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Report

**Expert Group Meeting on Advancing Care Economy in the Arab Region:
Underexplored Care-Related Areas
12–13 November 2024
Virtual Meeting**

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Introduction

1. ESCWA convened a virtual Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on “Advancing Care Economy in the Arab Region: Underexplored Care-Related Areas” on November 12 and 13, 2024, which gathered regional and international experts, as well as representatives from UN agencies.
2. The EGM aimed to inform ESCWA’s ongoing research and policy recommendations, ultimately contributing to achieving Sustainable Development Goals 1, 5, 8, and 13. The EGM discussions focused on five central themes: (1) policy frameworks for older persons and persons with disabilities with a focus on caregivers, (2) a diverse and equitable care economy, (3) social protection as a tool for recognizing unpaid care work, (4) the complex interlinkages between care and multiple public policies, and (5) the potential role of artificial intelligence in reducing unpaid care responsibilities.
3. The Women Economic Empowerment Team within ESCWA’s Gender Justice, Population, and Inclusive Development Cluster met with Ms. Diane Elson and Ms. Ito Peng on November 11, 2024, as part of the experts’ discussions, to get their insights on the different themes raised in the meeting’s sessions. Their input has been incorporated within each session’s outcomes.
4. This report summarizes the key insights and recommendations generated from the EGM discussions, setting a foundation for ESCWA’s future actions to contribute to enhancing the care economy in the Arab region and promoting gender equality.

Opening session

5. The EGM began with welcoming remarks by Ms. Rouba Arja, Social Affairs Officer in the Gender Justice, Population, and Inclusive Development Cluster at ESCWA, and coordinator of ESCWA’s work on women’s economic empowerment and care economy, in which she introduced the meeting’s objectives and agenda. Ms. Arja presented work areas which ESCWA is focusing on to assist its member States to promote women’s economic empowerment by advancing the economy of care for children, older persons and persons with disabilities.
6. In her introductory note, she emphasized the importance of care as a public good essential for well-being, dignity, and human capital development. She stated that despite efforts by Arab governments to promote women’s economic empowerment, female labor force participation in the region remains below 20 per cent in 2024, with unpaid care work being a major barrier behind this challenge particularly in light of limited care economies in the region. She also provided an overview of the papers and focus areas which ESCWA is currently pursuing and around which the EGM revolves.

Session I. Older persons and persons with disabilities policy frameworks: focus on caregivers

7. Ms. Sadim Sbeiti, Research Assistant in the Gender Justice, Population, and Inclusive Development Cluster at ESCWA, presented ESCWA’s work on care to older persons and persons with disabilities from a caregiver rights perspective. She first highlighted the heterogeneity in care recipients and care needs and the continuum of care receipt and provision among different older persons generations. She presented the findings of a thorough revision of national strategies for older persons and persons with disabilities in Arab countries, noting the limited consideration of caregivers in these strategies and revealing the few examples of policies targeted towards caregivers in different countries. After an examination of the indirect benefits that policies directed to care recipients provide to caregivers, Ms. Sbeiti highlighted the need to explicitly address caregivers’ needs and rights within national strategies for older persons and for persons with disabilities and presented suggested policy measures targeting caregivers.

8. The presentation concluded with a set of recommendations to improve caregivers' well-being and facilitate women's participation in the labour market.

9. The participating experts agreed on the importance of the topic and underlined the relevance of accounting for the heterogeneity of care recipients, linking it to the continuum of care. They also acknowledged the relevance of the results of the review of policies and analysis which distinguish between paid and unpaid care providers. They pointed out the impact of the difference in income groups between and within Arab countries on policy priorities. In addition, they called for comprehensive data collection at the individual and institution levels to better understand the full scope of care work, particularly regarding migrant workers, internally displaced persons and refugees. They also urged the necessity of improving the conditions of informal care workers in institutions.

10. Moreover, experts suggested the addition of infrastructure and prevention policies among the policy measures scrutinized and shed light on the importance of the involvement and participation of both care recipients and caregivers in policy formulation. Participants also drew attention to the political economy differences between oil exporting and non-oil exporting countries, noting how these influence the segmentation of the labour market between migrant and national workers in the former, and public and private sector workers in the latter. They also stressed the need for a thorough analysis of non-contributory social protection programs for older persons and persons with disabilities to identify gaps in coverage.

