multi-layered system results in a variety of regimes and applicable laws, which in some cases, can contradict each other and send mixed signals to citizens. For example, the condemnation of a violent husband by a State criminal court does not automatically lead to a religious court allowing the victim to divorce and to be granted alimony and child custody. In Lebanon, the Law on the Protection of Women and Family Members from Domestic Violence expressly states, in its Article 22, that personal status laws have supremacy. Therefore, a recent ESCWA study on women's access to justice found that "the lack of unified judicial system impairs women's ability to seek and enforce remedies, and leaves women in a legal vacuum" (ESCWA, 2015g, p. 40).

²⁴⁴ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 8.

prosecution by marrying their victims,²⁴⁵ a leniency clause that is still in place in Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic.²⁴⁶ Several countries also passed laws to criminalize female genital mutilation (see box below).

Female genital mutilation in the Arab region

According to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), a large proportion of women and girls have been subjected to the harmful procedure of total or partial removal of their external genitals in Djibouti (93 per cent), Egypt (91 per cent), Mauritania (69 per cent), the Sudan (88 per cent) and Somalia (98 per cent).²⁴⁷ This practice finds its roots in tradition rather than religion. It is thought to safeguard girls’ chastity and usually takes place clandestinely.

Female genital mutilation is a violation of the rights of the child, and a brutal infringement on women and girl’s physical integrity. As highlighted by the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, “there is no developmental, religious, cultural or health reason to cut or mutilate any girl or woman. Although some would argue that this is a ‘tradition,’ we must recall that slavery, so called honour killings and other inhumane practices have been defended with the same weak argument.”²⁴⁸

Within the Arab region, female genital mutilation is outlawed in Egypt, Iraq (Kurdistan), Mauritania, Somalia, the Sudan (some States) and Yemen, but legislation is not always comprehensive and remains difficult to enforce.²⁴⁹ To prevent female genital mutilation, States have been urged to strengthen law enforcement mechanisms, and to launch education and community outreach programmes, as well as tools allowing health professionals to report cases when they believe that girls or women are at risk.²⁵⁰ In 2015, an Egyptian court issued for the first time a verdict against a doctor who had been involved in female genital mutilation.²⁵¹

3. Social and institutional barriers faced by women and girls when reporting acts of violence

The Beijing Platform for Action calls on States to “create or strengthen institutional mechanisms so that women and girls can report acts of violence against them in a safe and confidential environment, free from the fear of penalties or retaliation, and file charges.”²⁵² Accordingly, many Arab States have sought to facilitate the reporting and investigation of cases of gender-based violence through the establishment of specialized police units (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, and the Sudan).²⁵³ These initiatives have the potential to strengthen attention to crimes committed against women, but also contribute to the development of stronger mechanisms for data collection and monitoring. They may assist in increasing professionalization of the police when receiving reports from women survivors of violence. Morocco has gone even further by initiating a programme to collect data on the ‘quality of reception’ by authorities in charge of registering complaints from

²⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 23.

²⁴⁶ ESCWA, 2015g, p. 33.

²⁴⁷ For more details, see WHO, 2014a; and UNICEF, 2013, p. 2.

²⁴⁸ United Nations, 2014.

²⁴⁹ UNICEF, 2013, pp. 8–9.

²⁵⁰ Some of the UN resolutions and recommendations related to this issue include the Economic and Social Council’s Commission on the Status of Women Resolution 54/7, General Assembly Resolution 67/146, the General Recommendation No. 31 of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, and General Comment No. 18 of the Committee on the Rights of the Child.

²⁵¹ Hayoun, 2015.

²⁵² Paragraph 124 (l) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

²⁵³ These efforts are detailed in the relevant countries’ national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>. See also ESCWA, 2013b, p. 11.

female victims of violence, and to track action taken by police and justice authorities following the lodging of a complaint.²⁵⁴

Despite these efforts, which are often coupled with awareness-raising initiatives (see box below), the underreporting of cases of violence against women remains a major challenge in the Arab region.²⁵⁵ The notions of community, family honour and women's pride are strongly valued in Arab societies, and many women understandably shy away from disclosing attacks that might sully their reputation. A lack of guarantees for confidentiality and the absence of protection mechanisms against retaliation can contribute to these fears, and inappropriate disclosures may indeed result in lasting social stigma for both the victim and her family. In the case of sexual assault, this is compounded by the symbolic value given to female virginity and social taboos surrounding sexuality outside wedlock.

A variety of legal, institutional and social barriers are also preventing women from seeking redress. Women reporting sexual assault might end up being charged for indecency or adultery, and some countries regard their testimony as having only half the worth of a man's in civil and criminal procedure.²⁵⁶ In the most conservative environments, prevailing laws and social norms are also constraining women's freedom of movement, and thus their ability to reach a police station without a male chaperon. It can be particularly difficult for a woman to file a complaint when she has limited legal capacity and the perpetrator is her formal guardian.²⁵⁷

The issue of underreporting is also closely tied to the overall degree of citizens' trust in State institutions and the integrity of police and justice systems. Women's hesitancy to report crimes is heightened by their awareness of instances in which women, including underage girls, have been assaulted by policemen or other State agents. In some cases, those abuses seem to take place with impunity, confirming women's fears that they may be doubly victimized if they attempt to report experiences of violence. Several Arab countries have recently taken steps to clarify the role of law enforcement officers and to prevent policemen from discarding women's efforts to lodge a complaint. Qatar, for example, has issued new instructions to police and prosecution services, while Lebanon has indicated that any interference by law enforcement officers in such cases would result in disciplinary action and suspension from service.²⁵⁸

Several Arab countries have also sought to create more gender-sensitive justice systems by ensuring a better representation of women in law enforcement and justice-related positions. Lebanon, Oman and Yemen have recently taken steps to start including women in their police forces.²⁵⁹ Against much internal resistance, Egypt and Mauritania have allowed women to become judges, and Kuwait has opened posts for 22 female graduates within its Ministry of Justice.²⁶⁰ Women already comprise about 40 per cent of the judiciary in Algeria and

²⁵⁴ Haut-Commissariat au Plan du Royaume du Maroc, 2008, p. 291.

