

Background Note: Briefing to the Executive Board of UN-Women First Regular Session 2022

The Arab States

1. The Arab States – rich in diversity

The Arab States region, with all its dynamism and unifying traits is also multi-faced and deeply heterogenous, and can just as well be characterized by the many *diversities* between individual countries. While all regions are home to rich diversities, the Arab States region show a uniquely extended landscape, as some of the world’s absolutely wealthiest nations, share borders with some the poorest nations worldwide. Similarly, countries that have been spared armed conflicts on their soil for long periods of history, find themselves in proximity to countries experiencing the most devastating wars, as the region is home to two of the world’s largest humanitarian crises. In the Arab States, civilizations stretching 5000 years back are 2-hours away from nations celebrating a 50-year anniversary (in 2021). This is also a region where centuries of cultural and societal heritage subsist with a large proportion of young people (more than 30%), of which more than 50% are women and girls.

The Arab States (with more than 350 million people, and around 175 million women and girls) also share unique commonalities, notably language, religions and cultural references, that could propel regional collaboration, and consequently boost critical areas - notably trade, digitalization, gender equality and environment - that have the greatest potential for moving the region as a whole towards further prosperity and peace.

2. Gender Equality – Variations and Commonalities

The area of gender equality is a point in case, as the region shows both tremendous variations as well as unique similarities. The narrative about the region has generally looked at the commonalities underpinning gender inequality in the region, yet not equivalently acknowledging the many variations between countries. Without a sophisticated understanding of that richness in experiences, both the narrative as well as programmatic efforts will by nature be too generic to bring the profound impact, towards which the region is aspiring.

Two general assumptions therefore need to be nuanced. Firstly, the assumption that all countries in the Arab States all face the same challenges in the area of gender equality, and secondly that little or no progress is taking place across the entire region. The first assumption most probably derives from the fact that regional averages on gender-indexes for the Arab States are low, as the Middle East and North Africa region still struggles with the widest gender gap overall, the widely

used index produced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) 60.9 per cent. While this holds true these *low regional averages hide extreme variations between countries*, in many ways mimicking the variations mentioned above in the economic and political spheres.

For example, the data in key sub-indices produced by the Inter Parliamentary Union (IPU), such as *political empowerment*¹, shows that very picture, with the region being home to a number of countries with long traditions of women's political participation (stretching a century back) at the same time as it houses countries ranking below the 150 spots of this sub-index. Also, one of only 4 countries worldwide with 50% women in parliament is from the region, while the lowest figure globally for any country is also found in the Arab States. There are countries in the region that exceed global averages on women in cabinets, and also countries moving back from strong female ministerial representation to governments with close to zero women ministers.

An observed commonality throughout the region is the correlation between how armed conflicts have not only reversed development gains in the region overall; but have also measurably regressed developments towards achieving gender equality², particularly as conflicts turn into protracted humanitarian crises, where education facilities and jobs are diminishing, with women being the first to loose out in those areas³. And therefore, the need to support fragile countries to *transition* towards sustainable and equitable development, including basic social services and job creation, is of significant importance to the region as a whole.

The second common assumption, that of no or little progress in the area of gender equality in the region also very clearly needs to be nuanced, as advancements have been realized in certain areas, such as the area of legal reforms, particularly in countries with gender equality amongst lawmakers. In some countries women constitute more than 50% (which is high by global standards) of women lawmakers. In some countries legal reform has been facilitated by the fact of established Gender Responsive Budgeting, which stipulates clear accountabilities on gender equality. Since 2017, a number of key laws have been amended and adopted in efforts to strengthen women's rights throughout the region, as evidenced by the yearly multi agency updated (Gender Justice Dashboard), conducted by UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA and ESCWA. For example, the dashboard shows that in the area of violence against women – including sexual harassment - numerous countries have adopted laws in recent years, toughening penalties on violence against women. Still, as often is the case with important social reforms the picture is not clear cut and there are also several examples of positive trends reversing. Legislative efforts also need to be followed up with implementation that reinforces legislative intent.

