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Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Report

**The role of parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement
of women's economic empowerment in the Arab region
Focus on care policies
Online regional meeting
31 January and 1 February 2024**

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Introduction

1. The regional meeting on “The role of parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement of women’s economic empowerment in the Arab region: Focus on care policies” co-organized by the United Nations – Economic and Social Commission on Western Asia (ESCWA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in partnership with UN Women, and the International Labour Organization (ILO), aimed to address the role of parliamentarians in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality in the Arab region. Held virtually on Wednesday January 31st and Thursday February 1st, 2024, the two-day meeting discussions focused on the interlinkages between gender equality and women’s economic empowerment; care policies; and human capital development and dignity and rights of caregivers and care receivers.
2. Chaired by representatives from the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians, the meeting comprised six sessions and emphasized sharing best practices and strategies to promote women’s economic empowerment.
3. The meeting brought together 35 parliamentarians (29 women and 6 men) from 18 Arab countries, as well as 55 observers (parliamentary staff, government officials, and representatives of international and civil society organizations).

I. Opening Session

4. The opening speeches were delivered by Ms. Cynthia López Castro, the president of the Bureau of women Parliamentarians, IPU, and member of parliament from Mexico; Ms. Mehrinaz Al-Awadhi, Gender, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster leader, ESCWA; Ms. Susan Michael Eldhagen, Director of the Regional Office for Arab States, UN WOMEN; and Ms. Ruba Jaradat, Director of the Regional Office for Arab States, ILO.
5. Speeches emphasized the vital role of parliamentarians to advance care related legal frameworks and to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 5 on gender equality. They underscored the profound impact of COVID-19 crisis on care work, and on women’s economic participation and highlighted interconnectedness of care on sustainable development goals including Sustainable Development 8 on decent work. They also stressed the importance of investing in the care economy.

II. Sessions and Discussions

A. Day 1 Sessions

6. Ms. Farida Ilimi Haddouche, an Algerian Member of Parliament (MP) and First Vice-President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians chaired the sessions of the first day.

7. Throughout the sessions, participants called for and stressed the urgency of a cease fire in Gaza.

1. *Session 1: The 2030 Agenda and progress with SDG achievement in the Arab region and around the world*

8. The first session was moderated by Ms. Maisaa Youssef, Agenda 2030 and SDG Coordination Cluster Leader, ESCWA, who pointed out to the slow progress in the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 indicators in the region, despite the commendable efforts of the Arab States.

9. Ms. Jana El Baba, Sustainable Development Officer, ESCWA, presented an overview of the progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda in the region, considering the seventeen goals, their indicators, and related policies. She highlighted Arab States’ efforts towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals and targets while acknowledging persistently low development indicators, attributed in part to conflicts including

the Gaza war. Progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was presented borrowing findings from a forthcoming ESCWA report which shed light on legal reforms to promote gender equality and combat sexual harassment, alongside economic empowerment initiatives. Challenges in data collection and gender-based disparities were underscored, with six Arab countries ranking among the world's twenty most unequal States. Economic downturns due to conflict were raised, including increased unemployment, rising public debt, and reduced tax revenues. Marginalization of Arab women, particularly in low-paying sectors like agriculture and fisheries, was noted as hindering SDGs achievements. Additionally, the pivotal role of Arab parliaments in overcoming challenges such as limited independence, weak oversight, political divisions, corruption, misuse of public funds, and constraints on civil liberties was emphasized, underscoring the necessity of parliamentary action for sustainable development.

10. The first session also included a presentation on how parliaments around the world can contribute to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, delivered by Ms. Aleksandra Blagojevic, Development Program Manager, IPU. It covered parliamentarians' roles in global SDG implementation, stressing the importance of parliaments in participating in the reporting under the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) before the UN on the progress in implementing the SDGs. Efforts over the past four years and key observations were highlighted, including challenges and successes encountered by national parliaments. Based on parliamentary answers to an IPU survey on parliamentary involvement in VNRs, most respondent parliaments stated they are informed on the process, but only half of them were provided with a consultation plan that included a role for the parliament. An examination of VNRs over time shows a growing inclusion of parliaments in the process although only a quarter of the submitted VNRs reference parliaments as contributors to the report.

11. Ensuing discussions emphasized the significance of parliamentary engagement in women's economic empowerment globally and showcasing efforts in Egypt and Kuwait. Challenges such as educational and occupational disparities, wage gaps, and limited access to resources were identified, along with the need for effective exchange on policies and legislations among countries. Examples included laws in Kuwait supporting women's rights in care work and protection from domestic violence.