²⁵⁵ ESCWA, 2015a, p. 37.

²⁵⁶ According to a survey of legal systems of Arab States carried out by Freedom House (2010), women's testimony is only worth half of men's in the following countries: Algeria (in criminal cases), Bahrain (in religious courts), Egypt (in family matters), Iraq (in some cases), Jordan (in religious courts), Kuwait (in family courts), Libya (in some cases), Morocco (in family matters), Palestine (in cases related to marriage, divorce and child custody), Qatar (in family matters), Saudi Arabia, Syria (in religious courts), and the United Arab Emirates (in some civil matters). In Yemen, women are not allowed to testify at all in cases of adultery and retribution. The only Arab countries in which women's testimony is considered to be equal to men's in all circumstances are Oman and Tunisia.

²⁵⁷ ESCWA, 2015g, p. 32.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁶⁰ National report of Kuwait on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

Morocco, and the Supreme Court of Djibouti has been headed by a woman for several years.²⁶¹ The overall rates of female representation in the justice systems of Arab States remain, however, among the lowest in the world.²⁶²

Campaigns to combat violence against women

Laws alone cannot change deeply rooted social behaviours. Most national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action acknowledge this reality and recognize the profound resistance to change both within official institutions and in society as a whole.²⁶³

In order to transform attitudes towards violence against women, Arab governments, NGOs, and international organisations have launched various awareness-raising initiatives, but surveys assessing the effectiveness of these campaigns are rare because of the difficulties of measuring their impact. Yet, monitoring mechanisms are of critical importance to ensure that sensitization efforts are effective. Some studies have shown that awareness-raising projects, if poorly implemented, may actually solidify resistance to change and lead to an increase in men's pro-violence attitudes.²⁶⁴ Campaigns encouraging women to seek help may also render some male offenders more suspicious and incite abusive behaviour.²⁶⁵

Awareness-raising efforts also need to be accompanied by adequate measures to accommodate a possible increase in the reporting of cases, and to ensure the availability of high-quality protection mechanisms. A recent UN-Women guide on devising effective campaigns to end violence against women stressed that "campaigns [should] not be undertaken unless survivors and other community members have access to minimum services (health, protection and legal) or referrals to get the support they may need [...] If inadequate or no support services are available, it may be advisable to start with projects or advocacy campaigns for the establishment of organisations supporting survivors of violence."²⁶⁶

4. Challenges in the protection of female victims of violence

Many Arab States have initiated efforts to afford better protection and various forms of assistance to women survivors of violence. Such measures include the provision of health and psycho-social services, free legal advice and representation in court, temporary housing in special shelters (often accompanied by security measures), and small loans or financial support for education and training.²⁶⁷ While commendable, these services remain limited, and often leave civil society to fill the gaps. NGOs have played an important role in delivering assistance to female survivors of violence across the region, providing counselling, legal aid, and rehabilitation programmes.²⁶⁸ They have also launched innovative interventions, for example to prevent sexual harassment in public spaces.²⁶⁹

²⁶¹ UN Women, 2012b, pp. 60–61. See also the national reports on the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action from Algeria (p. 34) and Djibouti (p. 29), both available on the ESCWA Beijing+20 website, <http://www.escwa.un.org/sites/beijingplus20/documents.asp>.

²⁶² UN Women, 2012b, pp. 60–61. For additional data on female representation in the judiciaries of Arab States, see ESCWA, 2015g, p. 40.

²⁶³ ESCWA, 2015h, p. 7. Campaigns are an important part of the Beijing Platform's recommendations. See, for example, para. 125 (e) and (g) of the Beijing Platform for Action, according to which Governments, community organisations, NGOs and media are called on to fund campaigns to raise awareness about violence against women and to sensitize all to the personal and social detrimental effects of violence. Campaigns are also mentioned in para. 125 (h) and (j) and 126 (b).

²⁶⁴ See Broll and Crooks, 2012, p. 7; and Sloan et al., 2014, p. 17.

²⁶⁵ Broll and Crooks, 2012, p. 7.

²⁶⁶ UN Women, 2011, p. 11.

²⁶⁷ For more details, see ESCWA, 2015a, p. 35; and ESCWA, 2013b, pp. 30–31.

²⁶⁸ ESCWA, 2013b, pp. 41–54. In regard to the specific role of NGOs in providing counsel and legal aid to women in the Arab region, see ESCWA, 2015g, pp. 42 and 46–47.

²⁶⁹ ESCWA, 2014c, p. 7.

