



**Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)**

Committee on Women  
Tenth session  
Beirut, 16-17 November 2021



Item 9 of the provisional agenda

## **Building forward better after the COVID-19 pandemic**

### **Summary**

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on various structural gaps in the Arab region, which have translated into worsening social and economic conditions, and a dramatic deterioration in the status of women and their livelihoods. The present document provides examples of areas with prominent structural gaps, including violence against women and girls, women's representation in public life, and economic empowerment. It introduces practical recommendations to help policymakers build forward better after the pandemic, and implement better integrated national policies during the recovery process.

The present document presents strategies developed by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to support member States in designing gender mainstreamed policies. It is complemented by document E/ESCWA/C.7/2021/6 on tools developed by ESCWA to support member States in improving national institutions, strengthening legislation, and developing measures in socioeconomic areas of concern. The Committee on Women is invited to review the analysis presented and provide comments thereon.

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## Introduction

1. Across the globe, women earn less, save less, hold less secure jobs, and are more likely to be employed in the informal sector. They have less access to social protection and are the majority of single-parent households. Their capacity to absorb economic shocks is, therefore, less than that of men.<sup>1</sup>
2. The Arab region is no different. Women's access to, and control over, resources was uneven prior to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has aggravated women's marginalized position in the region, and has had a disproportionate impact on women and girls by exacerbating pre-existing inequalities with alarming social and economic repercussions for women, including increased reports of violence against them.<sup>2</sup> Violence against women and girls has become a 'shadow pandemic' globally and in the region.<sup>3</sup>
3. Although most Arab countries developed responsive plans to mitigate the economic and social impact of the pandemic, they have largely overlooked women's needs.<sup>4</sup> Across the region, a total investment of around \$150 billion was made in financial packages and social protection measures;<sup>5</sup> however, in many instances, these measures did not always take into consideration the unequal starting position of men and women. Of the total fiscal support announced by Arab Governments, only 1.2 per cent went to gender responsive measure with women as beneficiaries, including women employees, women entrepreneurs, households headed by women, and survivors of violence against women (VAW).<sup>6</sup> Moreover, few countries adopted sexual and reproductive health responses, although \$14.5 billion was allocated for health support measures in Arab countries<sup>7</sup>. In addition, prevention and redress of violence against women remained largely unaddressed in national response plans.<sup>8</sup>
4. Gender blind measures and inadequate mitigating efforts to address women's needs resulting from the pandemic have drawn attention to structural gaps in the Arab region, which limit women's access to relief and mitigation mechanisms developed by Governments. However, as the world is moving towards post-pandemic recovery, it is crucial to capitalize on lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis. Therefore, building forward better requires incorporating measures to address structural barriers.<sup>9</sup>
5. The present document provides an overview of the Arab region's response to mitigating the consequences of the COVID-19 crisis from a gender perspective. It also provides recommendations on approaches to build forward better, with a focus on building the capacity of national women's machineries, strengthening legal and policy frameworks to eliminate discrimination against women, and supporting

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women, 2020. Available at [www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-en-1.pdf](http://www.un.org/sexualviolenceinconflict/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/report/policy-brief-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women/policy-brief-the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-women-en-1.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Population Fund, *Arab States Region COVID-19 Situation Report No. 8*, 2020. Available at <https://arabstates.unfpa.org/en/publications/arab-states-region-covid-19-situation-report-no-8>.

<sup>3</sup> Statement by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director of UN-Women, 6 April 2020. Available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/04/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>.

<sup>4</sup> ESCWA, COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving women and girls further behind or a potential opportunity for gender equality? (forthcoming).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> United Nations, COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker. Available at <http://tracker.unescwa.org>.

<sup>7</sup> ESCWA, COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving women and girls further behind or a potential opportunity for gender equality? (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> UN-Women, Violence against women and girls: the shadow pandemic, 2020. Available at <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/04/statement-ed-phumzile-violence-against-women-during-pandemic>.

<sup>9</sup> ESCWA, COVID-19 Pandemic: Leaving women and girls further behind or a potential opportunity for gender equality? (forthcoming).

socioeconomic development measures to increase women's participation in the public sphere. The present document is complemented by document E/ESCWA/C.7/2021/6 on tools developed by ESCWA to support member States during the recovery and in building forward better.

## **I. Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women in the Arab region**

6. In the past decade, Arab countries have exerted considerable efforts to address gender inequality and women's empowerment in the civil, political, social and economic spheres. This is evidenced by the accession of 20 countries to and their reporting on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and the commitment of all Arab countries to the quinquennial reporting on the Beijing Platform for Action.

7. There has also been an increase in gender-sensitive legal reform, including enacting laws to remove barriers to women's access to labour markets; ensuring equal remuneration for work of equal value; combatting domestic violence and sexual harassment and holding perpetrators to account; and developing, endorsing and implementing strategies and policies covering a wide range of priority issues, such as national women's strategies, strategies to combat violence against women, and national action plans on women, peace and security.

