

Arab Regional Parallel Report for Beijing +30

**Five Lean Years: Limited Progress Amidst Persistent
Challenges Impeding Gender Equality Across the Arab
Region**

Acknowledgments

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Dr. Fatima Khafaji's Speech

Dr. Duraid Moez's Speech

Introduction

- This report delves into the evolving landscape of gender equality and women empowerment in the Arab region over the past four years (2020-2024), closely reflecting on the twelve goals set by the Beijing Platform for Action. With the backdrop of significant historical milestones, this report evaluates both the strides made and the persistent barriers standing in the way of gender equity in the Arab world. Thirty years after the adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action, the region continues to grapple with complex challenges.
- The methodology for crafting this report was extensive, drawing on diverse sources of insight. Starting with a review of relevant literature, such as national, regional, and international reports addressing Beijing 30+ focus areas and followed by the compilation of 11 national parallel reports from the Arab Feminist CSOs Network, based on consultations with local civil society and women's groups. Further, regional consultation sessions held across 12 Arab countries, online working groups, and a final validation meeting with ESCWA ensured a comprehensive, representative understanding of the situation.
- What follows is an overview of the key trends, challenges, and achievements in the Arab region. The report organizes the twelve areas of the Beijing Platform for Action into six broad, interconnected dimensions that highlight the alignment of the Beijing Platform for Action with the 2030 Agenda and speak to both progress and the enduring obstacles on the path toward gender justice. These comprehensive dimensions are:
 - A. Inclusive development, shared prosperity, and decent work.
 - B. Eradication of poverty, social protection, and social services.
 - C. Freedom from violence, stigma, and stereotypes.
 - D. Participation, accountability, and gender-sensitive institutions.
 - E. Peaceful societies where no one is left behind.
 - F. Environmental sustainability, protection, and restoration.
- This analysis does not focus on specific nations but aims to provide a regional overview, reflecting the broader trends and challenges as the Arab world navigates its gender equality journey.

Context

The Toll of Conflict: Gendered Impact of War, Crisis, and Catastrophe

The 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action coincides with one of the most devastating human rights crises in modern history—the ongoing genocide against the Palestinian people. Since October 8, 2023, Israel has unleashed a brutal and calculated campaign of ethnic cleansing against Gaza, which has claimed tens of thousands of lives (nearly 5% of the population was killed or injured), with women and children bearing the heaviest toll (over 70% of victims)¹. This campaign of destruction, enabled by artificial intelligence, advanced Western and American weaponry, and international complicity, has reduced Gaza's infrastructure to rubble, leaving millions without access to essential services. As the world stood by, witnessing this massacre unfold live on television and social media, Palestinian women were and still are bearing the brunt of its unimaginable horrors: displacement, the loss of loved ones, and relentless exposure to sexual and gender-based violence.

- This brutality is mirrored in the recent escalation of bloody Zionist aggression against Lebanon, where, in September 2024, another chapter of violence was added to the region's long history of suffering. The toll has been immense, leaving more than 4,041 martyred, 16,638 injured, and many more women, children, civilian men, and elderly displaced². The ripple effect of these wars extends far beyond the immediate battlefield, exacerbating a humanitarian, health, political, and economic crisis Lebanon has witnessed following the Beirut port explosion in 2020.
- Similarly, the ongoing civil war in Sudan, which erupted in April 2023, has internally displaced 8 million, and 3 million to neighboring countries. Estimates suggest that over 70% of the displaced are women and children, who endure horrific levels of sexual violence, forced marriages, and social stigmatization.³ As the conflict rages on, Sudanese women find themselves facing not only the trauma of war but also the near-complete absence of humanitarian aid and protection.⁴
- These conflicts, compounded by the challenges of limiting the spread of COVID-19 pandemic, unprepared state institutions, ongoing economic instability, and environmental disasters over the past five years, have reshaped the realities of the Arab world.⁵ Earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and droughts have decimated communities across Syria, Morocco, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen, leaving survivors in desperate need of humanitarian aid. These calamities have had a disproportionate impact on marginalized groups such as women and girls, who often bear the brunt of the destruction, displacement, and loss of livelihood.

¹ UNDP, (2024, April). Expected Socio-Economic Impacts on the State of Palestine - Update <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2024-05/2400314e-keymessages-gaza-web.pdf>

² Ministry of Public Health. Press Release. 4 Dec. 2024 Available at: <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Media#/en/Media/view/77360/4-047-martyrs-and-16-638-wounded-the-total-updated-toll-of-the-israeli-aggression>

³ UNHCR, (2025, Jan). Situation Report. Sudan. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/Sudan%20Situation%20Overview.pdf>

⁴ UNFPA, (2024). Sexual violence and conflict in Sudan: A war on the bodies of women and girls. Available at: <https://www.unfpa.org/news/sexual-violence-and-conflict-sudan-war-bodies-women-and-girls>

⁵ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

- The region's socio-political landscape has been further strained by global inflation, the economic downturn from the pandemic, and the ongoing war in Ukraine. While the rest of the world has seen gradual recovery, the Arab region remains mired in economic stagnation, rising poverty, displacement, and increasing unemployment. Inequity, particularly gender-based, has worsened, leaving many women at the periphery of development and prosperity despite commitments to SDGs.⁶
- For the many nations still embroiled in internal conflicts, such as Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Somalia, the trajectory of peace and stability remains uncertain. These protracted wars have led to an increase in the suffering of women and girls, particularly those from marginalized communities, who face a relentless cycle of violence, displacement, and deprivation. In 2020, approximately 9.3 million displaced people, including stateless individuals, lived in the Arab region.⁷ By 2022, this number had risen to 15 million⁸, and by mid-2024, it had reached 16.6 million, with millions living in high-risk humanitarian conditions, particularly regarding access to essential services, including welfare, and the risk of being deported from host countries.⁹ The region is also home to millions of displaced individuals, many of whom face violations of their basic rights, including access to health services, education, and legal protections. For women and girls, this represents a life of constant vulnerability, where they are at risk of exploitation, trafficking, and gender-based violence.¹⁰
- Accountability and transparency remain glaringly insufficient, with corruption rampant and elites monopolizing national resources, all while state institutions remain weak. Many Arab countries are trapped in a stagnant democratic transition, reeling from the repercussions of the Arab Spring, witnessing escalating restrictions on freedoms, human rights abuses, and intensifying political repression. These conditions have hindered the design of inclusive, responsive, and equitable political and institutional frameworks, deepening the trust gap between the people and their governments, which have consistently failed to deliver on the promises of justice, social equality, economic opportunity, legal rights, and climate resilience.¹¹
- This environment has further exacerbated all the challenges facing marginalized groups such as women and girls, persons with disabilities, displaced persons, refugees, migrants, and women working in informal and agricultural sectors. Despite efforts and pledges from governments, NGOs, and international bodies, gender inequality in the region has only worsened in the past five years. Arab populations are increasingly dissatisfied with their living conditions, with rising numbers of impoverished, deprived, and oppressed individuals.¹²

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ ESCWA, (2022). Situation Report on International Migration 2021 Building forward better for migrants and refugees in the Arab region. Available at: <https://mena.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1686/files/documents/srim-2021-english-june-30.pdf>

⁸ UNHCR, (2022). Global Report 2022. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/global-report-22/middle-east-and-north-africa#:~:text=GLOBAL%20REPORT%202022,uncertain%20funding%20situation%20in%202022.>

⁹ UNHCR, (2025). Global Appeal, regional review. Available at: <https://reporting.unhcr.org/operational/regions/middle-east-and-north-africa#:~:text=By%20mid%2D2024%2C%20there%20were,of%20expulsion%20from%20several%20countries.>

¹⁰ UN, (2023) United Nations Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict. Available at: <https://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/statement/srsg-patten-remarks-at-the-regional-meeting-on-the-implementation-of-the-arab-strategy-for-the-prevention-and-response-to-combat-all-forms-of-violence-in-asylum-context-especially-sexual-violence-aga/>

¹¹ Fourth Arab Governance Report: Equality, Inclusion and Empowerment for a More Effective Conflict Prevention, February 2022, ESCWA. E/ESCWA/CL6.GCP/2021/1 <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/governance-arab-equality-inclusion-conflict>

¹² Inequality in the eyes of Arab people, October 2024, ESCWA Publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.6 Available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/inequality-eyes-arab-people>

Attack on Feminist Movements

- The years under review have not only been marked by physical conflict but also by an ideological and institutional attack on feminist institutions and gender justice initiatives. CSOs, particularly those focused on gender equality and human rights, have faced increasing repression and lack of funding. In many countries, conservative forces—bolstered by regressive social and political norms—have targeted these organizations, to undermine their fieldwork and silence their voices.
- Feminist organizations, already struggling with limited funding and shrinking political space, have found themselves caught in a cycle of defunding, criminalization, and intimidation. This was primarily fueled by governments’ reluctance to enact the necessary legal and institutional reforms to foster women’s rights, making it increasingly difficult for said organizations to carry out their work. In some countries, these organizations face harassment and censorship, and in extreme cases, imprisonment, smear campaigns, death threats or forced exile¹³.
- Feminist and human rights organizations in the Arab region have recently found themselves at the crossroads of mounting resistance, particularly conservative social and religious forces clinging to patriarchal norms that confine women to subordinate roles. They have launched defamation campaigns, issued death threats, and targeted activists and organizations with imprisonment and arbitrary detention, often with the complicity—or direct involvement—of state actors. Such hostile conditions have severely disrupted the operations of many vital services and programs, leaving organizations isolated, under-resourced, and vulnerable. Governments have not only failed to protect these efforts but have also abdicated their responsibility to uphold their commitments to gender equality and non-discrimination. Political parties, for the most part, have largely turned a blind eye to these escalating challenges, offering little more than indifference, if not outright neglect.
- The blatant double standards of many Western governments—offering unwavering support for Israel’s genocide against Palestinians while taking a starkly different stance on the Russia-Ukraine war—have deepened societal hostility toward CSOs, including feminist groups. As a result, trust in these organizations has eroded further, with many in the region viewing them with suspicion and skepticism.

Silenced Perspectives: Women of the Global South

- A recurring critique from regional consultations is the persistent silencing of women from the Global South in global frameworks like the Beijing Platform for Action. Northern narratives dominate the discourse, overshadowing the voices, priorities, and lived experiences of Southern women. This Eurocentric, condescending, and orientalist lens often relegates Southern feminist and CSOs to technical roles, reducing their contributions to filling out predefined templates rather than shaping policies that reflect their contexts. This systemic disregard reinforces inequalities between the Global North and South, perpetuating a cycle of exclusion and injustice.
- Calls for a thorough rethinking of the reporting mechanisms under the Beijing Platform for Action have gained momentum. Three decades after its inception, reporting remains rigid and detached from on-the-ground realities. Structural barriers such as inequality within families or the disconnect between development planning and gender equality commitments are often overlooked. The current reporting model leaves little room for civil society voices to highlight the nuanced challenges hindering progress, allowing systemic discrimination and marginalization to thrive, unchecked and unchallenged.

¹³ Regional and specialized consultations, 2024.

- Women and girls with disabilities, among the most marginalized and excluded, remain nearly invisible in national, regional, and global reviews of the Beijing Platform for Action, including the Beijing+30 process. Instead of being woven into the framework, disability issues are addressed in a piecemeal manner, reducing their significance. This lack of integration weakens the voice of women and girls with disabilities in national reports, stripping their concerns of the attention needed to shape regional and global priorities for gender equality and sustainable development. Their voices deserve more than a footnote—they deserve to lead the conversation.
- The following section explores the progress, challenges, and priorities shaping the Arab region. However, two crucial realities must be recognized:
- **First**, despite dedicated efforts by governments, civil society, and international organizations, this five-year period saw minimal progress in gender equality and women empowerment across the Arab world. Instead, the region grappled with an era defined by wars, conflicts, crises, and disasters, affecting every country to varying degrees. These overlapping challenges, coupled with deeply rooted structural barriers, have derailed progress on the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, the SDGs, and human rights conventions.
- The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the fragility of policymaking¹⁴, as institutions faltered under inconsistent, non-inclusive approaches often ignoring gender dynamics. Weak coordination, insufficient funding, and inadequate monitoring systems exacerbated the situation¹⁵, leaving vulnerable groups—particularly women and girls with disabilities, rural women, and those living in conflict zones—further marginalized and neglected.
- **Second**, the chronic lack of disaggregated data remains a major roadblock to progress. Household survey coverage in the region dropped from 82% in 2012 to just 45% in 2019¹⁶, creating critical gaps in understanding intersecting issues such as poverty, violence, and access to essential services. Without reliable, gender-sensitive data, governments cannot design targeted, effective solutions. Instead, policies and programs are often built on incomplete or outdated information, falling short of tackling the full scale of challenges and failing to align with the realities on the ground.

¹⁴ The COVID-19 Pandemic in the Arab Region: An Opportunity to Reform Social Protection Systems, Social Development Report 4, April 2022
E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2021/1, <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/social-development-covid-19-arab-region-protection-systems-english.pdf>

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Jordan (2023) and Morocco (2024) recently conducted household surveys.

Section I: Progress Made, Realities Faced, and Challenges Ahead

Progress Achieved

- **Policy and Legal Reforms:**

Between 2020–2024, several Arab countries have implemented progressive steps toward fulfilling the Beijing Platform for Action, CEDAW, the SDGs, and other human rights commitments. This includes ambitious policy enactments, legal reforms, and programs targeting women and girls through training, capacity building, and economic empowerment.¹⁷ Key legal changes include extending paid maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, outlawing the dismissal of pregnant workers, and providing child care subsidies and paid nursing breaks.¹⁸

- **Poverty Alleviation Efforts:**

Several Arab countries have adopted multidimensional poverty measures, expanded social protection programs, and integrated vocational training and microfinance initiatives to empower economically disadvantaged groups, especially women in rural areas. Efforts also include improving infrastructure, enhancing access to water, sanitation, energy, healthcare, and education, and creating income-generating opportunities. Urban poverty strategies, such as social housing and slum upgrading, have also been introduced in certain countries.¹⁹

- **Combating Gender-Based Violence:**

Modest advancements have been made in addressing violence against women and girls, with four Arab countries²⁰ enacting laws against workplace and public harassment and domestic violence.²¹ Legal amendments in some states criminalize sexual harassment, impose stricter penalties, and enhance protections for survivors, including rehabilitation and support services.