These initiatives to assist women survivors of violence have often struggled with the dilemma of protecting women and girls from abusive spouses or other relatives, while also promoting family cohesion in accordance with prevailing social norms, national policies and laws. Family values and the expected roles of women as mothers and care givers play an important role in the region, and they have actually been consecrated in the constitutions of most Arab States.²⁷⁰ Assistance programs for female victims of violence must contend with these realities and determine the best way to protect women. In some cases, the desired outcomes are controversial; for example, the stated objective of counselling interventions in Bahrain is to reduce the number of divorce cases.²⁷¹ In her report following her mission to Algeria, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women also described the risks faced by fragile survivors when they were incited to enter new marriages, which were arranged by government-run shelters so that they could escape the difficulties and stigma of living on their own.²⁷²

Strategies to address violence against women need to ensure that adequate protection and rehabilitation programmes are provided to victims of abuse. They must also consider the root causes of gender-based violence. In the Arab region, discussions on violence against women often oversee that power imbalances are perpetuated, and actually enforced, by means of discriminatory laws. Discriminatory marriage, custody and guardianship laws contribute to keeping women within abusive unions. The legislation of many Arab countries is not fully aligned with international human rights law, including conventions that prohibit child marriage, and even when adequate laws do exist, they are rarely enforced. In most Arab countries, men can file for divorce unilaterally, but there are only limited grounds for women-initiated separation, which can be subject to heavy evidentiary requirements. When women are allowed to seek divorce without the burden of evidence ('khula'), they must give up any right to compensation and are required to pay back their dowry, putting them at a heightened risk of poverty.²⁷³ Even in cases when women are granted some protection by the law, they and their families may come under strong social pressure to waive their rights. A study of the Jordanian National Council for Family Affairs, for example, revealed that perpetrators of female homicide in that country benefitted from reduced sentences in 78 per cent of cases due to families giving up charges.²⁷⁴

B. WOMEN AS EITHER WEAPONS OF WAR OR 'COLLATERAL DAMAGE' DURING ARMED CONFLICT

The safety and protection of women and girls is of particular concern in situations of conflict and displacement. As fighting spread unimpeded and national institutions crumble, there remain few safeguards to protect women from violence. Women are at risk of being used as tools of war by both State and non-State actors in order to undermine opposing groups and to spread terror. Recognizing the particular dangers that armed conflict poses to women and girls, the Beijing Platform for Action calls on States to recognize, prevent and condemn the instrumentalisation of women in armed conflict, in particular when this occurs through sexual violence.²⁷⁵

In the Arab region, numerous reports have recounted the plight of women who have been brutally killed, or abused and turned into slaves by radical groups, such as Al Shabaab and the so-called 'Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant' (ISIL). ISIL is said to have issued a decree establishing the prices to be paid for Yezidi and Christian girls according to their age, and its recruitment propaganda relies strongly on the promise of sexual access to women and girls.²⁷⁶ According to the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), more than 2,500 women and children, most of them members of ethnic and religious minorities, were held captive by ISIL as of

²⁷⁰ UN Women, 2015a.

²⁷¹ ESCWA, 2013b, p. 24.

²⁷² United Nations General Assembly, 2011, p. 19.

²⁷³ ESCWA, 2015g, p. 32.

²⁷⁴ United Nations General Assembly, 2012, p. 8.

²⁷⁵ Paragraph 145 of the Beijing Platform for Action.

²⁷⁶ United Nations Security Council, 2015, p. 10.

November 2014.²⁷⁷ The United Nations Secretary-General's report on conflict-related sexual violence emphasizes that this form of abuse "is not incidental, but integrally linked with the strategic objectives, ideology and funding of extremist groups. It is used to advance such tactical imperatives as recruitment; terrorizing populations into compliance; displacing communities from strategic areas; generating revenue through sex trafficking, the slave trade, ransoms, looting and the control of natural resources; torture to elicit intelligence; conversion and indoctrination through forced marriage; and to establish, alter or dissolve kinship ties that bind communities."²⁷⁸

Women are also particularly vulnerable to abuses and assault by State forces, especially during house searches and detention.²⁷⁹ The United Nations Secretary-General noted, for example, that the occurrence of sexual violence in Somalia often coincided with military offensives, and that internally displaced women and minorities were considered particularly at risk.²⁸⁰ In the Sudan, the national army faces serious allegations of the mass rape of about 200 women and girls in less than two days in Northern Darfur in October 2014. According to the African Union-United Nations Hybrid Operation in Darfur (UNAMID), which documented those cases, six of these women were killed, and one third of the survivors sustained serious physical injuries.²⁸¹ It is the responsibility of the State to adopt necessary safeguards and to ensure accountability for these crimes when they occur, in accordance with international law and as detailed in paragraph 124 (b) of the Beijing Platform for Action.

Unfortunately, ongoing fighting and strong antagonism between parties in conflict, together with rampant insecurity and the absence of functioning justice systems, has hindered the investigation of crimes against women in most countries of the region. Efforts have been concentrated on providing relief to survivors whenever possible, and documenting cases of abuse in the hope that one day, justice would prevail. There were nonetheless some positive developments; for example, in May 2014, the Somali Ministry of Women and Human Rights Development adopted a National Action Plan to Combat Sexual Violence in Conflict.²⁸² Libya has recently acknowledged women survivors of violence as 'victims of war,' and announced comprehensive measures to grant them compensation (see box below).

While systematic rape and assault by armed groups are certainly among the most striking examples of gender-based violence, these are not the only ways in which women are abused in times of war. Displacement, in particular, significantly increases women's risk of being subjected to all forms of violence. The high levels of surrounding violence, overcrowding, and the powerlessness of men in the face of poverty and war, leads to an escalation of domestic violence. Focus groups of female Syrian refugees in Lebanon, for example, indicated an increase of spousal abuse following their departure from Syria, and an UNRWA household survey among Palestinian families in a refugee camp in Jordan found that 44.7 per cent of women in the camp had been beaten by their husbands.²⁸³

Extreme poverty, living in unsafe camps with little privacy, or sleeping on the streets, combined with the absence of male family members and social support networks, also renders women particularly vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse. The majority of cases of violence perpetrated against displaced women go unreported, due to feelings of shame, a lack of resources, mistrust of authorities, and fear of social stigma.²⁸⁴ In an attempt to protect girls from those threats, vulnerable families are increasingly marrying off their daughters at a very young age.²⁸⁵ Yet, child marriage exposes girls to health risks and various forms of abuse by husbands

²⁷⁷ Ibid.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

²⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

²⁸⁰ Ibid., pp. 13–14.