8. Prior to and since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, national women's machineries have engaged with a variety of stakeholders to ensure that gender considerations and needs are mainstreamed in measures adopted to contain the social and economic impact of this unprecedented global crisis. Strategies utilized by national women's machineries included building alliances with civil society, actively engaging with government officials to address emerging issues, providing expertise for comprehensive gender-sensitive policymaking, and integrating women's voices on a range of issues.

9. However, despite this progress, the Arab region still lags behind other regions, and women are far from realizing their equal social and economic rights and access to resources and opportunities. International indices such as the gender gap show that despite progress on several fronts, the Middle East and North Africa remains the region with the largest gender gap, standing at 60.9 per cent in 2021<sup>10</sup> compared with 60.5 per cent in 2020.<sup>11</sup> The 2019 Global Peace Index shows that 5 of the 10 worse performing countries are from the Arab region.<sup>12</sup>

10. Arab countries have adopted a variety of policies, strategies and action plans to address gender equality issues, combat violence against women, including national action plans on women, peace and security, which have proven vital to enhancing countries' efforts in addressing many of the structural inequalities between men and women. For example, the pandemic has shown that responding to the women, peace and security agenda not only serves as an analytical and policy-oriented framework for the Arab region owing to its unprecedented peace and security challenges, but also acts as an early warning tool to improve countries' emergency preparedness.

### **A. Violence against women and girls**

11. The Secretary-General of the United Nations has repeatedly stressed the importance of scaling up efforts on eliminating violence against women, so as to align national legal and institutional frameworks with

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<sup>10</sup> World Economic Forum, Global Gender Gap Report, 2021, p. 7. Available at [www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2021.pdf](http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2021.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, Women, Peace and Security Index, 2019, p. 2. Available at <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/the-index/>.

international instruments and standards.<sup>13</sup> This better equips countries to face increasing violence in times of crisis and in conflict settings. If not dealt with, this shadow pandemic will add to the economic impact of COVID-19. In the past, violence against women had cost the Arab region around \$245 billion annually.<sup>14</sup> This figure is rising as violence increases in severity and scale in the aftermath of the pandemic, as a result of government measures to restrict movement.

12. Many Arab countries have enacted recent reforms to criminal laws, including abolishing the so-called ‘marry-your-rapist’ laws, abolishing laws mitigating punishment for femicide, passing laws prohibiting female genital mutilation and child marriage, and strengthening antitrafficking laws. Notwithstanding these positive changes, regionally there is a long way to go towards gender equality within the law. For example, some States continue to hold reservations to CEDAW. A majority of countries have not enacted stand-alone domestic violence legislation, and do not criminalize marital rape or sexual harassment in public. Services for women survivors of violence are limited and inaccessible to a large segment of the targeted population, and social barriers continue to hinder women from seeking help. Moreover, few national legal or accountability frameworks are in place for gender-based violence during conflict.

13. During the pandemic, violence against women and girls has increased in severity and scale. The measures taken to restrict movement and ensure physical isolation have led to social isolation, and contributed to increased violence against women and girls.<sup>15</sup> Women and girls across the Arab region are experiencing intersecting inequalities, and their access to external support, such as social services<sup>16</sup> and shelters,<sup>17</sup> is limited. Significant demographic groups of women and girls are consequently more at risk, such as those who are imprisoned, displaced, or have a disability.

14. A recent report by the World Health Organizations estimates that 35.4 per cent of ever-married women in the region have experienced one form of intimate partner violence. Yet, and despite the high prevalence of violence against women in the region, the highest in the world, national data is still lacking and, if available, is not produced on a regular basis. Only 9 of 22 Arab countries have conducted stand-alone household surveys on violence against women, or have included a relevant module in a health survey such as the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS) or the Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS). Some of these surveys are recent and others go back to 2006. Furthermore, some surveys were conducted only once, which does not allow for tracking and comparability. Standalone surveys were implemented in the Comoros (DHS 2012), Egypt (VAW survey 2015; DHS 2014), Iraq (IWISH 2011), Jordan (DHS 2017), Mauritania (VAW survey 2011), Morocco (VAW survey 2019; DHS 2018), the State of Palestine (VAW survey 2011, 2015 and 2019), Somalia (DHS 2019), and Tunisia (VAW survey 2011).<sup>18</sup>

15. Estimating the economic cost of violence against women, which emerged as a key tool to help policymakers allocate national budget, track changes and introduce concrete policy reform, is not

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<sup>13</sup> Secretary-General's video message on gender-based violence and COVID-19, 5 April 2020. Available at [www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-05/secretary-generals-video-message-gender-based-violence-and-covid-19-scroll-down-for-french](http://www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2020-04-05/secretary-generals-video-message-gender-based-violence-and-covid-19-scroll-down-for-french).

<sup>14</sup> ESCWA, Press release: Arab stakeholders agree on priorities for gender equality and women's empowerment in the coming five years, 2019. Available at [www.unescwa.org/news/arab-stakeholders-agree-priorities-gender-equality-and-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-coming-five-years](http://www.unescwa.org/news/arab-stakeholders-agree-priorities-gender-equality-and-women%E2%80%99s-empowerment-coming-five-years).