12. Participants also shared experiences in advancing gender equality in their countries. Despite significant challenges, Syria remains committed to sustainable development, with laws such as Law no. 23 of 2014 providing for social insurance to cover both men and women, and Law no. 2 of 2016 fostering small business growth and female participation. Bahrain's Supreme Council for Women, established in 2001, exerts continuous efforts on promoting gender equality and economic empowerment. In Lebanon, the Women's and Children Parliamentary Committee identified women's issues during COVID-19 through participatory public hearings and established a process to address them. Saudi Arabia reported an increase in female labour force participation and economic contributions following the implementation of the Saudi Vision 2030, highlighting the importance of gender equality laws and male involvement for achieving equality.

*2. Session 2: Why is SDG 5 a catalyst for the achievement of all SDGs?
How is it progressing in the Arab region?*

13. The second session was moderated by Ms. Nada Darwazeh, Chief of ESCWA Center for Women, and included a presentation by Ms. Lemonia Fokaidou, Programme Specialist at UN Women Regional Office for Arab States, on the importance of SDG 5 and a snapshot of Gender Equality across SDGs. The presentation emphasized the critical importance of achieving Sustainable Development Goal 5 as a catalyst of all other SDGs, highlighting the pressing need to end discrimination and violence against women and girls while striving for gender equality. Despite some global progress - 15 per cent of the indicators within Goal 5 have been achieved, with 61 per cent of them at a moderate level of progress, and 23 per cent remaining significantly distant- the Arab region faces challenges in achieving gender equality by 2030, with existing legal barriers hindering women's economic participation in many countries. The Arab region is no exception as 178 countries around the globe have legal barriers preventing women from full economic participation,

compounded by other factors leading to approximately 2.4 billion women of working age lacking equal economic opportunities.

14. A presentation on the Inter-Parliamentary Union's [handbook for parliamentarians on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#), was also delivered by Ms. Zeina Hilal, Manager of the Gender Partnership Programme, IPU. The presentation provided highlights from the practical tools and case studies from various countries included in the guide, urging parliamentarians to take action and utilize available support to eliminate gender discrimination effectively. Attendees were encouraged to explore the handbook thoroughly for impactful parliamentary work.

15. The subsequent discussions shed light on examples from several countries. Morocco has made significant strides in bolstering women's rights and gender equality by integrating principles of justice, equality, and equal opportunities into the country's constitution. Moreover, Algeria's priorities regarding women's economic empowerment and political and social rights have been persistent since independence, evidenced by laws promoting gender equality in the workforce, supporting women's advancement in leadership roles, and safeguarding them from violence. A participant from Egypt highlighted the economic growth correlated with increased female workforce participation in the country, emphasizing that achieving gender parity is a priority in Egypt's Vision 2030 action plan. Efforts to remove cultural barriers and gender-biased labour policies are underway, with collaborations between the National Council for Women and international entities like the World Bank, supported by the UK Embassy in Egypt, and aim at enhancing gender equality in the private sector through various initiatives such as evaluation, recruitment, professional development, work-life balance policies, and combating harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

16. The discussion, furthermore, highlighted strides towards gender equality in Syria and Saudi Arabia. In Syria, constitutional commitments and legal reforms underscore the pursuit of gender parity in rights and opportunities. Efforts are underway to align laws with sustainable development goals and enhance women's access to education, healthcare, and employment. Meanwhile, in Saudi Arabia, Vision 2030 related initiatives have led to advancements in empowering women across various sectors. Reforms focus on creating a safe work environment, ensuring equal opportunities, and boosting women's economic participation. Notable measures include prohibiting wage discrimination and implementing programs to support women in the workforce. Both countries have seen substantial progress in economic participation indicators, indicating positive shifts towards gender equality.

3. Session 3: SDG 5.4 - The care economy and women's economic empowerment

17. Ms. Nada Darwazeh, moderated the session, which commenced with a practical exercise for participants conducted by Mr. Wessel van den Berg, Senior Advocacy Officer at Equimundo. The exercise aimed to clarify the impact of different professions and caregiving tasks on freedom in making decisions in daily life related to time organization and utilization. The exercise confirmed that women bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, whether paid or unpaid, and lack sufficient leisure time compared to men. Discussions stressed the imperative of men's involvement in caregiving to enhance women's economic empowerment and achieve societal balance. Furthermore, traditional gender roles were recognized as perpetuating inequality, with women predominantly assuming caregiving responsibilities. However, there is a gradual shift in the Arab region, with women's increased participation in policymaking and parliaments heralding a redefinition of societal norms. Cultural norms were highlighted, emphasizing the need for equitable participation of men in household chores and childcare. The evolving role of female parliamentarians signals a departure from traditional gender roles, reflecting changing societal perceptions and paving the way for greater equality.

