

Regional Consultation

The Future We Want: Rights and Empowerment

“Fostering the Inclusive Participation and Effective Contribution of Arab Women in the Public Sphere”



*Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.*



“ MOSHARKA ”

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Acronyms and abbreviations

BDS	business development services
CSO	civil society organization
CSR	corporate social responsibility
DDR	disarmament demobilization and reintegration
EFU	Egyptian Feminist Union
ESCWA	Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia
EU	European Union
GBV	gender-based violence
GDP	gross domestic product
GPECS	Global Programme for Electoral Cycle Support
HDR	Human Development Report
ICT	Information Communication Technology
IDEA	International Democracy and Electoral Assistance
ILO	International Labour Organization
LAS	League of Arab States
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
MENA	The Middle East and North Africa region
MFI	microfinance institution
NAP	National Action Plan
NCPE	National Committee for Pay Equity
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PNA	Palestinian National Authority
RBAS	UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States
RT	round table
SC	Security Council
SME	small and medium enterprise(s)
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
TAG-Org	Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
VAW	violence against women
WB	World Bank

Executive Summary

The UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States (RBAS) organized a regional consultation in Amman, Jordan on April 5 and 2014 ,6 to discuss its proposed initiative entitled “Fostering the Inclusive and Effective Participation of Women in Public Life” hereafter referred to as Mosharaka. The project has one outcome (“Faster progress is achieved in reducing gender inequality and promoting women’s empowerment”) and four specific outputs:

Output 1 Evidence-informed measures accelerated to advance gender equality and women’s economic, social and political participation.

Output 2 Women, Peace and Security frameworks and network established to reinforce human security and promote equal access to justice.

Output 3 Knowledge generation fora, mentoring and networking platforms established to strengthen women’s agency in national institutions, professional associations, the media, civil society, and the private sector.

Output 4 Strategies formulated to ensure that women benefit from early recovery and rapid return to sustainable development pathways.

One hundred and sixty participants from sixteen countries participated and deliberated on the overall concept, the thematic areas of intervention, the partnership modalities, as well as the expected role of RBAS and the UNDP country offices. In addition, a round table (RT) on Women and Islam was organized by RBAS in recognition of the religious discourse influence on defining gender roles in the Arab region and the importance of addressing fundamentalist interpretations of religion that legitimate gender

discrimination and inequality.

The advancement of women and their participation in all aspects of public life including peacemaking and peacekeeping processes are preconditions for the development of the Arab region as well as they constitute a human right and an end in themselves. The Opening Speeches of the UN (UNDP/RBAS, and UN Women) and the League of Arab States (LAS) representatives, as well as the interventions and recommendations of participants emphasized that leapfrogging the gender equality agenda and fostering women’s participation in the public sphere constitute a development imperative for the region post - 2011.

In the area of legislation, including a broad range of stakeholders in the dialogue on legal and policy reforms to accelerate women’s rights in law and practice was presented as a main thrust of the regional project, with personal status laws as a starting point for the review and discussion of national legislations and policy frameworks from a gender perspective. Participants reflected on the discrepancy between the international agreements and conventions that Arab countries have ratified, and their national legislative and policy frameworks, which discriminate against women by failing to protect and empower them. The nationality laws and the personal status laws were mentioned as constituting blatant examples of legislative discrimination in most countries of the region. The situation for women in countries such as Palestine and Lebanon is aggravated by the existence of multiple and conflicting legislative frameworks. Participants acknowledged that even in countries such as Algeria and Tunisia where judiciary reforms have taken place and contributed to increasing women’s agency, rural women remained disempowered due to the influence of patriarchal values as well as the prevalence of legal illiteracy. Finally, participants agreed that the legal gains

of women were fragile and easily threatened and that the support of influential political blocks was required to ensure the viability and continuance of gender-sensitive legal and judicial reform processes.

Participants discussed the need for a revision of the mandate and affiliation of the region’s gender equality institutions and machineries in order to boost their efficacy and ensure their sustainability. The inadequate positioning and scarce financial and human resources, as well as lacking coordination between various national mechanisms were mentioned as limiting the influence of the women’s movement on policy as well as its credibility on the national and global scales. Participants agreed on the importance of mobilizing the collective capacity and collective voice of these mechanisms so as to make a stronger impact at national, regional and at global level. In this context, participants emphasized the critical role that women machineries can play in revising the discourse and language used in reference to gender equality and women’s rights, to ensure that the gender discourse is communicated in non-alienating language and forms. The use of art, including graffiti, and infographics was mentioned as an effective and inclusive medium of communication to address broader segments of the public and to counter the claims that women’s rights are in opposition to men’s rights, or to Islam.

Women’s participation in political processes and decision-making was the subject of much reflection and deliberation with participants vying to provide country examples of measures taken by the state and civil society actors to promote women’s political participation in governance processes. In this context, women quotas and the access of women to the electoral process were noted as important measures to increase their representation in “significant decision-making spaces”. With regard to the quota, participants recognized that additional

measures are required so that it can translate into policy gains for women. Such measures would include enlisting the support of the media to promote the image of women as effective politicians, gender sensitization of electoral bodies to ensure that there is gender awareness in the planning and execution of elections, elections laws requiring political parties to ensure the meaningful participation of women in local as well as national elections, establishing a fund to provide financial support to women who want to run for office among other measures that will contribute to opening up spaces for women’s participation. The importance of communicating with electoral authorities and advocating for the presence of women in all levels of electoral administration to make sure that registration centres and polling stations are welcoming and safe for women was mentioned by discussants and participants in the context of improving women’s access to electoral processes. Finally, having an intersectional approach that builds on other social justice issues was also mentioned in the context of widening the potential for alliances with other human rights groups, male politicians, political parties and trade unions/syndicates. Political mapping to identify potential allies as well as opponents was emphasized as critical to the effectiveness of lobbying on behalf of women’s public participation.

During the session on women, peace and security, a number of critical issues were raised concerning the challenges that women groups face in advocating for UN Security Council Resolutions and in formulating and implementing National Action Plans. A main issue that was brought up by participants is the “disconnect” between the rhetoric and policies of the international community, including the UN and national governments, Examples include limited applications in peacekeeping operations, inconsistencies in donor policies and allocations, and the failure of peacekeeping missions to protect

women from gender-based violence (GBV). The absence of mechanisms for monitoring and reporting to the Security Council on the implementation of resolutions on women, peace and security was pointed out together with the need for additional measures to ensure stronger accountability of UN agencies in implementing the resolution, and addressing the non-compliance of governments to their international obligations. Participants recognized that, in certain countries, resolution 1325, among others, is providing leverage to civil society and women groups and has motivated governments to take steps toward promoting more inclusive processes of governance. However, in other countries, governments are less receptive to including women in peace processes; hence, participants called upon the international community to be more forward in advocating on behalf of women and in supporting the Ten-Point Manifesto on Women’s Rights and Security established in 2013 by the Arab Regional Network on Women, Peace and Security.

Two parallel sessions were organized to discuss Women’s Economic Empowerment, one of which was focused on the Macro-Economic and Social Policies required to better integrate women in the economy, and the other on the Entrepreneurship and Employment of Women. In both sessions, the disproportionate presence of women as workers and as entrepreneurs in the informal sector was emphasized as reflecting the gender blindness or the gender neutrality of macro-economic policies as well as the limited impact of national economic empowerment strategies on the integration of women in formal economies. Informal economies represent almost one third of economic activities in the region. The need to organize the informal sector and to establish unions to represent and protect the interests of workers was echoed by participants in

both sessions. Moreover, the lack of encouragement for women’s work was noted in both sessions, and accordingly, the need to engage men in the process of engendering economic policies. The discussion in the first session revolved around the kind of macro-economic policies that the Arab region needs, and the legislative and technical measures required to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in economic planning and budgeting processes, in employment policies and specifically those related to the industrial sector. Encouraging women’s entrepreneurship and employment in industrial growth sectors was stressed as being critical to the empowerment of women. The discussion in the second session was concerned with modalities of support to women’s entrepreneurship, and the organization of production processes to ensure that the potential of women’s economic activity is fully realized. Insights were provided into various initiatives that were being sponsored or piloted by governments, civil society organizations (CSOs), and the private sector within the framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Such initiatives include incubation of nascent businesses, business mentoring, the integration of entrepreneurship in the curricula of schools and universities, micro-finance, training and business development services (BDS). The important role that technology can play in advancing women’s economic empowerment was recognized in both sessions as being important, but especially in the second session during which mobiles and Information Communication Technology (ICT) solutions were mentioned in support women’s financial literacy and entrepreneurship, and as safe payment and money saving mechanisms.