²⁸¹ Ibid., p. 16.

²⁸² Ibid., p. 14.

²⁸³ International Rescue Committee, 2012, p. 6; and UNRWA, 2012, p. 1.

²⁸⁴ Un Women, 2013a, p. 24; and UN Women, 2013b, p. 32.

²⁸⁵ ESCWA, forthcoming(c).

who are often many years their senior. Violence against women and girls in emergencies can be prevented through well-designed interventions and the systematic mainstreaming of gender in the humanitarian response.²⁸⁶

A bill to formally recognize and compensate women victims of war in Libya

In an unprecedented move, the Libyan government proposed a bill in 2013 to confer the status of victims of war to women who were forced to join groups destined to satisfy the desires of former president Kadhafi and his sons, as well as to women who were raped during the uprisings of 2011. This initiative aims at complementing recent laws on transitional justice, which made only a general reference to ‘human rights violations’ and did not specifically mention crimes committed against women.²⁸⁷ The bill recommends compensating victims through a monthly financial allowance and the provision of housing loans. If the law is passed, women survivors of violence will be offered opportunities to pursue studies in Libya and abroad. They will be given priority in accessing jobs in the public sector and will be able benefit from free legal aid should they wish to file a case in court. Children who were born following assaults are also covered under this framework. The bill foresees the creation of a special commission to reach out confidentially to women survivors of violence.

²⁸⁶ Inter-Agency Standing Committee Task Force on Gender and Humanitarian Assistance and Global Protection Cluster, 2015.

²⁸⁷ Article 4 of Law No. 17 of 2012 on the Rules of National Reconciliation and Transitional Justice, available from [http://www.security-legislation.ly/sites/default/files/files/lois/311-Law%20No.%20\(17\)%20of%202012_EN.pdf](http://www.security-legislation.ly/sites/default/files/files/lois/311-Law%20No.%20(17)%20of%202012_EN.pdf). See also Law No. 29 of 2013 on Transitional Justice, available from <https://www.icrc.org/applic/ihl/ihl-nat.nsf/xsp/.ibmmodes/domino/OpenAttachment/applic/ihl/ihl-nat.nsf/E965634D2A728B0EC1257C60004D719B/TEXT/Libya%20-%20Transitional%20Justice%20Law.%202013%20%5BEnglish%5D.pdf>.

VI. Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

This study was undertaken to review major developments related to gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Arab region since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995. A universally endorsed list of actions and recommendations, the Beijing Platform provides a roadmap for Governments, international organisations, the private sector and civil society to safeguard women's human rights and to ensure their full and equal participation in society. The ambitious and transformative approach of the Beijing Platform makes it a reference framework that remains relevant today. The recently adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development explicitly reaffirms commitments made in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which, together with CEDAW, will continue to guide efforts to reach the new Sustainable Development Goals in the next decades.²⁸⁸

As these pages have shown, remarkable regional and national progress has been achieved in recent years in the area of gender equality. Arab States have made major strides in key aspects of human development, and these efforts have contributed to improvements in the lives of millions of women and girls. The gender gap in access to education has been greatly reduced throughout the region, and female youth literacy is now close to 100 per cent in most Arab States. The region has also performed well on major health indicators. Women in Arab countries now live on average four years longer than they did in 1995, and the average maternal mortality ratio has been halved. Almost all of the Arab countries have attained the objective set forth in the Beijing Platform of an under-five mortality rate below 45 per 1,000 live births.

At the institutional level, Arab States have established a number of mechanisms, strategies and tools to support women's advancement and to correct power imbalances. They have increasingly recognized the importance of women's political participation, as evidenced by the adoption of female quotas in parliaments in approximately half of the countries of the region. Data disaggregated by sex, though limited, has become more readily available. This information helps to shed light on the situation of women, and has enabled a more systematic evaluation of the effectiveness of particular government policies. Most countries of the region have established a national women's machinery to help promote gender-related initiatives, a move that can be considered an important achievement in itself as well as a practical foundation for the systematic analysis of gender-related concerns in government policies.

Despite these notable achievements, gender inequalities still persist at many levels of society in Arab States, putting women at heightened risk of poverty and violence. Advancements in the realm of women and girls' education have not yet translated into better access to employment. The average rate of female participation in the workforce has barely increased since 1995, and a limited demand for highly skilled labour has contributed to disproportionately high unemployment among female youth. Women's access to formal work is further undermined by weak institutional mechanisms in support of working mothers, as maternity leave entitlements often fall below international standards and options to care for children until their reach primary school age are limited or costly. Inadequate laws on maternity benefits also place undue burden on employers of women, thus reinforcing gender bias in hiring.

Power imbalances related to gender continue to be perpetuated, and in some cases actually enforced, through discriminatory legislation. Though most Arab countries have adopted laws establishing equal rights for women, highly discriminatory provisions remain in place, particularly in the realm of private and family law. There are also significant challenges to the effective implementation and enforcement of new laws and policies, which therefore largely fail to act as effective deterrence and accountability mechanisms. Women and girls continue to face a range of legal, institutional and social barriers that often prevent them from seeking protection and redress when they become subject to discrimination or abuse.