18. Additionally, the session explored through a presentation by Ms. Rouba Arja, Social Affairs Officer, ESCWA, caregiving in the Arab region, focusing on its legal and policy frameworks. It underscored women's predominant role in unpaid caregiving, impacting their workforce participation and access to paid caregiving roles. Challenges encompassed ensuring social protection and favorable working conditions for care providers, addressed through policy frameworks advocating for recognition, redistribution of unpaid care and

representation of paid care workers. Efforts in the Arab region was acknowledged but deemed incomplete, necessitating expanded leave policies, flexible work arrangements, and workplace daycare facilities. ESCWA's contributions to advancing care economy were noted, particularly their [studies on women's economic empowerment and caregiving](#), revealing institutional shortcomings in integrating caregiving into policies and strategies and emphasizing the need for sectoral visions and laws acknowledging intersectionality.

19. Discussions during the session highlighted Algeria's commitment to women's participation in decision-making and education. Oman's progress since the 1970s was noted, with women excelling in various sectors, including diplomacy and investment promotion. In Syria, rural women play vital caregiving roles, necessitating women's economic empowerment and decision-making autonomy despite challenges.

20. The wrap up at the end of the first day highlighted the challenges in the Arab region affecting sustainable development goals, especially gender equality and women's empowerment. It stressed the need for laws recognizing and redistributing caregiving duties to enable economic empowerment and ensure rights and dignity for caregivers and recipients. Parliamentarians were urged to enact legislation supporting women's economic empowerment, including equal pay, protection from workplace harassment, and investment in the care economy. They were encouraged to be well-informed about caregiving and associated rights to facilitate law reforms.

B. Day 2 Sessions

21. Ms. Aida Naseef Ayyoub, an Egyptian MP and Second Vice-President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians chaired the sessions of the second day.

1. Session 4: Advancing care related labour policies

22. Mr. Oussama Safa, Chief of the Social Justice Section, ESCWA, moderated the fourth session, which commenced with a presentation on International Labour Standards (ILS) related to care work delivered by Ms. Zeina Mezher, WE CARE Project Manager at the International Labour Organization (ILO). The presentation emphasized the importance of adhering to ILS for achieving social justice, decent work, economic stability, poverty reduction, sustainable development, and international cooperation. It highlighted the role of parliamentarians in providing input and advice on labour conventions and bilateral labour agreements before they are adopted, and the ILO's provision of necessary technical assistance to constituents and policy makers on international labour standards and national policy updates. Using examples from the Arab region, the ratification of the Equal Remuneration Convention was illustrated as a key element that parliaments can promote. The presentation also emphasized parliamentarians' role in promoting national adherence to international labour standards especially in relation to standards relevant to the care sector such as parental leave. Discussion revolved around the role of parliamentarians in contributing to evidence-based research, legislation, policy formulation, gender budget monitoring, and encouraging social dialogue between employers, workers, and governments so the standards are adopted and applied.

23. The session continued with presentations by parliamentarians. MP Dr. Inaya Ezzedine shared Lebanon's experiences in submitting two family-friendly bills in 2023. She emphasized the need for legislative amendments, particularly in labour laws, to accommodate flexible work arrangements, promoting gender equality and social justice while balancing women's rights in both the workplace and family life. Emphasis was placed on equal opportunities for children and mothers, advocating for early childhood education and workplace flexibility. Legislative amendments proposed in 2023 included also the increase of maternity leave to 14 weeks, establishment of paternity leave, breastfeeding breaks, provisions for nurseries in the workplace or, if/when not possible provision of subsidies, and removing specific care-related discriminatory clauses against women in the social security law. The two bills were submitted following a participatory process including public hearings to identify needs, national consultations and knowledge production.