- **CEDAW and Regional Initiatives:**

While most Arab states have ratified CEDAW, many reservations persist. In 2022, the League of Arab States and UNHCR launched a regional strategy to prevent and respond to violence, particularly sexual violence, in refugee contexts. Legislative reforms in some countries also focus on preventing physical, psychological, and cyber violence, improving monitoring systems, and strengthening social protection frameworks.²²

- **Gender Equality Mechanisms:**

¹⁷ ESCWA, 2024, Comprehensive Arab Report on Progress in Implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 30 Years.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Lebanon (Anti-Sexual Harassment Law No. 205, issued in 2020), Saudi Arabia (Anti-Harassment Act, approved in 2018), Egypt (Ministerial Resolution No. 827/2021), and Kuwait (Protection Against Domestic Violence Law).

²¹ Brief No.1: Women's economic participation in the Arab region: recent accomplishments and remaining barriers, October 2024, ESCWA publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.4

<https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-economic-participation-arab-region-accomplishments-barriers-arabic.pdf>

²² ESCWA, 2024, Arab Sustainable Development Report.

All Arab countries have national mechanisms, such as ministries or councils, to advance gender equality. These entities draft policies, implement gender mainstreaming in government institutions, and coordinate with civil society.²³ However, their effectiveness is often questioned due to limited autonomy, resources, and political will.

- **Women's Political Representation and Budgeting:**

Eleven Arab countries have introduced gender quotas, and some have adopted gender-responsive budgeting to address women's specific needs. These measures aim to ensure equal opportunities in the public sector, improve gender-disaggregated data, and allocate resources to marginalized groups. Additionally, 11 countries now have national action plans for advancing the Women, Peace, and Security agenda.²⁴

- **CSO Contributions:**

CSOs across the region, despite varying capacities shaped by each country's political history and governance structures, have played a critical role in advocating for gender equality. They have pushed for legislative reforms, coalitions, and partnerships, raised awareness, and promoted women's political participation.²⁵ Regional and international CSO alliances have also driven advocacy efforts for labor rights, climate activism, trade unions, as well as gender justice and equality.

Behind the Curtain: Barriers to Equality

- As the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action approaches, the Arab region's diverse realities paint a complex picture of progress—or lack thereof—toward gender equality. Spanning resource-rich Gulf states with relative political stability, war-torn nations grappling with over a decade of violence, and middle-income countries weighed down by debt, refugee crises, and limited democratic advances, the region's challenges are as varied as they are daunting. Yet, one common thread unites all Arab nations: entrenched gender inequalities, discriminatory laws, and the systemic exclusion of women from meaningful engagement in public life.
- Across sectors such as labor, politics, media, and decision-making, women's representation remains sparse or entirely absent in many parts of the region. National strategies for economic development, climate adaptation, and social reform often overlook the unique needs of women, particularly marginalized women and girls with disabilities, refugees, displaced persons, migrant workers, and those working informally or in agriculture.
- Reports from regional consultations and civil society highlight an alarming trend: despite efforts, the status of women in the Arab region has stagnated—or, in many cases, regressed—over the past five years. This decline stems from an interplay of prolonged wars, deepening economic crises, mounting debt, weak governance, and systemic injustices. The fight for gender equality in the Arab region, though ongoing, remains fraught with obstacles that demand urgent and unified action.

²³ ESCWA, 2024, Comprehensive Arab Report on Progress in Implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 30 Years.

²⁴ ESCWA, 2024, Arab Sustainable Development Report.

²⁵ Regional review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 30 years in Arab countries, Amman, Jordan, 27-28 May 2024, <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/2400418A.pdf>

Persistent Gender Inequality

- The Arab region has the world's second-largest gender gap, closing only 37% of it by 2022²⁶, with WEF projections estimating it would take 149 years to achieve full parity at the current pace—significantly slower than the global average of 132 years.
- Women remain underrepresented in labor markets, politics, decision-making, and media. Marginalized groups, such as rural women, refugees, migrants, informal workers, and persons with disabilities, face compounding hurdles.
- Discrimination in the Arab region manifests starkly in unequal access to education and employment, particularly among refugees, displaced individuals, and rural communities. Barriers such as restricted mobility and the lack of adequate training and capacity-building opportunities, exacerbate these inequalities, leaving marginalized groups with limited career prospects and deepening cycles of exclusion. Political exclusion adds another layer to this inequity, disproportionately silencing women, youth, individuals with disabilities, and ethnic or religious minorities. Their voices are often sidelined, perpetuating systemic underrepresentation across the region.²⁷
- Gender inequality in the Arab region is vividly highlighted by discriminatory nationality laws. In most Arab countries, women are either outright denied or severely restricted in their ability to pass on their nationality to their children and spouses. This legal barrier creates cascading challenges: foreign-born children and spouses frequently encounter hurdles in accessing education, employment, banking services, and property ownership or inheritance, further entrenching poverty and exclusion. For stateless women and girls, the stakes are even higher—they are disproportionately susceptible to human trafficking, child marriage, and forced marriage. The waves of displacement and forced migration across the region have only deepened this crisis, leaving many children born in refugee camps or displacement areas without the documentation required to claim citizenship, leaving them in legal limbo. Similarly, children born to migrant workers, displaced women, and refugees face daunting legal and logistical obstacles in securing birth registration and nationality, exacerbating their vulnerability.²⁸
- Over the past five years, efforts to weave gender equality into sectoral development policies in the Arab region have moved at a frustratingly slow pace. Tax incentives designed to lure foreign direct investment have largely failed to deliver meaningful impact in job creation or economic growth that benefit women. Macroeconomic policies in the region are often blind to the unique challenges faced by women, especially those at the intersection of gender and disability. These policies routinely overlook the impact of economic programs on women's participation in the workforce, leaving groups like domestic workers, informal laborers, and migrant women marginalized.²⁹ While some reforms and amendments have been introduced, they've rarely translated into tangible action. The reason? A lack of implementation mechanisms, insufficient financial and human resources, and, above all, a glaring absence of genuine political commitment to change.³⁰

²⁶ Global Gender Gap Report, WEF and ESCWA
<https://publications.unescwa.org/2023/iar-2023/index.html>

²⁷ Regional and specialized consultations, 2024.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

³⁰ Ibid.

Where Justice Fails: The Void of Fair and Enforceable Laws

- Despite announcing a hundred new laws and commitments to achieving the SDGs, the Beijing 30+, CEDAW, and numerous other human rights conventions, the real-world impact of these declarations remains elusive, as this report will further explain. Key challenges include:
 1. Most Arab states still maintain reservations on the CEDAW.
 2. No Arab country has ratified the ILO's 2011 Domestic Workers Convention.
 3. None of the Arab states have signed the ILO Convention No. 190 on workplace harassment.
 4. Care work remains largely unrecognized in the region.
 5. Gender, nationality, identity, religion, race, and disability-based discrimination practices are widespread, posing significant challenges to human rights, social cohesion, and inclusive governance.
 6. Many Arab countries lack comprehensive laws addressing violence against women, and in instances where these laws are in place, they are often ineffectively enforced due to the absence of proper implementation mechanisms.
- According to the UN Women, UNDP, and ESCWA's "Gender Justice and the Law" report, some Arab countries have passed laws addressing gender-based violence, but implementation mechanisms are often insufficient, leaving women vulnerable to human rights violations with little legal protection. Social norms and weak judicial frameworks further hinder effective law enforcement.³¹

National Gender Equality Mechanisms – Form Without Substance

- Despite their existence, many national mechanisms for gender equality lack autonomy, accountability, and adequate resources. These entities often function as superficial measures to appease international scrutiny rather than as genuine drivers of reform. Civil society's trust in these mechanisms remains low, as consultations are often symbolic, and partnerships with feminist organizations are minimal.
- These mechanisms lack independence, accountability, and transparency, with most serving an advisory role without decision-making power. They often fail to hold state institutions accountable on women's issues or mainstream gender equality across policy areas. Without dedicated budgets, there's little political will to address women's rights, creating competition for resources with civil society organizations. Furthermore, staff training to address gender-based violence, especially sexual violence, is insufficient, and no formal mechanisms for reporting or monitoring such violence are in place.
- Trust between national mechanisms and civil society is often lacking. In some countries, consultations with civil society are superficial or seasonal, with little political will for genuine collaboration. In many instances, these mechanisms compete with CSOs for funding and fail to coordinate with feminist and human rights groups working on women's issues. The underlying

³¹ ESCWA, 2018, Gender Justice and the Law in the Arab Region.

issue lies in the lack of a comprehensive, rights-based approach and institutional capacity to transform goals into tangible, impactful practices for the target groups.³²

Moving Forward

The report's next section delves into concrete measures taken by Arab states over the past five years to address the 12 critical areas outlined in the Beijing Platform for Action. While progress exists, the region's persistent structural barriers, resource gaps, and lack of political will continue to impede the realization of gender equality. Addressing these challenges requires bold reforms, strategic investments, and genuine collaboration between governments, civil society, and international partners.

Section II: Progress Across the Twelve Key Areas of Focus

1. Inclusive Development, Prosperity, and Decent Work

Key areas of focus:	Women and Poverty – Women and the Economy – Women's Human Rights – The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- Over recent years, many Arab countries have made significant strides toward gender equality in the economy and labor market, particularly in reducing women's poverty. Some countries have amended laws to enhance women's participation in the workforce and improve social protection, such as extending paid maternity leave, introducing paternity leave, banning the dismissal of pregnant workers, providing childcare support, and offering paid nursing breaks. Several countries have equalized retirement ages for men and women, while others maintain early retirement options for women or set a lower retirement age.³³
- A few Arab nations³⁴ have enacted laws to address sexual harassment in the workplace and public spaces, as well as domestic violence.³⁵ Some have introduced or amended criminal or labor laws to prohibit sexual harassment, as well as increasing penalties, and criminalizing harassment in public spaces. These reforms also offer rehabilitation for victims and protection and support for survivors.
- A limited number of countries have reformed discriminatory labor laws that restrict women's access to certain types of work, while others have legislated for equal pay for equal work.³⁶ Some countries have introduced measures to encourage women's entrepreneurship, such as prohibiting gender

³² Regional consultations, 2024.

³³ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

³⁴ Lebanon (Anti-Sexual Harassment Law No. 205, issued in 2020), Saudi Arabia (Anti-Harassment Act, approved in 2018), Egypt (Ministerial Resolution No. 827/2021), and Kuwait (Protection Against Domestic Violence Law).

³⁵ Brief No.1: Women's economic participation in the Arab region: recent accomplishments and remaining barriers, October 2024, ESCWA publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.4
<https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-economic-participation-arab-region-accomplishments-barriers-arabic.pdf>

³⁶ Bahrain (2022), Jordan (2020), and the United Arab Emirates (2021).

discrimination in financial services and facilitating women's access to credit. Others have taken legal steps to improve women's mobility by removing restrictions on passport applications, travel, leaving home, or seeking employment without male guardian approval.

- Several Arab countries have implemented active labor market policies and economic empowerment programs aimed at creating job opportunities and breaking the poverty cycle. These include formal labor regulation, short-term job opportunities, public works programs, skills development, and employment support.³⁷ Many countries participated in the February 2024 Global Alliance for Social Justice conference, advocating for social justice by promoting decent work and focusing on fundamental human rights, employment opportunities, social protection, and social dialogue between governments, employers, and workers.
- In recent years, some countries have shown growing interest in platform economies as part of their economic policies. The rise of platform economies has opened new markets, paving the way to flexible, low-barrier job opportunities, and providing consumers with affordable goods and services, particularly in underserved zones. However, this transformation also brings challenges in ensuring platform workers access decent work. It is worth mentioning that the region has seen a rise in cooperative economies, peer-to-peer economies, small business economies, and demand-driven economies.
- Over the past five years, several Arab countries have launched programs targeting inequality and discrimination, including social protection programs and initiatives to support and retain working mothers. These initiatives provide financial assistance for childcare, enabling women to return to work after maternity leave, and offer registered daycare services. Seven Arab countries now grant women the right to pass their nationality to their children.³⁸ Other countries have implemented policies to address land ownership inequalities and discriminatory customs limiting women's property rights and inheritance. Cash transfer programs for households with children are also on the rise, and a few countries have introduced pension schemes for the elderly.
- Some countries have worked to close social protection gaps by facilitating the registration of informal workers into the system. Programs have expanded to include new groups such as self-employed workers, agricultural laborers, low-income workers, tour guides, taxi drivers, refugees, and displaced persons. Efforts have also focused on bridging the urban-rural divide, expanding access to education, healthcare, and improving infrastructure in rural areas, including investments in water, electricity, and paved roads.
- However, few countries have taken steps to include displaced persons in social safety net programs. Algeria stands out as the only Arab country to integrate non-discrimination principles in various labor policies. The national minimum wage applies to all workers regardless of nationality, and social insurance laws extend to migrant workers, including domestic workers, on par with local employees. Lebanon is the only Arab country offering a social grant program to support people with disabilities, addressing high poverty rates and cost of living disparities compared to those without disabilities.
- Many CSOs in the Arab region have focused on gender equality in inclusive development, prosperity, and decent work, especially for the most marginalized groups, such as informal sector workers, domestic workers, agricultural workers, and women in the private sector. These organizations have collaborated with labor unions and ILO to raise awareness of ILO Convention 190, lobbying governments to join the convention and ensure equal opportunities in employment

³⁷ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

³⁸ Algeria, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen.

and wages. Additionally, many CSOs are addressing the care economy, particularly focusing on the kindergarten, domestic work, and healthcare sectors.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- Despite efforts to enhance women's participation in development, prosperity, and decent work in the Arab region, alongside improved educational indicators and commitments to increasing women's labor force participation, tangible progress remains limited. Legal reforms, policies, and programs have had little impact on women's role in paid employment, technical education, and labor market inclusion. Economic justice policies are either underdeveloped or entirely absent, leaving women trapped in cycles of economic marginalization fueled by interwoven economic, political, legal, and socio-cultural challenges. Discriminatory laws continue to cast a long shadow, disproportionately affecting women with disabilities, refugees, and informal workers. Compounding these challenges is the pervasive invisibility of unpaid labor. Whether tending to households or toiling in agriculture, women's unpaid contributions remain undervalued and unrecognized across most of the region, perpetuating systemic inequities and stalling progress toward true gender parity.
- The ineffectiveness of these initiatives lies in a web of interconnected structural challenges. Poorly conceived program designs, paired with insufficient financial and human resources, stifle meaningful progress. The absence of updated, inclusive data worsens the issue, as does the glaring lack of representation for women—especially those with disabilities—in critical planning and decision-making spaces. Adding to this, socioeconomic hurdles like corruption, restrictive legal systems, deep-seated cultural norms, and logistical barriers continue to block women's pathways to workforce participation, equal caregiving responsibilities, land ownership, property rights, banking services, and inheritance, reinforcing cycles of exclusion and limiting the transformative potential of gender equity efforts.