²⁸⁸ ESCWA, 2015d.

War and political instability in the region have become major threats to women's safety and to the advancement of gender equality. In some countries, the recent surge in conflict has seriously tarnished progress achieved in previous decades and rolled back hard-won development gains. Women in Arab countries are exposed to unprecedented levels of violence by armed groups, while displacement and the security void created by conflict leaves them vulnerable to all sorts of abuse. Limited access to education under these conditions threatens to give rise to a new generation of illiterate women and girls. Furthermore, a large share of national spending throughout the region is now dedicated to financing armament, shifting resources away from social services, health and education. Military expenditures comprised, on average, 6.8 per cent of Arab countries' GDPs in 2014, compared to a global average of 2.3 per cent.²⁸⁹ Meanwhile, Arab States allocated only 2.7 per cent of their GDPs in spending on public health, in comparison with a global average of 4 per cent.²⁹⁰

The uneven progress that has been achieved in the Arab region over the past two decades prompted the title of this study, "Against Wind and Tides," which reflects the difficulty of asserting the sustainability of advances in the status of women in the region, amidst a precarious environment. This metaphor also cautions against the perception of women in Arab countries as locked into a rigid status-quo. In reality, while many challenges remain, women's conditions in the Arab region are in a state of flux. Both gains and losses have been experienced in recent decades, and some promising initiatives remain in place to lay the groundwork for achieving greater gender equality in the future.

Taking a step back from the evaluation of specific gender-related indicators, it has to be noted that the vision that inspired the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action is yet to be realized. The Arab region has not fully carried into effect one of the Platform's key principles—women's full and equal participation in decision-making at all levels. Women's ability to make decisions that will govern themselves and society as a whole is perhaps the most fundamental prerequisite for empowerment, and until this condition is reached other measures of success can only be regarded as contingent or even token advances. As the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development summarizes, "the achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities."²⁹¹

One of the key lessons from the discussion of women's uneven gains in this study is that there is no shortcut to equality. This can be seen perhaps most clearly from the example of women's presence in Arab parliaments. Quotas alone cannot guarantee women's meaningful representation or the creation of gender-sensitive legislation when women are otherwise marginalized in public debate and consistently represented in stereotyped fashion through the media. The review of progress in the fields of women's health, education, and entrepreneurship likewise demonstrate the limitations of approaches that focus only on increasing access to services without fully taking into account women's needs in the context of existing power structures. In particular, gaps in women's access to sexual and reproductive health information and services can only be resolved through major and concerted efforts to support women's autonomy in all aspects of their lives.

Given the stark economic and social contrasts that exists among various Arab States, and bearing in mind that women and girls are a diverse group marked by significant differences in age, level of education, income, and conditions of living, it would be illusory to propose a 'one size fits all' list of recommendations for future efforts toward gender equality and women's empowerment. However, as the region reflects on the best ways to implement the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and considers its next steps towards the realization of the Beijing Platform for Action, it may be useful to reiterate some of the key recommendations adopted in Beijing, which can still be tailored to fit the context and needs of each country. It is hoped that those references

²⁸⁹ World Bank Development Indicators Database, statistics for 'Military expenditure (% of GDP),' <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/home.aspx>.

²⁹⁰ WHO Global Health Expenditure Database, statistics for 'General Government expenditure on health as % of Gross Domestic Product,' <http://apps.who.int/nha/database>.

²⁹¹ United Nations General Assembly, 2015b, paragraph 20.

will constitute a useful basis for the elaboration of effective policies to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls in the Arab region in the years to come.

SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION

1. *Women and poverty*

- ❖ Restructure and target the allocation of public expenditures to address the basic social, educational and health needs of women, particularly those living in poverty (Paragraph 58 (d));
- ❖ Undertake legislative and administrative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property, credit, natural resources and appropriate technologies (Paragraph 61 (b));

2. *Education and training of women*

- ❖ Provide universal access to, and seek to ensure gender equality in the completion of, primary education for girls (Paragraph 81 (b));
- ❖ Reduce the female illiteracy rate, with emphasis on rural women, migrant, refugee and internally displaced women (Paragraph 81 (a));
- ❖ Develop training programmes and materials for teachers and educators that raise awareness of their own role in the educational process, with a view to providing them with effective strategies for gender-sensitive teaching (Paragraph 83 (c)).

3. *Women and health*

- ❖ Support and implement the commitments made in the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the obligations of States parties under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and other relevant international agreements, to meet the health needs of girls and women of all ages (Paragraph 106 (a));
- ❖ Provide more accessible, available and affordable primary health-care services of high quality, including sexual and reproductive health care, which includes family planning information and services ((Paragraph 106 (e)).

4. *Violence against women*

- ❖ Exercise due diligence to prevent, investigate and punish acts of violence against women, whether those acts are perpetrated by the State or by private persons (Paragraph 124 (b));
- ❖ Actively support and implement measures aimed at increasing the knowledge and understanding of the causes, consequences and mechanisms of violence against women among those responsible for implementing these policies, such as law enforcement officers, police personnel and judicial, medical and social workers, as well as those who deal with minority, migration and refugee issues, and develop strategies to ensure that the revictimization of women victims of violence does not occur because of gender-insensitive laws or judicial or enforcement practices (Paragraph 124 (g));

- ❖ Provide well-funded shelters and relief support for girls and women subjected to violence, as well as medical, psychological and other counselling services and free or low-cost legal aid, where it is needed, as well as appropriate assistance to enable them to find a means of subsistence (Paragraph 125 (a));
- ❖ Recognize the vulnerability to violence and other forms of abuse of women migrants, including women migrant workers, whose legal status in the host country depends on employers who may exploit their situation (Paragraph 125 (c)).

