SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS
IN THE MENA AND ARAB STATES REGION
A DECADE REVIEW 2010 – 2020

Executive Summary

The situation of women and girls in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Arab States region[1] remains unresolved. Incremental progress has been documented, yet the pace is slow and does not reflect the commitments made to the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals, nor to address the challenges of the region. As will be discussed, some progress related to gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment in several domains over the past decade has been witnessed. Within the region, laws, policies, and programming focused on gender equality are growing, women's representation in government and in national programming has increased, and many countries have established national women's machineries and other institutions that promote the rights and welfare of women and girls. Areas such as education and health have seen significant improvement in gender-related indices, and specialized programming aimed at supporting women's and girls' rights and empowerment have accelerated in many countries in the region. While governments have significantly stepped up efforts to ensure that they meet their gender-based human rights obligations, it is also necessary to highlight the increasing engagement of civil society, particularly women's and youth feminist civil society, in advocating for and securing gains. Women's civil society in the region has actively engaged with the Women Peace and Security agenda at the international level, for example, activists have testified in front of the Security Council to highlight the gender impact of conflict and occupation on the lives of women and girls in the region.

Yet, in the midst of these gains, gender gaps in the region persist and part of recent progress is at risk of regress. These gaps are augmented by the unanswered intersectional concerns of women and girls, and are further compounded by global and regional events, including political and economic upheaval, conflict, occupation, and the COVID-19 pandemic. Increasing backlash from governments towards civil society since the Arab uprisings over a decade ago, especially towards women's rights and youth feminist groups, has also impeded progress. Conflict is another factor that perpetuates gender inequalities and human right violations in the some countries of the region. Furthermore, the staunch patriarchal character of governments continues to impact the movement towards gender equality which, in turn, reinforces the structural inequities present in negative socio-cultural norms and practices through laws, justice mechanisms and socio-political institutions. Many States in the region still allow such norms and practices to restrict the rights of females relative to males, and limit access for women and girls to targeted education regarding their rights and other substantive empowerment initiatives. Taken as a whole and despite the gains made, the evidence detailed throughout this report illustrates that the MENA and the Arab States region has made the slowest progress on gender equality across multiple indicators and indices.

Throughout the report, the lack of data in many of the areas of concern is highlighted and the need to enhance data collection and evidence generation in these areas is stressed. Drawing from evidence gathered, the following highlights some of the common gaps that governments in the MENA and Arab States region need to explicitly address in order to ensure gender equality, the empowerment of women and meet their human rights obligations towards women and girls:

- Ratify and amend legislation to be in line and in compliance with all relevant international covenants, conventions and treaties, including the 1951 Refugee Convention and the

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1   Both Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and the Arab States region are used throughout the report to reflect the terminology used amongst the multiple agencies involved in this analysis. Countries of investigation under this study include those within the UNICEF MENA Regional Office and the UNFPA Arab States Regional Office [Algeria, Djibouti, Egypt, Gulf Area Office (Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates), Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, State of Palestine, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen]. Thus, the report will classify the region under study as including all these countries and will refer to the region as 'MENA and Arab States.'

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) without reservation.

- Draft, expand and codify effective and accountable laws and juridical procedures which ensure the rights of all women and girls, including anti-discrimination laws, violence against women laws, personal status laws, economic and political participation laws, and laws impacting the rights of the girl child.

- Monitor and allocate the required resources to implement existing laws, in line with international standards.

- Acknowledge the particular vulnerabilities of refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons to statelessness and being undocumented, which may include lack of access to basic health, educational, employment, and legal services, and act to address the significant and wide-ranging risks for women and girls created due to a lack of formal identification or nationality.

- Strengthen multisectoral initiatives and integrated services and allocate adequate financial resources to support people-centered programming and service delivery to address inequalities manifested through discriminatory social norms and community practices.

- Remove barriers to the proper functioning and funding of civil society, particularly women's rights, networks of women living with HIV, youth and feminist organizations.

- Institutionalize inclusive and gender-responsive/transformative and evidence-based planning practices at all levels of government and strengthen co-ordination platforms, multisectoral initiatives and integrated services to address intersectional discrimination.

- Invest in national women's machineries and other relevant ministries through gender responsive budgeting, with adequate and skilled human and financial resources allocated to structures, policies and capacities supporting women's rights and empowerment, in line with Agenda 2030 and Sustainable Development Goal Target 5.5.

PILLAR 1: HEALTH AND WELLBEING

OVERVIEW AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The region as a whole has made significant progress on improving key general health indicators including lowering maternal and under-five mortality and decreasing the disease burden generally. Furthermore, non-communicable diseases have replaced nutritional disorders and communicable diseases as major causes of women's death or disability. Throughout the region, emergency and conflict settings continue to have significant health impacts on populations, and disproportionately on women and girls.