Gaps Widen, Opportunities Fade

- Women's participation in the Arab region's formal labor market remains strikingly modest, overshadowed by deeply rooted male dominance. Traditional expectations continue to confine many women to reproductive and caregiving roles, reinforcing outdated norms that limit their presence in the workforce and economy. The gender gap in economic participation³⁹ is not just wide—it's growing. In 2020, women accounted for a mere 20% of the labor force, compared to 70% for men, with the disparity less pronounced in wealthier nations but starkly evident in middle- and low-income countries.⁴⁰ By 2024, the situation worsened⁴¹, with Arab women's employment plummeting to just 11.7%, while men held a commanding 66.2%.⁴² Even more disheartening, Arab women earn only 12.5% of what their male counterparts make⁴³, marking the region as home to the

³⁹ Brief No.1: Women's economic participation in the Arab region: recent accomplishments and remaining barriers, October 2024, ESCWA publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.4

<https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-economic-participation-arab-region-accomplishments-barriers-arabic.pdf>

⁴⁰ Egypt (16%), Jordan (14%), Morocco (20%), Qatar (64%), UAE (54%) and Kuwait (47%).

⁴¹ Excluding GCC countries.

⁴² Including GCC data raises the rate to 25.5%, still the second-lowest globally after South Asia (29.7%) and just above North Africa (20.1%)—Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁴³ ILO Flagship report. World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40inst/documents/publication/wcms_908142.pdf

widest gender income gap globally. These figures paint a vivid picture of untapped potential and entrenched inequality, calling for bold and transformative action.

- The Arab region continues to grapple with alarmingly high unemployment rates, with the ILO reporting an overall rate of 10.7% in 2022—the highest worldwide. Among women, the rate rises to 19.9%, while youth unemployment stands at 26.3%.⁴⁴ The ESCWA highlights a troubling upward trend in unemployment across the region, especially in non-GCC countries, where the rate soared to 16.1% in 2023. The gender disparity remains stark, with women’s unemployment rates 9% higher than men’s, far outpacing the global gap of just 0.4%. Similarly, youth unemployment in the Arab world is 14.2% higher among women than men, a staggering difference compared to the global average of just 0.6%.⁴⁵
- In parallel, the informal economy continues to dominate, accounting for over 60% of employment in most Arab nations as per ESCWA data.⁴⁶ While the rest of the world has seen a decline in informal labor over the past decade, the Arab region has experienced a sharp increase—from 59.9% in 2012 to 64.9% in 2022.⁴⁷ This informal sector, which predominantly employs women, is a breeding ground for inequality and exploitation. Women in this sector often work under harsh conditions, earning low wages and facing sexual harassment without legal protection or social benefits such as healthcare, pensions, or paid leave. Many are refugees, displaced persons, or migrants, who suffer disproportionately from poverty, legal discrimination, and exclusion from essential social safety nets. These women are trapped in a cycle of exploitation, with limited opportunities for economic mobility or security.⁴⁸
- On the other hand, women’s involvement in the informal sector in the Arab region saw a decline between 2017 and 2020, dropping from 60% to 54%. However, this trend reversed in 2020, driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of the service sector, predominantly run by informal businesses. During this time, women in the informal workforce bore the brunt of job losses, with a 2.3% decrease in female informal labor in 2020 compared to 2019, while male informal employment actually rose during the same period. It’s important to note that women leaving informal work does not necessarily mean they transition into formal employment. Instead, many are forced out of the workforce entirely, plunging them into unemployment, poverty, and deprivation. The burden of unpaid caregiving, along with limited access to job retention programs and flexible work arrangements for informal workers, led to greater job losses for women in this sector. Consequently, the reduction in informal employment among women from 2019 to 2020 did not translate into higher formal employment rates but rather an increase in female unemployment.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

ILO Flagship report. World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40inst/documents/publication/wcms_908142.pdf

⁴⁵ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ ILO, 2024, Informality and Structural Transformation in Egypt, Iraq and Jordan: A Framework for Assessing Policy Responses in the MENA Region:

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/2024-07/ILOECDUNDP%20report%20on%20Informality%20in%20MENA_Arabic%2010.pdf

⁴⁸ World Bank, Informal Employment in the Arab Region:

<https://blogs.worldbank.org/arabvoices/informal-employment-egypt-morocco-tunisia-what-can-we-learn-boost-inclusive-growth>

UNDP, Informal Employment Report:

<https://www.undp.org/arab-states/press-releases/tqyry-jdyd-yhdd-alwaml-almzzt-llaqtsad-ghyr-almnzwam-fy-swg-alml-alraqy>

⁴⁹ Ibid.

- Moreover, the distribution of unpaid caregiving work in the Arab region remains strikingly uneven, with married women shouldering most of the responsibility. This represents a major obstacle to increasing women's participation in the labor market, which is among the lowest worldwide. On average, women in the Arab region dedicate between 17 and 34 hours per week to unpaid caregiving, while men spend a mere one to five hours, depending on the country. Two-thirds to three-quarters of the time women spend on unpaid caregiving is in indirect care, such as household chores. Across all countries, married women spend about twice as much time on unpaid indirect work compared to unmarried women, and at least seven times as much on direct caregiving, largely due to child-rearing responsibilities. Working married women outside the home bear a particularly heavy burden, as they juggle professional work with the intense demands of home and family care.⁵⁰
- In the Arab world, the private sector holds a firm grip on nearly every aspect of the economy, from services to agriculture, creating an environment where progress toward economic justice for women is continually stifled. The lack of strong governmental oversight allows the private sector to deepen the divide between the rich and poor, perpetuating cycles of poverty and exploitation—particularly for women. The situation is made worse by a web of corruption, favoritism, and the near-absence of women in labor unions, which weakens the sector's accountability. The private sector wields tremendous power, not just as the dominant employer and tax contributor, but also in shaping policies and influencing legislative bodies. With the privilege to organize itself through powerful industry chambers, it has considerable sway over both politics and the economic landscape, often sidelining workers, especially women, in the process.
- Even when legal reforms are passed to promote women's economic empowerment—such as equal pay, maternity leave, or job quotas for disabled individuals—these policies often fall short when it comes to implementation in the private sector. The absence of clear enforcement mechanisms and dedicated resources leaves these reforms largely toothless. In some cases, they backfire, with employers opting not to hire pregnant women or those with family commitments for fear of legal obligations. Rather than empowering women, these reforms inadvertently push them further to the margins, reinforcing deep-rooted gender inequality in the labor market.

Breaking Barriers: The Quest for Prosperity and Decent Work for Marginalized Women

- Refugee, displaced, and migrant women in the Arab region face systemic injustice, exploitation, and significant violations of their labor rights. The cumulative impact of ongoing wars, violence, and natural disasters has had catastrophic repercussions on women's economic opportunities. Over the past five years, millions have been displaced internally or across borders, and projections indicate that displacement will only intensify. These women encounter formidable obstacles to entering formal labor markets, including exclusion from education and vocational training, mobility restrictions, and the difficulty of obtaining work permits. Those who do find employment often end up in the informal economy, working under exploitative conditions with longer hours, lower wages, little to no social protection, and an absence of legal safeguards⁵¹. The situation in Gaza exemplifies these challenges, with unemployment and poverty rates among women approaching 100%. The collapse of economic opportunities has left the entire population dependent

⁵⁰ UN Women, 2020 The care economy in the Arab states: towards recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. Policy Brief No. 1.

https://arabstates.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Field%20Office%20Arab%20States/Attachments/Publications/2020/12/English_PolicyBrief_Arab%20States.pdf

⁵¹ ILO Flagship report. World Employment and Social Outlook: Trends 2024

https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40inst/documents/publication/wcms_908142.pdf

on humanitarian aid, while women take on increasing caregiving responsibilities and are more likely to head households, particularly as rates of disability soar in the region.

- Despite limited data, regional consultations highlight the pervasive inequalities faced by women and girls with disabilities in employment, education, and vocational training. They face compounded barriers, including lower education and literacy levels, deeply entrenched discriminatory attitudes from employers, insufficient workplace accessibility, a lack of inclusive policies, and inadequate enforcement of employment quotas. These systemic challenges exacerbate their exclusion, emphasizing the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive interventions that prioritize equitable opportunities, accessibility, and sustainable livelihoods for marginalized women.⁵²

Shattering Ceilings: Legal and Policy Roadblocks to Women's Economic Empowerment

- Despite various legal tweaks and empowerment programs aimed at women in the Arab region, their impact is little more than a drop in the ocean. Many of these initiatives end up reinforcing the status quo, perpetuating traditional gender roles, and overlooking the deep-rooted legislative and social barriers that prevent women from becoming economically independent. National economic policies often lack the intersectional approach needed to tackle the problem head-on, leaving women stuck between a rock and a hard place. Cultural barriers continue to cast a long shadow over women's participation in the workforce. Societal expectations and outdated stereotypes relegate women to their reproductive roles, sidelining their economic, political, and social contributions. This mindset doesn't just live in people's heads—it's baked into the fabric of government practices throughout the region. For instance, in high-income Gulf states like Saudi Arabia and Qatar, women's participation in the labor market remains a tough nut to crack, despite ambitious plans like "Qatar Vision 2030." Conservative cultural norms still put the brakes on opportunities for women. Similarly, in rural parts of Egypt and Iraq, women's economic roles are mostly limited to informal, family-run agricultural work. With land ownership by women ranging from just 3% to 20%, their ability to break free from economic dependency is severely constrained.⁵³

Key Legislative Gaps

- **Domestic Workers and Labor Protections:**
No Arab country has signed off ILO's Domestic Workers Convention (2011), leaving migrant domestic workers without the legal protections they need. Without labor rights, they are sitting ducks for exploitation and trafficking.
- **Workplace Harassment:**
Arab nations have yet to hop on the bandwagon by adopting the ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention (190), which leaves women without a legal safety net against workplace harassment.⁵⁴ Six out of 18 Arab states still lack comprehensive laws against harassment, leaving victims with

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Gender Gap in MENA: Cultural, Legal and Institutional Barriers
<https://fanack.com/society/gender-equality-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa/gender-gap-in-mena-cultural-legal-and-institutional-barriers/>

⁵⁴ The International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190, aimed at eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work, was adopted in June 2019 by the International Labour Conference and came into force on June 25, 2021. The convention covers all forms of violence and harassment and applies to everyone in the world of work. It promotes a shared understanding of violence and harassment as a unified concept and stresses that the world of work extends beyond the physical workplace. For more information on the convention, you can refer to the position paper prepared by the Arab Feminist CSOs Network, titled "ILO Convention No. 190 and Recommendation 260," published on July 1, 2022.

no clear path to justice. Some laws even place hurdles in the way of women's employment, requiring them to get their husband's permission to work or travel.

- **Narrow and Inadequate Definitions:**

Many laws that do address workplace harassment are more about punishing offenders than preventing harassment in the first place. Definitions of harassment are often narrow, leaving gaps in coverage, and some laws lack clear penalties for offenders. In many places, women have to prove physical force or penetration to prosecute harassment or rape, which goes against international norms.

- **Domestic Violence and Economic Independence:**

Domestic violence laws are largely missing in action across most Arab countries, and this is a major roadblock to women's participation in the workforce. In some countries, personal status laws still require women to seek their husband's permission to work or travel⁵⁵, with maintenance rights being denied if they don't. Certain labor law reforms—like paid nursing hours or maternity leave—have backfired, with employers shying away from hiring women to avoid these obligations. Meanwhile, other reforms remain dead in the water, as they lack the enforcement mechanisms, funding, and institutional resources to make a difference. In many cases, they end up being little more than window dressing. The Arab world must not only rethink its laws but also ensure they are enforced, challenging cultural norms, protecting women from exploitation, and opening doors for their full participation in the workforce. Only then will the scales begin to tip in favor of women.

Recommendations

At the National Policy Level:

- **Enact and enforce laws** that guarantee women equal property rights and combat sexual harassment in the workplace, in line with ILO Conventions 190 and 189. This requires training law enforcement and prosecutors on relevant laws and gender issues. Additionally, steps should be taken to ensure women's safety during their commute to and from work, such as improving street lighting and expanding safe coverage in public transportation. Emergency hotlines for women facing harassment or other issues during transit should also be established, along with rapid-response services.
- **Create an enabling environment** for women's engagement in the workforce and economy by developing inclusive economic policies that address gender inequalities and foster economic opportunities for women, including women with disabilities, refugees, and displaced persons. This includes allocating resources, providing job opportunities, ensuring social protection, and investing in social infrastructure to address care work gaps, including transportation services for marginalized and remote groups.
- **Enhance policies** that help recognize and redistribute unpaid domestic and care work, thus easing women's integration into the labor market. This involves setting up subsidized child and elder care centers, implementing paid parental leave policies, and promoting flexible work arrangements.
- **Strengthen laws and policies** to include persons with disabilities, especially women and girls, in education, the labor market, and mandatory programs. This requires integrating the rights of women with disabilities into various development policies and ensuring the implementation of national social protection systems to protect their rights, particularly in the workforce.