<sup>15</sup> United Nations, *Violence against Women and Girls and COVID-19 in the Arab Region*, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/violence-against-women-girls-COVID-19-arab-region-english\\_0.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/violence-against-women-girls-COVID-19-arab-region-english_0.pdf).

<sup>16</sup> ESCWA and others, *An essential pathway: Service provider coordination and referral systems in the Arab region* (forthcoming).

<sup>17</sup> ESCWA and others, *Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the Arab region*, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/20-00131\\_gpid\\_pb\\_eng\\_apr5.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/20-00131_gpid_pb_eng_apr5.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> ESCWA, *Arab Gender Gap Report*, 2019, p. 139.

systematically used in the Arab region. Egypt, Morocco and the State of Palestine are the only Arab countries that have undertaken such an exercise.

## **B. Women's economic empowerment**

16. The female labour force participation rate in the Arab region, standing at around 20 per cent, is the lowest worldwide.<sup>19</sup> This rate is coupled with high unemployment reaching 19.5 per cent in 2019, compared with 9 per cent for men.<sup>20</sup> Although prior to the pandemic it was evident that women were more at risk of facing income inequalities as compared with their male counterparts, the crisis has amplified the high levels of pre-pandemic informality in the region. In addition, the pandemic has revealed that many categories of workers are not covered by social protection schemes and labour market measures. Another major revelation was the vulnerability of women and their inability to respond to shocks, which have led to an enormous impact on their livelihoods and wellbeing.

17. About 62 per cent of active women work in the informal sector in the Arab region.<sup>21</sup> Data show that the percentage of women in the informal sector stood at 48 per cent in Iraq, 49 per cent in Algeria, 83 per cent in Morocco, and as high as 87 per cent in Mauritania in 2017.<sup>22</sup> Women's weak economic participation is partially linked to their significant involvement in unpaid care work.

### *1. Labour market*

18. The other challenge hindering women's economic participation is that labour market policies and strategies in some countries disregard the needs of women, especially women with disabilities. An additional challenge is the mismatch between the education system and the demands of the labour market, and the inability of women to meet market demands because of a skills mismatch.

19. Even before the COVID-19 crisis, progress towards gender equality in the labour market had been uneven.<sup>23</sup> In addition to the world's lowest female labour force participation rates, the Arab region registers significant gender gaps in accessing the labour market. Women in the Arab region are often employed in low-paid formal and informal jobs, and are rarely seen in leadership roles. Furthermore, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates that 73.3 per cent of women in the Arab region are outside the labour force owing to their care responsibilities.<sup>24</sup> The belief that men are breadwinners and women are caregivers is a dominant stereotype in the Arab region, in addition to social prejudices, restrictive gender norms, and legal and regulatory frameworks that continue to perceive women in their conventional roles as carers, thus limiting their agency.

20. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the deep pre-existing gender inequalities in the Arab labour market, and has worsened these inequalities and discrimination against women in several areas. While the

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<sup>19</sup> Analysis in this section is based on ESCWA, COVID-19 pandemic: Leaving women and girls further behind or a potential opportunity for gender equality? (forthcoming). The paper builds on the ESCWA COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker, available at [www.unescwa.org/covid-19-stimulus-tracker](http://www.unescwa.org/covid-19-stimulus-tracker).

<sup>20</sup> International Labour Organization, *World Employment Social Outlook*, 2019. Available at [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_670542.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_670542.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> ESCWA, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the Arab region, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/impact\\_of\\_COVID\\_on\\_gender\\_equality\\_-\\_policy\\_brief.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/impact_of_COVID_on_gender_equality_-_policy_brief.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> Samit Aita, Informal labor in the Arab countries: facts and rights, 2017. Available at <https://refugees-partners.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Informal-Labor-in-the-Arab-Countries-EN.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> The 2020 Global Gender Gap Report notes that it would take 135.6 years to close the global gender gap, and to achieve gender parity. See [www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality](http://www.weforum.org/reports/gender-gap-2020-report-100-years-pay-equality).

<sup>24</sup> ILO, Care work and care jobs for the future of decent work, 2018. Available at [www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS\\_633135/lang--en/index.htm](http://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_633135/lang--en/index.htm).

impact of months of lockdown on labour markets in the region is yet to be fully explored, initial research findings indicate that women in formal and informal labour will be affected drastically. The pandemic has hit women entrepreneurs and workers particularly hard, as their economic activities are largely concentrated in the manufacturing and service industries, such as health care, retail, hospitality and food services, which have suffered the most under pandemic lockdown measures, and have inevitably impacted more women than men.<sup>25</sup>

21. As part of their national response plans, Arab Governments have taken 74 measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic on labour markets. These measures include wage subsidies to employers against layoffs; paid leave or work from home; labour regulation adjustments; work hours adjustment; and activation (training). Bahrain, for example, announced that economic sectors most adversely affected by COVID-19 repercussions would be further supported by the Labour Fund (*Tamkeen*) according to the controls and conditions approved by its Board of Directors. In Qatar, employers continued to pay basic wages and other allowances, such as food and housing, according to contracts in sectors, activities and services that continued to operate during lockdown periods. In contrast, employers in other sectors, which were enforced to stop their work due to precautionary measures to combat the spread of the pandemic, had the option of agreeing with workers to either take unpaid leave or annual leave, reduce working hours, or to temporarily reduce wages.

