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The role of parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement of women's economic empowerment under SDG 5 in the Arab region:

Focus on care policies

Concept note

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) and the International Labour Organization (ILO), are organizing a regional meeting for parliamentarians from Arab States with the aim to accelerate the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality by strengthening actions on women's economic empowerment and care policies in the region.

According to the latest report of the United Nations Secretary-General *Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet*,¹ the SDGs are badly off track. With just seven years until the 2030 deadline, there is a pressing need to raise global leadership to the occasion and ensure that national plans, strategies, policies, legislation and budgets are contributing to the realization of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda).

The regional meeting aims to raise awareness on the complementarity of SDGs, in particular by showcasing how actions on women's economic empowerment and participation in economic life are integral to the realization of SDGs as a whole. The meeting will examine existing interlinkages between care policies and human capital development in areas such as childcare and early child education; the rights of groups in vulnerable situations including older persons and persons with disabilities, and the preservation of their dignity and well-being; and the advancement of gender equality, including through equal care policies. The meeting will provide an opportunity for parliamentarians to exchange experiences and good practices on the development and implementation of care policies in the region. In particular, the meeting seeks to increase interest,

¹ United Nations Economic and Social Council, Progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals: towards a rescue plan for people and planet (New York, 2023):
<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2023/secretary-general-sdg-report-2023--EN.pdf> - A/78/80-E/2023/64

raise awareness, and advocate a set of concrete policy and legal reforms to advance care economies that deliver to all. It should serve to build political will and capacity among male and female MPs to advance the implementation of SDG target 5.4, “Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate” and reaffirm the interrelation between the care economy and the other SDGs.

BACKGROUND

The limited participation of women in the labour market is a lingering challenge in the Arab region. The region continues to present one of the largest gender gaps in the world and despite its progress in educational attainment it still exhibits one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation which, according to ILO estimates, was at 19.5% in 2023.² Out of the 13 Arab countries of the 146 countries featured in the World Economic Forum’s 2023 Global Gender Gap Report,³ 12 Arab countries were in the bottom 35 positions of the Global Gender Gap Index. The report highlights the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region as that which is furthest away from parity needing 152 years to attain full regional parity. These figures show the Arab region lagging behind in the achievement of SDG 5 on gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls, and call for actions to up-scale the efforts and accelerate progress to this end, particularly given the importance and direct or indirect role of SDG 5 as driver and catalyst of all the other goals.

The gender gap in labour force participation rates in the Arab region can be linked to different factors, with one of the most important factors being women’s involvement in unpaid care duties. Indeed, the Arab region has the most critical gender gap in unpaid care work distribution in the world, with women performing the bulk of unpaid care work, ranging between 80 to 90%,⁴ and devoting 4.7 times more of their time to carrying unpaid care tasks than men, compared to a global average of 3.2 times more time than men.⁵ The main recipients of care include children, older persons, persons with disabilities and persons with illnesses. Following the social norm in the Arab region, women take on the role of caregivers for family members falling within the mentioned categories.

Arab States participating in the regular ESCWA ministerial sessions of the Committee on Women are tasked with identifying women-related priorities in the programmes of work of ESCWA and its Member States, following up on global and regional conferences, coordinating regional efforts to implement ensuing resolutions and recommendations, and preparing and implementing projects for the advancement of women in ESCWA Member States. In 2019, 2021 and 2023, these States examined issues related to care economies and policies. Similarly, the ESCWA ministerial session of the Committee on Social Development, tasked with the identification of social priorities in

² International Labour Organization (ILO) (2023):

https://www.ilo.org/shinyapps/bulkexplorer47/?region=ROAS&lang=en&segment=indicator&id=EAP_2WAP_SEX_AGE_RT_A

³ World Economic Forum, *Global Gender Gap Report 2023* (Geneva, 2023):

<https://www.weforum.org/reports/global-gender-gap-report-2023/>.

⁴ Jonathan Woetzel and others, *The power of parity: How advancing women’s equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth* (McKinsey Global Institute, 2015), 29.

⁵ Jacques Charmes, *The Unpaid Care Work and the Labour Market. An analysis of time use data based on the latest World Compilation of Time-use Surveys* (Geneva, ILO: 2019).

Member States, discussed care policies in 2023. Associated recommendations were provided to both ESCWA and the Member States to boost efforts to address this topic and promote women's economic participation.

At the IPU level, parliaments have taken bold commitments in advancing SDGs implementation, including SDG 5 and its targets. Women Speakers of parliament, gathered under the IPU umbrella in dedicated summits, called to better value and redistribute unpaid domestic care work through gender-responsive policies and incentives, in particular paid parental leave and childcare support. In 2022, the IPU adopted the [Kigali Declaration](#) where parliamentarians from around the world committed to advance equality in caring responsibilities among men and women, and to make parliaments more caring institutions, meaning institutions more sensitive and responsive to the caring needs and responsibilities of their members and personnel. Marking the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, parliamentarians endorsed [specific pledges](#) to ensure women's access on an equal basis with men to decent work, including by advancing access to social protection for women employed in the informal sector and equal pay for work of equal value.

Parliamentarians have a central role in leading an impactful agenda in this area. They can shape policies and set out priorities while building a solid legal framework that enables the achievement of the SDGs. They can monitor the implementation of laws that deal with women's economic empowerment and the care economy, and ensure that government is accountable to the people for national progress in this area and that they respect the domestic and international commitments made. As members of the highest representative body, parliamentarians are uniquely positioned to make sure that the needs of all segments of the society – especially those that are underrepresented and/or are in vulnerable or marginalized situations – are duly taken into account.