⁵⁵ Brief No.1: Women's economic participation in the Arab region: recent accomplishments and remaining barriers, October 2024, ESCWA publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.4
<https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-economic-participation-arab-region-accomplishments-barriers-arabic.pdf>

- **Establish accurate and comprehensive data** on women's social and economic conditions, including women with disabilities, refugees, and displaced persons.
- **Reform education systems** to align with the needs of the modern labor market, focusing on vocational training, STEM education, engineering, and digital literacy to equip youth with relevant skills.
- **Close the gap** in access to education, work, training, and skills for women and girls with disabilities, and reduce the digital divide by building girls' skills and empowering women to transition into the green economy.
- **Develop legal and policy frameworks** to maximize opportunities provided by digital technologies while minimizing gender equality threats. Global, regional, and national standards should prioritize protecting women and marginalized groups from online harassment, violence, surveillance, and data misuse. Strict regulations on ethical development and AI deployment must be enforced, with clear accountability mechanisms to prevent biases.
- **Review and adjust conditional economic empowerment programs and policies** that have, in many cases, worsened the situation of women or excluded certain groups due to rigid criteria. This review process should aim to make these programs more inclusive and responsive to the diverse needs of women and girls with disabilities.
- **Promote rural development** through strategic investments in essential social and economic infrastructure, encouraging reverse migration to rural areas. This includes improving education, enhancing inclusive curricula, expanding health systems with a focus on maternal and child health, sexual and reproductive health, and investing in water and sanitation.
- **Build trust among partners** and manage crises effectively at the national and sectoral levels, focusing on gender-sensitive economic recovery from crises.
- **Develop consultation and collaboration mechanisms** across all stakeholders to better understand existing and emerging challenges in the labor market, including economic competition, social transformation, technological shifts, and the fourth industrial revolution's impact. The aim should be to offer alternatives to challenges and risks, highlighting the opportunities within these transitions.
- **Promote equality and fairness** across social structures and professional organizations for both employers and employees, reviewing and improving laws related to women's economic and social contributions. Efforts should focus on eradicating all forms of discrimination, violence, and harassment in the workplace.

At the Civil Society Level:

- **Continue advocacy efforts** and build alliances to guarantee the rights of women working in the informal, private, agricultural, and domestic sectors, and those facing exploitation in substandard working conditions.
- **Work with women in all sectors** to raise legal awareness regarding their rights and increase public awareness on women's issues related to work and the economy.
- **Invest in intersectional research and studies** on women, comprehensive development, prosperity, and decent work.
- **Focus on organizing women** through unions and other collective groups to ensure their active participation in labor-related matters.

At the United Nations and International Organizations Level:

- **Provide financial resources and technical support** to civil society.
- **Press governments and states** to fulfill their commitments to achieving economic justice.

- **Tighten accountability measures** for states in their action programs, ensuring they adopt a comprehensive, rights-based, and gender-equality approach.

2. Eradicating Poverty, Strengthening Social Protection, and Expanding Social Services

Key areas of focus:	Women and Poverty – Women's Education and Training – Women and the Economy – Women's Human Rights – The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- Efforts to tackle poverty across the region have been a mixed bag. In middle-income countries, the approach has been more than just skin-deep, with ambitious plans and policies aiming to reduce poverty through a broader lens. There's been a noticeable shift toward using multidimensional poverty indicators, as governments realize that poverty is not just about a lack of income but also about limited access to education, healthcare, and employment.⁵⁶ Many of these national plans tie poverty reduction to better access to services like education and health, with a special focus on reaching out to vulnerable groups: women, youth, the unemployed, people with disabilities, orphans, the elderly, and those in rural or isolated areas. At least 17 Arab countries are putting their money where their mouth is, prioritizing inclusive education for students with disabilities and pushing for stronger protections for their rights. Additionally, sexual and reproductive health, maternal care, and child health have been in the spotlight in many countries.⁵⁷
- On the social protection front, some middle-income countries have rolled up their sleeves and worked to make their social protection programs more inclusive. These programs are designed to offer a lifeline to those who were previously left out, such as workers in agriculture or the informal sector. Expanding targeted cash transfers and introducing new forms of assistance have been key strategies. In some countries, social insurance systems have been restructured to close the gap in benefits between public and private-sector workers. To improve performance, many countries are streamlining their systems, improving management, and creating more unified, wide-reaching strategies.
- Some middle-income countries are thinking outside the box, incorporating skills development, vocational training, job placement services, and microfinance into their poverty reduction efforts. These initiatives act as stepping stones for economic empowerment, particularly in rural and marginalized areas. Many countries are investing in upgrading infrastructure like water, sanitation, and energy systems. There's also a focus on improving access to healthcare and education services. To boost rural incomes, these countries are working to increase access to finance, integrate farmers into value chains, and create new job opportunities. In urban areas, governments are tackling poverty head-on with initiatives like social housing programs and slum upgrading.

⁵⁶ Mauritania launched its Multidimensional Poverty Index in 2023, while Palestine adopted its methodology back in 2017. Other countries that have developed their own Multidimensional Poverty Indices include Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Morocco, and Somalia.

⁵⁷ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024

- In conflict zones, poverty alleviation efforts often feel like trying to catch a falling knife, with aid efforts focused primarily on providing cash or in-kind assistance. However, these initiatives are often half-baked, with the international community stepping in as a key player in delivering social protection. In low-income countries, the Multidimensional Poverty Index shows that poverty rates remain high but are steadily decreasing. These countries have adopted poverty reduction and social protection strategies, with cash assistance programs being central to short- and medium-term responses. These programs target vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, people with disabilities, and those facing food insecurity. Many countries have enacted legislation to guarantee basic healthcare access, prioritizing universal health coverage.
- In terms of healthcare services, the Arab region excels in covering family planning, contraceptive methods, prenatal, delivery, and postnatal care, along with child health. However, areas like cervical cancer prevention and treatment, early childhood development, adolescent health, and violence against women remain under the radar. Integrated sexual and reproductive health services in most countries focus primarily on maternal and child health, as well as family planning, within the framework of primary healthcare. It's a case of "the essentials are covered," but much work remains to tackle the overlooked gaps.
- For low-income nations, the focus has been on reducing diseases and deaths linked to sexual and reproductive health, but women and girls with disabilities often get the short end of the stick. Facing a double whammy of discrimination and lack of awareness, they are frequently excluded from receiving essential healthcare, particularly in reproductive health.
- Most Arab nations have strategies or programs for family planning and reproductive rights, but these are often lacking solid legal support. Safe abortion laws vary greatly across the region—while illegal in most countries except in certain cases, Tunisia stands out as the one country where abortion is fully legal. Exceptions span over the following: when a woman's life is at risk, or to preserve her mental or physical health, or in cases of rape, incest, or fetal abnormalities. It's a case of "the law's a tough nut to crack" when it comes to reproductive rights, with many hoops to jump through.
- When it comes to education, nearly every country has recognized the right to free, compulsory education. Nineteen Arab states have made education the responsibility of the state, and some have overhauled curricula and improved teacher qualifications. The drive for digital literacy is gaining momentum, with a focus on STEM education. Some countries are bridging the skills gap by updating curricula and creating vocational and technical education pathways that are in sync with the demands of the labor market. Stronger cooperation with the private sector has also helped improve alignment with employer skill needs.
- Across the region, CSOs often in partnership with international agencies and governments, have been the unsung heroes, delivering essential services like healthcare, education, and social protection, especially in regions that the government struggles to reach. These programs also focus on providing training, economic empowerment, and support to help individuals break free from the cycle of poverty. However, much of the assistance, especially in conflict zones, still revolves around in-kind aid.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- Despite the ambitious policies and plans aimed at tackling poverty, recent years have seen poverty rates climb across much of the Arab world. While some countries have come to understand that poverty goes beyond just income—spanning education, employment, and healthcare—multidimensional poverty indicators are still largely neglected. These indicators could be key to

crafting effective poverty-reduction strategies, but they remain underutilized. Income continues to be the dominant measure of poverty, even in nations that have adopted broader metrics. To make matters worse, the lack of coordination between development partners often results in a fragmented social protection system, with overlapping programs, weak beneficiary tracking, inconsistent funding, and patchy coverage. Additionally, there's often a disconnect between humanitarian initiatives and national social protection frameworks, leaving gaps that widen the divide.

Women Caught in a Web of Growing Poverty and Challenges

- In recent years, poverty rates across the Arab world have climbed sharply. The poverty rate rose from about 12.3% in 2010 to 18.1% in 2023⁵⁸. This increase has been particularly pronounced in poorer countries and those grappling with wars and armed conflicts. By 2023, it was estimated that around 20.2% (roughly 29 million people) of the Arab population were living on less than \$2.15 a day.⁵⁹
- Additionally, the proportion of women living in poverty, especially female-headed households, has risen. These households account for between 10% to 40% of the poorest families in the region, and those with a higher proportion of adult women tend to be even more impoverished. More children, particularly girls, in female-headed households often means deeper poverty.⁶⁰ The COVID-19 pandemic, wars, and environmental disasters have only exacerbated this trend, pushing many such families below the extreme poverty line and threatening their basic food security.
- The region has also seen an uptick in both monetary and multidimensional poverty. According to data from the World Bank's Poverty and Inequality Platform, global poverty recently reverted to pre-COVID-19 levels, except in MENA. While the poverty rate has decreased slowly post-pandemic, it still increased from 12.3% in 2010 to 18.1% in 2023.⁶¹ The ESCWA estimates that by 2023, 20.2% of the Arab population lived on less than \$2.15 a day, compared to 9.5% in 2015 and 6.2% in 2005.
- Moreover, the percentage of workers living below the international poverty line has doubled from 3.1% to 7.6% between 2010 and 2022, with the sharpest increase in less-developed countries and conflict zones. Between 2019 and 2021, the number of Arab millionaires rose by 70,000, while about 29 million people fell below the extreme poverty line, living on less than \$2.15 a day.⁶² Macroeconomic shocks between 2020 and 2022 are estimated to have pushed an additional 5.1 million people into unemployment.⁶³
- The highest poverty rates were recorded in the least developed Arab countries, reaching 35.1% in 2019. These countries face severe deprivation, with limited access to basic services like sanitation and infrastructure. Rural areas suffer the most from poverty, though some urban poverty pockets exist as well. The challenges are compounded by slow economic growth, high unemployment, rising consumer inflation, and overwhelming debt burdens that limit resources for poverty alleviation programs. Wars, conflicts, and environmental disasters have exacerbated poverty, especially in fragile and poor countries. Refugees, displacement, destroyed infrastructure, corruption, and financial opacity have all weakened governments' capacity to respond effectively,

⁵⁸ Based on the poverty line of \$3.65, according to the three international poverty lines used by the World Bank to track global poverty.

⁵⁹ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁶⁰ Shireen AlAzzawi and others, 2023. Female Headship and Poverty in the Arab Region: Analysis of Trends and Dynamics Based on a New Typology. Discussion Paper Series. IZA – Institute of Labor Economics. DP No. 16641

⁶¹ Based on the poverty line of \$3.65, according to the three international poverty lines used by the World Bank to track global poverty.

⁶² Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁶³ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/making-data-count-devise-better-policies-fight-poverty-mena>

further pushing poverty rates up. Multi-dimensional poverty remains high in middle-income Arab countries, affecting one in four people. Slow economic growth, urban-rural disparities, and high informal employment worsen the situation, with recent crises pushing more people into poverty amidst weak social protection systems.

- Poverty in the Arab world is primarily rural, with urban pockets emerging in many countries. Access to basic services—such as water, sanitation, electricity—varies significantly between rural and urban areas. Rural and remote populations are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to employment, education, healthcare, and infrastructure services like water, electricity, and sanitation. Often, people in these areas must travel long distances for school or healthcare. In some Arab countries, multidimensional poverty rates in rural areas are four times higher than in urban ones.
- Women and girls in rural areas are disproportionately affected by these service disparities. Rural women, especially those in poverty, struggle to access social protection and quality healthcare. A higher percentage of them work in agriculture compared to men, but their access to land and other agricultural assets is limited. They also lack income security, as they are often employed in family businesses or as day laborers on large farms. Limited access to land remains one of the biggest challenges facing women in rural areas, where most economic activity depends on agriculture.

Falling Through the Cracks: The Invisible Struggle of Women in the Arab Region's Social Safety Net

- In the Arab region, women are often left to navigate a fragmented and threadbare social safety net. Despite public expenditure levels that nearly match global averages, the allocation of resources tells a different story—one of neglect and missed opportunities. While the region spends close to the world average on overall public services (34.6% of GDP compared to 35.7%), its investment in health, education, and social protection is a shadow of what it should be. In 2021, Arab nations collectively allocated just 8.3% of GDP to these vital sectors, a far cry from the global average of 19.8%. Meanwhile, military spending devoured 4.6% of GDP and 16.4% of government budgets, dwarfing global averages of 2.2% and 5.8%,⁶⁴ and diverting funds amounting to \$63 billion that could have transformed lives, particularly in the health and education sectors⁶⁵. However, approximately 80% of social spending is consumed by salaries and subsidies, yielding low returns in productivity enhancement compared to alternatives like employment programs, social insurance, or early childhood development, and spiking debt levels.⁶⁶ It's a tale of misplaced priorities, where the potential for progress is sacrificed at the altar of short-term security.
- The cracks in the system are glaring. Many Arab countries lack comprehensive policies to address the sexual and reproductive health needs of adolescents and youth, especially young women, rural populations, and those with disabilities. These gaps perpetuate cycles of poverty and exclusion. While 89% of the region's population had access to basic drinking water in 2022, this figure plummeted to 80% in rural areas and 63.4% in low-income countries. Similarly, access to electricity, a basic necessity, was available to 90.8% of the population overall but only 82.8% in rural areas and 63.5% in low-income countries.⁶⁷
- Social protection coverage is equally inadequate. Only 35.1% of the population and 37.2% of the elderly receive any form of social assistance, compared to global averages of 46.9% and 77.5%. The benefits provided are often a drop in the ocean, insufficient to meet basic needs. Non-health

⁶⁴ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ United Nations, 2022, The Social Expenditure Monitor for Arab States: Toward Making Budgets More Equitable, Efficient and Effective to Achieve the SDGs.

⁶⁷ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

social protection spending stands at a meager 6.2% of GDP, less than half the global average of 12.9%. Worse still, these benefits disproportionately favor public sector workers, leaving the most vulnerable—women, children, and those with disabilities—to fend for themselves.

The Invisible Burden: Poverty and Marginalization

- For the 45 million Arabs living with disabilities, including women, girls, and children, life is a relentless struggle. Most reside in rural or remote areas, trapped in cycles of exclusion, neglect, and poverty. They were the first to feel the impact of natural disasters, economic crises, and armed conflicts in the last five years, yet the last to receive support.⁶⁸
- Women and girls with disabilities face a double burden, battling discrimination and systemic barriers to access healthcare, particularly sexual and reproductive services. Despite international agreements like CEDAW and the ICPD Program of Action, these women remain invisible to policymakers, denied the care and support they desperately need. The WHO emphasizes that access to family planning and reproductive health information is a right, not a privilege—one that must be inclusive and responsive to the unique needs of persons with disabilities, leaving no one behind.⁶⁹
- The relationship between poverty and disability is a vicious cycle. Poverty increases the likelihood of disability, and disability deepens poverty. For women, this cycle is compounded by gender inequality and socioeconomic marginalization.⁷⁰ They face material deprivation, limited access to education and employment, and inadequate healthcare. Poor living conditions, unsafe water, and lack of sanitation exacerbate health challenges, while emergencies expose them to heightened risks of violence and exploitation.
- Refugee, displaced, and informally employed women, particularly in agriculture and informal work, are similarly excluded from social protection programs. Many poverty reduction initiatives fail to reach the most vulnerable, leaving them to grapple with rising inflation, soaring food prices, and economic instability. Even well-intentioned programs, like microfinance, have sometimes backfired, pushing women into debt and further marginalization.