The voice of disabled women was introduced during the second session in the discussion on women’s economic rights with participants noting the scarcity of opportunities available to disabled persons in the region, and recognizing that in addition to being a

human right, the empowerment of disabled women makes economic sense.

During the RT on Women and Islam the importance of reconciling the region’s Islamic values with the universal values embodied in the various international human and women’s rights declarations was emphasized; and reference made in this context, to the UN’s recognition of the role of religion in shaping the normative framework of the region including its politics, laws and gender relations. Participants denied the existence of a conflict between the principles of Islamic jurisprudence and the International Human Rights Treaties and Conventions, noting that the universality of women’s human rights, and the legitimacy of their demands for justice and fair representation have been recognized in the Al Azhar Document and the Alexandria Declaration on Women’s Rights in Islam. Concern was expressed regarding the rise of regressive religious discourses and interpretations, and the impact of these on the advancement of women’s rights. There was consensus about the need for a new paradigm for understanding Islam which would benefit from a gender-sensitive rereading of Islamic text and jurisprudence. Participants emphasized the utmost importance of engaging moderate scholars in the process of revising legislation, media content, as well education curricula of schools. Also deemed critical is the use of information technology to reach out and educate different constituencies, about gender issues while referring to moderate interpretations of the religious text and sharia (Islamic law).

The RT was very rich in terms of discussion and insights provided as to the work being done by different faith-based organizations, universities and groups in the region and globally, in the area of women’s rights and the reconciliation between universal values, religious faith and cultural integrity.

Conclusion

A key message coming out of the regional consultation was that women’s empowerment and full integration in the public sphere is intrinsic to resilience and critical to the sustainable development of the region. In that context, the importance of establishing national and regional mechanisms to monitor and expose gender-based discrimination and violence against women (VAW) was emphasized during the discussion and affirmed in the recommendations of participants. Accordingly, the establishment of observatories and national committees to document and expose violations of women’s rights was a foremost recommendation in most sessions. Mobilizing collectively and speaking in one voice was also stressed as an important strategy ensuring the effectiveness and credibility of women’s advocacy. Accordingly, supporting the implementation of the Cairo and Algiers Declarations was recommended as well as the establishment and consolidation of various national and regional platforms and networks, including the Arab Regional Network for Women, Peace and Security, the LAS Crisis Department, and the proposed Regional Media Platform for Women.

Forming alliances and working collaboratively with existing as well as non-traditional partners to advocate on behalf of women’s participation in the formulation of inclusive social and economic development agendas, was also suggested through various recommendations. The importance of considering technology and art as mediums of outreach and communication with marginalized communities and groups was emphasized. Finally, espousing a gender discourse that is non-alienating and respectful of the region’s culture was also affirmed by participants who called for engaging women and men in a gender-sensitive rereading of Islamic text and jurisprudence.

Introduction

The UNDP/RBAS organized a regional consultation in Amman, Jordan on April 5 and 6, 2014, to discuss its proposed initiative entitled “Fostering the Inclusive and Effective Participation of Women in Public Life” hereafter referred to as Mosharaka. The consultation was held back to back with a meeting of the LAS Crisis Department, a three project managed by RBAS, and funded by the EU. By doing so RBAS capitalized on the presence of LAS representatives as well as other stakeholders to provide critical insights into the consultation.

The specific objective of the regional consultation around Mosharaka was to solicit feedback from participants to inform the design of the project or Outcome Document. One Hundred and sixty participants from sixteen countries were invited to deliberate on the overall concept, the thematic areas of intervention, the partnership modalities, as well as the expected role of RBAS and the UNDP country offices. Accordingly, representatives from UNDP Headquarters, and Country Offices, UN Women and other UN Agencies, came together with women groups and activists, academics, donors, government and private sector operators to reflect upon the deficits in the public participation and citizenship rights of women in the Arab region, and to discuss the formulation of a three years project addressing the structural impediments to gender equality in the region and women’s empowerment. The two-day event was organized around a plenary and six thematic sessions covering the project outcome (“Faster progress is achieved in reducing gender inequality and promoting women’s empowerment”) and its four specific outputs:

Output 1 Evidence-informed measures accelerated to advance gender equality and women’s economic, social and political participation.

Output 2 Women, peace and security frameworks and network established to reinforce human security and promote equal access to justice.

Output 3 Knowledge generation fora, mentoring and networking platforms established to strengthen women’s agency in national institutions, professional associations, the media, civil society, and the private sector.

Output 4 Strategies formulated to ensure that women benefit from early recovery and rapid return to sustainable development pathways.

In addition, a round table on women and Islam was organized by RBAS in recognition of the religious discourse influence on defining gender roles in the Arab region and the importance of addressing fundamentalist interpretations of religion that legitimate gender discrimination and inequality. The session was chaired by Dr. Adel Abdellatif, Chief of the Regional Programme Division, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States.

The regional consultation was highly interactive, and participants were encouraged to provide oral and written recommendations, all of which are being carefully considered in the design of the project document. A key message coming out of the regional consultation was that women’s empowerment and full integration in the public sphere is intrinsic to resilience and critical to the sustainable development of the region. In that context, the importance of establishing national and regional mechanisms to monitor and expose gender-based discrimination and VAW was emphasized during the discussion and affirmed in the recommendations of participants. Accordingly, the establishment of observatories and national committees to document and expose violations of

women’s rights was a foremost recommendation in most sessions. Mobilizing collectively and speaking in one voice was also stressed as an important strategy ensuring the effectiveness and credibility of women’s advocacy. Accordingly, supporting the implementation of the Cairo and Algiers Declarations was recommended as well as the establishment and consolidation of various national and regional platforms and networks, including the Arab Regional Network for Women, Peace and Security, the LAS Crisis Department, and the proposed Regional Media Platform for Women. Forming alliances and working collaboratively with existing as well as non-traditional partners to advocate on behalf of women’s participation in the formulation of inclusive social and economic development agendas, was also suggested through various recommendations. The importance of considering technology and art as mediums of outreach and communication with marginalized communities and groups was emphasized. Finally, espousing a gender discourse that is non-alienating and respectful of the region’s culture was also affirmed by participants who called for engaging women and men in a gender-sensitive rereading of Islamic text and jurisprudence.

This report provides an overview of the highlights of the consultation and a summary of the main issues raised in each session, as well as the specific recommendations proffered by participants and RBAS.

The plenary

Opening speeches

The three opening speeches were right on target stating that despite a growing realization that gender equality is vital to the realization of democracy and human rights in the region, women’s rights are compromised at the expense of other rights and/or priorities. Women continue to lag behind men in all aspects of participation in public life and in most countries of the region they experience various forms of violence in the domestic as well as the public sphere, including physical assault, rape, and murder. Her Excellency Reem Abu Hassan, Minister of Social Development, Jordan stressed the importance of working together as women and men, capitalizing on differences, to achieve complementarity and to build synergies in all fields and sectors. Her Excellency concluded her opening speech, affirming that “this is the era of women”.