¹ The [IPU's global monitoring of women's parliamentary representation](#) ranks the Arab States as the lowest performing region in the world. Most concerning is that over 2018-21 women's representation in the region overall decreased from 17.5% (2018) to 16.3% (2021).

² ESCWA: Arab States Sustainable Development Report (2020:12)

³ The region hosts the largest refugee response (Syria) since the second world war (5.5 million Syrian Refugees). Yemen has some of the largest humanitarian needs in the world (it is experiencing a catastrophic humanitarian crisis caused by years of conflict, with 20.7 million people, or over 66% of the population now in need of humanitarian assistance). Other humanitarian crises include Iraq³, Lebanon, Libya³, Palestine³, and Syria affected countries (Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Lebanon).

3. Education and employment – a striking paradox and the lost income

The region scores relatively well overall on the WEF Gender Gap sub-index on *educational attainment*, with exception of countries in conflict. Yet, the relatively high level of educational attainment stands in sharp contrast to scores under the economic participation and opportunity sub-index, which overall are low in the region. This paradox of high levels of education on one hand, and low levels of female economic participation/opportunities on the other, is one of the greatest sources of *unnecessary economic loss* for individual families and states in the Arab States. This is closely connected with the economic stagnation witnessed in parts of the region in recent decades, but also connected to the nature of economic disparities amongst segments of the populations.

While economic development is varied between nations, all countries show high levels of economic disparities between rich and poor (affecting both women and men). The increasing disparities between rich and poor is a global phenomenon, underpinned by structural economic factors such as the prolonged period of low interest rates, where the highest percentiles in terms of wealth in all regions worldwide becoming wealthier relative to the poorest segments of society. In the Arab States, 56% of national income accrues to the top 10%, and only 12% goes to the bottom 50%.⁴ For women specifically, persistent challenges leave more women outside the job market – this is related inter alia to various areas of financial exclusion, such as *family laws* (limiting women’s access to capital), limited investments in the *care economy* (which caters to around only 10% of care needs in the region), extended *care responsibilities* (women accounting for 4.7 times more unpaid care work than men – the highest ratio anywhere in the world, limiting not only their time for and in employment, challenging opportunities for growth into leadership⁵), and *safe public transportation* (limiting women’s physical access to jobs). The partial exclusion from the job market leaves women particularly vulnerable to poverty, including broad segments of the middle class and young women⁶.

COVID-19 has affected most economies globally, with different levels of economic contraction. The Arab States region too has witnessed economic contraction, with the highest negative growths mounting to -59%.⁷ UN Women estimates that women, while only representing approximately 20 % of the labor market, will bear 41 percent of job loss due to COVID-19.⁸ With this in mind, capitalizing on women economic participation and opportunities throughout the region is a necessity to accelerate economic recovery post Covid 19, and then towards a surge in overall economic development throughout the region. The forgone GDP due to countries not achieving national goals for Female Labour Force Participation is estimated (where data is available) at between 4.4 and 12.5 percent⁹, with an estimated loss of 575 billion¹⁰, an *unnecessary and hence*

⁴ World Inequality Database (2021): article “Income inequality in the Middle East”. <https://wid.world/news-article/income-inequality-in-the-middle-east>

⁵ Less than 5 per cent of by ESCWA examined enterprises in the region reported having a female top manager compared to more than 15 per cent in the world. ESCWA/ILO report (2021: 49) “Towards a Productive and Inclusive Path: Job creation in the Arab States” https://www.ilo.org/beirut/publications/WCMS_817042/lang-en/index.htm (accessed December 2021)

⁶ ESCWA: Arab States Sustainable Development Report (2020:136) In countries where national income averages are high and rising, the focus on the poorest detracts from the widening gap between the rich and poor, and the shrinking middle class.

