



**ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
COUNCIL**

Distr.  
LIMITED  
E/ESCWA/C.7/2024/6  
26 October 2024  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

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

Committee on Women  
Twelfth session  
Muscat, 8 December 2024



Item 8 of the provisional agenda

## **Leaving no woman or girl behind in the Arab region**

### **Summary**

The present document examines one of the basic principles of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: leaving no one behind. It provides an overview of women's status in the Arab region, and an intersectional lens to discuss the status of women and girls who are furthest left behind owing to age, disability, geographic location, or migratory status. It focuses on women and girls in conflict-affected countries experiencing forced displacement and food insecurities, and who are at a heightened risk of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. It also sets out policy recommendations to ensure that no woman or girl is left behind in the Arab region.

The Committee on Women is invited to review the contents of the present document and provide feedback on its recommendations.

## Contents

	<i>Paragraphs</i>	<i>Page</i>
Introduction .....	1–4	3
<i>Chapter</i>		
<b>I. 2030 Agenda and the principle of leaving no one behind .....</b>	<b>5–8</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>II. Regional sociopolitical and economic context.....</b>	<b>9–13</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>III. Status of women in the Arab region .....</b>	<b>14–20</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>IV. Reaching the furthest left behind women and girls in the Arab region .....</b>	<b>21–70</b>	<b>6</b>
A. Women and girls in conflict-affected countries .....	21–32	6
B. Women with disabilities.....	33–38	8
C. Older women.....	39–47	8
D. Migrant women.....	48–54	10
E. Rural women.....	55–63	11
F. The girl-child and female young people .....	64–70	12
<b>V. Conclusion and policy recommendations.....</b>	<b>71–75</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

1. Globally, diverse groups of women and girls are left behind, especially those living in rural areas, women and girls with disabilities, older women, displaced women, women migrants, and those living in conflict-affected countries.
2. In all societies, those who are left furthest behind endure multiple and intersecting disadvantages. In many parts of the world, women and girls are left behind due to discriminatory legislation, policies and practices that impede women and girls' human rights. These same women and girls may live in rural areas and face additional burdens and setbacks related to accessing education, health care services and economic opportunities. In times of conflict and armed warfare, women and girls may become internally displaced, experience heightened insecurities including food shortages, and are at increased risk of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitative practices.
3. Arab Governments made strong commitments to end poverty and hunger and prevent premature deaths to reduce inequalities between the rich and the poor, and between those living in urban and rural areas. They committed themselves to improving access to basic living standards, including clean water, quality health care and education. They also pledged to empower women and girls through a specific focus on Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender equality, and through the remaining 16 crosscutting Goals and attributed targets.
4. The present document provides an overview of the status of women and girls in the Arab region, and an intersectional lens to decipher the multifaceted ways that women and girls are left behind. It discusses the situations of different categories of women and girls left furthest behind, namely women and girls in conflict-affected countries who require urgent interventions and humanitarian aid, women and girls with disabilities, older women, women migrants seeking economic opportunities in the region, rural women living in underdeveloped and remote geographic locations, and the girl child and female youth. The present document also provides policy recommendations on urgent actions for reaching the women and girls who are left furthest behind first.

### I. 2030 Agenda and the principle of leaving no one behind

5. The United Nations [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) and its 17 SDGs set out several overarching principles, including leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first. Those left behind include men, women, girls and boys who have not benefitted from human development progress.
6. The following five major factors contribute to leaving people behind:
  - (a) Discrimination based on sex, gender, age, class, disability, religion, ethnicity or migratory status;
  - (b) The geographic location of persons facing isolation and vulnerability, or weak public services and inadequate infrastructure;
  - (c) Governance issues whereby people face disadvantages due to ineffective, unjust, unresponsive and unaccountable institutions. This can also include discriminatory laws, policies and processes, and inadequate allocation of resources to improve their meaningful participation in society;
  - (d) Socioeconomic status, which disadvantages people who cannot secure an income, compete in the labour market, acquire wealth, live healthy lives, attain quality education, and access fundamental rights such as the right to clean water, sanitation, and social protection;
  - (e) Shocks and fragility, including events that expose people to conflict, violence, climate change, displacement and economic crisis, resulting in major setbacks to development processes.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Programme, [What does it mean to leave no one behind?](#), July 2018.

7. Those left furthest behind include persons who face multiple deprivations and disadvantages stemming from discrimination and deep-seated inequalities that prevent them from earning income, accessing jobs, training and technology, attaining quality education, and accessing good standard health care, security and other public services and infrastructure.