Quoting the 2010 MDG Summit Outcome Document, Ms. Sameera Maziad Altuwaijri UN Women Regional Director, talked about the importance of translating this vision into reality, hence the establishment in 2010 of UN Women as the UN organization dedicated to gender equality and women’s empowerment with regional presence and country offices all over the world. The UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, explained Ms. Al Tuwaijri, aspires to be the centre of knowledge providing evidence-based studies and technical expertise on women issues and women’s rights to other UN agencies, ESCWA, LAS as well as to other partners from government, civil society and the private sector. In that context, she announced that the UNDP would lead the development of a comprehensive report assessing women’s status in the region, with the contributions of other UN agencies.

Dr. Sima Bahous, UNDP Assistant Administrator and Director, Regional Bureau for Arab States reflected on the significance of the role played by women during the Arab uprisings, and their subsequent marginalization from constitutional and transitional, as well as from peace and security processes. Dr. Bahous talked about the persistent exclusion of women from decision-making spaces including governance institutions and the formal economy as holding back the region’s development. Accordingly, she emphasized the importance of a regional initiative that is knowledge-driven and bold so as to address the systemic gender inequality in all spheres, the political, economic and social. Dr. Bahous concluded her opening remarks by paying special tribute to women in conflict zones especially Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Libya, Syria and Iraq who are struggling to protect their families and maintain their self-identity and the integrity of their communities.

The preparatory session

Setting the stage for the consultation

The session began with showing footage of the film developed by the UNDP titled Changing the odds. Featuring a conversation between a male and a female embryo about the forms of discrimination that girls and women endure as soon as they are born and throughout their life, the film shows how gender norms and roles are socially constructed, and learned through socialization processes. The dialogue ends with the male embryo concurring that differentiating between gender roles, responsibilities, opportunities and privileges on the basis of sex, is deeply unfair.

The film was very well received by participants because of the simplicity and directness of the messages conveyed, and the session resumed with the key note speech of Dr. Adel Abdellatif, Chief of the Regional Programme Division, UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States, who set the stage for the proceedings of the consultation by reminiscing over the fact that while initial calls for women’s emancipation came from the region, beginning with Qassem Amin in Egypt in 1899 and Taha Haddad in Tunisia 30 years later, the 2002 Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) referred to three critical deficits: freedom, knowledge and women’s empowerment. He reflected on the slow progress of the gender equality agenda over the past decade, and the persistently low level of women’s participation in the public sphere, saying that leapfrogging this agenda and empowering women to take a more active role in public life is a development imperative for the region post - 2011. Accordingly, the UNDP regional project Mosharaka aims to support national efforts to build a new social order that women would help shape and benefit from. Dr.

Abdellatif explained that the outcome of the regional project and its four outputs, have been formulated to respond to the gaps articulated through various consultative processes, including the post - 2015 consultations, and that in this context, the project will support and encourage synergies among multiple stakeholders engaged in knowledge generation and dissemination, advocacy and networking, legislative and policy reform, women’s inclusion in conflict resolution and peace processes, and women’s political and economic participation. Mosharaka will also address the discourse on Islam and women because of the influence it has on legislation, and because advances in the women agenda in a number of countries of the region, especially where personal status laws are concerned, have been triggered and supported by moderate men of religion through progressive interpretations of the religious text.

Dr. Abdellatif concluded asking participants to focus their interventions over the course of the next days on how to address the challenges facing women in the Arab region.

The League of Arab States

Referring to the longstanding partnership between the LAS, the UNDP and UN Women, Ambassador Haifa Abu Ghazaleh, Assistant to the LAS Secretary General and Head of the Media Sector, gave a synoptic overview of the potential areas of collaboration with the media department, including operationalizing and linking “The Decade for Civil Society Declaration 2024 - 2014” and its action plans to the post - 2015 agenda, and establishing a “Regional Media Platform for Women” to communicate women’s concerns and aspirations. The LAS platinum anniversary and the online TV and radio to be launched in 2015

would be the opportune occasion to announce the establishment of this Regional Media Platform which would evolve to become a forum for discussion among peers, networking, and media advocacy on behalf of women.

Acknowledging the disproportionate suffering of women in conflict situations, and the importance of including them in peace processes, Ambassador Abu Ghazaleh talked about the second phase of the project “Strengthening Crisis Response Capacities of the League of Arab States” as providing a framework for cooperation between the LAS and organizations concerned with women, peace, and security. In that context, she mentioned the “Arab Network on Women, Peace and Security” established by the regional civil society organization Karama in 2013, in cooperation with the LAS, the UNDP, and UN Women. Women and men activists and leaders from fourteen Arab countries—including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tunisia and Yemen—came together and developed draft country-based national action plans (NAPs) on women, peace and security. Supporting the Network and the implementation of the NAPs will strengthen accountability on gender issues in conflict and post-conflict situations.

In conclusion, Ambassador Abu Ghazaleh explained that the LAS is in the process of revising its bylaws and programmes so that the organization is more effectively positioned to support democratic processes in the region. A Department for Civil Society has been established within the LAS and an envoy affiliated to the office of the secretary general has been appointed to interact and consult with civil society organizations about their needs and convey recommendations from civil society to Arab League Summits. The launching of a LAS Decade for Civil Society 2024-2014, with specific action plans, will be presented during the January 2015 LAS summit. The aim of the Decade is to raise awareness about

the role of civil society and it will include regional and national campaigns to encourage governments to develop action-based platforms for civil society. Ambassador Abu Ghazaleh ceded the floor to Mr. Tarek El-Nabulsi, Head of the Coordination and Follow-up Unit of the LAS Social Sector. Mr. Nabulsi talked about the 2014 Cairo Declaration, describing it as the new road map for women’s empowerment in the region, and announcing that it will be presented to the Arab Economic and Social Summit in Tunisia next January. The importance of the Cairo Declaration according to the speaker, resides in its emphasis on social justice, freedom, and affirmative actions to ensure inclusion of marginalized and vulnerable groups, the strengthening of women machineries and gender equality units, and the prevention of GBV. The Cairo Declaration calls for working together as women and men to eradicate all forms of gender-based discrimination and it also calls for the adoption of strategies and indicators to ensure that social justice is achieved through gender-sensitive planning and budgeting, and gender-sensitive public service delivery.

Mr. Nabulsi expressed his hope that the implementation of the Cairo Declaration and the realization of women’s agenda in the region will be supported within the context of the collaboration between UNDP, UN Women, the LAS and civil society through the implementation of the regional project Mosharaka.

Session 1

Legal and policy reforms to accelerate women’s rights in law and practice

Including a broad range of stakeholders in the dialogue on reform was emphasized in the formal presentation as being a main thrust of the regional project, together with the production of knowledge and data about national legislations and policy frameworks. Personal status laws and the use of a religious discourse to legitimate gender-based discrimination will constitute the starting point for the review of national legislations and policy frameworks from a gender perspective. The fact that discrimination begins within the private domestic sphere and is subsequently carried onto the public sphere was noted as being an important factor in opting to review personal status laws.

Participants were invited to reflect on how to address the following issues: firstly, the institutional bias against women within the judiciary and its perpetuation of discriminatory practices; secondly, the discrepancy between the international agreements and conventions that Arab countries have ratified, and the national legislative and policy frameworks; thirdly, the failure of national laws to penalize violence against women in the private sphere, as well as in the public sphere; and, lastly, the capacity requirements of relevant stakeholders so that they can act effectively on behalf of women.

The presentation generated interesting reactions and comments from the panel discussants about whether discrimination resided in the text of the law or in its implementation. While certain members

of the legal profession were of the opinion that discrimination occurs in the enforcement of the law, or lack thereof, rather than in the text of the law, others differed providing examples of how legislation in their countries discriminates against women. The nationality laws and the personal status laws were mentioned as constituting blatant examples of legislative discrimination in most countries of the region. The situation for women in countries such as Palestine and Lebanon is aggravated by the existence of multiple and conflicting legislative frameworks. For example, in Lebanon there are 18 sects and 15 personal status laws, which means that there is not only discrimination between men and women, but also between women and women.