A Call to Action: Building a Stronger Safety Net

The time has come to rewrite this story. The road ahead is long, but the stakes are too high to ignore. The women of the Arab region deserve more than invisibility and neglect. They deserve a future where their rights are protected, their needs are met, and their potential is realized. It's time to mend the cracks in the system and build a foundation of equity and justice for all.

Recommendations

At the National Policy Level:

- Invest in multidimensional poverty studies and intersectional data.

⁶⁸ Poverty and disability: interlinkages and the way forward, September 2024
E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.3 <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/poverty-disability-interlinkages-way-forward-arabic.pdf>

⁶⁹ Promoting sexual and reproductive health for persons with disabilities: WHO/UNFPA guidance note:
https://unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/srh_for_disabilities.pdf

⁷⁰ Poverty and disability: interlinkages and the way forward, September 2024
E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.3 <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/poverty-disability-interlinkages-way-forward-arabic.pdf>

- Develop pro-poor social and economic policies, integrating poverty reduction into comprehensive national plans that address education, health, employment, and training gaps. Transparency and anti-corruption measures should be strengthened, with a focus on expanding essential services like clean water, sanitation, and adequate housing—especially in marginalized, rural, and remote areas. Special attention must be given to the needs of women and girls with disabilities, ensuring their access to healthcare, education, and safe employment opportunities.
- Enhance disaster response and early warning systems, ensuring inclusion of women and girls with disabilities. Governments should critically evaluate their performance during recent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes.
- Strengthen social protection through legislative reform, constitutional guarantees, and improved governance.
- Leverage technology to empower women and girls with disabilities, for digital tools can bridge gaps in education, healthcare, and employment, fostering greater inclusion.
- Expand access to education and healthcare, particularly in marginalized and rural areas.

At the Civil Society Level:

- Invest in intersectional poverty studies to inform policy-making.
- Improve governance and develop indicators for equitable economic and social development.
- Advocate for social protection policies aligned with ILO Convention No. 102 (1952), Recommendation No. 202 (2012), and SDG 3.
- Push for public programs that support vulnerable groups, including those unable to work and individuals with disabilities, while reviewing compensation systems and recognizing occupational diseases and workplace injuries.
- Promote sustainable social and solidarity economies that prioritize human and environmental well-being.
- Establish flexible legal frameworks to ensure small-scale professionals can access financing, supply chains, and markets, integrating marginalized groups into the economic cycle.

At the State and International Organizations Level:

- Support multidimensional poverty studies with technical and financial resources.
- Provide funding and logistical support for programs targeting female-headed households, especially in war-torn countries.

3. Liberation from Violence, Stigma, and Stereotypes

Key areas of focus:	Violence against Women – Women's Human Rights – Women and Media – The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- **Legal Reforms and National Strategies**

Several Arab countries have enacted or amended⁷¹ laws addressing violence against women, including domestic violence. These laws often include provisions for prosecution, punishment, prevention, protection, and compensation. However, only five⁷² out of the eight countries with laws protecting women from domestic violence have national plans or strategies specifically targeting violence against women. These plans are supported by national mechanisms responsible for overseeing implementation, monitoring, and reviewing progress. Additionally, three countries⁷³ have introduced legal measures to criminalize online violence against women and girls, while three other countries⁷⁴ have established national strategies and implementation mechanisms to address this issue. Furthermore, some nations have broadened the definition of violence to encompass physical, sexual, psychological, and economic abuse.⁷⁵

- **Combating Rape and Child Marriage**

Most Arab nations have criminalized rape by non-spouses, though legal definitions vary. Many countries classify rape under penal code sections dealing with "family honor" or morality, often emphasizing public ethics and family integrity. Some nations have abolished laws allowing rapists to escape punishment by marrying their victims. On child marriage, middle-income Arab countries have taken steps to close legislative loopholes, setting the legal marriage age at 18, with limited exceptions.

- **Fighting Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) and Human Trafficking**

Countries where FGM is prevalent have introduced or amended laws to criminalize the practice, impose stricter penalties, and eliminate its medicalization. Several nations have also adopted comprehensive anti-trafficking laws, aligning with the UN's Palermo Protocol, which includes punitive, protective, and preventive measures. Some countries specifically criminalize sex trafficking and provide victims with legal aid, shelters, and other support services.

- **Civil Society Efforts**

⁷¹ Bahrain, Djibouti, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, UAE.

⁷² Bahrain, Lebanon, Morocco, Tunisia, UAE.

⁷³ Egypt, Morocco, UAE.

⁷⁴ Egypt, Iraq, Palestine.

⁷⁵ Lebanon, UAE.

Arab civil society and feminist organizations have been at the forefront of combating gender-based violence and discrimination. They work through national, regional, and international alliances, conducting advocacy campaigns, raising awareness, and documenting cases of sexual, digital, economic, and legal violence. Many organizations provide protection and care for survivors, especially in countries lacking adequate state services. They offer legal, psychological, and social support, including hotlines and shelters for women at risk of gender-based violence or femicide. However, the reliance on NGOs highlights the need for governments to fulfill their due diligence obligations in prevention, protection, rehabilitation, and legal accountability.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- Despite legal reforms, over a third of Arab women experience spousal violence, with rates significantly higher in conflict-affected areas. FGM remains prevalent in some countries, and child marriage persists, particularly in war-torn regions. In 2020, 20.4% of Arab women aged 20–24 were married before 18, exceeding the global average and reaching 33.5% in fragile and low-income Arab states.⁷⁶
- **Economic Costs and Societal Barriers**
Only Egypt, Jordan, and Palestine have conducted studies on the economic cost of gender-based violence. The lack of data and household surveys hampers efforts to quantify the impact. Violence reduces women’s productivity, increases time out of work, and raises costs for specialized services like healthcare and legal aid. Deep-rooted patriarchal attitudes, societal tolerance for gender-based violence, and cultures of impunity and silence continue to fuel discrimination and inequality, posing significant barriers to progress.⁷⁷
- **The Way Forward**
Gender discrimination, inequality, and gender-based violence in the Arab region are perpetuated by a deeply ingrained cycle of attitudes that put men on a pedestal while putting women on the backburner. The patriarchal mindset within both society and state institutions presents a significant barrier to meaningful progress in combating gender-based violence, stigma, and stereotypes. This is reflected in a culture that not only tolerates such violence but often shields it with impunity, where silence from both society and the victims themselves perpetuates the cycle of harm.

Violence Soars, Protection Collapses

- In the last five years, there has been a significant rise in all forms of violence against women, particularly GBV, with a heightened impact on women and girls with disabilities. The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated this trend, with global lockdown measures leading to a surge in domestic violence, especially in the Arab region. Reports from national bodies indicate that the pandemic not only increased physical, sexual, psychological, economic, legal, and environmental violence but also escalated technology-facilitated abuse. With restrictions in place, many women, including those with disabilities, elderly women, displaced persons, and women working in the informal sector, found themselves trapped in abusive environments.
- As violence surged, vital protection services—both governmental and non-governmental—were severely lacking. Shelters closed in many countries due to the pandemic, leaving women with no safe haven. In addition, many essential services, including healthcare and legal support, dwindled or vanished entirely during the crisis.

⁷⁶ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁷⁷ Estimating the Cost of Violence against Women in the Arab Region, ESCWA
https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/unwcostingvaw_arbrochure_web_0.pdf

- Refugee, migrant, and displaced women and girls, particularly in war-torn regions like Sudan and Libya, experienced sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation. Many faced trafficking risks, especially in their host communities. In Sudan, sexual assault and rape spiked. Palestinian women detainees in Israeli prisons also endure systemic physical, sexual, and psychological violence, with no protection or support services available.
- Hundreds of thousands of women, girls, and women with disabilities in conflict zones have suffered extreme physical, psychological, and economic violence, including murder and rape. They also face the additional violence of displacement, loss of resources, and deprivation of basic rights. In Gaza, the situation is dire, with extreme poverty, violence, and marginalization, stripping women of their fundamental rights to health, employment, education, and a dignified life. Conditions are similarly harsh for women in Lebanon, Yemen, Iraq, Libya, and Somalia, where ongoing conflicts have only worsened gender-based violence over the past five years.
- Women and girls with disabilities are especially vulnerable, enduring compounded violence and prolonged abuse in both private and public spheres. The absence of comprehensive protection systems, along with insufficient services to address their unique needs, makes them highly exposed to various forms of violence. This issue, rooted in both gender and disability, is prevalent across homes, institutions, public spaces, and even on social media platforms. Addressing this requires a unified political will and collaborative efforts across multiple sectors. It must be prioritized by CSOs and feminist groups, extending beyond specialized disability-focused institutions.

Legislation and Laws: A Double-Edged Sword

Progress on Paper, Gaps in Practice

- Despite some legal reforms in certain Arab countries, these changes alone are not enough. The key challenge remains the implementation and enforcement of these laws, ensuring protection and accountability. These laws often falter due to a lack of financial resources, inefficient human resources, and the absence of genuine political will. Political changes related to gender equality and women's empowerment are often driven by international frameworks rather than national priorities. The fundamental issue in tackling GBV in the region is the lack of true political will, conflicting interests, and the sacrifice of gender equality for political gains. While countries that have ratified international human rights agreements are aware of their legal obligations, they hesitate to take necessary actions due to political and economic interests, leaving women and women's organizations to combat opposing forces alone.
- In many countries, the legal amendments made regarding domestic violence remain ineffective, with contradictions between family laws and customary laws, which hinder proper law enforcement. Some of these laws are still riddled with issues, particularly when it comes to child custody in cases where protection orders are in place, and they adopt a narrow definition of domestic violence that overlooks psychological, economic, and cyber violence, as well as marital rape. The absence of effective legislation and the limited access to justice for women in the Arab region exacerbate these challenges.⁷⁸
- As for reforms related to child marriage, numerous issues persist. Legal exceptions have become widespread, and what's even more concerning is that these marriages—especially prevalent among displaced populations—are often arranged by circumventing laws, with marriage contracts only being registered when the girl is pregnant or reaches the legal age. This discrepancy has led to a stark contrast between official statistics showing low rates of child marriage and the reality of unregistered marriages. Matters become more complicated when children are born and cannot

⁷⁸ Regional review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 30 years in Arab countries, Amman, 27-28 May, 2024. <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/2400418A.pdf>

obtain birth certificates, and in cases of divorce, the girl and her children lose all rights due to the inability to prove the marriage or divorce, perpetuating cycles of poverty and marginalization.

- Several Arab countries lack strategies to combat all forms of violence and discrimination against women. Even when strategies exist, they are often ineffective due to insufficient or absent funding for women's protection and a failure to allocate budgets sensitive to women's needs. Governments tend to treat women's issues as isolated concerns, without integrating them into national policies related to finance, labor, industry, skills development, entrepreneurship, and loans.

Recommendations

At the Policy Level:

- Align accountability mechanisms for violence against women, including national laws, with international agreements and due diligence standards, adopting national laws consistent with UN standards to address violence against women.
- Develop comprehensive laws against all forms of violence, not just domestic violence, ensuring full protection for women and girls.
- Reform laws to address legislative gaps, improve access to justice, and implement due diligence principles, while strengthening institutional capacities to enforce the law.
- Ensure that laws protecting women and girls with disabilities are aligned with international human rights standards and provide flexible legal pathways for victims to access justice.
- Provide data on violence and femicides, particularly cases of fatal assaults, categorized by perpetrator, relationship to the victim, economic status, migration status, and residence, to help analyze root causes and design prevention strategies.
- Facilitate access to shelters and support centers for women and girls with disabilities, ensuring protection and care without discrimination.
- Invest in reducing violence against women and girls, particularly those with disabilities, both in public and private spaces, criminalizing trafficking and exploitation.
- Establish a regional committee to oversee the implementation of programs responsive to the needs of women with disabilities.
- Ensure adequate budgets and policies are allocated to improve access to psychological, social, health, and economic support for all violence victims, with a focus on accessibility for women and girls with disabilities.
- Enhance monitoring and documentation of violence against women by developing and utilizing robust national monitoring mechanisms.
- Advance laws and mechanisms to combat the trafficking of women and girls, alignment with international standards and effective implementation to address this grave violation of rights.

At the Civil Society Level:

- Advocate for the adoption or implementation of laws protecting women from all forms of violence, including documenting cases of violence against women.
- Raise public awareness and work to change tolerant attitudes toward violence against women, integrating gender equality and freedom from violence into educational curricula and legal awareness campaigns.
- Increase awareness among partners, including national and local authorities, police, social workers, and healthcare providers, about the costs of various forms of violence against women.
- Contribute to the calculation of the cost of violence against women by estimating the costs of services provided by non-governmental entities.

- Involve men and boys in gender equality and anti-violence programs, promoting positive masculinity.

At the UN and International Organizations Level:

- Provide technical consultation on international standards to support legal reforms addressing the constraints of national legislation on violence against women.
- Build capacity and facilitate the exchange of information on gender-responsive budgeting.
- Support the design and implementation of cost analyses related to violence against women through technical advice and regional and national consultations.
- Support effective and comprehensive national responses to violence against women.