Despite significant progress on several health indicators, the 2020 report by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for West

Asia (ESCWA)[2] on the status of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Arab region noted that levels of health and well-being remain significantly uneven within and between countries, with health services fragmented and often supply-driven, and access to universal health coverage varying widely within and among countries and social groups. Most health systems continue to focus largely on curative health services instead of primary and preventative care and pay little attention to the social determinants of health.[3]

Recent data confirm that women and girls throughout the region face major barriers in accessing Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MHPSS), programming, and information. While many women throughout the region suffer from depression and stress at higher rates than men,[4] cultural stigma around mental health often prevents both access to services and effective treatment. Furthermore, the lack of dedicated mental health legislation in half of the countries within the region and a lack of national policies and plans in 30 per cent of the countries may indicate that a large proportion of women are likely left without prevention and response services.[5] Overall, there is a lack of psychosocial support across the region[6] which has been amplified and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.[7]

Ensuring that Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) are met for all women and girls in the region requires that norms and practices that are embedded in society are challenged and confronted. Barriers to SRHR are present in laws, policies, and the economy worldwide, and prevent women and girls from gaining access to knowledge and services that contribute to healthy and equitable lives for women and girls at all stages of their lifecycle. Securing adequate and appropriate

sexual and reproductive health care for every woman and adolescent girl hinges on the realization of reproductive rights, which are often overlooked.[8] These barriers are not unique to the region and are present throughout the globe, however, the MENA and Arab States region present a particularly challenging operating environment as SRHR is a culturally sensitive topic for many societies in the region, especially within the context of the ongoing conflicts and fragilities. For example, a reluctance to teach sexuality has meant that young people often rely on the internet or peers for information, and this may be inaccurate. Furthermore, a prevalent tendency among socially conservative societies of the region to only consider SRHR in the context of marriage means that unmarried adolescents, men and women, face social barriers in raising issues concerning their SRHR with health-care providers.[9]

Overall, however, the region exhibits a lack of a rights-based approach to SRHR, despite commitments to and efforts to comply with the range of global instruments noted above. Countries in the region still face challenges in granting access to sexual and reproductive health care for all, without discrimination based on sex, nationality, displacement status or marital status. Services related to maternal health, family planning, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS are not fully integrated within primary health care. Accessibility and quality vary across countries, among social classes and from urban to rural areas. Cultural barriers significantly prevent women and couples from deciding freely and responsibly on their sexual and reproductive health, including family planning.[10]

Similarly, as discussed below legal frameworks do not reflect a rights-based approach that promotes well-informed individual choices, and often stipulate

2   ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020, 2020.
3   Ibid.
4   Arab Barometer, 'Arab Barometer Wave V.'
5   Dalacoura, Katerina, Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional order and Domestic Transformations, Women and Gender in the Middle East and North Africa: Mapping the Field and Addressing Policy Dilemmas at the post-2011 Juncture, 2019.
6   UN Women, Accountability for Sexual Violence in Conflict: Identifying Gaps in Theory and Practice of National Jurisdictions in the Arab Region, 2018.
7   WHO, The impact of COVID 19 on mental, neurological and substance use services in the Eastern Mediterranean Region: results of a rapid assessment, 2020.
8   Starrs, Ann M, et al, Accelerate progress – sexual and reproductive health and rights for all: report of the Guttmacher-Lancet Commission, 2018.
9   ESCWA, Arab Sustainable Development Report 2020, 2020.
10 Ibid.

exemptions from the legal age to marry, forcing young girls into marriage, and early pregnancy.

There is a specific gender dimension to food security and nutrition that is widely supported by established research and data. Worldwide, women and girls experience a greater risk of malnutrition than men, and more girls die of malnutrition than boys, as a result of gender-based discrimination.[11]

Yet, there is limitations in the sex and age disaggregated data on hunger and food insecurity in the world and in the region. Often data on hunger is collected through interviewing the heads of households while the cultural norms in the region show that men are most likely to be identified as heads of households because of their socially accepted gender roles as breadwinners. This in turn, risks disregarding food security challenges facing women, girls, and boys and disregards the inequalities caused by gender-based discrimination within intrahousehold dynamics.

Roles and responsibilities associated with food security and nutrition largely fall on the shoulders of women and girls in the region due to gender social norms. The lack of engagement of men and boys in food preparation exacerbates women and girls' unpaid domestic chores, restricts women and girls from engaging in paid labor, re-enforces stereotypical gender roles, and puts men and boys at risk of food insecurity and malnutrition in case of any losses of women family members, especially in conflict and displacement settings. Social and behavioral communication change initiatives are needed to promote the equal engagement of men, women, girls, and boys in food security and nutrition interventions.

Women and girls in the region remain particularly vulnerable to food insecurity and face a triple burden of malnutrition, consisting of undernutrition, overweight or obesity, and micronutrient deficiencies. Undernourishment is especially high in conflict-affected countries: a 2019 study of gender

disparity in dietary intake noted that the MENA and Arab States region features a marked gender gap detrimental to women.[12] Every country in the region has either moderate or severe rates of anaemia in women of reproductive age, while, at the same time, women in the Arab States are far more likely to be overweight or obese than in any other region.[13]

Knowledge of and adherence to infant and young child feeding (IYCF) practices, including breastfeeding, vary substantially both between and within countries in the region, with factors such as mother's education level, mother's age, mother's health, mother's employment status, place of delivery, and place of residence (i.e., urban versus rural) impacting children's nutritional status. Provision of social and behavioral change communication (SBCC) initiatives are required to enhance the awareness of women, men, girls, and boys about infant and young child feeding practices and breastfeeding. Food security and nutrition actors, including governments, should work to create enabling environments that support IYCF. This includes promoting policies that support breastfeeding, provide maternity protection, and removes barriers to breastfeeding within workplaces (facilities, services, parental leave, and breaks) and communities. Policies should ensure that women's choice to breastfeed does not negatively affect their economic security and rights.