Participants acknowledged that even in countries such as Algeria and Tunisia where judiciary reforms have taken place and contributed to increasing the agency of women, rural women remained disempowered due to the influence of patriarchal values as well as the prevalence of legal illiteracy.

An interesting issue that was brought to the fore by one of the discussants is the “unprecedented mobility of women” encouraged by the advances in health and education of the past years. This change in the situation of women requires an ideational shift that men especially are finding difficult to cope with. The difficulty is compounded by structural factors that affect men more than they affect women, such as unemployment and an increasing distance between

aspirations and actual entitlements. It is therefore critical that the impact of these structural factors in blocking the achievement of MDG 3 is given serious consideration and addressed at the policy as well as at the ideational and cultural levels.

The fragility of women’s legal gains and the threats and to the continuance of legal and judicial reform processes was also discussed during the session and participants agreed that the support of influential political blocks was required to ensure the viability and continuance of gender-sensitive legal and judicial reform processes. The case of Turkey and Tunisia were cited as pertinent examples. In Turkey, women groups lobbied for over 50 years for amendments to the civil code that would expand their rights in alignment with the constitution, but it is only in 2001 because of the EU accession process that it was reformed. The new civil code addresses women’s position within the family, defining marriage as a “union based on equal partnership”. The women’s movement mounted a nationwide campaign involving 64 women NGOs pushing to eliminate gender-based discrimination and increase the penalty for honour crimes. Honour killings and honour crimes are treated in the amended civil code as any other crime whereas sentences were previously reduced when the crime involved honour. In Tunisia, the example of the post-revolution draft constitution in which the wording of article 148 emphasized that Islam is the religion of the state, could have reintroduced polygamy, which has been prohibited under the Tunisian Code of Personal Status since 1957. However, due to the vigilance and efforts of women groups and civil society, the outcome of the 2014 constitutional vote maintained the status quo with regards to women’s rights. The discussion was lively with discussants and participants giving country examples of the various legal impediments and threats to women’s

empowerment as well as reforms undertaken in a number of countries to redress gender-based injustices, and to align legal frameworks with constitutional provisions. In addition numerous recommendations were provided for activities to be considered in the regional project outcome document. These activities, together with interventions initially proposed by RBAS, are listed in the section below

Recommendations

- Support evidence-based research in the region on Legislation and Public Policy.
- Advocate for a gender-responsive legal reform agenda.
- Support the mainstreaming of gender in national legislation, national public policies and plans.
- Support the establishment of a regional platform for women’s legal empowerment.
- Support legal awareness and literacy programmes within different national constituencies.
- Collaborate with the LAS media department and social affairs department in advocating to include women’s legal empowerment in the post - 2015 agenda.
- Collaborate with the LAS media department in implementing the Cairo Declaration under the title of the development Agenda of Arab women beyond 2015: Opportunities and Challenges.
- Support the establishment of a Regional Judiciary Observatory and national committees to monitor discriminatory laws.
- Support the gender sensitization and capacity development of the Judiciary and Law enforcement officials with regard to the implementation of the CEDAW and international conventions within national legal frameworks.
- Provide technical, policy and advocacy support in relation to constitutions, electoral law, laws on gender equality, family, domestic violence, property, land, inheritance, and citizenship.
- Support the establishment of a General Attorney’s office at Regional Level.
- Convene international conferences addressing best practice gender-sensitive legal frameworks.
- Support analyses of legal systems from the perspective of the sociology of law.
- Support the capacitation of women in the judiciary.
- Support the documentation of best practice

gender-sensitive legislation.

- Engage the religious establishment in raising awareness of women’s rights and men’s obligations towards women.
- Conduct analyses at national level to identify actual or potential political blocks that may foster resolutions/legal reforms in favour of women’s rights.

Session 2

Gender equality institutions and machineries

The presentation on gender equality institutions and machineries reviewed the two types of national mechanisms existing in the Arab region, with which the UNDP is working. Leading national mechanisms such as autonomous ministries, national commissions and higher councils are mandated to promote gender equality and mainstream gender perspectives on vertical and horizontal levels, guide legal and policy reform as well as the formulation of gender-sensitive strategies and the mainstreaming of women’s issues in the country’s national plans. Secondary national mechanisms such as gender units, consultative councils, networks, forums, intra-ministerial coordinating committees usually support leading mechanisms.

The presenter emphasized the focus of the regional project on South-South learning and exchange of experience between North and South, the collection of sex-disaggregated data, and the support to organizations/groups working on the ground to expand their outreach in promotion of women’s advancement. Participants were invited to identify additional interventions and messages required to establish a popular base of support for women.

The tendency of women groups to talk to each other using language that distances them from the rest of society and is an obstacle to forming strategic alliances among constituencies that are critical to advancing the women agenda was a topic that generated a heated discussion among participants. Some agreed that the gender discourse was elitist, while others were less critical of the performance and achievements of the women’s movement, arguing

that women are held back by lacking political will, and unresponsive governments, rather than by an elitist gender discourse or by the failure of women groups to form coalitions. The prevailing consensus among participants, regardless of their point of view, was that it is important to communicate the gender discourse in non-alienating language and forms. The use of art, including graffiti, and infographics was mentioned as an effective and inclusive medium of communication. In the same context; the importance of mobilizing regionally to address “the invisible social norms” that hold gender inequality in place was advanced; and gender equality institutions and machineries were urged to tap on social media and the entertainment industry to reach out with their gender equality messages to young people and to the broader public.

The successive Arab regimes’ self-serving portrayal of women’s rights as anathema to and in opposition to men’s rights was acknowledged by participants as contributing to the alienation of large segments of society. Once again, participants emphasized the critical role of women machineries in revising the discourse and language used in reference to gender equality and women’s rights. The example of Bahrain was cited to confirm the importance of communication and culturally sensitive terminology. In 2008, when the term gender equality was first used, it was widely rejected. Accordingly, women activists pursued their efforts on behalf of women, using less threatening terminology such as women needs. Currently, equal opportunity units are being established in all Bahraini ministries, and the national budget is being engendered.

Participants noted that political will is a critical factor in enabling change and in advancing the women agenda. In the case of Bahrain, the wife of the ruler is heading the High Council for Women. Similarly, in Egypt, the National Council for Women (NCW), under the leadership of Suzanne Mubarak, wife of the deposed president, has had significant achievements in term of the legislations enacted to protect and advance women’s rights. In Algeria the law stipulates a 30 per cent representation of women in parliament. Political parties who present lists that do not include women are deprived from the state financial assistance. In this context, participants were of the opinion that agreeing on a collective norm by which governments and political parties can be held accountable to their gender commitments would be an important step toward ensuring that women’s rights are not being sidelined.

There was much deliberation around the efficacy and sustainability of the national machineries in the region, with participants agreeing that a revision of the mandate of institutional mechanisms and their affiliation was required. The inadequate positioning and scarce financial and human resources, as well as lacking coordination between various national mechanisms were mentioned as limiting the influence of the women’s movement on policy as well as its credibility on the national and global scales. In Kuwait the women committees established in the parliament as well as in most ministries work in isolation from each other, refusing to include male members within their organizations. As a consequence these committees have not had any influence on policy. In Iraq, the success of the Ministry of State for Women Affairs in implementing its strategy for women’s advancement is diminished by the lack of coordination between the various equal opportunity units established in parliaments, ministries and governorates. Similarly, in Palestine, there is unnecessary duplication of efforts due to

the lack of coordination among existing gender mechanisms. Participants agreed on the importance of mobilizing the collective capacity and collective voice of these mechanisms so as to make a stronger impact both at national and at global level.