4. Participation, Accountability, and Gender-Sensitive Institutions

Key areas of focus:	Women in Leadership and Decision-Making – Violence against Women – Institutional Mechanisms for Advancing Women – Women's Human Rights – Women and Media – The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- Most Arab countries have established national mechanisms to promote gender equality. These mechanisms, though varying in effectiveness, collaborate with local and international institutions and alliances to achieve justice, gender equality, and women's empowerment. Politically, most Arab nations express their commitment to enhancing women's and youth's participation in public life, be it political or economic. Eleven Arab states have adopted women's quota systems, while several others have implemented gender-responsive budgeting measures. These efforts include ensuring equal opportunities within the public sector, developing gender-disaggregated performance indicators and data, and allocating resources to address the specific needs of women and youth.
- Constitutions across the Arab region broadly guarantee public freedoms such as freedom of expression, assembly, and press. Some countries have revised their laws to ensure access to information or amended regulations governing non-governmental organizations. A growing number of nations also emphasize principles of justice, accountability, and transparency in public spending. The percentage of Arab states with national human rights institutions adhering to the Paris Principles has increased from 27.3% in 2020 to 31.6% in 2022, although still lagging behind the global average of 42.8%.⁷⁹
- All Arab countries are signatories to the United Nations Convention Against Corruption.⁸⁰ Many have introduced anti-corruption legislation, adopting new laws or launching integrity-focused strategies. All nations criminalize bribery within the public sector.
- CSOs, particularly those focused on women's rights, have been instrumental in promoting women's participation in leadership and decision-making. Through awareness campaigns, advocacy efforts, coalition-building, and research, these organizations leverage tools like the women's quota system to enable greater political engagement. They also align their work with international frameworks to push for gender-inclusive policymaking and decision-making processes.
- National human rights institutions have played a pivotal role in documenting discrimination against women and addressing violations of women's rights, amplifying the voices of marginalized groups and advocating for systemic change.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- Reality paints a stark picture: in much of the Arab world, genuine participation and accountability remain elusive. While there are differences among countries, the majority of CSOs, along with marginalized groups—women, youth, persons with disabilities, and others—are largely excluded from decision-making processes on closely relevant matters. Fundamental issues like freedoms and justice remain critical challenges in the region. Despite some variance, an increasing number of

⁷⁹ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

⁸⁰ Except for Syria, which signed but has not ratified.

states impose restrictions on freedom of expression, assembly, and access to information. Alarmingly, only eight countries have enacted laws ensuring public access to information.

- Although governments have implemented measures to boost women's political participation, the political arena remains a male-dominated space. Women and other marginalized groups continue to be notably absent from political leadership and decision-making processes, especially on issues critical to their well-being. A significant gap persists in women's representation in positions of power, as well as in the effectiveness and capacity of national mechanisms addressing women's rights and human rights.

The Missing Voice: Women's Limited Political Participation in the Arab Region

- Women's presence in decision-making positions across the Arab world remains far below expectations. In 2022, women held only 18.2% of parliamentary seats, a slight decline from 18.8% in 2015. Their participation in local governments stood at 19.5% in 2023, significantly lower than the global average of 35.5%. Representation varies widely across the region, with women making up 31.7% of elected deliberative bodies in the least developed Arab countries, compared to 25.5% in North Africa, 8% in the Levant, and a mere 1.3% in the GCC states. The numbers are even lower in administrative leadership, where women occupied just 12.4% of managerial positions in 2021, far below the global average of 28.2%.
- While some Arab countries have adopted gender quotas, these do not necessarily translate into meaningful representation. In many cases, women in high-ranking positions do not advocate for gender equality or feminist agendas, rendering their presence symbolic rather than transformative.
- Political freedoms, transparency, and fair elections are often lacking across the region. Electoral engineering and vote-buying are common, particularly in states struggling with democratic transitions. In some cases, women's quotas are manipulated in ways that do not genuinely advance women's rights. Meanwhile, security agencies exert undue influence over political processes, further stifling women's access to power.
- Beyond systemic barriers, deep-seated cultural norms continue to sideline women from political participation. Social attitudes confine women to reproductive roles, downplaying their contributions to governance, economics, and public life. Regional consultations reveal that many women running for local or municipal elections face exclusion—whether by political parties or national gender equality mechanisms. In some cases, women were even barred from using their photos or names in campaign materials due to societal resistance to the idea of women in leadership.

Media: A Double-Edged Sword

- Women in the Arab region face deep-rooted discrimination in the media, a reflection of the broader inequalities they endure in society. Media policies across the region largely fail to incorporate gender perspectives, reinforcing stereotypical gender roles and normalizing patriarchal dominance on television and across digital platforms. Instead of serving as a tool for empowerment, Arab media often stigmatizes and marginalizes women and other vulnerable groups. Moreover, there are no structured efforts to collaborate with media employers or the tech industry to establish gender-balanced hiring policies or uphold human rights-based codes of conduct. This lack of regulation further weakens women's participation in decision-making across political, economic, social, and cultural spheres. By failing to challenge harmful narratives, the media fuels hate speech, deepens marginalization, and reinforces systemic discrimination. At the same time, women in politics face intense gender-based violence, both online and offline. Many women politicians are targeted with

harassment, threats, and character assassination, discouraging them from public life and weakening their connection with their communities.⁸¹

- The intersection of political, economic, and social factors—coupled with outdated media narratives and gender-blind policies—continues to suppress women’s role in decision-making. Without structural reforms and a shift in societal perceptions, women’s participation in politics will remain a distant goal rather than a lived reality.

Political Puppets or Agents of Change? The Reality of Gender Equality Mechanisms

- National mechanisms for gender equality in the Arab region are riddled with shortcomings, revealing a lack of effectiveness and political will to achieve true gender parity. These mechanisms are neither independent from governments nor empowered with decision-making authority. They function largely as advisory bodies, with no mandate to hold states accountable for gender equality commitments or human rights violations against women. Instead of mainstreaming gender issues across Arab state institutions and ensuring accountability, these bodies often focus on implementing projects that should rightfully be led by civil society.
- Accountability and transparency are also sorely lacking in the selection of members for these mechanisms. Appointments are often politically driven, elitist, and partisan, with no clear professional criteria or job descriptions to ensure qualified leadership. As a result, these bodies fail to truly represent the feminist movement or drive meaningful change.
- These mechanisms rarely engage in genuine partnerships with civil society and feminist organizations. Distrust defines their relationship, and in many cases, coordination is either nonexistent or reduced to superficial, seasonal consultations with no real commitment to collaboration. In some instances, these bodies prioritize working with pro-government NGOs while sidelining independent feminist organizations.
- A critical barrier to their effectiveness is the absence of adequate government funding and resources. This financial neglect underscores the state’s lack of commitment to the women’s rights agenda. As a result, these mechanisms often find themselves competing with civil society for external donor funding. Furthermore, staff training on addressing gender-based violence—especially sexual violence—is virtually nonexistent. There are no complaint mechanisms or systematic efforts to monitor violence against women. Instead of serving as robust institutions for gender justice, these mechanisms remain largely symbolic, in dire need of institutionalization with rights-based, comprehensive approach and skilled personnel to translate mandates into impactful policies. Gender units within government agencies, though theoretically a step toward integrating gender perspectives into policymaking, often lack institutional influence, funding, and trained personnel. Their presence, in many cases, remains purely decorative, with little to no tangible outcomes.
- Ultimately, national gender equality mechanisms in most Arab states serve more as diplomatic window dressing than as instruments of real change. They exist to polish the country’s image on the international stage and secure funding from donors rather than to advance women’s rights in meaningful ways. These bodies neither engage feminist and human rights groups nor have the authority or independent budgets necessary to monitor progress effectively. Their role remains advisory rather than directive, limiting their ability to drive substantive policy reforms.
- Additionally, gender-responsive budgeting across the region suffers from a severe lack of financial and human resources, as well as weak coordination among relevant stakeholders. Above all, the political will to implement these budgets is missing. The effectiveness of national institutions and rule of law in addressing shrinking civic spaces varies across Arab states. Wealthier, politically

⁸¹ Maharat Foundation (2024) Gender and Media: Commitments of Media Institutions to Gender Equality.
<https://maharatfoundation.org/media/2591>

stable nations tend to have stronger mechanisms compared to low- and middle-income countries plagued by conflict and instability.

- Without genuine political commitment, adequate funding, and meaningful collaboration with feminist movements, national gender equality mechanisms in the Arab world will remain little more than hollow institutions—existing on paper but choosing tokenism over transformation.

Half-Hearted Reforms, Full-Fledged Resistance

- Despite public rhetoric, Arab states fundamentally lack the political will to achieve genuine gender equality. Many of their so-called reforms are little more than box-ticking exercises designed to placate donors rather than drive meaningful change. Even these superficial efforts are plagued by systemic flaws—insufficient funding, a shortage of trained personnel, and the absence of concrete implementation plans or accountability mechanisms. Gender-focused institutions, being government-affiliated, remain tethered to state interests rather than the voices of civil society. Instead of dismantling patriarchal structures, they often reinforce them, maintaining a façade of progress while the reality remains unchanged.
- Moreover, collaboration with CSOs on women's rights is either weak or outright adversarial. In many cases, governments sideline these organizations, failing to engage in meaningful dialogue or partnership. Worse still, when feminist and human rights groups faced backlash from reactionary forces, states not only failed to protect them but actively ignored threats against activists—even dismissing reports of death threats. In some instances, they went as far as shutting down joint programs with feminist organizations, revealing their true priorities. The message is clear: political expediency takes precedence over gender justice, and progress remains hostage to outdated power structures.

Walls Closing In: The Disappearance of Civic Freedoms and the Elusive Promise of Justice

- Despite constitutional guarantees of free speech, press freedom, and the right to assembly, transparency and accountability remain scarce across the Arab region. Governments continue to impose tight restrictions on expression and protest, with arbitrary arrests, harassment, and even assassinations of dissenters still commonplace. These repressive measures impact both women and men, as Arab states persist in criminalizing criticism of ruling authorities, censoring digital platforms, blocking independent media, and carrying out unlawful detentions. As a result, civic space is in a constant state of contraction, leaving little room for human rights, justice, and equality to take root. In war-torn countries, where legal systems have collapsed or fallen under the control of warring factions, the absence of rule of law has fueled severe human rights violations—especially against women and marginalized communities.
- Corruption remains deeply entrenched, perpetuated by weak enforcement of anti-corruption laws. Over the past years, bribery and fraud have surged, particularly in fragile states grappling with conflict and economic instability. The lack of transparency and ineffective governance structures have eroded public trust in national institutions, creating a volatile climate where social unrest and violent conflict become the norm.
- This growing sense of injustice is not lost on the people. Over the past five years, dissatisfaction has escalated across the Arab world, with an increasing number of citizens expressing pessimism about the future. According to a 2022 ESCWA survey, nearly half of Arabs were dissatisfied with healthcare services (48%) and education (45%), while over a third were unhappy with their standard

of living—an alarming increase from 28% in 2016 to 37%. Unsurprisingly, frustration is highest in conflict-affected and low-income countries, where economic hardship is most severe.⁸²

- Inequality in the Arab world manifests in multiple forms—economic, social, and political. From wage gaps to gender-based disparities, from unequal access to education, healthcare, and financial resources to youth unemployment, the region’s deepening inequalities continue to widen the divide. Educational inequality, in particular, has a direct link to rising unemployment, further entrenching cycles of poverty.⁸³
- Discriminatory nationality laws further reinforce systemic inequality. Most Arab countries deny women the right to pass their nationality to their children and spouses, leaving families trapped in legal limbo. Without citizenship, children and foreign spouses often face severe restrictions on employment, education, property ownership, and financial services—exacerbating poverty and exclusion. Stateless women and girls are at heightened risk of human trafficking, including forced and child marriages. The refugee crisis has only compounded this issue, with displaced children often born without the necessary documentation to secure a nationality. Migrant domestic workers face similar legal hurdles, struggling to register births and secure legal identity for their children, pushing yet another vulnerable group into the shadows.
- The failure of state institutions to address injustice and systemic grievances only deepens conflict across the region. Weak governance and a lack of accountability create fertile ground for political and social unrest. This institutional dysfunction also cripples crisis response, whether for natural disasters or man-made emergencies. Several recent catastrophes in the region could have been mitigated had authorities taken proactive measures, but in the absence of effective governance, preventable disasters turn into humanitarian tragedies.

Recommendations

At the State Policy Level:

- **Foster an Enabling Environment:**

Encourage the participation of women, youth, and persons with disabilities in leadership and decision-making roles by implementing Recommendation No. 40 from CEDAW, adopting laws that guarantee political participation and representation, and allocating necessary human and financial resources, along with developing comprehensive action plans, monitoring, and evaluation mechanisms.

- **Meaningful Civil Society Engagement:**

Actively involve CSOs in shaping policies and plans—not as a formality, but through creating robust mechanisms for dialogue, monitoring, documentation, and the regular publication of results. Emphasize best practices in social dialogue and civil engagement in developing public policies, strategies, and programs, while fostering collaboration on national and international challenges, in alignment with a shared, integrative vision that expands the political choices for governments in an effective and productive manner.

- **Strengthen Anti-Corruption Measures**

⁸² Inequality in the eyes of Arab people, October 2024, ESCWA. Publication: E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy brief.6 Available at: <https://www.unescwa.org/publications/inequality-eyes-arab-people>

⁸³ What is driving inequality in the Arab region? September 2024. ESCWA Publication: : E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2024/Policy Brief.7 <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/what-driving-inequality-arab-region-arabic.pdf>

Implement proactive measures to combat corruption, focusing on public sector misconduct by addressing systemic transparency issues, holding power dynamics accountable, and establishing national independent anti-corruption bodies with proper authority and funding to protect whistleblowers and eradicate corruption in public institutions.

At the Civil Society Level:

- **Empower Grassroot Feminist and Youth Organizations:**

Work alongside these organizations to enhance their capacity, amplify their voices, and address issues that directly impact them—especially organizations focused on the rights of women and girls with disabilities.

- **Raise Political Participation Awareness:**

Raise awareness about the importance of political participation for all groups, particularly by challenging the culture that downplays women's ability and value in political and decision-making arenas.

- **Document Human Rights Violations:**

Systematically document human rights violations against women, ensuring these cases are recognized and acted upon.

At the UN and International Organizations Level:

- **Hold Governments Accountable:**

Apply pressure on Arab governments marginalizing women, youth, and persons with disabilities in policy-making and decision-making processes, urging them to open pathways for inclusion.

- **Provide Financial and Technical Support to Civil Society:**

Offer essential financial resources and technical assistance to civil society for better advocacy and sustainable change.