According to the most recent data, the countries in MENA with a stunting rate over 20 per cent are 4 out of 17 countries with available data. Therefore slightly less than one quarter of the countries of the region have a high or very high prevalence of stunting in children under 5 years of age. This is very problematic, as stunting and anaemia adversely affect the cognitive and physical growth of children, contributing to lower performance in schools and lowering lifetime incomes. It should be noted that the most successful efforts to reduce stunting have been connected with programmes aimed at reducing poverty and socio-economic inequities, particularly of gender inequalities. Mothers with a

11   FAO, Gender and Nutrition, No date.
12   FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO. 2020. Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition in the Near East and North Africa, Rethinking food systems for healthy diets and improved nutrition, 2019.
13   Ibid.

low level of education and a low income are more likely to have stunted children due to their limited knowledge and capacity to obtain food that will provide a diverse and nutritious diet. Improving women's socio-economic status, by increasing their access to decent employment and social protection programmes, is essential not only to improve their well-being, but also children's health and nutrition.

Equitable access to safe Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) services has not been met in the region. Women in poor households are less likely to have access to clean, safe places for Menstrual Health Management (MHM) or other sanitation facilities that provide appropriate security and hygiene standards to maintain women's unique needs related to privacy and dignity. Further, lack of access to WASH services at schools for women and girls may lead to their missing school or dropping out altogether. These access issues are exacerbated in very impoverished and/or conflict-affected countries, and more generally there are gaps in access to services between rural and urban communities throughout the region. Further, because suitable drinking water sources are also frequently missing at a family's home site, cultural norms throughout the region that designate women and girls as responsible for their household's water collection can involve long walks that expose them to protection and security risks.

During crisis situations, gender-based water insecurity is amplified, especially for refugee or internally displaced women and girls who face major barriers in access to basic services that are essential to their and their families' health and well-being. In addition to accessing basic services, women-headed households experience financial burdens that further limit their abilities to purchase water. In some countries water rights are tied to land rights, which in certain instances restrict women's access.[14]

Moving forward, key considerations include:

○ Continue fostering a rights-based and people-centred approach to health and focus on the four essential elements of the right to health: availability, accessibility, acceptability and quality. This includes ensuring a gender-based approach to health services, policies and increasing relevant investments in health.

○ Ensure provision of integrated benefit packages which deliver services including the whole continuum of care at all ages with focus on maternal health, family planning, and the prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS and GBV services, and strengthen cross-sectoral co-ordination to improve efficiency including aadvocating for comprehensive sexuality education in education – both in formal and non-formal settings. Ensure that services provision includes the dimensions of universal health coverage in terms of better access to services with focus on access in rural areas and innovative telemedicine approaches, the scope and quality of care, securing equitable access to health information, in addition to financial protection to those most vulnerable including women and girls.

○ Addressing the health disparities and inequities through addressing the social determinants of health and focus on 'whole-of-society' approach that's ensures the engagement of women in decision making in reference to health service provision and accountability.

○ Ensure essential services are provided to vulnerable populations including women's and girls in fragile countries in the region and those of humanitarian complex settings including maintaining these services amid the current COVID-19 preparedness and response.

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14   United Nations, Women, Water Security, and Peacebuilding in the Arab Region, Policy Brief, 2018.

○ Address insufficient data on adolescent health and nutrition by prioritizing key health indicators, allocating adequate resources to relevant quantitative and qualitative research gaps, and enhancing effective data management with focus on sex and age disaggregation.

○ Address the major increase in non-communicable diseases by ensuring gender-responsive research, policies as well as adequate access to training facilities.

○ Advance mental health legislations and policies and expand access and quality of available medical, mental health and psychosocial support services, including to address violence against women and girls, especially for those impacted by emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic.

○ Build gender and adolescent-responsive health systems, including Primary Health Care systems, to provide quality non-discriminatory and integrated youth-friendly health services with an adolescent and gender-competent workforce.

○ Address existing social and economic barriers to women's food security and nutrition by ensuring their equal entitlements, access to and control over assets, resources and services (financial and non-financial), and by enhancing their access to decent employment, livelihood opportunities, and social protection. Special attention should be dedicated to support women and girls in conflict-affected areas, women refugees and IDPs.

○ Enhance the access of rural women to and control of agricultural assets (land, in particular) and facilitate their exposure and uptake of nutrition-sensitive agricultural practices and technologies through targeted and accessible capacity building programmes.

○ Allocate adequate resources for the adoption of gender-transformative approaches in food security and nutrition-related policies and programmes, including capacity building of stakeholders in gender analysis and programming, to tackle the discriminatory social norms and gender roles that limit women's control over income and assets, and their decision-making power within households and communities.

○ Ensure the sex and age disaggregation of data on hunger and malnutrition and provide support to regional and national strategies and programmes through intersectional gender and age analyses. This should be done in a manner that explores intrahousehold dynamics and roles in food security and nutrition, and addresses hunger and malnutrition through a lifecycle approach.

○ Engage women, men, girls, and boys through social behavioural communication change initiatives that seek to engage all groups equitably utilizing gender transformative approaches that change stereotypical gender roles associated with food security and nutrition and acknowledge the valuable contributions of women and girls to food security, food production, preparation, and distribution.