8. One of the universal principles of the 2030 Agenda is gender equality and women's empowerment, also referred to as "leaving no woman or girl behind". This principle embodies a commitment to ensure that all women and girls have equal rights and opportunities in all aspects of life, across social, cultural, economic and political spheres.

## II. Regional sociopolitical and economic context

9. Several wars and conflicts are currently taking a toll on the Arab region, including in Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, the occupied Palestinian territory, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen, with devastating effects on entire populations, especially women and children.

10. Iraq is making efforts to recover from the devastating abuses perpetrated by Da'esh against its population. In 2014, Da'esh killed over 9,000 Yazidis and enslaved more than 6,000 women and children, some of whom were sold into slavery.<sup>2</sup>

11. Since 2019, Lebanon has been witnessing an economic and financial crisis, described as one of the worst financial crises worldwide since the mid-nineteenth century. By February 2023, the Lebanese pound had lost more than 98 per cent of its pre-crisis value.<sup>3</sup> The country is also still reeling from the effects of the 2020 Beirut Port explosion, one of the worst non-nuclear explosions in history, which killed at least 218 people.<sup>4</sup> Since 8 October 2023, more than 2,300 persons have been killed in the country, and about 10,782 have been injured. The escalating conflict has created massive displacement. More than half the displaced are women, many of whom were experiencing pre-existing vulnerabilities.<sup>5</sup>

12. The Arab region has the largest unemployment rates globally. It is also the only region worldwide with increasing poverty rates. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimates that between 2015 and 2021, fewer Arab countries were at medium risk of economic crisis, but more countries moved to the high and low risk brackets.<sup>6</sup>

13. The Arab region also has the largest youth population worldwide, estimated at 113 million people between the ages of 15 and 29.<sup>7</sup> Male and female young people face significant issues related to employment, education and civic participation. Approximately 30 per cent are not in employment, education or training, with the proportion of female young people not in employment, education or training reaching 42.1 per cent compared with 19.7 per cent for males. The region records the highest youth unemployment rate worldwide, estimated at 27 per cent, affecting 40.1 per cent of female young people.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Valeria Cetorelli and others, [Mortality and kidnapping estimates for the Yazidi population in the area of Mount Sinjar, Iraq, in August 2014: a retrospective household survey](#), 2017.

<sup>3</sup> World Bank, [Lebanon: Normalization of crisis is no road to stabilization](#), 16 May 2023.

<sup>4</sup> Human Rights Watch, ["They killed us from the inside"](#), 3 August 2021.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), [Lebanon: Flash Update #35 - Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 14 October 2024](#), 2024.

<sup>6</sup> [E/ESCWA/C.2/2024/7](#).

<sup>7</sup> International Year of Youth, [Regional overview: youth in the Arab region](#) (n.d.)

<sup>8</sup> ESCWA, [Arab SDG monitor](#).

### III. Status of women in the Arab region

14. Although Arab countries have made significant strides in areas related to girls and women's educational attainment and their health and survival, the region's women continue to be significantly held back in economic participation and political representation. The Arab region ranks the second lowest on the Global Gender Gap's subindex on economic participation and opportunity at 42.7 per cent, compared with a global average of 60.5 per cent. It ranks last on the political empowerment subindex at 10.8 per cent, compared with a global average of 22.5 per cent.<sup>9</sup>

15. Across the Arab region, women and girls face stringent barriers that limit not only their opportunities, but their full potential to contribute to the advancement of their societies. Over the decades, girls' education has significantly improved with 74.4 per cent of girls completing lower secondary school, which is comparable to other regions worldwide.<sup>10</sup> However, the adult literacy rate, measured as those 15 years or older who can read or write, is only 73.9 per cent compared with 83.8 per cent globally. Disparities in women and girls' education remain high in rural areas and in conflict-affected countries, due to factors related to poverty, child marriage and socio-cultural norms that do not encourage girls to go to school.

16. Economic inequality is a major barrier that limits women's potential and socioeconomic well-being. Women in the region face limited job and entrepreneurial opportunities, earn less wages than men for similar work, and are discriminated against in the workplace. Economic participation is frequently restricted by legal and social barriers, prohibiting women from working in specific sectors or requiring husbandly permission to leave the house or work outside the home.<sup>11</sup> According to the World Bank, women in the Arab region have the potential to contribute 26 per cent to annual global gross product (GDP), and 47 per cent to annual GDP by 2025.<sup>12</sup>

17. Women's participation in the region's labour force is significantly low, at only 19 per cent compared with 71.3 per cent for men.<sup>13</sup> Of all firms in the Arab region, only 13.5 per cent are co-owned by women compared with 33.7 per cent globally.<sup>14</sup> A third of all female workers are employed in the agricultural sector, which remains an informal sector where women work without any social protection, including pension or health-care coverage.<sup>15</sup>

18. Although many Arab countries are amending their legislation to ensure that more women can access the labour market, laws and policies relating to family matters, reproductive health and rights, and combating violence against women still require further attention to facilitate women's full engagement in public life.