5. Women and armed conflict

- ❖ Respect fully the norms of international humanitarian law in armed conflicts and take all measures required for the protection of women and children, in particular against rape, forced prostitution and any other form of indecent assault (Paragraph 144 (b));
- ❖ Provide women who have been determined refugees with access to vocational/ professional training programmes, including small-scale enterprise development training, and counselling on all forms of violence against women, which should include rehabilitation programmes for victims of torture and trauma (Paragraph 147 (l));
- ❖ Provide adequate funding to assistance programmes for refugee women, other displaced women in need of international protection and internally displaced women, taking into account in particular the effects on the host countries of the increasing requirements of large refugee populations and the need to widen the donor base and to achieve greater burden-sharing (Paragraph 147 (l)).

6. Women and the economy

- ❖ Develop and promote employment programmes and services for women entering and/or re-entering the labour market, especially poor urban, rural and young women, the self-employed and those negatively affected by structural adjustment (Paragraph 178 (e));
- ❖ Enact and enforce laws and introduce implementing measures, including means of redress and access to justice in cases of non-compliance, to prohibit direct and indirect discrimination on grounds of sex, including by reference to marital or family status, in relation to access to employment, conditions of employment, including training, promotion, health and safety, as well as termination of employment and social security of workers, including legal protection against sexual and racial harassment (Paragraph 178 (b));
- ❖ Provide affordable support services, such as high-quality, flexible and affordable child-care services, that take into account the needs of working men and women (Paragraph 173 (g)).

7. Women in power and decision-making

- ❖ Take positive action to build a critical mass of women leaders, executives and managers in strategic decision-making positions (Paragraph 192 (a));
- ❖ Establish the goal of gender balance in governmental bodies and committees, as well as in public administrative entities, and in the judiciary, including by implementing measures to substantially increase the number of women in all governmental and public administration positions (Paragraph 190 (a));
- ❖ Take measures that encourage political parties to integrate women in elective and non-elective public positions in the same proportion and at the same levels as men (Paragraph 190 (b)).

7. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women

- ❖ Promote national strategies on equality between women and men in order to eliminate obstacles to the exercise of women's rights and eradicate all forms of discrimination against women (Paragraph 204 (c));
- ❖ Ensure that before policy decisions are taken, an analysis of their impact on women and men, respectively, is carried out (Paragraph 204 (a));
- ❖ Ensure that statistics related to individuals are collected, compiled, analysed and presented by sex and age and reflect problems, issues and questions related to women and men in society (Paragraph 206 (a)).

8. Human rights of women

- ❖ Implement the CEDAW Convention by reviewing all national laws, policies, practices and procedures to ensure that they meet the obligations set out in the Convention; all States should undertake a review of all national laws, policies, practices and procedures to ensure that they meet international human rights obligations in this matter (Paragraph 230 (g));
- ❖ Review national laws, including customary laws and legal practices in the areas of family, civil, penal, labour and commercial law in order to ensure the implementation of the principles and procedures of all relevant international human rights instruments by means of national legislation, revoke any remaining laws that discriminate on the basis of sex and remove gender bias in the administration of justice (Paragraph 232 (d));
- ❖ Take urgent action to combat and eliminate violence against women, which is a human rights violation, resulting from harmful traditional or customary practices, cultural prejudices and extremism (Paragraph 232 (g)).

9. Women and the media

- ❖ Promote research and implementation of a strategy of information, education and communication aimed at promoting a balanced portrayal of women and girls and their multiple roles (Paragraph 243 (a));
- ❖ Encourage gender-sensitive training for media professionals, including media owners and managers, to encourage the creation and use of non-stereotyped, balanced and diverse images of women in the media (Paragraph 243 (c)).

10. Women and the environment

- ❖ Establish strategies and mechanisms to increase the proportion of women, particularly at grass-roots levels, involved as decision makers, planners, managers, scientists and technical advisers and as beneficiaries in the design, development and implementation of policies and programmes for natural resource management and environmental protection and conservation (Paragraph 254 (a));
- ❖ Integrate women, including indigenous women, their perspectives and knowledge, on an equal basis with men, in decision-making regarding sustainable resource management and the development of policies and programmes for sustainable development, including in particular those designed to address and prevent environmental degradation of the land (Paragraph 256 (a)).

11. *The girl child*

- ❖ Set specific target dates for eliminating all forms of child labour that are contrary to accepted international standards and ensure the full enforcement of relevant existing laws and, where appropriate, enact the legislation necessary to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child and International Labour Organization standards, ensuring the protection of working children, in particular, street children, through the provision of appropriate health, education and other social services (Paragraph 178 (m));
- ❖ Take appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the girl child, in the household and in society, from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse (Paragraph 283 (b));
- ❖ Enact and strictly enforce laws to ensure that marriage is only entered into with the free and full consent of the intending spouses; in addition, enact and strictly enforce laws concerning the minimum legal age of consent and the minimum age for marriage and raise the minimum age for marriage where necessary (Paragraph 274 (e))

Annex I. List of the Beijing Platform for Action's Strategic Objectives

The text below reproduces, for ease of reference, the list strategic objectives as they appear in the Beijing Platform for Action document.

