



الأمم المتحدة

الاسكوا

ESCWA

**Commission on the Status of Women
59th Session**

Ministerial Round Table

***Results of Regional Beijing+20 Reviews of the United Nations Regional
Commissions***

The Arab Perspective

Intervention of Ms. Rima Khalaf,

Under-Secretary-General, Executive Secretary

United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia

Thursday 12 March 2015 – 3 to 6 pm
Trusteeship Council Chamber

Excellencies and Distinguished Delegates,

In the Arab region, notable progress has been made over the past 20 years towards implementing the Beijing Platform for Action. While I will focus on some key achievements, I must first address the elephant in the room.

No accurate socio-economic picture of the Arab region may be drawn these days without the stains of conflict and violence:

- The longest foreign occupation of modern times continues in Palestine, depriving millions of Palestinians of their basic rights: confiscating their lands and appropriating their lives, imprisoning their children and destroying their schools, and killing or incarcerating their breadwinners. These daily crimes, not surprisingly, have a detrimental effect on women, their rights and their wellbeing. The 2014 Israeli War on Gaza is a case in point. When Israel damaged 15 of Gaza's 32 hospitals, 40,000 pregnant women became deprived of access to basic healthcare. When 148 schools were destroyed or damaged, advances in girls' education were instantly put at risk.¹
- Unprecedented levels of conflict are threatening entire communities and affecting women and girls disproportionately. Arab women are coming into war situations already vulnerable. In displacement and in refugee camps, women, widows of war, orphans, and girls are facing the horrors of trafficking, enslavement, sexual exploitation or forced marriage. These are generations of doomed futures.

Despite this most challenging context, findings from the regional review highlight multi-dimensional progress:

¹ According to OCHA, 174 Palestinians were killed in Gaza in the **November 2012 Gaza war**. At least 168 of these were killed by Israeli military action, of whom 101 are believed to be civilians, including 33 children and 13 women. According to the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights (PCHR), a further 92 women were injured and many more endured the trauma of witnessing their family members being killed or injured, having their homes damaged or destroyed, and suffering evacuation and displacement. According to OCHA also, preliminary assessment of the impact of the **July-August 2014 War on Gaza**, at least 2,133 Palestinians were killed, including 187 girls and 257 women. In addition, the Palestinian Ministry of Health reported that at least 11,000 were injured, including 2,088 women and 3,374 children. Also during this war, neonatal mortality was reported to have doubled from 7 to 14 per cent at Shifa Hospital. Moreover, 26 schools were completely destroyed and 122 were damaged. (Source: Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women and Girls July 2012 – June 2014; E/ESCWA/ECW/2015/Technical Paper.2).

(1) ADOPTED MEASURES AND THEIR OUTCOMES:

Arab countries have ratified or adopted most instruments concerning women's rights. 20 out of 22 countries have joined CEDAW. Among them only Palestine acceded without any reservations. It is noteworthy that recently 6 Arab countries lifted some of their reservations while Tunisia went all the way, dropping all of them. Actually, the new Tunisian constitution is unique in its recognition of full equality between men and women and total adherence to universal human rights.

New national laws were enacted to address gender inequality. Some labor laws were amended to institutionalize equal wages and maternity leave. Nationality laws were reformed in countries such as Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Morocco, Tunisia, and Yemen to eliminate discrimination against women. New laws have also been legislated in Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and last week in Algeria, explicitly criminalizing domestic violence and/or violence against women. And most countries have allocated efforts and resources to increase women's educational and economic participation.

These measures among others like mandatory and free primary schooling, yielded significant results. Since 1995 the share of girls enrolled in primary education increased from 67% to 86%; female youth literacy rates increased from 77% to 89%, reaching near 100% in the Gulf; while female to male tertiary enrolment rates went up from 76% to 107%.

In parallel, improvements in women's health have raised life expectancy from 68 to over 71 years, and decreased maternal mortality by over one third since 1995.

Such successes in building women's capabilities, have not, however, translated into proportional utilization of their capabilities. Arab women's political and labor force participation are still the global lowest. Only 23% of females are economically active compared to a global 51%. Women earn less for the same work and are consistently under-represented at senior levels. Generally, labor protection schemes and allocation of economic resources reflect institutionalized gender bias, leaving Arab women economically vulnerable and financially

dependent on male family members. In terms of political participation and despite adopted quotas in many countries, Arab women in parliaments hold today no more than 17% of seats.

Finally, despite the sincere measures to fight gender based violence and the intense efforts of civil society, 35% of women in the Arab region have suffered from physical and/or sexual violence, and 60 million Arab women and girls have been subject to genital mutilation.

With these ongoing gaps and persistent gender-based discrimination including in nationality laws, one can conclude that though progress on women's rights in the Arab region is evident, it remains limited, uneven, precarious and vulnerable to conflict.

(2) KEY NEXT STEPS TO IMPLEMENT THE AGREEMENTS FROM THE REGIONS:

Most of the key steps needed are actually spelled out in The Declaration endorsed by Arab States at the conclusion of the Beijing+20 High-Level Conference in Cairo. The Declaration stressed the need for **more comprehensive legislative reviews**, and for new **laws to eliminate gender discrimination** and prevent **harmful practices**. It also advocated **enabling mechanisms** to protect women from violence and secure their human rights. Moreover, it called for **systematic support** towards greater women's political and economic participation, and stressed the need to join efforts with all those concerned, including civil society.

The concluding statement of civil society organizations, who also actively participated in the Conference, called in addition, for the lifting of all remaining reservations on CEDAW, including those related to personal status codes and nationality rights. It emphasized the need for **effective and efficient coordination between UN entities**. Both civil society and governments strongly called for providing all **financial, human and technical resources** needed to sustain achievements and protect acquired rights, focusing chiefly on **women under occupation and in conflict settings**.

This is clearly an ambitious agenda; but it is a critical one -- critical not only for gender equality, but for the overall development of the region. Its implementation stands to face daunting challenges. First and foremost among them are **foreign occupation and wars**, which contribute to an increased militarization of the region at the expense of sustained development, even in countries not witnessing any open conflicts. In the context of protracted wars, the region has the double burden of having to combine development with humanitarian assistance.

Challenges include addressing the **gaps between legislation and actual implementation**. Eliminating these gaps require not only increased **resources**, but more importantly **political will** that translates into concrete strategies to overcome the **resistance to change** and **bring about greater awareness of women's rights as human right**. Without a strong political commitment, achievements of the past will shift from being undeniable victories for women to circumstantial

improvements that could fade away with the emergence of new political or economic realities.

Meanwhile, we at ESCWA, as the regional arm of the UN system in the Arab region, renew our commitment to support Member States and all other concerned stakeholders in implementing more progressive agendas for women's empowerment, until our common objectives are fully achieved.

We will work closely with them all, through a comprehensive approach that mobilizes not only our resources dedicated to gender issues, but those of the entire organization with its various specialized divisions. This approach integrates the overall tenets of the Beijing Platform for Action into ongoing processes, including the new post-2015 agenda and the regional preparations on sustainable development, which ESCWA has been mandated to lead in the Arab region.