22. The majority of labour market-related measures taken by various Arab countries targeted the formal labour markets, and were channelled through their existing structures. Furthermore, only a few measures can be considered gender-responsive and fall under the category of care policies, as identified by ILO, which take into account women's unpaid care work. The measures taken by Arab Governments mainly include paid leave for pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers, and mothers of children under 12 years. Notwithstanding the above, low female participation in the formal labour market, combined with the high rate of women working in the informal sector and high unemployment among women in the region, reveals that a majority of women in the labour market were excluded from government measures.

23. Further challenges facing women labour force participation are anticipated as the Fourth Industrial Revolution is expected to erode current labour opportunities in lieu of new emerging market needs. Nonetheless, this would create new opportunities if countries positively engage with its outcomes, understand emerging market demands, and formulate education and labour market policies that respond to changing demand. This will also require more resilience and responsive economic policies linked to the business, spatial and financial environment, economic governance, and adequate and responsive infrastructure, which require a resilient urban context to ensure an effective response and recovery.

## 2. Social protection

24. Social protection is a fundamental human right and is considered essential for attaining sustainable development, as affirmed by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Social protection is defined as “all measures providing benefits in cash or in-kind to guarantee income security and access to health care”.<sup>26</sup> These measures encompass social assistance policies – non-contributory social protection – including cash transfers and subsidies; and social security measures – contributory social protection mechanisms – such as old-age pensions, disability benefits, maternity and unemployment benefits.

25. Provision of social protection is also a key mechanism to eliminate poverty. However, it raises several challenges, including eligibility criteria and identifying evidence-based targeted policies for eliminating poverty. Hence, a broader understanding of multidimensional poverty, rather than a pure monetary assessment, would help ensure that social protection measures not only address the immediate ramifications of poverty but also its long-term underlying causes.

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<sup>25</sup> ESCWA, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on gender equality in the Arab region, 2020.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *Promoting Inclusion through Social Protection: Report on the World Social Situation*, 2018. Available at [www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/07/1-1.pdf](http://www.un.org/development/desa/dspd/wp-content/uploads/sites/22/2018/07/1-1.pdf).

26. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, many Arab countries were investing in improving social security schemes, with the goal of extending social, health-care and insurance coverage to self-employed and selected groups (such as persons with disabilities, older persons and school children). In addition, efforts in Arab countries were ongoing to shift from general subsidies to other forms of social assistance, notably cash transfers, as well as improving social and health assistance distribution channels for individuals and households.<sup>27</sup> However, expenditures in the Arab region on social protection remain low compared with other regions.<sup>28</sup>

27. Few Arab countries took the initiative to extend social protection programmes to specifically target women. For instance, Egypt has a conditional cash transfer programme known as *Takaful* and *Karama*. This programme is aimed primarily at women, and nearly 2 million women have benefited from it. Algeria offers an ‘Algerian solidarity grant’, under which the State provides direct assistance to disadvantaged groups, and women constitute two thirds of beneficiaries. Nonetheless, social protection programmes targeting women in the region remain inadequate, especially for domestic workers, and migrant and refugee women. Informal workers, mainly women, constitute the large share of the ‘missing middle’, and are not covered by social assistance or social protection measures.<sup>29</sup>

28. Notwithstanding such successful programmes, informality and unemployment are two key factors that contribute to keeping women without social insurance coverages, prone to vulnerability and suffering from gender-related inequalities, particularly during economic crises, thus limiting women’s equal access to COVID-19 crisis response measures through social security programmes.

29. Understanding State responsiveness to the crisis allows for better identification of structural gaps, and provides an opportunity to examine and learn about other countries’ (with similar socioeconomic conditions) response to mitigate challenges posed by the pandemic. According to the [COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker](#), among the 142 social assistance measures taken by Arab Governments to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, only 20 measures are considered gender-sensitive in the sense that they tend to protect women (women-headed households, women health-care providers, and older women), with only three countries providing conditional cash transfers (Egypt, Lebanon and Mauritania), and two countries providing in-kind transfers/vouchers assistance (Jordan and Kuwait).

30. Furthermore, understanding the gendered implications of multidimensional poverty would allow policymakers to evaluate how their responsiveness and social protection measures have contributed to eliminating poverty and to ensuring that no one is left behind.