5. Peaceful and Inclusive Societies

Key areas of focus:	Women and Armed Conflict –Women's Human Rights –The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- Eleven Arab countries have adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) to advance the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, including measures to address conflict-related sexual violence and GBV. NAPs emphasize women's participation in conflict prevention, peace mediation, humanitarian response, and post-conflict recovery. Many also highlight the importance of engaging youth in political and public life through volunteer programs focused on peace, security, environmental sustainability, and community development. However, political commitment to the WPS agenda has varied across the region over the past five years.
- Key priorities include strengthening legal and policy frameworks to prevent and prosecute sexual and gender-based violence, expanding victim support services, and ensuring protection for internally displaced and refugee women. In 2022, the League of Arab States and UNHCR launched the Arab Strategy for the Prevention and Response to All Forms of Violence in the Context of Refugee Situations, with a particular focus on sexual violence against women and girls. The strategy outlines key national priorities for safeguarding refugees from GBV.⁸⁴
- Approaches to the four pillars of the WPS agenda differ across Arab states. Efforts to enhance women's participation have focused primarily on tackling legal and policy discrimination. In terms of protection, conflict-affected and occupied countries have given it significant attention, while investment in preventive services remains minimal and lacks national coverage. Relief, recovery, and reconstruction efforts are largely limited, with humanitarian response efforts—whether governmental, UN-led, or international—dominating the landscape.⁸⁵
- Feminist organizations continue to push for accountability for Israeli Occupation crimes, advocating for engagement with international mechanisms to prevent impunity under UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (Article 11). The Palestinian National Action Plan prioritizes legal action against Israel for war crimes and crimes against humanity targeting women and girls in the occupied Palestinian territories. Accountability is particularly critical given the realities of Israeli settler-colonial expansion. However, this issue is largely absent from Lebanese civil society agendas, despite the Occupation's repeated aggressions against Lebanon.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- The main challenge in advancing peaceful, inclusive societies and the WPS agenda is their disconnect from the lived realities of most people in the Arab region. Many communities lack peace and human security due to wars, armed conflicts, and occupation, leading to a rise in marginalized populations. The Arab world now hosts the highest number of displaced people globally.
- UN Security Council Resolution 1325 remains largely ineffective in conflict settings, as it lacks an internationally recognized framework for monitoring progress. Feminists and civil society organizations have also questioned its relevance in contexts like Palestine. The 2023 war on Gaza

⁸⁴ Regional Report, Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Arab Region, July 2023. E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2023/2 https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-peace-security-agenda-arab-region-arabic_0.pdf

⁸⁵ Ibid.

exposed the failure of international institutions to prevent genocide, raising concerns about their credibility, transparency, and effectiveness. With women and children making up the majority of victims, and attacks on civilians and their property violating both Resolution 1325 and international humanitarian law—particularly the Fourth Geneva Convention—these issues highlight the urgent need for accountability and stronger protections.⁸⁶

Silenced and Sidelined: Women’s Struggle for Inclusion in the Peace and Security Agenda

- Women in the Arab region remain unheard, excluded from conflict negotiations, and subjected to ongoing rights violations. Despite state commitments to protect women from violence and promote their participation in peace efforts, broader socio-political and economic factors—exacerbated by the post-COVID-19 context—have hindered progress on gender equality. While national action plans outline measures for the WPS agenda, a gap persists between state efforts and the continued threats to women’s safety and civic and political participation.⁸⁷
- Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) in conflicts has not declined. In fact, reports of sexual violence against women and girls in war zones have increased significantly in recent years. The lack of reliable data remains a major challenge, with cases documented in 14 war-affected Arab states. Additionally, fragmented survivor support services with limited geographic coverage highlight the systemic failure to protect women before, during, and after conflicts.
- Gender-responsive approaches in humanitarian relief remain weak or absent, sidelining women from relief, recovery, and reconstruction efforts. This exclusion deepens cycles of marginalization, insecurity, and instability for millions of women and girls across the region.
- CSOs advocating for WPS face societal backlash, fueled by Western double standards in implementing international laws. Some organizations have been forced to remove terms like “equality” and “women, peace, and security” from their materials, and in many countries, terms such as “gender” or “gender-based violence” are censored. This has led to the obstruction or shutdown of initiatives aimed at increasing women’s participation in conflict and post-conflict settings.
- Advancing women’s rights in armed conflicts is inseparable from the broader fight against gender discrimination and the push for social and economic justice. A genuine political commitment to gender equality requires a cross-sectoral, gender-sensitive national strategy—something all Arab states currently lack.

Recommendations

At the State Policy Level:

- Enact laws to protect marginalized and disadvantaged groups, reduce social and economic inequalities, and improve access to essential services, particularly in rural and remote areas. Special attention should be given to education, healthcare, employment, and protections for migrants and refugees.
- Ensure no one is left behind by adopting laws that safeguard the rights of women and girls with disabilities, displaced women, informal sector workers, and women in agriculture, with a particular focus on protection from violence and discrimination.

⁸⁶ Regional consultations, 2024.

⁸⁷ Regional Report, Implementing the Women, Peace and Security Agenda in the Arab Region, July 2023.

E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2023/2 https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/women-peace-security-agenda-arab-region-arabic_0.pdf

- Localize the WPS agenda to align with national contexts, ensuring the involvement of civil society and feminist movements.
- Strengthen institutional capacity for WPS implementation, allocate sufficient budgets, set measurable targets, and integrate WPS into humanitarian responses. Legal and policy reforms should be holistic and avoid fragmented approaches.
- Amplify women's voices by ensuring their inclusion in conflict negotiations, peacebuilding efforts, and national reconciliation processes. Women should have equal representation in dialogue on social, economic, and political issues.

At the Civil Society Level:

- Reassess the WPS agenda's alignment with local realities through consultations with women affected by conflict and war.
- Advocate for accountability on women's rights violations in conflict zones, particularly in Gaza, Sudan, Libya, Yemen, and Lebanon.
- Invest in intersectional research to update gender inequality indicators, ensuring an in-depth analysis of how violence, poverty, disability, gender, and age intersect in conflict settings. Research should also examine the social and health impacts of armed conflicts on women and girls with disabilities.

At the UN and International Organizations Level:

- Mobilize the global community to halt the wars on Gaza and Lebanon and hold the Israeli Occupation accountable for genocide and war crimes.
- Introduce a new UN resolution expanding on UNSCR 1325 to address the Palestinian women's struggle against genocide and apartheid.
- End conditional funding restrictions on Arab CSOs under the pretext of counterterrorism, and adopt a more participatory approach to working with these organizations instead of imposing restrictive conditions.

6. Environmental Preservation, Protection, and Restoration

Key areas of focus:	Women and the Environment –Women's Human Rights –The Girl Child
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Progress Made

- Over the past five years, the Arab region has made strides in addressing environmental issues, climate justice, and gender-sensitive policies for disaster mitigation and response. Several countries have adopted strategic frameworks for sustainable consumption, green economies, and land degradation neutrality. Nine voluntary targets were registered under the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, and by mid-2023, 20 Arab nations had conducted multi-stakeholder national dialogues as part of the 2021 Food Systems Summit and its follow-up.⁸⁸
- In pursuit of sustainable food systems by 2030, 11 countries have developed concrete national pathways. All 20 Arab nations that are parties to the Paris Agreement have submitted at least one Nationally Determined Contribution (NDC) to the UNFCCC, outlining adaptation needs, mitigation goals, and priority actions.
- While 15 countries updated or submitted new NDCs within five years of their initial commitments, most have renewable energy targets aligned with the Paris Agreement. However, only eight have formulated actionable strategies to meet these goals. The path to net-zero emissions remains largely theoretical, with only a few countries translating commitments into comprehensive economic strategies with integrated programs and sector-specific targets.⁸⁹ Some governments recognize the link between climate change, environmental degradation, displacement, and deepening poverty. As a result, their social protection and poverty eradication strategies now incorporate climate-related analyses and objectives.
- In a promising shift, several Arab countries have pledged to integrate climate change education into their curricula. Additionally, the region is witnessing a rise in sustainable smart cities, with 14 nations launching initiatives aimed at enhancing urban safety, traffic security, early warning systems, and real-time data applications for crime prevention. Some of these initiatives also address violence against women and girls in public spaces. However, only four countries have explicitly drafted national urban policies—most of which still lack inclusivity and integration.
- CSOs across the Arab region have played a crucial role in advancing women's rights, environmental sustainability, and climate justice. Working in partnership with local communities and international institutions, CSOs have implemented programs focused on advocacy, awareness, and regional and global coalition-building. Their initiatives range from reforestation campaigns and home gardening projects to rainwater harvesting and community-led efforts to protect rivers and springs.

Progress at a Crossroads: The Path Ahead

- Environmental Commitments: Promises on Paper, Absent in Action

Despite vocal commitments to environmental issues, in practice, they remain at the bottom of national priorities. Environmental strategies and goals suffer from chronic underfunding, while action plans are often

⁸⁸ ESCWA, 2024, Comprehensive Arab Report on Progress in Implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action after 30 Years.

⁸⁹ Arab Sustainable Development Report, 2024.

disorganized, lacking both research-based foundations and community participation. Many state institutions are simply too weak to implement their own climate ambitions, leaving commitments as little more than ink on paper. Even as the Arab region faces an escalating environmental crisis, governments sideline these concerns—both during and after conflicts—focusing instead on immediate humanitarian needs.⁹⁰

- A Perfect Storm: Environmental Disasters and Conflict Collide

The past five years have brought a surge in environmental catastrophes—earthquakes, hurricanes, floods, and droughts—compounding the already dire impact of wars and armed conflicts. These overlapping crises have created a tangled web of environmental challenges that will haunt local communities and ecosystems for generations to come.

- Displacement and Environmental Strain: A Crisis Within a Crisis

The Arab region hosts the largest number of displaced people worldwide, a reality that carries severe environmental consequences. The unregulated overuse of natural resources in and around refugee camps is straining already fragile ecosystems. Water demand in these camps frequently exceeds available supply, exacerbating water scarcity and intensifying drought effects. In a region where most land is arid or semi-arid, this dynamic accelerates desertification, further threatening livelihoods and survival. Without urgent action, environmental justice in the region will remain an unfulfilled promise, as displacement, conflict, and climate change fuel a cycle of devastation.

Climate Change and Gender Justice in the Arab Region: A Crisis of Inequality

- Climate change disproportionately impacts marginalized communities—including refugees, migrants, low-income individuals, and coastal populations—deepening poverty and exclusion. These groups already struggle to access essential resources and technologies needed for climate adaptation, yet existing policies fail to account for the intersecting realities of gender, disability, age, and economic status. As a result, women, people with disabilities, the elderly, and the poor bear the brunt of climate-related disasters.
- Women at the Frontlines of the Climate Crisis
In the Arab region, climate change is exacerbating existing inequalities, with women facing heightened vulnerabilities due to rising temperatures, water scarcity, droughts, sandstorms, and floods. Many women, especially in rural areas, depend on natural resources and agriculture for their livelihoods. As environmental conditions worsen—through water shortages and land degradation—the economic burden on women grows. Their struggle to secure food and water for their families intensifies, demanding extra physical and emotional effort that takes a toll on their health and mental well-being.
- Climate Change and the Cycle of Inequality
Women in climate-affected areas also experience restricted access to resources and education, further deepening their isolation. For instance, during prolonged droughts, families may be forced to pull girls out of school so they can help collect water or contribute to household income, limiting their future opportunities for financial independence. Rising temperatures and worsening droughts contribute to environmental degradation and increased health risks. Women, who often shoulder caregiving responsibilities, are more exposed to air and water pollution, increasing their

⁹⁰ Regional consultations, 2024.

susceptibility to climate-related illnesses. The depletion of natural resources also restricts their access to healthcare services, particularly in remote areas.

- **Climate-Driven Displacement: Women at Risk**
Environmental crises like desertification and rising sea levels are fueling forced displacement across the Arab region. Women who are displaced due to climate disasters face heightened risks of violence and exploitation in refugee camps and resettlement areas. Displacement deepens their vulnerability, often forcing them into greater caregiving responsibilities while struggling to secure safety and stability for their families.
- **Exclusion from Climate Decision-Making**
Despite being at the heart of climate struggles, women—and feminist organizations—remain largely excluded from decision-making processes on climate policies. They are underrepresented in government delegations at international climate negotiations and lack the necessary funding to implement adaptation strategies or access modern technologies that could help mitigate climate challenges.
- **Conflict, War, and Environmental Devastation**
Armed conflicts and wars pose one of the most severe environmental threats in the region. The widespread use of weapons, including internationally banned ones, military excavation, deforestation, destruction of farmland, and landmines all contribute to the degradation of natural resources. The long-term effects of war—such as soil erosion, water and air contamination, and the presence of hazardous remnants like unexploded ordnance and toxic chemicals—jeopardize ecosystems, agriculture, and public health for generations to come.⁹¹ Without inclusive and equitable climate action, the most vulnerable will continue to suffer the greatest consequences of a crisis they did not create.

General Recommendations

At the State Policy Level:

- Governments should establish national systems that protect women from climate change and invest in approaches that promote climate justice and gender equality. This involves including women, youth, farmers, and civil society in identifying needs, planning, and decision-making processes related to environmental issues. Key steps include raising environmental awareness, offering training and incentives, and integrating environmental topics into educational curricula. Additionally, women and youth should be involved in national and international climate negotiations.
- Environmental information must be made accessible, alongside investments in cross-sectional research to assess the impacts of environmental degradation on women, especially those living with disabilities or in rural areas, as well as other vulnerable groups.
- Strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks to protect natural resources and ensure sustainable land use is crucial, including enforcing existing laws, combating illegal resource exploitation, and promoting sustainable practices.

⁹¹ Conflict in the Arab region: degrading the land, threatening the future, July 2024. E/ESCWA/CL1.CCS/2024/Factsheet <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/conflict-arab-region-threat-land-future-arabic.pdf>

At the Civil Society Level:

- Civil society should monitor the impact of climate change on women and involve them, alongside local communities, in consultations for national climate change plans. This includes providing information to state bodies to integrate into programs, plans, and budgets.
- Empowering women in climate solutions means involving them in decision-making and negotiations related to climate change policies.
- Access to resources for women should be enhanced, through building skills for transitioning to a green economy.
- Raising environmental awareness within communities is vital, as women play a major role in educating future generations. When women are informed about climate change and adaptation strategies, they pass on sustainability practices to children and youth, fostering more eco-conscious societies prepared for future challenges.
- Equipping women with knowledge about climate negotiations is key to building resilient communities, enabling their active participation in addressing climate challenges and contributing to positive, sustainable change.
- Women must be seen as essential partners in climate adaptation efforts. Their empowerment and active role in these efforts are critical, especially since climate change affects not only the environment but also the social and economic fabric of Arab societies.

At the UN and International Organizations Level:

- It is essential to provide financial resources and technical support to CSOs working on climate justice issues.