○ Address the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the food security and resilience of women and girls and promote gender equality and climate resilience in interventions related to the development of food systems.

○ Strive for equitable access to safe WASH services, especially in rural and conflict/emergency settings and ensure adequate resources for effective implementation.

○ Address the gender impact of climate change through gender responsive National Adaptation Plans that builds on relevant evidence, engage women and girls in the development process, maintain health and education services and secure economic and empowering opportunities for women and girls in WASH sector.

○ Promote health literacy and nutrition and WASH education to improve the nutritional status of women and girls, households and communities, by ensuring that fathers and mothers are equally targeted by programmes and initiatives.

PILLAR 2:
LEARNING AND LIVELIHOODS

LEARNING: OVERVIEW AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Formal and non-formal education plays a large role in children's and young persons' lives throughout the region. In the region, there are disparities among women and girls in terms of relevance of education opportunities, abilities, access and outcomes For this reason, it is important to explore multiple pathways for education including those that help female children and youth transition into lifelong learning and dignified livelihood opportunities. Access to education and learning opportunities – in both formal and non-formal settings – is crucial for

advancing the interests of all women and girls in the region.

Despite recent gains as a region, educational inequalities between males and females persist. These inequalities are based on a number of additional factors (e.g., migration, conflict, language of instruction, ethnicity or social group, disability status, privatization of educational access, uneven educational opportunities) and manifest in myriad forms, most often affecting the most marginalized girls and women (e.g., rural, impoverished, displaced or nomadic communities, and those with disabilities).15 For example, rural females at both the primary and lower secondary levels exhibit higher out-of-school rates than other populations in the region, with some exceptions. Female youth are more than twice as likely to be Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET) than male youth.16 Yet, when young females have access to education, girls outperform boys in learning outcomes throughout the region. Another group that is often marginalised, when it comes to accessing education are females with disabilities – between 63 per cent and 92 per cent of females with disabilities report having no schooling at all.17

Unfortunately, the increase in girls' and women's literacy and educational attainment has not translated into participation in the labour force.[18] Even with higher education, men and women with advanced education experience starkly different unemployment rates in all countries for which data exist. Women with advanced education are at least twice as likely to be unemployed than their male counterparts in 90 per cent of the countries in the region.[19] Educational attainment is often not the only factor contributing to unemployment and this is especially true in this region. Socio-cultural norms including what is considered appropriate work and roles for women, laws and policies that restrict a woman's ability to perform certain tasks

15   UNICEF MENA Regional Office in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017.
16   ILOSTAT, Share of youth not in employment, education or training (NEET) by sex- ILO modelled estimates, Nov. 2020 (per cent) | Annual, 2020.
17   ESCWA, Disability in the Arab Region, Disability-Dashboard, 2020.
18   Dalacoura, Katerina, Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping Geopolitical Shifts, Regional order and Domestic Transformations, Women and Gender in the Middle East and North Africa: Mapping the Field and Addressing Policy Dilemmas at the post-2011 Juncture, 2019.
19   ILO, Unemployment with Advanced Education, ILOSTAT Database.

(e.g., hours or sector), and traditional gender norms all contribute to higher levels of unemployment.[20]

Regional data suggests that higher female participation to education correlates with lower prevalence of child marriage[21] and educational attainment is also a key determinant of sexual and reproductive health – women with education tend to access sexual and reproductive health services more than women with lower or no education (see Pillar 1).

Within the region, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) accounts for only 20 per cent of post-secondary enrolment and suffers from a negative perception, even though evidence shows that TVET graduates have higher prospects for employment compared to university graduates.[22] Concerningly, research in the region determined that vocational training programmes themselves reinforce gender-based discrimination, often dividing programmes into topics that are socially acceptable to men and those that are socially acceptable to women.[23] Additionally, research has found that TVET programmes in the region offer limited support to vulnerable groups, including persons with disabilities, former detainees, and illiterate populations.[24]

Research in the region concluded that life skills and citizenship education programmes in non-formal settings play an important role in targeting marginalized and vulnerable groups. However, these programmes are sporadic and are sustained by support from implementing non-governmental organizations. As such, these activities often lack national or local co-ordination mechanisms and are delivered on a project-by-project basis which calls into question the long-term sustainability of such activities.[25] Nevertheless, a few countries in the region have integrated life skills and citizenship education into their national education system and curriculum.

Within both formal and non-formal education settings, Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) have the potential to promote inclusive and equitable quality education as well as promote lifelong learning opportunities for all women and girls. However, access to ICTs and low levels of digital literacy are factors that contribute to an unequal landscape within the region, both between countries and between the sexes. This digital divide[26] is exacerbating inequalities, especially based on wealth (poor vs. rich) and location (urban vs. rural), as well as gender inequalities hinder women's and girls' participation in education. Women's and girls' access to ICTs vary greatly within the region. As an example, the percentage of the female population using the internet in the region ranges from 11 per cent in Sudan to 99.8 per cent in Kuwait. (See Table 2.7.)