Session II. Social protection as a means to recognize unpaid care work

11. Ms. Rouba Arja presented the work on the use of social protection for the recognition of unpaid care work. She stressed the need to recognize unpaid care work, which is one of the main reasons for limited economic participation of women in the Arab region, and given the impact of its invisibility on macroeconomic policies and decisions. Noting the challenges of regularly conducting time-use surveys, calculating the value of unpaid care work, and also integrating its value in national accounts, Ms. Arja underlined the importance of exploring additional means to recognize unpaid care work while pushing for measuring and accounting it in national accounts. She emphasized that social protection systems could be an effective approach to acknowledge unpaid care work and integrate it into policy frameworks. The presentation outlined four pillars of interconnection between social protection and care, with the first pillar focusing on care leaves and benefits, particularly targeting formal workers; the second pillar involving the provision of high-quality, affordable, and accessible care services for both formal and informal workers; the third pillar addressing social protection for paid care workers, aiming to ensure decent work conditions, dignity, and fair wages; and the fourth pillar highlighting the importance of pension contributions for caregivers, recognizing unpaid care work as legitimate labour and integrating it into social protection systems.

12. Ms. Arja concluded by outlining the key recommendations, calling for mainstreaming care in all social protection policies and measures, and for further exploring the relevance of models that recognize care through social protection measures in the Arab region.

13. The participants emphasized that a distinction should be made between contributory social insurance programmes, which are tied to formal employment and risk pooling, and non-contributory social assistance programmes as mechanisms to better support unpaid care workers and care recipients, including through cash or in-kind transfers. In addition, the absence of family or child tax credits in the region was noted, with a recommendation to explore such policies to support families during periods of unpaid care work. It was noted that women who take unpaid care breaks often face lower pension values or lose eligibility altogether, underscoring the need for options that allow caregivers to continue contributing to social insurance during break periods taken to assume unpaid care responsibilities. The need to reform social insurance systems to enable individuals to take short-term breaks for unpaid care to continue contributing to the system was also discussed.

14. The inclusion of migrant workers, particularly domestic workers, in contributory social insurance programmes was highlighted as crucial for ensuring legal and effective coverage.

15. Non-contributory social assistance programs, such as unconditional cash transfers, were seen as more effective in addressing unpaid care work, as they avoid reinforcing gender norms. Public works programmes were highlighted as potential to address unpaid care work by offering flexible work arrangements and supporting infrastructure development to ease caregiving responsibilities.

Session III. Advancing a diverse care economy sector

16. Ms. Haifa Hussein, consultant on women economic empowerment at ESCWA, presented the work on advancing a diverse care economy sector, highlighting the care sector's potential as a key job provider, driven by demographic shifts like ageing populations and increasing demand for care services. She noted that this sector does not only offer direct job opportunities but could also unlock employment for women in other sectors.

17. She highlighted that realizing this potential would require strengthening and diversifying the care economy to involve both women and men, which improve working conditions and wages. The presentation shed light on care-related persistent challenges in the Arab region including limited access to quality services, and devaluation of work, poor working conditions, and low wages in the paid care sector. It explained how these challenges may have led to missed employment opportunities for women in other sectors such as the technology sector, particularly in the Arab region, where women remain underrepresented.

18. The presentation also highlighted how work remains undervalued and often wage gaps and lower pay are faced in female-dominated sectors. It stressed the importance of promoting diversity in the care sector to include both men and women to address these issues.

19. Participants stressed the importance of conducting mapping of all types of unpaid and paid care workers within or outside institutions in the Arab countries to inform policy making. They also underlined the need for a strong public sector to ensure vulnerable populations have access to quality care services. Tackling entrenched social norms within households to redistribute unpaid care work and encourage more equitable caregiving roles was also pointed out, alongside efforts to address rigid social norms and the perception of caregiving as a feminine task through education and media. Improving working conditions in the care sector was deemed crucial for ensuring decent opportunities and attracting more men to the field.