Also, in the context of the effectiveness and sustainability of women machineries, participants agreed on the importance of mobilizing the collective capacity and collective voice of these mechanisms to develop and present joint statements at global meetings, including the Commission for the Status of Women (CSW), so as to make a stronger impact both at national and at global level.

The interventions of the panel discussants and their sharing of experiences brought to the fore the issue of the scattering of lessons learned from the experiences of women groups and activists, and the need to consolidate such knowledge into think tanks, data banks, and e-networks that can be used to inform advocacy and policy making. Participants agreed that this was an area where the regional project can add significant value.

Recommendations

- Lobby governments to establish and empower women machineries.
- Advocate for the inclusion of men in national women machineries.
- Support coordination among national machineries and civil society organizations.
- Engage the media in educating the public about the role and added value of having an empowered women’s machinery.
- Provide capacity building and technical assistance to strengthen existing national machineries
- Support the establishment of women’s rights observatories.
- Launch a Regional Advocacy and Awareness Campaign using simple language and art forms to address the cultural obstacles and misconceptions that contribute to women’s unequal access to their rights.
- Support the Learning Exchange events through regional conferences and e-networks.
- Support the establishment of think tanks and data banks to consolidate knowledge and lessons learned about women machineries and other gender-related institutional mechanisms.
- Support alliances between gender equality advocates and existing and new forces.
- Identify gaps in gender-sensitive data and key entry points for improvements, working through the global knowledge network/community.
- Support collective capacity through joint action and voice, e.g. joint statements.
- Support alliance building activities and innovative methods of outreach to potential national, regional, and international partners to advance the women agenda.

Session 3

Women’s participation in political processes and decision-making

The focus of the presentation in the session on women’s participation in political processes and decision-making was on proposed actions to advance women’s presence in “significant spaces” especially in countries of the region where progress continues to lag and where women are marginally represented in various branches of governance including the executive branch, public administration and civil society. The presenter urged women to elevate their aspirations for representation in decision-making positions from the 30 percent target to 50 percent, saying that in countries where quotas and positive actions have been adopted, women have ascended to decision-making positions. Algeria and Tunisia are cases in point. However, these measures need to be complemented with a host of other initiatives because women’s political gains can disappear if they are not vigilant and if there is no political will to ensure women’s representation in governance processes.

The presenter mentioned the array of support measures that the regional programme could provide to advance women’s participation in decision-making, including actions to open up spaces for women in the leadership structures of political parties, the strengthening of women machineries, the establishment of networking platforms and forums, mentoring programmes, actions to galvanize the advocacy and lobbying efforts of civil society and women groups. The regional programme will also support data collection and evidence-based

research on the obstacles facing women in the public sphere, as well as their successes.

A number of methodological and conceptual issues were raised during the ensuing discussion concerning the premises upon which women groups base their activism. In this context, participants emphasized the need for more research and better analyses of the environment in which women and men interact, coexist or compete. It was pointed out that much of the research considers women as a problem and/or a solution, and foregoes looking at what it means to be a woman and/or a man working in a hostile environment. Moreover, the claim that the domain of politics does not belong to women or that society is unwilling to accept the leadership of women has been disproved time and again by evidence on the ground. The number of women who voted in Egypt during the referendum on the constitution indicates that the domain of politics is also that of women.

Making the case for political gender quotas, participants agreed that the rules of the political process are an obstacle to women’s political participation, and that these rules have been established by men without consideration for the needs of women and the resources available to them. Hence, participants also recommended the establishment of a fund to provide financial support to women who want to run for office.

A discussion of the political quota ensued, with participants providing country examples of how the institution of such measures has increased women’s

presence in national parliaments. The representative of the Youth Palestinian Legislative Council, Palestine, explained that it is a UNDP assisted initiative aiming to encourage the participation of youth in politics. She mentioned that 29,000 young women and men had participated in the elections of the Council, with women obtaining 45 of 132 seats based on a quota system. Comparing the result of these elections with various other elections, shows that women’s representation in Palestinian politics is consistently commensurate with the institution of quotas. The representative from Algeria talked about the various legislative measures and quotas that were put in place to guarantee and sustain women’s presence in the public sphere, and in this context she referred to the recommendations of the Algiers Declaration on the realization of gender equality, including the establishment of an International Network of Women Parliamentarians to reinforce women’s parliamentary diplomacy. In Jordan, various measures have been instituted to ensure women’s integration in the political processes, including quotas and the establishment of the Jordanian National Commission for Women, the objective of which is to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and to promote their effective and equal participation in all political, economic, social and cultural arenas.

While, agreeing that quotas did enhance women’s political representation; nevertheless, a note of caution was raised concerning the dependency on gender quotas to translate into policy gains for women and to address the issue of unequal power relations. Participants noted that even when quotas are instituted, women’s influence remains minimal. Additional measures are needed such as enlisting the support of the media to promote the image of women as effective politicians, gender sensitization of electoral bodies to ensure that there is gender awareness in the planning and execution of elections, elections laws requiring political parties to ensure

the meaningful participation of women in local as well as national elections, among other measures that reflect the political will to open up spaces for women’s participation.

The critical issue of women’s access to the electoral process primarily as voters, but also in the administration of the elections, was extensively discussed, with participants agreeing on the importance of working with electoral authorities to make sure that registration centres and polling stations are more welcoming and safe for women to come to. In this context, improving the presence of women in all levels of electoral administration would ensure that everyday realities of women’s life are taken into account in the development of electoral procedures and electoral processes.

Participants talked about widening the potential for alliances by working with women and men across other social movements that advocate social justice and equality. They agreed on the added value of having an intersectional approach that builds on other social justice issues, so it is not just the voice of women that is being heard, rather that of collective of institutions and groups. The consensus among participants was that it is critical for women’s movements to establish spaces of dialogue encouraging communication and exchange between women groups and male politicians, political parties and trade unions/syndicates. Reference was made to the work of the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) in Latin America and East Europe. The representative from IDEA, talked about the positive changes in the attitude of the leadership of male-dominated political parties, trade unions and syndicates towards women’s political participation that have resulted from IDEA’s gender sensitization activities as well as encouraging more conducive communication and exchange between these leaders and the women committees in these organizations.

The session was lively, with discussants and participants vying to provide country examples of measures taken by the state and civil society actors to promote women’s political participation in governance processes. Numerous recommendations were provided about actions required to ensure the sustainability of women’s political gains.

Recommendations

- Advocate for women’s membership in political parties, syndicates and trade unions.
 - Support women’s access to technical capacities needed to run effectively in elections at local and municipal level as well as at the central level.
 - Support the establishment of a fund to provide financial support to women who want to run for office.
 - Support trainings of female elected officials and potential female candidates from across the region to build capacity and opportunities for collective action.
 - Support political mentorship programmes and linkages between female politicians and female unionists.
 - Advocate for the institution of quotas as well as other affirmative actions to promote women’s participation in the public sphere.
 - Support the implementation of the recommendations of the Algiers Declaration, including the establishment of an International Network of Women Parliamentarians.
 - Advocate for women’s access to the electoral process, primarily as voters, but also in the administration of elections.
 - Support the capacitation of electoral bodies and commissions to mainstream gender in elections through trainings and knowledge products.
 - Establish spaces of dialogue encouraging communication and exchange between women groups and the male leadership of political parties and trade unions/syndicates.
 - Support the documentation of electoral violence against women as well as the development of practical tools and strategies for prevention.
 - Support data collection and evidence-based research on the obstacles facing women in the public sphere, as well as their successes.
- Support the establishment of a strong knowledge base that explains the different patterns of women’s electoral participation in the Arab States. This will require some research as well as active assessment of electoral arrangements in each country.
 - Support the development of women leadership programmes in local councils, syndicates and trade unions

Session 4 Women, peace and security

The session on women, peace and security was very interactive with short commentaries from the activists in the panel about the relevance of resolution 1325 to the region and the challenges they faced in advocating for its implementation in their respective countries.