### 3. *Care economy*

31. Care work is indispensable to the development of economies and societies, and is central to human wellbeing. It consists of two overlapping activities: direct, personal and relational care activities; and indirect care activities. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, research shows that care needs were increasing globally owing to a growing population, ageing societies, and changing family structures. These demographic, socioeconomic and environmental transformations are increasing demand for care workers, who are often trapped in low quality jobs. Today, no country in the world has achieved an equal share of unpaid care work between women and men. Across all regions and countries, women do more unpaid care work than men throughout the life course. According to the McKinsey Global Institute, in the Arab region, women carry out

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<sup>27</sup> ESCWA, *Social Protection Reform in the Arab Region*, 2019. Available at [https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/social-protection-reforms-arab-countries-2019-english\\_0.pdf](https://archive.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/publications/files/social-protection-reforms-arab-countries-2019-english_0.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> United Nations, *Social protection responses to the COVID-19 crisis in the MENA/Arab States region*, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*



80 to 90 per cent of all unpaid care tasks.<sup>30</sup> According to ILO, they spend, on average, 4.7 times more time than men on unpaid care tasks.<sup>31</sup>

32. The pandemic has deepened the ‘crisis of care’. However, care-related issues are core economic issues that were largely unseen or marginalized, but COVID-19 has made care issues more visible and critical. The COVID-19 crisis has brought to light, in an unprecedented way, the crucial role of care, which is predominately performed by women both as frontline health-care workers and informal care providers in their families.

33. School closures, lockdown measures, household isolation and global transport challenges are moving the work of caring for children, older persons, and persons with disabilities from the paid economy (schools, day-care centres, babysitters, personal aides) to the unpaid economy. As access to formal and informal alternatives declines, the rise in demand for unpaid care is likely to fall more heavily on women, not only because of the existing structure of the workforce, but also because of social norms and beliefs categorizing women as the main caregivers in their families.

34. As part of their COVID-19 mitigation response, few measures were implemented in Arab countries to address the care-work burden. In Egypt, pregnant women or those looking after one or more children under 12 years old are granted exceptional leave for as long as this COVID-19 measure remains in place, and allows all working mothers to fulfil their family duties without losing their jobs. In line with the Emirati Government’s aim to support employees during the crisis, the Cabinet adopted a resolution to grant paid leave to all federal government employees to care for children below the age of 16.<sup>32</sup> Realizing the importance of women’s presence on the frontline, the Bahraini Government adopted a recommendation issued by national women’s machineries to grant the spouses of women assuming vital frontline duties the opportunity to work remotely. Moreover, from the earliest stages of the outbreak, authorities were directed to enable mothers in the public sector to work from home.<sup>33</sup>

35. Arab Governments implemented 142 social assistance measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, with almost half involving cash transfers and income support amounting to an estimated \$7 billion. Surprisingly, however, none of those cash transfers or income support measures targeted the care economy. The in-kind transfers/vouchers implemented by Arab Governments channelled almost \$230 million to the most vulnerable families, but only one measure, taken by the Government of Kuwait, targeted persons living in nursing homes and in need of social care. Though limited in scope and scale, the measures taken by Arab Governments are important as they pave the way for further similar or related policy initiatives.

### **C. Women’s representation and participation in public life**

36. Women's political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality. In recent years, Arab countries have taken various measures to increase public participation, leading to an increase in the political representation of women in the region. This is evidenced by the increase in the proportion of seats held by women in parliament (both elected and appointed, in line with the political systems of each country). Despite this progress, women remain largely underrepresented at all levels of government in the Arab region. The

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<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Woetzel and others, *The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women’s Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth*, 2015, p.29. Available at [www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth](http://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth).

<sup>31</sup> ILO, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, 2018. [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_633135.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_633135.pdf).

<sup>32</sup> Emirates News Agency, UAE Cabinet adopts resolution to grant paid leave to select categories of Federal Government employees, 2020. Available at <https://wam.ae/en/details/1395302835563>.

<sup>33</sup> World Economic Forum, 3 ways Bahrain is supporting women through COVID-19 and beyond, 2020. Available at [www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/bahrain-supreme-council-women-coronavirus-pandemic/](http://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/09/bahrain-supreme-council-women-coronavirus-pandemic/).

average share of women members of parliament at the regional level stands at 16.3 per cent, which is well below the global average of 25.5 per cent.<sup>34</sup>

37. The proportion of female members of parliament in the Arab region has been steadily rising, largely as a result of quotas rolled out in an increasing number of countries,<sup>35</sup> which is a strong driver towards normalizing the presence of women in the public sphere. For example, women assumed the roles of mediators and peacebuilders in Iraq. However, more needs to be done in terms of legal and institutional reform and overcoming sociocultural barriers that discourage women from engaging in the public sphere.

38. Despite women's determination to engage in the public sphere, their efforts have been hampered by political constraints, structural and bureaucratic barriers, financial and economic constraints, lack of preparation and training, and violence during elections.<sup>36</sup> However, the pandemic has highlighted women's role in mediation, security forces, and other public positions in various Arab countries, such as Iraq and Yemen.<sup>37</sup> The pandemic has also presented an opportunity to increase women's engagement in responding to COVID-19, and meaningfully participating in public life.