⁷ IMF World Economic Outlook database, (April 2021). Comparative table between 2019-2021 available here: <https://www.bruegel.org/2021/06/the-socio-economic-consequences-of-covid-19-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/>.

⁸ ESCWA, UN Women (2020) Estimates from June 2020 anticipated that women would bear 41% of job losses in the Arab world. Results from Wave VI of the Arab Barometer run between July and October of 2020 corroborate this finding for North Africa, showing that both job loss and job interruptions are borne disproportionately by women.

⁹ UN Women (2021:22). “Assessing macroeconomic response policies to COVID-19 in the Arab region: what implications for women’s economic empowerment?” https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/fieldoffice%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2021/10/macroeconomic%20paper_english.pdf?la=en&vs=1148 (accessed December 2021)

¹⁰ Source Ferrant and Kolev (2016), cited by OECD: https://www.oecd.org/development/gender-development/SIGL_cost_final.pdf

preventable economic loss per year. With the relatively high levels of education among women throughout many countries in the region, this area is uniquely well positioned for speedy advancements in the Arab States. The percentage of women pursuing an education in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) fields is higher in the Middle East than for other regions¹¹. This means there are excellent opportunities in key growth sectors such as ICT, digitalization and the green economy. Action in this area not only benefits women directly (financially, politically, and health-wise including psychologically and EVAW), but also bears benefits to the overall *family* income and towards a strengthened *national* GDP and *regional* prosperity.

3. Measurable Progress 2018 to 2021 - Through close partnerships at national and regional level

Throughout the previous strategic note 2018 – 2021, UN Women together with national and regional partners embarked on a common journey with the aim of tangibly (measurably) advancing the situation of women and girls throughout the Arab States region, in particularly within the following six areas. Each area is marked by strong partnerships with governments, sister UN agencies as well as the private sector, media and CSOs, particularly women’s and youth organizations. Key results are highlighted below, with the list being far from representative.

1. Women’s economic empowerment Through its signature programme “Work for Women”, implemented through a Joint Programme with ILO in Egypt, Palestine and Jordan, UN Women; (a) works with Ministries of Labor and National Women’s Machineryes, to define labor laws and policies, including maternity/paternity leave and workplace safety; (b) partners with the private sector to implement the UN Global Compact Women’s Empowerment Principles to ensure private sector companies attract more women to the workforce, and progress into leadership; (c) strengthens entrepreneurship and job opportunities for women by offering trainings to bridge educational/information gaps; (d) works with the League of Arab States to deepen the work of the “Khadija Network”, with a focus on advancing gender responsive procurement; (e) develops cutting-edge knowledge on the care economy and the macro-economic responses to the COVID-19 pandemic for policy advocacy and response.

Measurable results in this area include the following 3 important achievements: 1) **Laws** on care economy and parental leave have been strengthened in the region (e.g. the maternity protection regulation endorsed in Jordan 2020), 2) **Increased private sector commitment to GEWE**: a 25% annual increase of CEOs in the region committing to GEWE by joining WEPs has been documented. 3) **Increased opportunities in the private sector**: as of today 311 businesses have signed the WEPs in the Arab region with more than 200,000 employees, of which 61,000 women have benefitted from revised frameworks related to a harassment-free, family friendly, equal opportunity workplaces. 4) **Scale**: the WEE portfolio is moving towards scale so as to accelerate women’s economic participation and opportunities. Promising large scale programmes from the

¹¹ According to 2015 data from unesco , regional averages for the share of female researchers are 39.8 percent for Arab states and 32.3 percent for North America and Western Europe.

region serve as examples, such as the financial inclusion programme in Egypt, which has progressively expanded, reaching more than 120 000 women in rural areas.