24. MP Ms. Mayada Shreem, shared the experience of advancing legislative measures in Jordan in support to caregivers, including maternal insurance and nursery care programs under social security laws, to achieve the rights of paid care providers and to promote gender equality and economic participation. The challenges necessitating the reforms included unequal pay, insecure employment, and short-term contracts, with efforts resulting in a revised contract reflecting recommendations after seven years of consultations and cooperation. Amendments allocated funds for maternal social protection programs, benefiting around 28,000 families, offering financial aid to working mothers and childcare support. The amended law mandates employers to provide childcare facilities, easing family responsibilities' redistribution. However, compliance challenges persist, leading to employees' hesitancy in asserting their rights. Ministry-led awareness campaigns are crucial to educate citizens about their rights under this law. Example of Article 69's of the labor code was provided which aimed to protect pregnant women, individuals with disabilities, and night shift workers. While it granted more work freedom for women, some criticized its vagueness, allowing ministerial intervention that could impede women's employment opportunities, contradicting anti-discrimination clauses. It was amended in 2023.

25. The discussions further tackled examples and practices from countries. Lebanon's equal pay law which provides for penalties imposed on an employer who discriminates between male and female workers was highlighted. However, discrimination may occur in the nominations for capacity building programs and training which impact career path and development, as well as women's access to managerial positions.

26. A participant from Syria pointed out the impact of economic crises on living conditions and healthcare, advocating for proposals supporting caregivers and parental leave. Syria introduced laws protecting children's rights and establishing agencies for unclaimed childcare and education. Additionally, organizations in Syria focus on developing care for chronically ill and elderly individuals.

27. In Mauritania, efforts have been made to allocate budgets to childcare facilities, and to education and training for women and girls, as well as to guarantee equal pay in the law.

28. The Arab Parliament's recent document addressed economic barriers to women's empowerment and promoted gender equality. Efforts include drafting laws and resolutions to enhance women's rights on international and regional levels, alongside empowering Arab female parliamentarians and updating legal frameworks. The role of parliamentarians in discussing and contributing to international agreements on standards was also discussed. Most often, parliaments intervene after government's input, at the time of ratification, limiting lawmakers' ability to amend them. Internal dialogue between government, employers, and workers, advocating for equal parental leave to address discrimination against women in employment due to potential maternity leave costs was also raised and discussed. Parliament has a pivotal role to play by fostering such dialogues and following up on implementation of existing standards, including by conducting hearings, consulting civil society and receiving complaints. Awareness-raising efforts are equally important to achieve the needed reforms.

2. Session 5: Opportunities created by promoting the rights of paid care workers

29. Ms. Rouba Arja, moderated the fifth session, which included a presentation on the rights of paid care workers delivered by Ms. Sophia Kagan, FAIRWAY Chief Technical Advisor, ILO. The global workforce in paid care encompasses 381 million individuals, primarily in healthcare, education, and domestic work, with women constituting a significant portion. Key elements for decent care work include recognition of unpaid care, its redistribution, representation of care workers, and capacity building for collective bargaining. Addressing vulnerable groups like domestic workers, including migrants and those in informal economies is crucial, with promising national investments in transformative care packages highlighted – especially in education, healthcare and social work. Analyzing financial and operational aspects for sustainable care financing, identifying gaps, and promoting innovative solutions are emphasized, along with the need for legal and policy reviews to ensure decent work in care professions and enhance worker representation and participation in social dialogues and unions.

30. The floor was also opened for parliamentary interventions and contributions on approaches promoting policy change to ensure the rights of paid care workers. Discussions underscored Syria's strategic plan for gender equality, emphasizing economic empowerment, the reduction of domestic violence, increased female participation in decision-making, healthcare, and education access. The session also highlighted obstacles in childcare and women's employment in Lebanon, including funding inadequacies and quality discrepancies between public and private daycare, advocating for a flexible labour law.

31. Moreover, it highlighted global gender disparities in wages and caregiving burdens, exacerbated by COVID-19, stressing the need for comprehensive political leadership, investment, and reforms to integrate gender equality into national strategies. These same needs are visible for the Arab countries Discussion therefore included a proposal to establish union bodies, at the national level, to monitor regulations, wages, and systems for care service providers, advocating for social-cultural improvement and legal frameworks to address societal norms.

32. Furthermore, final remarks emphasized the challenge of balancing household and paid work for women, advocating for increased daycare services and female union engagement to improve policymaking. Social protection for care workers and protection from harassment at work also require strengthening.