39. Women's equal participation and gender-sensitive protection is needed to mitigate the gendered impact of COVID-19. The women, peace and security agenda provides a useful framework for action, as it calls for ensuring gender-sensitive responses and women's participation in all matters relevant to recovery, peace and security. It also recognizes the disproportionate and varied impact of conflict and crises on women and girls, and calls for dedicated measures to ensure women's representation in conflict prevention and resolution. National action plans should articulate and prioritize the gendered needs of women and girls in times of crisis, pandemics and conflicts.

40. Globally, women's engagement to combat the COVID-19 pandemic as health-service providers was not translated into an increased presence in leadership positions, representation and participation in policymaking forums and processes related to the pandemic. Global data show that the proportion of women on COVID-19 task forces is low, with men comprising the majority of decision makers and taskforce leaders.<sup>38</sup> Only 24 per cent of COVID-19 task forces have members who are women, and 19 per cent are female-led. The numbers in Africa and Asia, within which the Arab region lies, are lower than those in the rest of the world. Africa has only 19 per cent and Asia has 15 per cent of COVID-19 task forces with women members.<sup>39</sup>

41. Furthermore, in the Arab region, of the 829 measures taken to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, only 83 were gender-responsive, including 30 relating to care services, as shown in the table below.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Inter-Parliamentary Union. 2021. Parline - global data on national parliaments, 2021. Available at <https://data.ipu.org>.

<sup>35</sup> ESCWA, *Women's Political Representation in the Arab Region*, 2017. Available at <https://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/women-political-representation-arab-region-english.pdf>.

<sup>36</sup> ESCWA, *Women Running for Elected Office in Iraq: Needs and Challenges*, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/publications/strengthening-womens-political-participation-women-running-elected-office-iraq-needs](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/strengthening-womens-political-participation-women-running-elected-office-iraq-needs).

<sup>37</sup> ESCWA and UN-Women, *Impact of COVID-19 on women in Iraq*, 2021. Available at <https://publications.unescwa.org/projects/icwi/index.html>.

<sup>38</sup> COVID-19 Global Gender Response Tracker. Available at <https://data.undp.org/gendertacker>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> COVID-19 Stimulus Tracker. Available at <https://tracker.unescwa.org/>.

**Table. Gender-responsive measures taken by Arab Governments to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**

<b>Policy category</b>	<b>Number of measures</b>	<b>Gender-responsive measures</b>	<b>Care services</b>
Social assistance	140	29	9
Financial policy support	236	3	0
Health related support	136	23	7
Labour markets	76	13	7
Loan and tax benefit	43	0	0
Social insurance	27	2	1
General policy support	157	13	6
Multiple policies	14	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>829</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>30</b>

## **II. Building forward better**

42. The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing national policy responses have shed light on structural impediments that limit women's access to policy measures introduced by Governments to mitigate the impact of the pandemic. As detailed above, women are not integrated into formal structures and mechanisms that Governments could use to channel the support needed to mitigate the social and economic consequences of the crisis. Governments employed measures that were swiftly made available and accessible, and which were mainly associated with formal labour markets and implemented through existing social security mechanisms. Women benefited little from those measures because they are highly unemployed and largely concentrated in the informal sector.

43. In addition, gender concerns were largely unaddressed in COVID-19 responses, partly because of weak female participation in national taskforces aimed at formulating national policy responses, and partly because decision makers continued to plan and design interventions with gender blind assumptions. However, COVID-19 recovery measures provide an opportunity to eliminate structural barriers, amend existing disparities, address long-term discrimination, rethink social and economic policies, and build resilience to build forward better.

44. As the world moves towards economic recovery, Arab countries are called to capitalize on this opportunity to better integrate women in formal social and economic structures, and ensure their active contribution to recovery and development mechanisms. The present document suggests key strategies to build forward better by committing to advancing gender equality as follows: building the capacity of national women's machineries to take a more prominent role in advancing gender equality and bringing the voices of women to the fore; strengthening legal and policy frameworks by amending and introducing measures to eliminate discrimination against women; and introducing and supporting socioeconomic measures that are gender sensitive and contribute to increasing women's participation in the public sphere.

45. In its efforts to support member States in addressing many of the gaps identified above, ESCWA developed a set of policy tools that could help States to better understand existing gaps; identify lessons learned from around the world; and design evidence-based policies. These tools will be explored further in document E/ESCWA/C.7/2021/6.

### **A. Strengthening the capacity of national women's machineries**

46. **Aligning national legislation and policies with international frameworks:** The consecutive crises and instabilities witnessed in the past 10 years in the Arab region have tested the resilience of national women machineries (NWMs), which play a multifaceted role in advancing gender equality and empowering women and girls by ensuring the alignment of national legislative and policy frameworks with international standards,

mainstreaming gender in national programmes, and ensuring that the interests of women and girls are reflected in recovery efforts and that such processes are gender-responsive.<sup>41</sup>

47. **Investing in capacity-building for NWMs:** NWMs hold a unique role in the region as they are entrusted to raise women's concerns and rights-based agendas in national debates; and to work alongside all other national institutions, civil society, development professionals, and humanitarian actors in gender equality efforts. Nonetheless, NWMs commonly experience challenging socioeconomic contexts, weak internal institutional structures, limited human and financial resources, and cultural and societal resistance.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, investing in building their capacity would ensure that they continue to place women's advancement at the heart of national developmental goals.