2. Women Peace and Security (WPS) UN Women’s signature approach to WPS includes: (a) the inclusion of gender concerns and women’s voices in peace-making and reconciliation efforts for Syria, Yemen and Libya, by, inter alia, working closely with the office of the UNSG Special Envoy; (b) support to the development of National Action Plans (NAP)s on UNSCR 1325; (c) technical support to the League of Arab States to implement WPS agreements, as aligned to the LAS-UN framework of collaboration. As direct results of the work on WPS in the Arab States the following two examples serve to highlight what is possible when partnerships are created towards distinct goals: **1) *Increased levels of female participation in peace processes:*** Women’s participation in peace and local mediation processes has tangibly increased to 20% in the Libya National Dialogue, and to 28% in the Syria Constitutional Committee following; **2) *Surge in development of NAPs throughout the region:*** 7 NAPs have been developed and 3 are underway (which is an increase from the baseline of 0 NAPs in 2014); **3) *Establishment of the first of its kind diplomatic AS network:*** Together with the League of Arab States, UN Women has established the Arab Women Mediation Network, which is the first ever regional women network that consist of professional and active diplomats.

3. Humanitarian/resilience UN Women implements the Women’s Leadership, Empowerment, Access & Protection in Crisis Response (LEAP) programme. . Through this a “multi-dimensional approach” the programme deals with three issues simultaneously; 1) economic vulnerability (training and access to employment for women); 2) Violence against women, through strengthening/establishment of services for women survivors of violence and; 3) policy, knowledge and technical support to the UN system to advance gender inclusion in humanitarian action (gender mainstreaming). As direct impact of UN Womens work on humanitarian/resilience in the Arab States, ***more than 90 000 women have directly benefitted UN Women’s operational programmes*** (measured by FAO/UN Women “resilience index”, showing increased resilience in correlation to the programme) and many more women have been supported through more impactful UN system humanitarian response programmes.

4. Ending Violence Against Women (EVAW) UN Women’s work on EVAW focuses on response and prevention efforts. Regarding *response*, through implementing the UN ***Essential Services Package*** guidance tool, in collaboration with UNFPA, WHO, UNDP and UNODC, as well as focusing on ending violence within vulnerable communities under the LEAP programme described above. As direct impact the work on VAW in the Arab States region, UN Women has established EVAW services (offering psycho-social, medical, legal support) across the region. Most recently UN Women, in partnership with UNODC, is implementing the corporate flagship product “Handbook on ***gender responsive police services***” to train the police in Iraq, Jordan, Tunisia, Palestine, and Morocco. *Prevention* is centered around ROAS flagship programme on engaging men and boys described below. Additionally, UN Women works with the League of Arab States to monitor/define regional legal frameworks on EVAW (including the Cairo Declaration).

5. Governance and women’s political participation UN Women’s work seeks to support electoral processes, particularly by working with national (electoral management) bodies and regional networks to enhance women in leadership, political participation and representation, and by working with civil society and youth to create space for their engagement and understanding in/of elections¹². The governance portfolio further includes building capacity to monitor the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the latter in partnership with LAS and ESCWA at regional level. Advancing the availability of gender data and statistics, is implemented through the regional gender justice programme, which sees a collaboration with ESCWA, UNDP, UNFPA to monitor changes to legal frameworks. This complements data collection mechanisms established corporately under SDG 5.1.1 and is aligned with the direction taken by the UN RCP. The region has benefited from the Global Women Count programme, in Jordan and Morocco, and is working with HQ to advance the implementation of the programme at regional level and across the region, where demand for gender data is high, including in the GCC countries. At institutional level, the ROAS is supporting the establishment of the Women Development Organization of the Organization of the Islamic Cooperation – the Secretariat of the WDO, being established in Cairo, Egypt.