Socio-cultural norms and practices are critical impediments to women's and girls' access to ICTs including computers and mobile phones. Throughout the region, these traditional gender roles and harmful social norms undermine girls' and women's access to and use of ICT tools. This precludes the ability of women and girls to adapt to the heightened demand for digital skills and access to digital technologies to foster learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and to participate in recovery efforts. This is especially true in lower socio-economic environments or rural localities, where ICTs are often accessed outside of the home where safety concerns and norms regarding socializing act as barriers for women's and girls' access to these technologies. Additionally, lack of control over when and how to use these technologies can present another barrier for women and girls. Lastly, it is important to note that while there has been a focus

20 World Bank Group, Women, Business and the Law, 2018, p. 14.
21 UNICEF MENA Regional Office in collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), Child Marriage in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017.
22 Internal UNICEF Document titled Gender dynamics and barriers for girl child employability in MENA (shared with the research study team by UNICEF), no date.
23 Oxfam, Counting on Women's Work Without Counting Women's Work, 2019.
24 UNICEF MENA Regional Office, Analytical Mapping of Life Skills and Citizenship Education in the Middle East and North Africa, 2017.
25 Ibid.
26 The digital divide refers to the uneven possession of skills and experience that are required to use ICT tools and it entails access to hardware and software as well as the aspects of access and use which all impact the digital divide.

on improving school ICT infrastructure throughout the region in recent years, the same priority has not been given to reforming education methods to improve the quality of teaching. In fact, limited statistical evidence from the region reveals that use of ICTs in education does not have a significant impact on education methods.[27]

Moving forward, key considerations include:

- Ensure that education opportunities, including digital learning, are available, accessible, and acceptable to all girls and women, independent of wealth, location, ethnicity, ableness or displacement status.

- Review and revise education curricula, including e-learning content, to ensure that they are gender-responsive, do not perpetuate gender stereotypes and equally prepare girls and boys for a dignified transition into adulthood, including decent and productive employment/livelihood and lifelong learning.

- Integrate and operationalize gender responsive foundational and transferable life skills curricula through formal and non-formal education platforms and improved teaching practices.

- Promote and monitor equal access to and acceptance of digital learning to address and mitigate gender-inequalities reinforced by the digital divide and expand affordable access to the most disadvantaged population with focus on girls in rural areas.

- Review and amend education policies to promote girls' and young women's access to both learning and livelihood, specifically addressing harmful practices and social norms barriers.

- Ensure education services and policies are gender-responsive in emergency and humanitarian settings, with specific attention to girls and young women needs and risk of dropping out of school.

- Ensure available, accessible and gender-responsive WASH facilities including menstrual health and hygiene support, in education settings for girls and adolescent females, including in humanitarian settings.

- Implement policies and accountability frameworks to ensure a safe and protective school environment to address wellbeing, including mental health and psychosocial support, and to mitigate against the increased risk of GBV.

- Ensure a safe learning environment, including that all schools and tertiary education must provide accessible and reliable means of reporting cases of sexual harassment and assault (be it physical, psychological, emotional and/or verbal) as enshrined within school governing documents/policies, which must be inclusive.

LIVELIHOODS: OVERVIEW AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

The period covered in this report, 2010-2020, has been a time of massive change in the region. In particular, there has been an increase in recognition of the need to further integrate women more fully into the economy, with many countries introducing new incentives programmes and changing labour laws to allow this to be achieved. While much progress has been made, there is still much that can be improved. Women's labour force participation rates are still among the lowest in the world, and women and girls face disproportionate barriers to inheritance, property ownership, and access to capital, as well as one of the world's highest ratios of unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities compared to men.[28]

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27 ESCWA, Arab Horizon 2030 Digital Technologies for Development, 2019.
28 UN Women, 'The Role of The Care Economy in Promoting Gender Equality', 2020.

During the past decade, the MENA and Arab States Region has seen an increasing recognition of the importance of women in the economy. Private organizations and global donors have begun to develop monitoring and evaluation mechanisms,[29] reports and research, and data[30] regarding women's impact in the business and financial sectors. However, much of the information gathered during this time period has shown mixed results. While the enabling environment for women entering the workplace has arguably improved, the observed trends increased the over-representation of women among the unemployed population. As of 2018, women's labour force participation[31] rates in the region remain the lowest in the world, with an average rate of around 19 per cent across the region, compared to 49 per cent globally.[32] With the emergence of COVID-19, labour force participation numbers are expected to decrease.[33]

While overall economies in the region have grown, disparities between urban, rural, and poorer communities have grown. With an overall regional poverty rate of 13.4 per cent (as of 2017),[34] this number hides great disparities. The Least Developed Countries (LDC) in particular face greater and more widespread poverty, with poverty rates approaching 50 per cent in Sudan and 30 per cent in Yemen.[35] Conflicts in Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and Syria exacerbate poverty, and continue to slow economic growth. Projections for 2019 for the region also predict slow economic growth, estimated by the World Bank at 0.6 per cent due in part to decreasing oil prices.[36] This follows a downward trend during the entirety of the reporting period, with overall regional growth rates slowing year over year.[37] Decreasing oil prices and conflict in the region seem to be the main drivers of this

slow-down. The good news is that there has not been widespread retraction – the regional average growth rate has not become negative. The World Bank predicted stronger growth in the coming years, however the recession caused by the emergence of COVID-19 have made the growth rates for 2020 and beyond uncertain. Growth rates in the region are expected to be impacted by a loss in real GDP, loss in jobs as well as a high increase in people living in poverty.[38] The projection of job losses are expected to be highest in 'most at risk' sectors as well as in the informal economy, where women in the region make up 62 per cent of the labour force.[39]

Moving forward, key considerations are:

- Formally codify or enhance anti-discriminatory and gender-responsive laws governing livelihoods, such as the labour code, and include implementable repercussions or sanctions against those who violate them, in addition to enforcement mechanisms and robust monitoring.