48. **Strengthening the institutional resilience of NWMs:** This is central to allowing NWMs to respond to crises, including COVID-19. This can be achieved by ensuring that NWMs are internally strong, equipped with adequate human and financial resources, have a strong relationship with their constituencies, and have solid partnerships and collaboration with all relevant actors. Moreover, NMS should be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses; be diverse and able to draw on different capabilities and ideas; be integrated through strong coordination and harmonization internally and with other entities, most notably civil society representatives; be self-regulating and capable of monitoring their operations to address any emerging outside shocks; and be adaptive and flexible to function in changing circumstances.<sup>43</sup>

49. **Advocating for sex disaggregated data:** Increasing the availability of sex-disaggregated and gender-related data is a priority to support national institutions to build gender-sensitive policies, based on reliable and accurate socioeconomic data. Hence, the Arab Gender Gap Report 2020<sup>44</sup> recommends strengthening the alliance between national statistical offices and NWMs to ensure the production of quality gender statistics and policies.

50. **Building alliances with national partners:** Beyond the partnership with national statistic offices, NWMs' role and impact is maximised when they cultivate effective alliances with all national institutions to facilitate the delivery of their mandate in the public, private and civil society contexts.

51. **Prioritizing the women, peace and security agenda:** Making use of international tools such as the women, peace and security agenda has never been more relevant than during the pandemic. COVID-19 is a conflict multiplier and represents a threat to international peace and security in its own right.<sup>45</sup> The agenda provides a methodology and tool that help countries prepare for emergencies, including a pandemic. With the surge in designing and implementing the agenda across the Arab region in recent years, the adoption of dedicated national action plans remains the most concrete action several countries have undertaken. In addition, to build more gender-inclusive national institutions, countries require support in implementing national action plans that prioritize the prevention of and response to violence against women, institute

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<sup>41</sup> ESCWA, *Employing a gendered approach to transitional justice in the Arab region: Potential role of national women's machineries*, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/publications/employing-gendered-approach-transitional-justice-arab-region-potential-role-national](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/employing-gendered-approach-transitional-justice-arab-region-potential-role-national).

<sup>42</sup> ESCWA and others, *Cultivating Resilient Institutions in the Arab Region: National Women's Machineries in Challenging Times*, 2019. Available at [www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/cultivating-resilient-institutions-national-women-machineries-english\\_2.pdf](http://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/cultivating-resilient-institutions-national-women-machineries-english_2.pdf).

<sup>43</sup> ESCWA, LAU, and LSE (2019), *Cultivating Resilient Institutions in the Arab Region: National Women's Machineries in Challenging Times*. Available at [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/cultivating-resilient-institutions-national-women-machineries-english\\_2.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/pubs/pdf/cultivating-resilient-institutions-national-women-machineries-english_2.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> ESCWA, *The Arab Gender Gap Report 2020: Gender Equality and the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2019. Available at [https://publications.unescwa.org/projects/aggr/sdgs/pdf/en/The%20AGGR%202020\\_Final\\_eng\\_08April2021.pdf](https://publications.unescwa.org/projects/aggr/sdgs/pdf/en/The%20AGGR%202020_Final_eng_08April2021.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> UN-Women, *Women, peace and security, and COVID-19 in Asia-Pacific*, 2021. Available at <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/focus-areas/peace-and-security/women-peace-and-security-and-covid-19-in-asia-pacific>.

monitoring mechanisms such as gender audits, and establish clear and measurable targets for action such as the ESCWA Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment within National Institutions in the Arab Region.

### **B. Strengthening legal and policy frameworks to eliminate discrimination against women**

52. **Adopting a comprehensive approach towards legal reform:** Although the Arab region has witnessed a surge in legal reform towards advancing women's rights, the majority of legislative changes were focused on economic sector activities. While these are much needed reforms, a piecemeal approach to legislative change will not achieve the impact expected for wider socioeconomic development. Hence, notwithstanding the importance of passing equal remuneration legislation, it should be coupled with laws that protect women in the public sphere; and enhance women's equal right to mobility, choosing their place of residence, and protection from violence. Furthermore, Arab countries would benefit from identifying key areas and solutions to improve their ranking in international indices.

53. **Reforming, adopting and aligning legislation with international standards:** National efforts to reform existing legal frameworks and develop new ones, in line with global frameworks and international commitments to CEDAW, the Sustainable Development Goals, and the Beijing Platform for Action to eliminate discrimination against women, are core to building forward better. Adopting such laws will have a long-term impact on equality between men and women, and is key to recovering from external shocks to ensure the realization of all women and girls' rights, to unlock their potential and equal contribution to economies, and to enhance societies' opportunities to reach sustainable social and economic development. The existing gender justice and law initiative helps countries identify legal amendments needed to address gaps in rights and public participation; combating violence against women; and ensuring equality provisions in labour rights and economic benefits, equality in marriage and in the family, and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights.