3. *Session 6: I care to care – Advancing equal care in and through parliament*

33. Mr. Oussama Safa, moderated the last session of the meeting, which began with a presentation on the “[State of the World's Fathers 2023](#)” Report and the [International Men and Gender Equality Survey \(IMAGES\) for the Middle East and North Africa region](#), delivered by Mr. Wessel van den Berg, Senior Advocacy Officer at Equimundo. The presentation highlighted the importance of policy reforms to involve men more in caregiving, challenging stereotypes. The above-mentioned reports highlight men's increasing advocacy for caregiving reforms and the significance of caregiving policies, addressing concerns such as the cost of living. The COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the importance of caregiving. However, the reports indicate limited views on gender equality among youth and elderly men, with gradual improvements observed among men in their thirties but stagnation overall, particularly in the MENA region. Studies also reveal an unequal distribution of unpaid caregiving tasks, with men typically engaging in less demanding activities like playing with children or taking them to school.

34. During the roundtable discussion, Moroccan MP Ms. Koloub Faitah, made a presentation about recent legislative reforms, including advancements in women's empowerment and protection against discrimination, particularly in rural areas, starting with the 2004 Family Code. Efforts to strengthen gender equality in public service employment include legal enhancements to improve women's working conditions while preserving their rights, aligning with Morocco's principle of shared responsibility within families. The application of International Labor Organization Convention 183 on maternity protection has been integrated into Moroccan law since April 13, 2011. Additionally, measures have been enacted to support maternity rights and equal childcare responsibilities, including amendments to the General Regulations of Public Service, granting male employees 15 consecutive days of paternity leave and extending breastfeeding leave to 24 months. Morocco is committed to furthering women's economic empowerment through initiatives like expanding childcare facilities, improving transportation access, enhancing workplace conditions, and promoting financial inclusion.

35. Furthermore, MP Mr. Tim Loughton from the UK presented about work to promote fatherhood. He highlighted changes in the UK Parliament over the past decade, including allowing members to bring their children to sessions and extending paternity leave to three months. Emphasizing the importance of legislation concerning both parents and not only mothers, six key aspects were identified that require both parents' involvement, namely psychological and cognitive development, social development, gender role development, support and encouragement, discipline and guidance, physical health and mental health. Research shows that involvement of both parents from an early age is critical for a child's brain development, especially in the first 1,001 days of life, promoting school readiness. Moreover, the discussion moved towards the impact of domestic violence during pregnancy on child development as well as the significant impact of parents' mental

health on children. It was also noted that women globally spend four times more time than men on unpaid care work, and stressed the need to address parents' mental health and equal participation in caregiving. A British survey showed the extent of social pressure exerted on men as breadwinners for the family, which affects their sense of competence and masculinity, and highlighted the importance of dealing with mental health issues and removing the stigma. In the British Parliament, open discussions on this issue led to the establishment of Parliamentary Mental Health Services.

36. Discussions expanded to include parental leave related to the loss of a child and fathers' participation in the pregnancy. Changing social norms requires educational and awareness-raising efforts. National studies should be strengthened. Proposals were also made to study the impact of relevant measures on child well-being and to conduct national studies on the impact of expanded social protection policies on women and men.

III. Conclusions

37. There remain significant efforts to be exerted to ensure the achievement of the SDGs by 2030. SDG 5 on gender equality in particular acts as a catalyst for the achievement of other SDGs, such as SDG 1, SDG 4, and especially SDG 8. Women's economic empowerment is crucial to achieving the SDGs as a whole.

38. The Arab region continues to present one of the largest gender gaps in the world, as it still exhibits one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation, which was estimated to be 19.5 per cent in 2023 by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Arab women perform the bulk of unpaid care work and devote 4.7 times more of their time to carrying unpaid care tasks than men, which negatively impacts their labour force participation. Paid care workers, the majority of whom are women, work in less-than-ideal conditions, with their work being undervalued and underpaid.

39. Care work is a public good and is extremely important to society; for instance, childcare contributes to human capital development, while care provided to older persons and persons with disabilities helps preserve their dignity and well-being. Men also play a role in the provision of both paid and unpaid care work; men's role is particularly important from a child development perspective and from a gender equality perspective. Therefore, care responsibilities should not be solely borne by women.

40. Parliamentarians can shape policy directions and priorities and help build a solid legal framework. They can promote and monitor the implementation of laws that deal with women's economic empowerment and the care economy. They can make sure that unpaid care work is recognized, reduced and redistributed among the different stakeholders and that paid care workers are represented and rewarded. They can enhance laws and policies to guarantee equal pay, protection from harassment at work, decent work and social protection. Through investments in education, awareness raising, data collection and cross-sector dialogues it is possible to achieve the needed reforms and ensure accountability.

41. There presently is real momentum – both internationally and within Arab national agendas – to enhance women's economic participation through the work of parliament.

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