- Enact or strengthen legislation that addresses discriminatory social norms that dissuade women from inheriting wealth and accessing collateral.

- Support women entrepreneurs through increased access to credit and capital, business and technical training, strengthening networks and associations, and gender-responsive procurement and inclusion of women-led businesses in value chains.

- Work with community groups, businesses, and the government to challenge norms in vertical

29   See: Buvinic et al., 'Measuring Women's Economic Empowerment: A Compendium of Selected Tools.'
30   For instance, see resources available at Data2x: https://data2x.org/resource-center/
31   Labor force participation is defined by the International Labour Organization as being the proportion of the working age population currently employed. It is usually calculated using ages 15 and above. For more information, see https://ilostat.ilo.org/resources/concepts-and-definitions/description-labour-force-participation-rate/.
32   ILO, 'World Employment and Social Outlook Trends for Women 2018: Global Snapshot.', 2018.
33   UN Women, 'The Impact of COVID-19 on Gender Equality in the Arab Region.', 2019.
34   League of Arab States et al., 'Arab Multidimensional Poverty Report.'
35   Ibid.
36   Arezki et al., 'Reaching New Heights.'
37   Ibid.
38   United Nations Sustainable Development Group, Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on the Arab Region An Opportunity to Build Back Better, 2020.
39   Ibid.

and horizontal occupational segregation that prevent women from taking on leadership and senior roles in the world of work, as well as from entering occupations in non-traditional sectors of the economy.

○ Enact gender-responsive laws and policies, including those on finance and enforcement, and support the private sector to improve working conditions, safety and security at work, to encourage more women to enter the private sector as an employer of choice.

○ Ensure adherence to global standards in the world of work (including equal pay for work of equal value), implementation of gender-responsive policies in the workplace, and promoting gender-responsive tripartite dialogue.

○ Address the high burden of women's unpaid care work and disproportionate domestic responsibilities such as childcare, education, and caring for the elderly and the infirmed, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, including responding to any need of support

for women to re-enter the workforce or shift demands as businesses reopen.

○ Invest in the care economy, inspired by the 5R framework for decent care work: recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, including in collaboration with the private sector; reward paid care work, by promoting more and decent work for care enforcement workers; and guarantee care workers' representation, social dialogue, and collective bargaining;

○ Strengthen the ability of refugee communities to obtain work permits by providing opportunities and develop local economies that will allow women to join the formal economy.

○ Ensure that governmental macroeconomic policies, response programmes and fiscal stimulus packages to mitigate the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 are gender-responsive and include the varying needs of women and men, including through supporting employers and women-led businesses to protect women's employment, where possible.

PILLAR 3:
FREEDOM FROM VIOLENCE AND ACCESS TO JUSTICE

OVERVIEW AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Everywhere in the world, gender discriminatory norms and practices are at the root of multiple forms of Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG). This is no exception in the MENA and Arab States region, where patriarchal beliefs that support male privilege and power exist in virtually every area of life. Many forms of VAWG persist across the region, and throughout the female lifecycle. In situations of armed conflict and occupation, and among women and girls who are particularly marginalized, the risk of exposure to violence is compounded. However, data and documentation on VAWG is limited due to the stigma and fear of retaliation. Crises can exacerbate existing vulnerabilities and risk factors, leading to an increase in GBV, abuse and neglect, as well as an increased lack of access to professional care and support services for survivors. Since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries have reported a simultaneous increase in

gender-based violence (GBV), which has come to be known as the 'Shadow Pandemic.'[40]

A girl child living in the MENA and Arab States may be at particular risk for child marriage, domestic labour and Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), for which several countries in the MENA and the Arab States region have some of the highest rates globally. For example, one in five girls in the region are married before the age of 18. Collective violence against children is also higher in the MENA and Arab States region than in any region of the world, and while boys are primarily affected, girls also face high rates of collective violence, particularly in settings affected by armed conflict. Another growing problem is online violence. This issue is especially salient in the age of COVID-19, where in many communities across the region the internet has become integrated into everyday life.

As girls grow older, additional risks present themselves. In the MENA and Arab States region, existing data suggests that slightly more than a third of females are likely to be exposed to intimate partner violence, and in some settings the rate is likely to be much higher. Other VAWG risks include abusive temporary marriages, trafficking, and non-partner sexual violence.

It is critical to note, however, that the prevalence of different forms of VAWG varies considerably throughout the region. For example, while an estimated third of all girls are married as children in Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq, the rates are very low to non-existent in Algeria, Tunisia and Qatar. Likewise, the rates of FGM are very high in Somalia, Egypt and Sudan, while the practice is essentially absent in Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia. Aside from cultural norms, demographic factors such as wealth, education and state stability affect rates of various forms of VAWG. For example, urban areas—and particularly settings with higher levels of wealth and education–typically have fewer cases of child marriage and FGM. On the other hand, VAWG can be exacerbated by conflict. For example, sexual violence has been used as a tactic of war by armed

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40   UN Women, 'COVID-19 AND VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: ADDRESSING THE SHADOW PANDEMIC', 2020.

forces in Sudan, as well as by ISIL in Iraq[41] and has been weaponized against female political activists in Libya, and Somalia. Displacement also creates particular risk factors for VAWG, including sexual violence and exploitation and child marriage.