The continued exclusion of women from the transition and peace processes in the region, despite the obvious contextual relevance of their contributions, was signified in introduction to the session together with the steps taken so far by the Arab Regional Network on Women, Peace, and Security, launched in October 2013, by Karama and the UNDP. A meeting on Gender in Conflict and Emergency was jointly organized by the LAS, the EU in cooperation with the UNDP in Amman, Jordan during 3-1 April 2014, the output of which was a Ten-Point Manifesto urging the international community to support the role of women as agents of change in peace building rather than addressing them as victims. They also called for gender perspectives, which consider the experience of women in times of conflict and emergency, to be adopted and mainstreamed in all peace building efforts and initiatives. In response, the regional project Mosharaka has included women, peace and security, and the formulation of strategies to ensure that women benefit from early recovery and rapid return to sustainable development pathways as two of four outputs.

Following the introductions of Karama and the UNDP, panellists from Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Somalia, Morocco and Jordan talked about the relevance of resolution 1325 to their respective countries and the actions taken by women groups

and civil society to develop NAPs ensuring the representation of women in peace processes and their protection from violence during times of conflict. A main issue that was raised by a number of panellists was the “disconnect” between the rhetoric and policies of the International community including the UN and national governments. Examples include limited applications in peacekeeping operations, and inconsistencies in donor policies and allocations. The failure of peacekeeping missions to protect women from GBV in Libya, Iraq and Syria was also mentioned by representatives from these countries. The representative from Syria talked about the suspension of her country from the LAS and the economic sanctions that were imposed, saying that it made women and the opposition poorer but did not have any effect on the repressive regime and its supporters. The representative from Libya explained that to mitigate women’s under-representation in the transitional and peace negotiation processes, civil society organizations have been focusing on gender mainstreaming in disarmament demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of militias as well as on multi layered inclusive dialogue. The absence of mechanisms for monitoring and reporting to the Security Council (SC) on the implementation of resolution 1325 on women, peace and security was mentioned by the representative from Somalia who said that the report of the Secretary General to the SC is not enough, and that additional measures were needed to force governments to fulfil their international obligations. The representative from Lebanon talked about the government’s inattention to the topic of women, peace and security, and how

it befall on civil society organizations to address the many problems facing women in a country rife with sectarian conflict, and where there is an unchecked influx of refugees from Syria.

Other panellists talked about the leverage that resolution 1325 is providing to civil society and women groups. The Syrian Women Charter calling for peace and security for women in Syria was released by women groups and a national committee was established to formulate the 1325 NAP. In parallel, the Syrian government organized a meeting for women during which they acknowledged resolution 1325, and called for a committee to work on peace and security for women in Syria. We consider this to be a big achievement said the panellist from Syria, and we intend to present them with our NAP to serve as a guideline for their work on the NAP. In Yemen, during the transition, resolution 1325 enabled women to negotiate for an initial and follow up meetings with the UN Special Envoy and to put pressure on the ruling authorities to issue a decree stipulating a minimum of 30 per cent representation of women in all aspects of governance, as well as forbidding the marriage of girls before the age of 18 years. In Jordan, the resolution was instrumental in promoting women’s participation and representation in Parliament as well as in the Judiciary, and in the executive branch of government. Finally, the representative from Morocco explained that her country is host to refugees from Syria and the sub-Saharan, and that this situation entails many problems for women including GBV and sexual harassment and rape. As a consequence civil society organizations are calling for the implementation of resolution 1325, and there are ongoing consultations about the formulation of a NAP.

The interventions from the panellists were impassioned, providing the audience with a panorama of the efforts

and challenges facing women activists in various conflict settings. The moderator asked each of the discussants to specify the one most critical challenge they faced with respect to resolution 1325.

The challenges listed were as follows:

- Lebanon:** Sectarianism and lack of government accountability
- Yemen:** The masculine culture and the belief that war and peace issues are male concerns
- Syria:** The ignorance and or obliviousness of the international community as to the condition of women inside the country
- Palestine:** Getting the civil society and the public sector to work together
- Jordan:** The traditional fundamentalist view on gender roles
- Morocco:** Insufficient commitment and support from the international community to the Arab Network for Women, Peace and Security
- Libya:** The international community does not have the will to help Libya with issues such as demilitarization, demobilization, and reintegration
- Somalia:** There is no unified vision within the international community on how to engage civil society and women groups in the reform of the security sector

Recommendations

- Promote the access of women in conflict and post-conflict settings to international Criminal Tribunals.
- Call for stronger accountability of UN agencies in implementing women peace and security resolution 1325.
- Call on the Security Council to set up a body to monitor the implementation of resolution 1325.
- Support the development, implementation and enforcement of national action plans (NAPs) to implement the requirements of UN SCRs 1325,1820,1888,1889, and 2122 on women, peace and security.
- Advocate for the engagement of women in the development of the NAPs.
- Advocate for the ratification and implementation of the Geneva conventions on protecting women from rape.
- Call on the CEDAW committee to activate its role in Palestine and schedule field visits to follow up on State commitments.
- Call on peacekeeping missions to assess human rights violations and abuses of women in conflict and post-conflict situations (as provided for in the last UNSC resolution on Women, peace and security).
- Support Governments in the region to identify and address legislative gaps in national laws that impede the application of UN security resolutions.
- Support developing the technical capacity of field personnel on implementing the UN resolution 1325.
- Support developing the capacity of women organizations and networks to provide gendered perspectives to peace building, security sector reform, and justice sector reform.
- Call for demilitarization and disarmament and support the engagement of women, youth and civil society in demilitarization programmes.
- Support the mainstreaming of gender in the operations of the Arab League’s Crisis Room
- Mainstream Human Rights in the curricula of peacekeeping missions.
- Support national efforts to review and revise educational curricula from gender-sensitive and human rights perspective so that they promote peace and non-violence.
- Support awareness raising programmes that elevate the dialogue on security from the focus on militarization and policing to a broader human development agenda.
- Support information generation and exchange activities that promote a unified vision on gender equality, and women, peace and security.
- Advocate for the adoption of gender-sensitive policies and national strategies in conflict and post-conflict settings.
- Support consultations around a media code of conduct that is sensitive to gender, peace, and security.
- Support the development a Regional Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security with Government, Civil Society and the League of Arab States.
- Support the establishment of an observatory for “Arab Women in Armed Conflicts and Humanitarian Crises”.
- Promote and Support the Network for Arab Women, Peace and Security.
- Support the establishment of relief and crisis management agency/mechanisms to support women and children affected by wars and humanitarian crises.
- Support economic integration efforts that reflect market opportunities for women and men of displaced population groups, as well as for the host communities so as to promote acceptance of displaced groups in general and women specifically.

- Support social cohesion building activities in host communities in which girls and women work on a set of tasks together, learning leadership and negotiation skills, and team work.
- Support skills training of women and girls in conflict settings as well as in host communities.
- Support developing the capacity of a regional pool of women trainers on conflict mediation, conflict and development analysis, and GBV prevention.
- Support gender sensitization trainings for security, relief and border management personnel.
- Support the establishment of early warning systems which incorporate the gender perspective to prevent the escalation of gender-based violence and other violations of women’s rights.
- Support evidence-based research and data collection activities about the violation of women’s human rights in crisis settings.
- Engender, adapt and Arabize available security sector reform tool kits.
- Advocate for the participation of women in fact-finding missions, expert assessment teams, consultations, and committees pertaining to peace building, reconciliation and reconstruction.
- Support the organization of media campaigns and community-based events, to raise awareness of the causes and consequences of all forms of violence against women.

Session 5

Women economic empowerment – Macro economic policies and social constraints

The presentation was about the neo liberal economic policies and the transformed public policy environment and its negative impact on women. It focused on the need for interventions to establish vibrant innovative economies that can deliver sustainable growth, with the participation of women on equal basis. Such interventions include legislative reforms, addressing skills deficits to respond to market demand, developing gender-responsive social protection and public service delivery programmes, and conducting public awareness and education campaigns about the role and contribution of women in various economic sectors.