6. Addressing social norms and engaging men and boys UN Women’s work on addressing harmful social norms engages youth (through the regional Agora Network and the Scouts) and women’s organizations (through the Arab States Feminist CSO Network), to build capacities for policy-advocacy. UN Women brings together government and civil society to broker common understanding on key (policy) issues required to advance the situation of women at country level. Through its flagship programme “Men and Women for Gender Equality” UN Women works with national partners, civil society organizations and academia to improve available evidence on the root causes of gender inequalities (particularly as related to ERAW and WEE), through a bottom-up approach, prioritizing the engagement of men and boys. Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices surveys have been conducted in 7 countries in the region (Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco, Palestine, Jordan and Tunisia – latter two forth-coming). Through these knowledge products, UN Women together with national partners is pioneering positive community-based behavior change projects and spearheading changes in national legislation. Region wide and context specific Fatherhood Campaigns, are on-going throughout the COVID-19 period, to advance understanding and messaging targeting men on ending violence in the household and care-giving roles. ***This programmes evidences in clear numbers (baseline and end-line studies) what many thought was not possible; that significant and measurable attitude improvement towards constructive and positive interaction rooted in gender equality, is indeed achievable, and even in a relatively short period of time.*** As exemplified in a number of significant areas, such as the fact that pre programme ca 64% of respondents thought negatively of men’s engagement in caring for children or other domestic work, contrasting the figure decreasing by more than half to 30% by end of the programme. Also attitudes around women role being predominantly at home decreased significantly from 74% to 49% in a similarly short period of time. These figures are even more encouraging if combined with other surveys that UN Women has conducted throughout the region

showing for example that a majority of men would like to spend more time with their children. And surveys conducted by other agencies showing that a major source of depression amongst men is the inability and stresses coming from being the sole breadwinner. If looked at in conjunction, then positive attitudes towards gender equality, benefits (as stated above), women, men and children alike. Hence societies and nations overall.

Continued strong partnership and coordination with the United Nations:

As exemplified above, all areas of work entail close partnership with sister UN agencies. This partnership on national level is also matched by a strong regional collaboration between agencies. One of the strongest examples is the joint work by UN Women, UNDP, UNFPA and ESCWA on gender justice. The *Gender Justice Portal* provides member States, researchers and civil society organizations with an updated presentation and analysis of legal frameworks relating to gender equality and the law. The initiative is founded on collaboration between four United Nations agencies, and is based on a detailed examination of laws and policies on gender equality and the alignment of these laws with international human rights standards.

Another example of regional UN collaboration is the Issue Based Coalition (IBC) for Gender Justice in the Arab States, co lead by UN Women and UNFPA and involves more than 10 UN agencies working on distinct topics based on comparative advantage. After an initial period of an extensive portfolio, UN Women has geared the groups work towards a focus on the two areas of WEE and EVAW – in accordance with the UN Women consultations conducted with Member States, NGOs, CSOs and youth throughout the region.

Innovative UN Women Partnerships with Media:

The year of 2021, saw excellent partnerships with media, as UN Women broadened its media base outside traditional media channels towards a number of impactful media houses with wide ranges outreach. For example ITP Media Group with more than industry 30 titles, 8 million followers, 200 journalists. Operating globally from its Middle East HQ, ITP Media Group’s portfolio includes major international and regional brands such as GQ, Time Out, Arabian Business, Harper’s Bazaar, Construction Week, Grazia, Esquire and Condé Nast Traveller Middle East. With this types of partnerships, UN Women and its partners reaches wide range audiences in the private sector, and distinct sectors within such as construction, tourism and ITC.

4. Looking forward: Priorities of the Region - defined by the region, 2022 to 2025

What all areas listed above show is that tangible progress (even in what is perceived as the most “difficult” areas) is indeed possible, through political will, innovative approaches and collaborations that capitalizes on each partners expertise and strength. Building on these achievements, UN Women engaged deeply with Member States, NGOs, CSOs, Youth, academia and private sector throughout 2021, so as to define the strategic direction t the coming 4-year period (2022 to 2025).