Presently there is real momentum – both internationally and within Arab national agendas – to enhance women's economic participation through the work of parliament. This can be done through advancing care policies and economies that recognize, seek to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work, the brunt of which is carried by women, especially in the Arab region. This momentum falls in line with the commitment to the 2030 Agenda and the achievement of its 17 goals, especially since the investment in care economy would constitute a steppingstone in the achievement of related SDGs.

OBJECTIVES

In light of the above, ESCWA and the IPU, in partnership with UN-Women and the ILO, are organizing a regional meeting for parliaments in the Arab region to build political will and capacities in reforming care-related policies and legal frameworks, with the ultimate objective of reaching gender equality and socio-economic justice on time for the 2030 Agenda. The meeting will focus on women's economic empowerment, care policies and the economy, including equal care among men and women, aiming to shed light on concrete actions to achieve objectives by showcasing practices from countries which have made significant advances in this field while exploring means and strategies to promote cross-fertilization throughout the countries of the region.

Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff participating will have the opportunity to:

- Acquire up-to-date information and data on the progress of SDG 5 in the region with particular focus on policies and legal frameworks related to SDG target 5.4.
- Exchange their experiences with peers from different parliaments.
- Discuss common concerns in advancing women's economic empowerment, care policies and an economy that deliver for all.
- Identify tangible actions to accelerate progress towards women's economic empowerment and equal care.

EXPECTED OUTCOMES AND FOLLOW-UP ACTIONS

As the demand for childcare and care for older persons, persons with disabilities and persons with illnesses is increasing in the Arab region, as well as in the whole world, concrete and innovative solutions are needed on two fronts to foster women's economic empowerment through the care economy: (i) in regard to the nature and provision of care policies and services, and (ii) in the terms and conditions of care work.

Therefore, solutions should be addressed within this framework, and a set of recommendations is to be reached regarding legislative and other measures that support women's economic empowerment in the context of the care economy, such as through labour policies consisting of paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, or through affordable care services, incentives and promotion of family-friendly policies or the adoption of gender-responsive budgeting principles.

As a follow-up to the meeting, a report detailing the main recommendations will be shared with the participants. In addition, a survey will be shared for participants to indicate what follow-up actions they aim to take, what follow-up support they may need in this regard, and whether they wish to be updated on resources to promote progress in care policies and women economic empowerment.

PARTICIPANTS

The meeting is open to men and women parliamentarians from Arab States, in particular MPs involved in the areas of gender equality, social protection and labour rights, as well as invited parliamentarians from other countries, experts, civil society organizations (CSOs) and private sector actors. Parliamentary staff from invited parliaments are also welcome to attend as observers.

DATE AND TIME

The event will take place virtually on the platform Zoom, from 11:00 to 14:00 EET (Beirut time), on 31 January and 1 February 2024.

LANGUAGES

Simultaneous interpretation will be provided in Arabic, English and French.

REGISTRATION

Persons wishing to participate in this meeting are welcome to register using the online form available at this link.

Register in advance for this meeting:

<https://zoom.us/meeting/register/tJ0udO-gpjluH9YPzF4oWHqFhFhxzhKZLZbW>

MODALITIES

The meeting will provide the opportunity for introductory presentations followed by experience sharing and group reflection. Priority to taking the floor will be given to participating parliamentarians while interventions will be limited to 3 minutes.

MPs are invited to be prepared to share their experiences on policy-level developments and good practices on the topics as described in the agenda below.

The meeting is dedicated to enabling an equitable and inclusive platform for exchanges where diverse perspectives are heard, contributing to a constructive dialogue. Invited parliaments are welcome to ensure a balanced nomination of parliamentarians between women and men.

Participants are kindly requested to focus on the topics listed in the agenda below and to refrain from political statements outside the scope and purpose of the meeting.

DRAFT AGENDA

Wednesday, 31 January 2024 Setting the stage The role of parliaments in boosting SDG achievement by enhancing actions to empower women with focus on care policies	
11:00–11:15	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Opening remarks<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ ESCWA○ IPU○ ILO○ UN-WOMEN
11:15–12:10	The 2030 Agenda and the progress in SDG achievement in the Arab region and around the world: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Presentation on the SDGs and the status of their achievement in the Arab region- Presentation on how parliaments around the world are contributing to SDG implementation- Interventions from participating parliamentarians on Arab country experiences in the acceleration of SDG achievement
12:10–13:05	Why is SDG 5 a catalyst for the achievement of all SDGs? How is it progressing in the Arab region? <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Presentation on the importance of SDG 5 and its role as a catalyst- Presentation of the latest CEDAW Handbook for MPs (IPU)- Interventions from participating parliamentarians on recent national level developments in advancing SDG 5 implementation of SDG 5
13:05–13:10	Break
13:10–13:55	SDG 5.4 - The care economy and women economic empowerment: <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Practical exercise for participants: What is care? How can equal care lead to women's economic empowerment?- Presentation on the status, importance, interlinkages and implications of care work in the Arab region- Q&A session
13:55–14:00	Wrap up of day 1
Thursday, 1 February 2024 Country experiences	

Unlocking success: Lessons and good practices from the region and beyond	
11:00–12:10	Advancing labour policies related to care <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poll on International Labour Standards related to care work - Presentation of the International Labour Standards related to care work - Presentations and interventions on legal reforms related to care economy in the Arab countries
12:10–12:40	Opportunities created by promoting the rights of paid care workers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation on the rights of paid care workers - Interventions by parliamentarians on entry points to promote policy change to ensure rights of paid care workers
12:40–12:45	Break
12:45–13:45	I care to care: Advancing equal care in and through parliament <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presentation Round table discussion Exchange of good practices from around the world Practical exercise
13:45–14:00	Wrap-up and key take aways