A. Women and Poverty

- A.1. Review, adopt and maintain macroeconomic policies and development strategies that address the needs and efforts of women in poverty.
- A. 2. Revise laws and administrative practices to ensure women's equal rights and access to economic resources.
- A. 3. Provide women with access to savings and credit mechanisms and institutions.
- A. 4. Develop gender-based methodologies and conduct research to address the feminization of poverty.

B. Education and training of women

- B. 1. Ensure equal access to education.
- B. 2. Eradicate illiteracy among women.
- B. 3. Improve women's access to vocational training, science and technology, and continuing education
- B. 4. Develop non-discriminatory education and training.
- B. 5. Allocate sufficient resources for and monitor the implementation of educational reforms.
- B. 6. Promote life-long education and training for girls and women.

C. Women and health

- C. 1. Increase women's access throughout the life cycle to appropriate, affordable and quality health care, information and related services.
- C. 2. Strengthen preventive programmes that promote women's health.
- C. 3. Undertake gender-sensitive initiatives that address sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, and sexual and reproductive health issues.
- C. 4. Promote research and disseminate information on women's health.
- C. 5. Increase resources and monitor follow-up for women's health.

D. Violence against women

- D. 1. Take integrated measures to prevent and eliminate violence against women.
- D. 2. Study the causes and consequences of violence against women and the effectiveness of preventive measures.
- D. 3. Eliminate trafficking in women and assist victims of violence due to prostitution and trafficking.

E. Women and armed conflict

- E. 1. Increase the participation of women in conflict resolution at decision-making levels and protect women living in situations of armed and other conflicts or under foreign occupation.
- E. 2. Reduce excessive military expenditures and control the availability of armaments.
- E. 3. Promote non-violent forms of conflict resolution and reduce the incidence of human rights abuse in conflict situations.
- E. 4. Promote women's contribution to fostering a culture of peace.
- E. 5. Provide protection, assistance and training to refugee women, other displaced women in need of international protection and internally displaced women.
- E. 6. Provide assistance to the women of the colonies and non-self-governing territories.

- F. Women and the economy
 - F. 1. Promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources.
 - F. 2. Facilitate women's equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade.
 - F. 3. Provide business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women.
 - F. 4. Strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks.
 - F. 5. Eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.
 - F. 6. Promote harmonization of work and family responsibilities for women and men.

- G. Women in power and decision-making
 - G. 1. Take measures to ensure women's equal access to and full participation in power structures and decision-making.
 - G. 2. Increase women's capacity to participate in decision-making and leadership.

- H. Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
 - H. 1. Create or strengthen national machineries and other governmental bodies.
 - H. 2. Integrate gender perspectives in legislation, public policies, programmes and projects.
 - H. 3. Generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation.

- I. Human rights of women
 - I. 1. Promote and protect the human rights of women, through the full implementation of all human rights instruments, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.
 - I. 2. Ensure equality and non-discrimination under the law and in practice.
 - I. 3. Achieve legal literacy.

- J. Women and the media
 - J. 1. Increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.
 - J. 2. Promote a balanced and non-stereotyped portrayal of women in the media.

- K. Women and the environment
 - K. 1. Involve women actively in environmental decision-making at all levels.
 - K. 2. Integrate gender concerns and perspectives in policies and programmes for sustainable development.
 - K. 3. Strengthen or establish mechanisms at the national, regional and international levels to assess the impact of development and environmental policies on women.

- L. The girl child
 - L. 1. Eliminate all forms of discrimination against the girl child.
 - L. 2. Eliminate negative cultural attitudes and practices against girls.
 - L. 3. Promote and protect the rights of the girl child and increase awareness of her needs and potential.
 - L. 4. Eliminate discrimination against girls in education, skills development and training.
 - L. 5. Eliminate discrimination against girls in health and nutrition.
 - L. 6. Eliminate the economic exploitation of child labour and protect young girls at work.
 - L. 7. Eradicate violence against the girl child.
 - L. 8. Promote the girl child's awareness of and participation in social, economic and political life.
 - L. 9. Strengthen the role of the family in improving the status of the girl child.

Annex II. Gender Equality Indices: A Brief Outlook

Composite indices have become increasingly prominent in recent years in many areas of research, and the field of gender studies is no exception. These indices can be very useful in providing a snapshot of States' performance in relation to specific sets of indicators. They are powerful awareness-raising tools that can promote government accountability and reforms, especially if progress can be tracked over time. They may also create positive emulation between States, whether globally or at the regional level.

At the same time, there are significant limitations that can arise in relying on indices. The interpretation of results from these instruments can sometimes become overly simplistic. The construction of indices is fraught with methodological challenges. For example, the United Nations Development Programme's (UNDP) Gender Development Index (GDI), which was launched in the aftermath of the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, relies on the ratio of female to male scores in the Human Development Index (HDI).²⁹² Therefore, the GDI is not a direct measure of gender inequality *per se*, but rather assesses the 'human development penalty' of gender inequality.²⁹³

Furthermore, States' rankings in indices may not appropriately reflect the variety of contexts and challenges faced by different countries. The GDI, for instance, has been criticized for the predominance of its income variable, which implies that countries with lower income are unlikely to receive high scores regardless of their achievements in the field of gender equality.²⁹⁴ Indices that have been developed more recently, such as the World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) and the UNDP's Gender Inequality Index, attempt to remedy this shortcoming by emphasizing measurements of equitable access to resources, rather than absolute levels of resources.

Table 14: Main indicators used in gender indices

	UNDP Gender Development Index (GDI)	UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII)	World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI)
Health			
Life expectancy	✓		✓
Reproductive health indicators		✓	
Education			
Years of schooling	✓		
Share of women with secondary education		✓	
Literacy and enrolment rates			✓
Economy			
Estimated earned income	✓		✓

²⁹² UNDP, 2014b.