In recent years, countries in the MENA and Arab States region have made significant legislative progress in addressing VAWG. The constitutions of Egypt, Tunisia, Somalia, Yemen, and Iraq include provisions seeking to eliminate VAWG. Stand-alone legislation regarding VAWG also exists in eight countries in the MENA and the Arab States, and a majority of countries in the region criminalize non-partner sexual violence. FGM has also been outlawed in many of the countries in which it is most prevalent (Egypt, Somalia, and Sudan). However, in spite of these measures, protection gaps persist in laws and policies. In many states, marital rape is not considered a crime, and laws prohibiting child marriage vary widely in terms of both their implementation and their enforcement. Laws also often fail to specifically protect those at greatest risk, including refugees, women and girls with disabilities, migrant domestic workers, etc.

Specialized services and programming to aid women and girls affected by VAWG are growing in the MENA and Arab States region. For example, all Arab countries have established formal channels to report VAWG to the police, and several countries, such as Jordan and Tunisia, have dedicated units to investigate cases, offer legal support, and provide women and girls who report VAWG with access to safe shelters and psychosocial services. Several governments offer free medical and psychosocial services to survivors, although the accessibility of these can be limited, particularly for marginalized women and girls such as refugees, women and girls with disabilities, adolescent girls, and others. Where government services have been insufficient, international and local non-governmental organizations (NGO) fill some gaps, offering shelters, providing capacity building and awareness raising, and promoting improved VAWG data collection. However, their capacity is also proscribed by limitations in funding—an increasing concern in the COVID-19 pandemic.

Access to justice for survivors of VAWG has shown some improvement through statutory systems in some countries in MENA and the Arab States region over the last ten years, supported by near gender parity in the judiciary in countries such as Lebanon, Tunisia, and Algeria, as well as the proliferation of dedicated police desks for women and children, and increasing participation of women in the legal sector. However, many women and girls in the region continue to face very challenging barriers to accessing justice in both formal and informal institutions—not only in relation to VAWG, but for gender justice more generally. Discriminatory gender norms enforced by family or personal status laws remain in many countries, essentially codifying inequality. Justice is not yet gender-responsive in the region, neither for women nor for girls. Despite progress with female representation, the legal system remains male-dominated. In addition, many deep-rooted socio-cultural practices do not incentivize but stigmatize and even endanger women and girls who seek justice, particularly gender justice, and services to challenge these norms and help women and girls overcome such barriers are largely insufficient.

Not only are many laws and policies in the region discriminatory towards women and girls—particularly in terms of family or personal status laws – but discriminatory norms prohibit women and girls from accessing justice for other reasons, including that the legal/justice sector being male dominated; socio-cultural norms and practices disincentivize, stigmatize and even endanger women and girls who seek justice, particularly gender justice; and there is lack of services that challenge these norms and sufficiently assist women and girls to overcome the myriad obstacles to accessing justice.[42] Despite these challenges, there is evidence of some shifts towards greater gender equity in the legal/justice sector across a number of countries in the region. These shifts may, over time, improve policies,

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41   United Nations, UN News, 'UN human rights panel concludes ISIL is committing genocide against Yazidis, 2016.
42   OECD, 2014. Women in Public Life–Gender, Law and Policy in the Middle East and North Africa, p. 31.

standards, norms, and law enforcement processes related to access to justice for women and girls.

Even with significant progress in some countries in the region regarding VAWG and access to justice, much remains to be done.

Moving forward, key considerations include:

- Collect information on the prevalence of gender-based violence using systematic methods aligned with international standards for collecting sex, age and disability disaggregated data on VAWG as well as periodical collection of data aligned with the SDG indicator on prevalence of different forms of VAWG. This includes emerging forms of violence, such as online harassment and exploitation.

- Adopt stand-alone legislation on VAWG, including violence related to the legal age of marriage, trafficking, marital rape, and online harassment and amend existing legislation in line with a survivor-centred approach. Ensure such legislation is enforceable and that perpetrators are held accountable.

- Address stereotypical gender norms by developing social norms programming targeting men and women on drivers of VAWG, such as patriarchal beliefs and gender discriminatory norms, including related to growing forms of VAWG such as online harassment.

- Ensure VAWG programmes assess risk, including recognizing the overlapping risks girls and women experience at different stages, and protective factors across the lifecycle of women and girls in order to promote prevention and age-appropriate responses at all stages.

- Adopt an intersectional approach to VAWG programming, including addressing drivers of marginalization, that is available and accessible to women and girls with various demographic profiles, especially those facing significant challenges accessing support and protection,

such as women and girls who are economically disadvantaged, stigmatised, less educated, living in rural areas, or with disabilities.

- Address the stigma related to support-seeking and ensure integrated, age-appropriate and specialized services for survivors of VAWG are affordable, acceptable, accessible and of good quality. This includes improving prevention, accountability and response interventions and promoting survivor-centred approaches.