### **C. Measures to increase women's economic and political participation**

54. **Adopting intersectional and inclusive approaches:** Responses to COVID-19 are an opportunity to reinforce equality and inclusion, and address structural gaps in the social and economic scenery of the region. The pandemic's socioeconomic impact should be addressed with an intersectional strategy that is gender inclusive.<sup>46</sup> This is particularly necessary in the areas of economic empowerment, gender-sensitive social protection policies, and women's leadership.

55. **Addressing gender disparities in the labour market, including gender stereotypes:** Today, there is growing awareness that empowering women in the economy and closing the employment gender gap are essential to enhancing economic resilience and responsiveness to shocks. Increasing women's economic participation requires addressing gender disparities in the labour market in the Arab region<sup>47</sup> by challenging prevalent sociocultural perceptions to improve women's labour mobility and access across the full range of economic sectors, including capital-intensive fields; and reforming labour laws to encourage female economic participation and employment in the private sector.

56. **Adopting measures and policies to redistribute care work equally between men and women:** Promoting women's economic empowerment requires policies that recognize and reduce women's unpaid care responsibilities and redistribute them more equally between women and men, the State and the community. Providing financial support to women entrepreneurs, unemployed and informal workers, and expanding the formal care economy, are central to building back better so as to ease the burden on women and allow them to

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<sup>46</sup> ESCWA, Impact of social protection policies responding to COVID-19 on gender equality in Iraq, 2021. Available at <http://publications.unescwa.org/projects/icwi/index.html>.

<sup>47</sup> ESCWA, The labour market in the Arab region (forthcoming).

engage in economic activities; and create economic opportunities for women,<sup>48</sup> and thus support economic recovery. Women's entrepreneurship should be enhanced through financial programmes and support, and governmental agencies should implement a policy framework that generates female employment in specific contexts.<sup>49</sup>

57. Adapting labour market related policies to respond to challenges and embrace opportunities created by the Fourth Industrial Revolution: In the Arab region, promoting women's entrepreneurship has gained traction over the past decade as a valuable approach for creating jobs within a generally discriminatory environment. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a key tool for enhancing women's opportunities, especially in view of the risks and opportunities presented by Fourth Industrial Revolution. Differences in resources and the ability to access and effectively utilize ICTs within and between countries, regions, cities, sectors and socioeconomic groups must be redressed to close the digital gender divide. ICTs can play a significant role in propelling women into entrepreneurship in the Arab region.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, insights regarding the future of the job market could help identify education and training needs for communities. This is also relevant to providing a comprehensive understanding of the qualitative and quantitative indicators that support the creation of inclusive cities and communities, which are economically resilient and have the necessary infrastructure to advance job markets.

58. **Hearing women's voices and ensuring their presence in decision-making circles:** An inclusive and coordinated approach to addressing the gender dimensions of the pandemic must ensure that women's leadership is reflected in the COVID-19 response, taskforces and recovery bodies. Interventions should also ensure that women can access funds to take action.<sup>51,52</sup> Measures should be implemented based on societal needs, including gender considerations, with the participation of civil society organizations.<sup>53</sup>

59. **Exploring innovative tools and approaches to address gaps:** To address challenges in instituting and executing integrated gender mainstreamed socioeconomic policies, a set of practical policy tools are required that allow policymakers to design policy options, and ensure optimal use of limited national resources in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### III. Conclusion

60. To achieve policy integration, Arab countries are invited to examine the above recommendations, which would allow all members of society to benefit from government measures and participate in the recovery process for building forward better. All national responses must place women and girls – their inclusion, representation, rights, social and economic outcomes, equality and protection – at the centre if they are to have the necessary impact. Evidence across sectors, including economic planning and emergency response, demonstrates that policies that do not consult women or include them in decision-making are less effective, and can even do harm.<sup>54</sup> In addition, member States are invited to capitalize on the ESCWA toolkit, which provide a detailed understanding of structural gaps, and showcases good practices and policy responses.

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<sup>48</sup> ESCWA, Impact of COVID-19 on women's economic participation in Iraq, 2021.

<sup>49</sup> ESCWA, Impact of COVID-19 on women's economic participation in Yemen (forthcoming).

<sup>50</sup> ESCWA, *Propelling Women into Entrepreneurship in the Arab Region*, 2020. Available at [www.unescwa.org/publications/propelling-women-entrepreneurship-arab-region](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/propelling-women-entrepreneurship-arab-region).

<sup>51</sup> ESCWA, Impact of social protection policies responding to COVID-19 on gender equality in Iraq, 2021.

<sup>52</sup> ESCWA, Impact of social protection policies responding to COVID-19 on gender equality in Yemen (forthcoming).

<sup>53</sup> ESCWA, Impact of social protection policies responding to COVID-19 on gender equality in Yemen (forthcoming).

<sup>54</sup> United Nations, Policy brief: The impact of COVID-19 on women, 2020.