Reviewing the economic status of women in the Arab region and the slow progress achieved in terms of their economic integration, the presentation stressed the importance of integrating gender analyses and gender perspectives into economic planning policy and budgeting processes so as to make economic policies and poverty reduction strategies more gender-equitable and evidence-based. Reference was made to a new Gender and Economic Policy Management Initiative (GEMPI) launched by the UNDP as a promising programme in Africa, to be eventually adapted and replicated in the Arab region. The GEMPI programme establishes a cadre of policy makers able to integrate gender equity in national and sub-national planning and it enhances gender awareness among civil servants and policy makers.

A number of questions were raised concerning the kind of macro-economic policies that the Arab region

needs and the legislative and technical measures required to ensure that gender is mainstreamed in economic planning policy and budgeting processes, how to mobilize men in the process of engendering economic policy, and the role of UN organizations in supporting such processes.

The ensuing interventions revolved around the status of women's economic participation in various countries of the region, and the measures taken by government to promote a better integration of women in the economy. In Algeria, until the 1990's women were primarily employed in the public sector; however, ten years later, due to the encouraging strategies adopted by the state to promote youth employment and small and medium enterprise (SME) growth, there was a noticeable shift with women's presence visible in the private sector and in various industries. The Jordanian representative explained that women's economic participation and opportunity in her country was one of the lowest in the world, with women's participation ranking 133 out of 136 countries according to the Global Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum. This made the government more attentive to the issue of women's employment in the National Employment Strategy. An analysis of the reasons why Jordanian women shy from formal employment revealed the following: unequal pay for same work and sometimes refusal to pay women minimum wage; the absence of nurseries; the absence of safe public transport; and, of course the traditional culture

which views the role of women as predominantly within the household. Of all these factors, the wage gap was the most blatantly obvious. Accordingly, the National Committee for Pay Equity (NCPE) was established in 2011, based on the recommendations of the International Labour Organization (ILO). The Committee headed by the Secretary General of the Ministry of Labour and the Secretary General of the National Commission for Women, has been decreed as permanent. The NCPE has conducted a comprehensive legal review that recommended legal amendments to promote equal remuneration for all workers in line with international standards, including the ILO's Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100). The Committee also conducted research on how pay equity commissions in different countries operate with the view to learn from good practices and reflect on the best options for Jordan. The Committee has also produced research on pay discrimination in private schools revealing the stark gender pay gap in Jordan and concluding that the country's current legislative framework does not encourage women's labour participation, nor does it promote equality in the workplace. The parliament and the media have been on board cooperating with the Committee in discussing legal provisions to encourage women's work and in presenting such work to the public as a family right rather than as a women specific right.

The informality of women's work was discussed in the context of women's economic empowerment, with participants agreeing that it is important to recognize the significant role played by this economy in providing employment and income to women and youth in stressed or developing economies because of its low entry requirements; also, that informal sector activities include profitable enterprises in the industrial and service sectors. Informal economies represent almost one third of economic activities

in the region. Youth and especially women are disproportionately represented in the informal economies of most countries in the region, and although visible in all sectors, women's informality is predominantly within the agricultural sector where they often work as unpaid labour. Participants noted that informal work, especially women's, is unprotected and unregulated. Examples were cited of Egypt and Jordan where approximately 40 and 44 per cent respectively of the female labour force is informal working without any social or health coverage. Hence the consensus was that given the critical role played by the informal economy, it is important that efforts are made to organize it and to establish unions to represent and protect the interest of workers.

The minimal impact that national economic empowerment strategies have had on the integration of women in formal economies was also noted by participants. Limited access and control over productive assets and financial resources, including inheritance, were mentioned as obstacles. The discrepancy between urban and rural women in educational levels, training and employment opportunities and other available services were also mentioned as detracting from the effectiveness of national economic empowerment strategies. Participants recognized that rural women are also more disadvantaged than urban women because they are more constrained by traditions and culture that do not encourage women's economic role.

The lack of encouragement for women's work was echoed by a number of participants who emphasized that women's economic role is only encouraged when the household needs her income. In addition, participants noted that the additional income does not provide women with a more equal status at home, as they are still expected to perform what

is considered their primary duty which is caring for the household’s domestic needs. So in referring to women’s work or economic activity as empowering, participants cautioned against imposing on women additional burdens, saying that women’s economic empowerment must be viewed and approached holistically, with interventions addressing legislation, policy and culture.

Encouraging women’s participation in higher added value sectors mainly industry was emphasized as critical to women’s economic empowerment.

Recommendations

- Support the establishment of an Observatory on Women and employment.
- Support the Mainstreaming of Gender in Research and in Statistics and identify key entry points for improvements in generating gender-sensitive research and data to support policy making.
- Advocate for the systematic inclusion of informal work/businesses in labour and enterprise surveys.
- Support evidence-based research on the differences between men and women in working conditions and salaries.
- Support the establishment of gender-based business incubators to facilitate the start-up of women-owned businesses in specific high value added sectors of the economy.
- Support the establishment of infrastructure and services required for women to manage their multiple roles.
- Promote women’s participation in higher added value sectors of the economy.
- Support the design and testing of programmes that use renewable resources such as solar energy, harvesting non-timber forest products, and environmentally sustainable practices such as improved water management and replanting timber plots.
- Support a regional advocacy campaign to promote women’s right to property and inheritance.
- Raise the awareness of policymakers on the importance of gender equality and women leadership in poverty alleviation strategies.
- Support legislative reform and capacity building measures to ensure pay equity and decent work conditions for women.
- Support advocacy on behalf of a quota for women in public and private businesses
- Complement the analysis of quantitative data on women’s economic participation and contribution

with strong qualitative data.

- Support a review of policies and procedures on cooperatives and advocate for women’s leadership and equal representation on their boards.

Session 6

Women’s economic empowerment: employment and entrepreneurship

The presentation compared the state of women’s entrepreneurship in the Arab region with the situation in OECD countries, showing that in OECD countries, where gender issues are less pronounced, women-owned and managed enterprises are growing at a faster pace than those of men, contributing significantly to employment generation, and development beyond enterprise growth and turnover numbers. A WB survey of firms in ten countries of the MENA region reveals that only 15 percent belonged to women, and that there were differentials between men and women in access to financial and non-financial services, as well as gaps in women’s legal capacity and property rights, resulting in a significantly low growth of women businesses. Also that there is an over-concentration of women-owned businesses in unregistered informal and lower added value sectors of the region’s economy, with more women than men starting a business out of necessity than out of entrepreneurial inclination.

The importance of encouraging women’s entrepreneurship was emphasized by discussants and participants because of the sense of self-worth that work provides, as well as the added value to women’s families and to the economy. Participants discussed the modalities of support to women’s entrepreneurship, and the organization of production processes to ensure that the potential of women’s economic activity is fully realized. The example of the self-help groups and group saving mechanisms in India and Nepal were cited as having helped many women start and grow businesses producing goods

for the local market as well as the export market.

The representative from India suggested focusing on sectors and subsectors where women have natural skills, such as small scale cultivation, food processing, and crafts and textiles. The crafts and textiles sector is especially suited to the life condition of women allowing them to work a few hours and make a decent living, while it is also relevant to countries that want to promote tourism as a source of economic revenue.

Insights were provided into various initiatives that were being sponsored or piloted by governments, CSOs, and the private sector within the framework of CSR. Such initiatives include incubation of nascent businesses, business mentoring, the integration of entrepreneurship in the curricula of schools and universities, micro-finance, training and BDS.

The important role that technology can play in advancing women’s entrepreneurship was recognized by participants as being an area that the regional project Mosharaka can support. Mobiles and ICT solutions for example, can support women’s financial literacy and entrepreneurship, as well as provide safe payment and money-saving mechanisms for women entrepreneurs.