20. Furthermore, there was a recommendation on the reassessment of the value of care work in a way that equalizes care employment with employment in male-dominated sectors, and the rethinking of the occupational structure to raise the status and wage of care work. Finally, participants called for a nuanced approach to understanding how gender diversity can boost the care economy.

Session IV. Care and public policies: a complex web of connections

21. Ms. Sadim Sbeiti provided an overview of the complex interconnections between care and public policies, highlighting their non-linearity. She illustrated how various policies intersect with each other and with care, such as infrastructure impacting accessibility and autonomy of individuals; labour policies shaping leave and work arrangements; media influencing gender roles and stereotypes; and social protection systems, including pension credits and taxation policies, playing a crucial role in shaping women's choices concerning labour market participation.

22. She shed light on the complex interconnectedness between public policies and care, with a focus on how gender equality and women's empowerment add additional layers forming a web of interlinkages. She noted that implementing care policies in isolation would be insufficient in addressing these interconnected challenges, hence the need for complex, non-linear solutions which build on examining and disentangling the

interlinkages and ensure care is mainstreamed into different public policies. The presentation recommended thus the development of national care-centered strategic visions to support mainstreaming efforts to be guided by the four steps outlined in the Purple Economy (Care Economy +) policy brief by the United Nations Economist Network: creating a macroeconomic framework that recognizes care investment as generating high returns; adopting policies that recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work; diversifying care employment to economically empower women; and ensuring robust participation, accountability and monitoring mechanisms; and the ILO 5Rs framework.

23. Participants commended the proposed approach to unmask and disentangle the complex interlinkages between care and public policies and echoed the key recommendations. They, however, emphasized the need for a dedicated component within the vision to frame the mainstreaming exercise. They stressed the diversity of the Arab region and its countries and thus the impact on policy priorities within this region. Participants recommended also considering the interlinkages between care, migration and climate change. They stressed the importance of prioritizing the development of comprehensive care systems and integrating care into social protection and health policies. They advocated for the establishment of an institutional setup such as a national body to coordinate care-related policy making and reforming efforts.

Session V. Investing in artificial intelligence to reduce unpaid care work

24. Ms. Rouba Arja delivered a presentation on a project proposal, to explore the potential of artificial intelligence (AI) to reduce unpaid care work, being developed by ESCWA and the Artificial Intelligence, Data Science and Computing Hub at the American University of Beirut. She highlighted the diversity of women in the region and their differentiated needs and stressed the fact that they require a myriad of solutions and alternatives to be made available for them. She explained that AI was chosen to reap the benefits, if available, of this rapidly emerging technology. She outlined four proposed pillars for the project: the need to disentangle and categorize the nature of unpaid care tasks within households in the region; the worldwide mapping and categorization of existing solutions to reduce unpaid care work; facilitation of discussions and exchanges among key stakeholders, including private sector actors, institutions, and associations to raise awareness and push for the development of actionable solutions; and the development of a policy framework to encourage the private sector to actively contribute to developing these solutions.

25. Participants encouraged the exploration of technologies beyond AI only, with a focus on technologies in the area of interactive care, which remains underdeveloped, and good practices were highlighted from different countries. They also noted that women's diverse experiences, shaped by factors like class and rurality, must be considered in the context of utilizing AI, to avoid risks of excluding marginalized groups. Participants suggested using existing feminist typologies for care interventions while considering how technologies, such as AI, can exclude certain groups. The need to acknowledge the importance of care work was emphasized in order to avoid, while attempting to reduce care work and namely unpaid care work, overlooking its value. They also highlighted that reducing women's domestic workload specifically is important to empower them and increase economic participation freedom and opportunities.

Closing session

26. In the closing remarks, Ms. Rouba Arja thanked the participants for their valuable and constructive contributions throughout the discussions which provided key insights into successes, challenges, and recommendations, and which will be taken into consideration in the finalization of the papers and projects that ESCWA is developing.

27. Ms. Arja highlighted the importance of continued collaboration, coordination and open communication with all stakeholders and partners working on care particularly in the Arab region. She also thanked the participants for having shared useful resources throughout the discussions.

Annex I*

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