Recommendations

At the UN and International Organizations Level:

1. **Halt the Israeli aggression** and genocide against the Palestinian and Lebanese peoples, hold Israel accountable for its crimes against humanity, and immediately cease wars in Sudan, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. Urgent humanitarian aid must be provided to all regions affected by conflict, prioritizing the needs of women, disabled women and girls, unemployed women, and female-headed households.
2. **Amplify the voices of Global South women in international platforms, including the Beijing Platform for Action, and reconsider and expand its scope** to address emerging challenges, ensuring stronger alignment with the SDGs and human rights agreements.
3. **Expand the legal framework of UNSCR 1325** to include provisions for equal and full participation of women in formal peace processes, including in occupied regions.

At the National Level in Arab Countries:

4. **Arab states must fulfill their international commitments** to implement the Beijing Platform for Action, achieve SDGs, eliminate all forms of discrimination against women, and reaffirm their commitment to human rights for women and girls of all races, colors, abilities, and socio-economic backgrounds. This includes amending discriminatory family and personal status laws in line with international human rights treaties, such as CEDAW and ILO conventions.
5. **Invest in cross-sectional data collection and national surveys.** Gender, disability, and age-disaggregated data are crucial for informed decision-making. Updated statistics on

multidimensional poverty, violence against women, and women's employment in the informal sector, agriculture, and migration are needed. This data should be analyzed using an intersectional feminist lens to understand the impact of economic systems on women's justice and equality.

6. **Develop policies and strategies to achieve economic and social justice** for women in the Arab region, ensuring policies are sensitive to gender, disability, age, race, and other intersecting factors that perpetuate poverty and inequality.
7. **Governments must provide support and protection to feminist institutions and activists** working to combat violence, ensuring that states uphold their legal and ethical responsibilities under international laws.
8. **Gender considerations should be integrated into climate agreements, policies, and standards.** Climate policies must address intersecting inequalities, and civil society, including diverse women, must be included in decision-making processes at all levels.

At the Level of Civil Society, Feminist Movements, and Human Rights Organizations:

9. **National gender equality mechanisms must operate independently from governments** and hold states accountable for gender equality issues in the Arab region.
10. **Foster community participation** in planning processes and ensure the inclusion of women, disabled women and girls, youth, and marginalized groups in determining needs and designing plans across economic, social, developmental, and climate-related sectors.
11. **Develop mechanisms to combat sexual violence against women and girls in conflict and occupied areas**, ensuring protection and support for refugees and displaced women in the Arab region.

Annexes:

Annex.1

Amman Declaration Arab Feminist CSOs Network

We, the members of the Arab Feminist CSOs Network, gathered in Amman, Jordan, on December 12, 2024, to launch the regional parallel report on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action +30. Following extensive national and regional consultations to assess progress, gaps, and the realities women face across the Arab region over the past five years, we express our deep concern over the worsening conditions and deterioration of women's well-being.

Women in the Arab region continue to endure escalating forms of violence, perpetuated by discriminatory legal frameworks, entrenched patriarchal policies, and regressive religious rulings and interpretations that undermine their dignity and rights. Practices such as child marriage, polygamy, and femicide remain prevalent, reflecting the lack of genuine political will to uphold women's human rights, entrenching stereotypes, legal discrimination, and marginalization from political and public life.

In light of these challenges, we hereby declare the following:

- We strongly condemn the ongoing genocide targeting Palestinians, particularly women and children.
- We express unconditional solidarity with women suffering in conflict zones across Lebanon, Yemen, Sudan, Libya, and Syria, recognizing the disproportionate impact of wars and crises on their lives.
- We hold the international community accountable for its failure to exert meaningful pressure to end atrocities in the Arab region, urging an impartial approach that prioritizes peace, security, and welfare for all.
- We demand that Arab governments honor their international commitments to eliminate violence, discrimination, and poverty, particularly among women, and allocate adequate financial and human resources to fulfill said obligations.

Based on the findings of the regional parallel report for the Beijing +30 review, we promptly call for:

- Safeguarding existing achievements in women's rights under all circumstances.
- Ending restrictions on feminist organizations and ensuring their ability to operate freely in the Arab region.
- Amplifying the voices of Global South women in international forums, including the review of the Beijing Declaration, ensuring it addresses emerging challenges and aligns with the SDGs and human rights conventions.

- Expanding and localizing the provisions of UNSCR 1325 to ensure equal and meaningful participation of all women in peacebuilding efforts.
- Integrating a gender perspective into climate agreements and policies to address the unique challenges faced by women in the context of environmental crises.
- Promoting community engagement in policymaking, ensuring the inclusion of women and girls with disabilities, youth, and marginalized groups in identifying problems and solutions.
- Preserving the autonomy of national gender equality institutions, in line with the Paris Principles.
- Developing robust mechanisms to combat sexual violence against women and girls in contexts of war, armed conflict, and occupation, while providing protection and support for refugees and displaced women across the Arab region.

We that sustainable development, peace, and security cannot be achieved without genuine political will from the UN system and Arab governments to embrace inclusion, dismantle exclusionary stereotypes, and uphold women's rights as a cornerstone of progress. We emphasize the critical role of feminist organizations in advancing human rights and development, calling for their active participation in all relevant processes and platforms.

Issued on December 12, 2024

Annex.2

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen,

It is an absolute honor to welcome you all today—distinguished colleagues, friends, and partners, notably our esteemed collaborators from UN Women's headquarters in New York and the regional office in Cairo.

Let me begin by saluting the courageous women of Palestine, Lebanon, and Sudan—emblems of resistance, perseverance, and sacrifice. Their unyielding spirit shines as a beacon of hope and liberation in the face of occupation, oppression, and violence. These women remind us of what is possible when bravery meets purpose.

Five years ago, on November 26-27, a significant gathering took place here in Amman. Seventy representatives of feminist organizations, civil society groups, and young visionaries from across the Arab region came together to reflect on the progress and lessons from implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. It was indeed a moment of unity, ambition, and collaboration, which coincided with the proud launch of UN Women's *Generation Equality* initiative with remarkable figures such as Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka and Lopa Banerjee, Director of Civil Society. Together, we envisioned a transformative future for gender equality and women empowerment in the Arab world.

During those pivotal discussions, I joined Ms. Lina Abou Habib in proposing the creation of a regional feminist network—an idea that resonated deeply. What began as a vision soon became reality. Today, that network, launched with 25 feminist organizations spanning countries from Egypt to Yemen, has become a

powerful collective voice for change. I had the privilege of co-leading this network alongside Lina, and since 2021, the esteemed and dear Randa Siniora has carried the torch with unwavering dedication.

This network was built on bold goals: to unite feminist organizations in confronting systemic discrimination, to demand open civic spaces for all, and to foster collaborative efforts between civil society and governments to dismantle structural inequalities. We also set out to amplify the voices of Arab women—not just within our region but on global platforms as well. And we delivered. Through participation in *Generation Equality's* Action Coalitions, the NGO Working Group on Women, Peace, and Security, and the CSAG Planning Committee, Arab women's priorities are now firmly embedded in the international discourse. Our contributions to curated discussions and preparatory meetings, particularly at the Mexico and France Conferences, have ensured that these priorities are recognized and acted upon on the global stage.

In 2019, during our *Beijing+25* discussions, we declared eight key priorities:

1. Driving legislative reforms to eliminate discriminatory laws.
2. Strengthening institutional frameworks for gender equality.
3. Eradicating gender-based violence.
4. Securing human safety for women across the Arab world.
5. Improving access to education and healthcare for women and girls.
6. Empowering women in leadership.
7. Supporting women participation in all forms of work, including unpaid and informal labor.
8. Demanding reliable data and indicators to track progress.

These priorities were not just ideas on paper—they were calls to action. But now, we must ask ourselves: Have we achieved enough? Yes, there have been victories, but the harsh truth is that we have fallen short of our ambitions. Why? The answer lies in the growing chasm between two forces: the entrenched patriarchal systems clinging to power and the feminist movements tirelessly fighting for justice.

The struggle is real, and the examples are heartbreaking:

- In Libya, a young minister recently proposed mandating the hijab, requiring male guardian approval for women to travel, and reviving morality policing. Such measures weaponize patriarchy to control, silence and strip women of their rights.
- In Iraq, parliament recently debated legalizing child marriage (girls as young as nine) under the guise of "family choice," a move was backed by Shia members of parliament, who sought to secure voter support ahead of the October 2025 elections, undoing decades of progress since the progressive 1959 Personal Status Law.
- In Sudan, over 130 women in Al Jazirah tragically took their own lives last October to escape the horrors of sexual violence and rape by RSF. Reports later emerged of other women drowning themselves in the Nile to avoid a similar fate—a collective cry against the unbearable and unimaginable.
- In Egypt, the recent reformation of the National Council for Women deliberately excluded feminist voices by appointing 30 uninvolved women, sidelining civil society at a critical moment.

These examples reveal how deeply rooted patriarchal systems continue to threaten women’s rights. But amidst these challenges, there are stories of resilience and glimmers of hope to be celebrated:

- In Jordan, women’s groups are innovating solutions to water scarcity. Through rainwater harvesting and gray water reuse, they are not only addressing resource sustainability but also strengthening local communities.
- In Egypt, feminist organizations partnered with young lawyers to launch *Microjustice*, a groundbreaking digital platform bridging the gap between marginalized women and access to justice. By empowering rural women, migrants, and religious minorities, they are ensuring no one is left behind.
- At the recent climate conference in Baku, Arab women activists stood shoulder to shoulder with global leaders, protesting the Global North’s failure to meet their \$500 billion annual climate funding commitment and SDGs. Their persistence raised the pledge to \$300 billion—proof of what collective and intersectional action can achieve, even in the face of formidable odds.

These stories of triumph amidst adversity remind us of our power when we come together. But the path forward requires more than hope—it demands strategy, boldness, and unity.

To truly bridge the gap, we must prioritize transformative actions to address systemic barriers. We need:

1. **Legislative reforms** to dismantle discriminatory laws and ensure justice is accessible, affordable, and enforceable.
2. **Institutional accountability** to ensure national mechanisms for gender equality are inclusive, collaborative, and effective—not competitors for donor funding.
3. **Cultural shifts** to challenge harmful traditions, gender stereotypes, and conservative interpretations of religion, while valuing and redistributing unpaid care work.

The road ahead is long, but it is not insurmountable. With collective action, courage, and focus, we can transform this region into one where equality is not a distant dream but a lived reality for every woman and girl.

Thank you.

Annex.3

Event Details

- **Launch of the Arab Regional Parallel Report for Beijing +30 by the Arab Feminist CSOs Network**
- **Time:** 9:30 AM, **Thursday**, December 12, 2024
- **Venue:** Sheraton Hotel, Amman, Jordan

Key Highlights

- Dear members of the Arab Feminist CSOs Network, esteemed colleagues, and friends,
- It is a privilege to gather here today, warmly welcomed by the Network, for the launch of the Arab Regional Parallel Report on the implementation of the Beijing +30.
- Just days ago, some of us convened in Muscat for the high-level meeting on Beijing +30 progress, culminating in the “Muscat Declaration.”
- In this declaration, Arab states pledged under Clause (9J) to strengthen collaboration between national women’s mechanisms and partners, including parliaments, human rights institutions, civil society organizations, youth and disability groups, as well as other stakeholders. The goal is to collectively advance girls and women’s rights through joint initiatives and implement international recommendations.
- While these promises are encouraging, we are acutely aware of the challenges women face daily across the Arab region—be they elderly, young, or living with disabilities. Gender inequality and systemic discrimination persist, demanding relentless effort in advocacy, services, and data from all of us to create tangible change.

Our Partnership and Progress

Dearest friends,

- This gathering marks a vital moment in our shared journey. We last gathered here in Amman for the Beijing +25 High-Level Conference, joined by some founding members present today, including Dr. Fatima Khafaji, and we worked toward a collective vision of gender equality and women empowerment. Since then, the Network has expanded to 77-member organizations and achieved significant milestones, such as:
 - Developing 11 national reports for Beijing +30 through national consultations.
 - Establishing five thematic WGs⁹² that have contributed to international policymaking processes⁹³.
 - Launching the **Network’s Women’s Issues Monitoring Unit**, the first of its kind in MENA, which documents women’s stories and experiences in conflict zones and areas under occupation to amplify their voices globally.

⁹² Women, Peace and Security, Economic Justice, Climate Justice, Family and Personal Status Laws, End Gender Based Violence (GBV), The Feminist Forum for Young Women in Arab Countries

⁹³ COP27 and COP28

- Allow me to commend the courage and resilience of women working under debilitating conditions of war, conflict, and genocide, such as the ongoing ethnic cleansing in Gaza, who are collecting real-time data on the atrocities perpetuated by the occupation against women, paving the way for gender-sensitive humanitarian and development responses.

UN Women's Findings on Gender Issues in Gaza:

- Nearly one million women and girls have been displaced, many over ten times, leaving them in extreme vulnerability.
- Reproductive health services have been critically impacted, with 690,000 menstruating women and girls stripped of basic dignity and rights.
- Over 550,000 women and girls face severe food insecurity, with 70,000 at risk of famine alongside their families in the coming months.
- Amidst such devastation, we deeply admire and applaud the unwavering dedication of human rights defenders who document such stories under bombardment, risking their own lives to ensure the experiences of women are not erased and that their voices continue to resonate.

UN Women's Support

- To address these pressing issues, UN Women activated its rapid humanitarian assistance mechanism, enabling swift funding to support the Network's emergency response.
- However, achieving financial sustainability for the Network remains crucial. As highlighted in the CSW52 agreed conclusions⁹⁴, predictable and increased funding for feminist civil society is vital for effectively implementing the Beijing Platform for Action and achieving the SDGs, particularly SDG 5 on gender equality⁹⁵.
- We call on donors attending the Network's roundtable to generously support its strategic plan, which will undoubtedly yield significant outcomes for women and girls in the Arab region.

Conclusion

Dearest colleagues and friends,

- As we launch the Arab Regional Parallel Report on Beijing +30, I look forward to the impactful discussions ahead. UN Women remains committed to standing with you in delivering tangible results for women, girls, and communities across the Arab region.

Thank you.

Prepared by:

Simone Oluoch-Olunya, UN Women Regional Advisor on Women's Political Participation, Leadership, and Governance.

⁹⁴ [CSW52 E-FINAL.pdf](#)

⁹⁵ Clause (9J) of the High-Level Regional Meeting's final document on Beijing 30+ review calls for predictable government funding to support its commitments. The UN Secretary-General also highlights the need for adequate funding to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality.