Four distinct red threads were noted, particularly in intergovernmental dialogues and conversations with national decision-makers. Firstly, the importance of *accelerated speed and scale in terms of*

impact in the lives of women and girls (including through engaging men and boys) in the Arab States. Secondly, the importance of *tangible measurement* of actual changes in the lives of women and girls – hence the necessity of *strengthened national data and monitoring* systems with investment in knowledge development and management, as well as programme. Thirdly, the need to balance the focus on challenges and hindrances with sharing tangible progress and building on *enablers for accelerated* progress and windows of opportunities as well as successful programmes. And fourthly, the need to build a *regional GEWE knowledge hub in ROAS*, that shows regional quantitative trends (data, statistics and projections) with qualitative knowledge explaining enablers and triggers (laws, policies, programmes) behind these trends.

5. Translating regional priorities into a regional strategy for 2022 to 2025

Together with partners from throughout the region and based on the priorities expressed in the numerous consultations (see above), as well as national, regional and global frameworks, UN Women will support national and regional partners to *measurably accelerate the achievements of GEWE for the largest possible numbers of women and girls in the region*, including most vulnerable. This will require 5 *strategic directional shifts* in SN 2022 – 2025 (compared to 2018 – 2021). Yet building further on the strongest achievements from the previous strategic period, in line with the listed examples above.

1. **Programmes at regional scale:** Thirdly, for the WEE programme, a shift from measuring *numbers* of women and girls benefitting from UN Women supported programmes, towards *national percentages* of women and girls – to reach scale at regional level. This experimental methodology will be applied to the exponential *expansion of the Women Economic Empowerment* portfolio throughout the region: a large scale 7 country programme aiming to increase FLWFP by 5% in the AS, between 2022 - 2025. Private sector, green economy care economy.
2. **Focus in critical areas:** Fourth, for Governance and Participation in Public Life and Ending Violence against Women and Girls (EVAW), the regional strategy shifts deliberately towards *focus*. In the area of WPP, the focus of UN Women in the Arab States is on gender parity particularly in Parliaments and Cabinets through stronger engagements throughout electoral cycles. In EVAW, there is a heightened focus on 2 areas: domestic violence and violence in public spheres, due to the still high levels of violence against women in these two spheres, throughout the region.
3. **Consolidate/link for amplified impact:** Fifth, in the WPS and Humanitarian Portfolios a shift towards *operational linkages*, for increased synergies to achieve the *humanitarian/resilience/development/peace nexus*. This means that WPS initiatives that are mainly political and centered around peace processes, negotiations and mediations on national level (track 1 and 2) will be linked to simultaneous initiatives “on the ground”

focusing on A) community level social cohesion (track 3) and B) immediate peace dividends such as equitable social services and economic opportunities (UN Women's humanitarian programmes, e.g LEAP). This transition-modality (with A and B conducted in conjunction and as a package) aims at enabling a transition from conflict to peace.

4. **Knowledge for accelerated speed:** Firstly, for all programmes, a shift in perspectives from focus on *challenges* towards capitalizing on *enablers*. This will be done through strengthening UN Women as a *regional GEWE center of excellence in ROAS/Cairo*, serving the region with evidence/data and analysis-based thought-leadership on; A) trends in areas such as WEE, WPP, VAW and WPP, and B) “Arab States accelerators/drivers” towards measurable progress and ultimately achieving GEWE in these 4 distinct areas.
5. **Strengthening evidence and data availability and use:** secondly UN Women will increase the accountability for the implementation of normative frameworks (UNSCR 1325, BPfA and the 2030 Agenda/ SDGs) while supporting regional frameworks (Cairo Declaration on Women) and inter-governmental review processes (Commission of the Status of Women; Arab Forum on Sustainable Development; Beijing+30 review with the LAS, AWO and ESCWA), moving beyond processes to building capacities for analysis and evidence.

Looking back at distinct achievements throughout the region and learning from those experiences, it is easier to plan forward based on lucid knowledge around challenges, but equally knowledge about opportunities and distinct enablers for accelerated speed and amplified impact throughout the Arab States. What works and what doesn't has in large parts been documented, and therefore the coming 4 years could see an exciting shift throughout the region, empowering women and benefitting women and men, thus societies and nations overall.