²⁹³ Klasen, 2006, p. 246.

²⁹⁴ See Permanyer, 2013, p. 3.

Ratio of labour market participation rates	✓	✓
Indicators on wage equality		✓
Indicators on female representation in decision-making		✓
Indicators on female representation in technical work		✓
<i>Political participation</i>		
Share of seats in parliament held by women	✓	✓
Share of female ministers		✓
Number of years for which a woman was head of State during the last 20 years		✓

Sources: UNDP, 2014b, p. 1, and World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 4.

In contrast to the above-mentioned indices, the Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI) elaborated by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) takes the stance of assessing the overarching context and framework for gender equality – in other words the input variables – rather than focusing on inequality outcomes. To accomplish this, SIGI focuses on five dimensions: discriminatory family code, restricted physical integrity, son bias, restricted resources and assets, and restricted civil liberties. Based on these factors, the SIGI index shows that the highest discrimination levels in the world takes place in the Arab region.²⁹⁵ The picture is particularly bleak with respect to the family code and access to resources, while mediocre performance on governance indicators further contributes to the region's poor performance.

Table 15: WEF Global Gender Gap Index

GGGI rank (Arab region)	GGGI rank (Global)	GGGI score	Country
1	113	0.6457	Kuwait
2	115	0.6436	United Arab Emirates
3	116	0.6403	Qatar
4	123	0.6272	Tunisia
5	124	0.6261	Bahrain
6	126	0.6182	Algeria
7	128	0.6091	Oman
8	129	0.6064	Egypt
9	130	0.6059	Saudi Arabia
10	131	0.6029	Mauritania
11	133	0.5988	Morocco

²⁹⁵ OECD, 2014, pp. 42–45.

12	134	0.5968	Jordan
13	135	0.5923	Lebanon
14	139	0.5775	Syrian Arab Republic
15	142	0.5145	Yemen

Source: World Economic Forum, 2014, p. 12. Note that Comoros, Djibouti, Iraq, Libya, Palestine, Somalia, and the Sudan are not included in this index.

Table 16: OECD Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI)

SIGI rank (Arab region)	SIGI rank (Global)	SIGI value	Country	Level of discrimination
1	36	0.1052	Morocco	Low
2	62	0.1985	Tunisia	Medium
3	78	0.2630	Iraq	High
4	83	0.2896	Lebanon	High
5	87	0.3118	Jordan	High
6	96	0.3953	Mauritania	Very High
7	98	0.4162	Syrian Arab Republic	Very High
8	100	0.4280	Egypt	Very High
9	103	0.4573	Somalia	Very High
10	107	0.5550	The Sudan	Very High
11	108	0.5634	Yemen	Very High

Source: OECD, 2014. Note that Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Kuwait, Libya, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are not included in this index.

Table 17: UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) for Arab States

GII rank (Arab region)	GII rank (Global)	GII value	Country
1	40	0.215	Libya
2	43	0.244	United Arab Emirates
3	46	0.253	Bahrain
4	48	0.265	Tunisia
5	50	0.288	Kuwait
6	56	0.321	Saudi Arabia
7	64	0.348	Oman
8	80	0.413	Lebanon
9	81	0.425	Algeria
10	92	0.460	Morocco
11	101	0.488	Jordan
12	113	0.524	Qatar
13	120	0.542	Iraq
14	125	0.556	Syrian Arab Republic
15	130	0.580	Egypt
16	140	0.628	The Sudan
17	142	0.644	Mauritania
18	152	0.733	Yemen

Source: UNDP, 2014a, pp. 172–175. Note that Comoros, Djibouti, Palestine, and Somalia are not included in this index.

Table 18: UNDP Gender Development Index (GDI) for Arab States

GDI rank (Arab region)	GDI rank (Global)	Female to male ratio of HDI	Country	Human Development Index (HDI) Groups
1	22	0.987	Kuwait	1. Very high human development
2	32	0.979	Qatar	1. Very high human development
3	41	0.974	Palestine	3. Medium human development
4	66	0.961	Bahrain	1. Very high human development
5	70	0.958	United Arab Emirates	1. Very high human development
6	93	0.931	Libya	2. High human development
7	110	0.9	Lebanon	2. High human development
8	112	0.897	Saudi Arabia	1. Very high human development
9	116	0.891	Tunisia	2. High human development
10	125	0.855	Egypt	3. Medium human development
11	127	0.851	Syrian A. R.	3. Medium human development
12	129	0.843	Algeria	2. High human development
13	130	0.842	Jordan	2. High human development
14	132	0.828	Morocco	3. Medium human development
15	137	0.802	Iraq	3. Medium human development
16	138	0.801	Mauritania	4. Low human development
17	146	0.738	Yemen	4. Low human development

Source: UNDP, 2014b, pp. 176–179. Note that Comoros, Djibouti, Oman, Somalia, and the Sudan are not included in this index.

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Twenty years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action on gender equality and women's empowerment, this review of its implementation could not be more timely. Although much has been achieved in recent years to advance the rights of women and girls in the Arab region, inequalities persist at many levels, often perpetuated by law. In some countries, conflict has set back progress made and threatens the very security of women and girls. Moreover, the region has failed to put into effect one of the basic principles of the Beijing Platform: the full and equal participation of women in decision-making.

This study, it is hoped, will encourage Governments and other concerned parties to redouble their commitment to the vision of the Beijing Declaration. It provides a sound foundation on which to build future development and gender equality strategies.