- Establish and maintain comprehensive referral systems that are survivor-centred and are aligned with human rights standards.

- Implement, customize and finance different survivor-centred approaches to improve women and girls' safe and age-appropriate access to justice, including improving female representation in the judiciary, providing virtual legal and judicial services, and developing legal literacy curricula for women and girls.

- Ensure appropriate mechanisms and non-discriminatory procedures for women and girls who lack identification documents or are non-citizens, such as internally displaced women, migrant women workers, refugees and asylum seekers, so that they are able to access justice mechanisms, including police protection, legal aid services, and a confidential process for lodging complaints to enable prosecution and protection.

- Eliminate the practice of criminalizing women and girls for being survivors/victims of gender-based violence and trafficking as well as end administrative detention for this reason.

- Engage in rights-based interventions with traditional/tribal leaders administering customary/informal justice in gender-based violence cases involving women and girls

- Prevent child violence, exploitation and abuse by enforcing child rights legislation on labour,

and adopt initiatives that address unpaid domestic work by the girl child and adolescent.

○ Ensure gender-sensitive respond to increased levels of GBV during the COVID-19 pandemic by strengthening capacity for PSEA, hotlines, safe spaces and case management as well as engage existing women's and youth rights networks to support connectivity and vital information flow   and ensure gender data are available, analysed and actionable.

PILLAR 4:
PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

OVERVIEW AND KEY CONSIDERATIONS

Women's participation and leadership in the MENA and Arab States region have historically been obfuscated, despite decades of community involvement, activism at the national and international levels, and formal and informal political engagement. During the past decade, however, women's formal engagement has gained greater focus and traction, often transgressing the invisible barrier between the public and private spheres. Despite this momentum, challenges remain, none

the least of which is the COVID-19 pandemic that has widened gaps between men and women in terms of employment, care work, perceived family obligations and, in some cases, actively curbed women's access to the public sphere. The region as whole remains resilient in the face of enduring conflicts, from the State of Palestine to Syria to Yemen, as women remain at the forefront of building their communities.

This chapter focuses on women's agency at the household as well as in public life of women, including engagement in civic society, activism, government, politics, and peace and security. From a legal perspective, inequality at the household level is codified through personal status laws. Additionally, household decision-making is often beholden to conservative socio-cultural norms and expectations resulting in women exerting less autonomy and power within the family, though this is not an absolute.

Community and national level civil society participation remains an important avenue for women to engage in leadership, however entry points, such as female youth's ability to participate in civic engagement, is limited by both conservative social norms and lack of opportunities to participate. Since the uprisings over a decade ago, women and girls' prominence in protests movements is now better documented, as is their formal political engagement (despite globally low rates of participation in the region). However, this has not translated into substantial and sustainable engagement. Notably, this increasing visibility has also resulted in increasing violence and harassment.

In a region overwhelmed by conflict and occupation, women continue to lead efforts related to peace and security. While the acceptance of the Women, Peace and Security agenda[43] has been gaining prominence at the grassroots and institutional levels in the MENA and Arab States region, women's main venue for influencing policy, peace processes and transitional justice processes continues to

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43   In October 2000, the United Nations Security Council adopted UNSCR 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS).

be through civil society and work at either the community level or at the international level, with serious omissions at the national level.

This chapter focuses on the public life of women, including engagement in civic society, activism, government, politics, and peace and security. It finds that women have been central to many of the movements for increased rights in the last ten years, but there is still more research left to do to fully understand the role that women have played.

Moving forward, key recommendations include:

- Adopt legislation and policies that facilitate women's political participation, including gender-based quota systems for seats in national parliament and local government level or gender-based quota systems for candidate lists for national parliament that meet the international standard of 50 per cent.

- Adopt and enforce legislation explicitly outlawing violence against women in politics and/or elections.

- Remove legal and financial restrictions on the work of civil society organizations and enforce protection of all women's human rights defenders.

- Enhance partnerships with civil society organizations and other non-governmental actors and ensure adequate funding for services provided by civil society organizations.

- Develop and implement policies and programmes, including in schools, to engage youth and provide safe physical and online spaces for young women to participate in volunteerism and local communities.

- Review school curricula and textbook contents to eliminate socio-cultural gender stereotypes and to stimulate a culture of equality between women and men by presenting progressive

and affirmative images of women to reflect their dynamic positions, multiple roles and identities in the household and in public life.

- Ensure transparent and complete reporting of women's participation in all areas of public life, including in the public service, in line with international standards and methodologies developed by Sustainable Development Goal indicators (women in local governance).

- Ensure regular data collection of national statistics on women's participation in decision making at the household level and in the public sphere.

- Initiate qualitative research to understand household decision-making dynamics, as well as research into women's participation in activism and politics at the local and national levels, in order to better understand and address barriers to leadership.

- Introduce policies and programmes and allocate adequate resources that address the unequal division of labour and gender stereotypes within households.

- Increase resource allocation to the Women, Peace, and Security agenda and the development of National Action Plans.

- Fund local civil society organizations to implement identified activities within Women, Peace, and Security National Action Plans in order to increase the oversight capacity of relevant ministries (often the Ministry of Women's Affairs).

- Create a safe environment for women to participate and actively engage in peace processes.

- Mainstream gender into all transitional justice processes at all levels.