Also discussed were the various ways to address the problems of women in the informal economy. Echoing the need to organize the sector and to

provide tailored assistance, participants emphasized the importance of gathering country-specific data and conducting research so as to understand the difference between the constraints and needs of poor women in countries that have a lower GDP like Egypt Jordan and Morocco and those of women in countries that boast a high GDP such as Saudi Arabia Kuwait Oman and Qatar.

Participants agreed on the importance of building bridges with the private sector and tapping on the opportunities it provides through CSR programmes. In this context, reference was made to the assistance extended by the Talal Abu Ghazaleh Organization (TAG-Org) to small women-owned enterprises in the informal sector of Jordan, providing them with finance and management training.

The voice of disabled women was introduced in the discussion on women’s economic rights with participants noting the scarcity of opportunities available to disabled persons in the region, and recognizing that, in addition to being a human right, the empowerment of disabled women makes economic sense.

Establishing platforms for dialogue and being on the lookout for synergies between the various programmes supporting women economic empowerment and entrepreneurship was echoed by discussants and participants. The representative from Istanbul Turkey talked about his Centre’s focus on the bottom of the pyramid markets in which women appropriate the largest share. Getting businesses to provide for the bottom of the pyramid, requires innovation and knowledge that the Centre is willing to share with NGOs and other organizations in the region. The representative from the Microfinance Network for the Arab Region, Sanabel Network, Jordan, talked about the services that Sanabel

provides to its member MFIs including capacity building and training, research, and the opportunity through its annual conferences to network and exchange knowledge about the sector. Sanabel represents approximately 100 institutions in twelve Arab Countries who currently serve over four million clients or beneficiaries, 75 per cent of which are women and 35 per cent youth.

Recommendations

- Establish the Voices of Business Women Platform as a space for businesswomen to meet, exchange information, and establish mentoring relationships and marketing linkages.
- Support a women’s leadership programme in the region for young entrepreneurs and professionals – could be linked to an award program for organizations and linked/announced at Sanabel Conference in September 2014.
- Support the documentation of success stories and case studies of women entrepreneurs from across the Arab region.
- Support women entrepreneurs in the areas where they excel, example: small scale cultivation, food processing and packaging, crafts and textiles.
- Support a mapping of existing skills in the region and develop programmes to further develop these skills.
- Conduct a regional awareness campaign on the importance of women’s entrepreneurship in building strong economies, and in improving living conditions for their families.
- Support the integration of entrepreneurship in schools and universities.
- Support the development of micro- and small enterprises especially in creative industries through facilitating access to finance or productive asset transfer programmes.
- Support the development and use of innovative technologies including safe payment and money saving mechanisms for women who want to start a business, using ICT solutions, online marketing, and mobile phones.
- Support the development and provision of gender-sensitive business development services (BDS) to improve the financial viability and sustainability of start-up and existing enterprises. This would include mentoring services as well as the establishment of linkages to other market actors – suppliers, wholesalers, transporters, and regional markets.
- Endorse and support training plan for girls and women with special needs and exchange experiences from other countries in this area
- Advocate for the implementation of the general principles of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities especially, provisions requiring states parties to promote opportunities for self-employment, entrepreneurship, the development of cooperatives and starting one’s own business.
- Support programmes that generate emergency jobs and environmentally sustainable livelihoods opportunities for women (cash for work, micro-enterprises, etc.).
- Support the establishment of a database of private sector companies, funding agencies, organizations providing business development services to women entrepreneurs.
- Build bridges with the private sector for social investment funding, incubation and venture capital.
- Promote Universal Standards for Social Performance based on the SMART campaign initiative and its Client Protection Principles (specific steps include sensitization workshops, and certification of assessors and trainers in the Arab region).
- Support rural women in creating and managing local initiatives to encourage creativity and innovation.
- Support financial literacy and financial education to ensure that women understand their rights and responsibilities.
- Support capacity building (training and mentoring) through e-learning platforms in Arabic.

Round table on women and Islam

The purpose of the round table was to examine the status of women in the region and gender relations from the perspective of Islam and within the framework of moderate interpretations of the religious text and Islamic jurisprudence. The importance of reconciling the region’s Islamic values with the universal values embodied in the various international human and women’s rights declarations was emphasized; and reference made, in this context, to the UN’s recognition of the role of religion in shaping the normative framework of the region including its politics, laws and gender relations. Participants denied the existence of a conflict between the principles of Islamic jurisprudence and the international human rights treaties and conventions, noting that the universality of women’s human rights, and the legitimacy of their demands for justice and fair representation have been recognized in the Al Azhar Document and the Alexandria Declaration on Women’s Rights in Islam. Concern was expressed regarding the rise of regressive religious discourses and interpretations, and the impact of these on the advancement of women’s rights. There was consensus about the need for a new paradigm for understanding Islam which would benefit from a gender-sensitive rereading of Islamic text and jurisprudence.

The representative of the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) Independent Permanent Human Rights Commission, talked about the OIC ten-year program of actions as highlighting the advancement of Muslim women in economic, cultural, social and political fields and protecting women against all forms of violence and discrimination. She mentioned that the OIC is currently undertaking a critical study on

national legislations with marriage and family as entry points to promote women’s rights in the member states. She talked about the reluctance of a number of member states in the OIC to adopt the concept of gender equality, preferring instead that of women’s empowerment which is believed to be in line with the sharia. Therefore an important task is to come up with a progressive understanding of the sharia principles that can be put in practice. She referred to the work of the Centre of Women’s Studies of the State University in Tunisia with progressive Islamic scholars and judges, to undertake reform from within and to counter the backlash of religious conservative forces. One of the outcomes of this project is that the judges are now confident enough to review laws and articles that they had previously rejected on the grounds that they were not in line with the sharia, including the human rights law proposed in 1999, the domestic violence act proposed in 2004 and the child protection law of 2003, among others.

Participants emphasized the utmost importance of engaging moderate scholars in the process of revising legislation, media content, as well as education curricula of schools. Also deemed critical is the use of information technology to reach out to and educate different constituencies, about gender issues while referring to moderate interpretations of the religious text and sharia. The representative from Kuwait talked about the projects of the Ministry of Religious Endowments (Awqaf) using technology extensively to develop literacy among women, improving the skills and awareness of teachers in dealing with gender issues and providing youth, both women and men with leadership and gender sensitization skills, referring all through to moderate

interpretations of the religious text and sharia.

The RT was very rich in terms of discussion and insights provided as to the work being done by different faith-based organizations, universities and groups in the region and globally, in the area of women's rights and the reconciliation between universal values, religious faith and cultural integrity.

Recommendations

- Establish platform on women in Islam to introduce a progressive understanding of Islamic principles based on a revisiting of Islamic jurisprudence.
- Call for activating the Alexandria Declaration on Women's Rights in Islam.
- Advocate for the Implementation of the Al Azhar 11 point Document.
- Support the engagement of moderate scholars and men of religion in the reinterpretation of Islamic verses and jurisprudence.
- Support the development of gender expertise among Islamic women scholars so that they can review and reinterpret Islamic jurisprudence from a gender-sensitive perspective.
- Support the work of the OIC Commissions in the region and globally.
- Support a network of women and men researchers interested in women and gender issues from the perspective of Islam.
- Engage moderate scholars in revisiting legislation, the messages propagated by the media, as well the curricula of schools and universities.
- Support initiatives such as the organization of summer courses in cooperation with universities across the Muslim countries to teach gender-sensitive and moderate interpretations of Islam.

Endnotes

- 1 Mosharaka is the Arabic term for participation.
- 2 Changing with the World: UNDP Strategic Plan 2017-2014. Available from http://www.undp.org/content/dam/undp/library/corporate/UNDP_strategic-plan_17-14_v9_web.pdf