19. Violence against women, including domestic abuse, harassment and trafficking, remains a critical issue, impacting the safety and well-being of women and girls. It is estimated that over 50 million women and girls

---

<sup>9</sup> World Economic Forum, [Global Gender Gap Report](#), 2024.

<sup>10</sup> World Bank Group, [Gender Data Portal](#).

<sup>11</sup> According to the [World Bank](#), 10 of 22 ESCWA member States restrict women from leaving the home without male permission.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Woetzel and others, [The power of parity: how advancing women's equality can add \\$12 trillion to global growth](#), 2015, p. 5. In the source, the 47 per cent annual GDP contribution refers to the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, not the Arab region as a whole.

<sup>13</sup> World Bank Group, [Gender Data Portal](#), [Middle East and North Africa](#).

<sup>14</sup> World Bank Group, [Gender](#). Data on the percentage of firms co-owned by women are available for 12 Arab countries, as follows: Djibouti (22.3 per cent), Egypt (5.2 per cent), Iraq (3.8 per cent), Jordan (22.6 per cent), Lebanon (9.9 per cent), Mauritania (15 per cent), Morocco (12.3 per cent), Saudi Arabia (4.9 per cent), the Sudan (8.2 per cent), Tunisia (40.1 per cent), the West Bank and Gaza (11.8 per cent), and Yemen (6.6 per cent).

<sup>15</sup> For ESCWA member States, the rates of women in the agricultural sector range from 0 to 52 per cent. The highest rates are in the Sudan (52 per cent), Morocco (48.2 per cent), and Yemen (45.9 per cent) (Source: World Bank Group, [Employment by sector \(%\)](#)).

in the Arab region experience some form of gender-based violence, constituting 25 per cent of all survivors of violence globally. Two of every 10 marriages in the region are child marriages: girls married before the age of 18, as defined by the Convention of the Rights of the Child.<sup>16</sup>

20. Women's participation in public and political life is dismally low. According to the World Bank, women in the region hold 17.9 per cent of parliamentary seats, which has remained the same for over a decade.<sup>17</sup> The global average for women's shares of parliamentary seats is 26.9 per cent. Moreover, women in the region make up only 20.7 per cent of ministers and 14 per cent of judges.<sup>18</sup>

## **IV. Reaching the furthest left behind women and girls in the Arab region**

### **A. Women and girls in conflict-affected countries**

21. Today, several Arab countries are experiencing conflicts with devastating effects on the lives of women and girls, namely Lebanon, the State of Palestine, the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic and Yemen. This has taken a severe toll on the civilian population as a whole; however, women and girls face additional gendered abuses of their bodily autonomy, freedom of movement and agency. These include sexual and gender-based violence, child and forced marriage, trafficking in girls and women, and increased rates of domestic violence.

22. These dangers and life-threatening events are further compounded by displacement and prolonged displacement, disrupted or non-existent health care and reproductive health-care services, education interruption, deteriorating economies, the dismantling of the social fabric, food insecurity, and other vulnerabilities.

23. The recent escalation of the conflict in Lebanon has severely affected infrastructure and essential services. As at 14 October 2024, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) reported that over 746,584 individuals have been displaced, 52 per cent of whom are women.<sup>19</sup> The health sector is overwhelmed, facing attacks on health-care facilities and the tragic loss of health workers. Similarly, the education sector is grappling with significant challenges, as most public schools are currently being utilized as collective shelters.

24. Palestinian women and girls have long endured the devastating effects of Israeli occupation, political violence, and human rights abuses. The Israeli military offensive in Gaza that began in October 2023 has left more than 42,000 Palestinians dead; the majority are women and children. Prior to the war, the United Nations estimated that approximately 2.1 million Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza would require some form of humanitarian assistance; 49.2 per cent being women. Moreover, before the current war, 80 per cent of Gaza's residents relied on humanitarian aid, but now this number is almost 100 per cent given the destruction of infrastructure, including hospitals, schools and roads.<sup>20</sup>

25. The dangers associated with military operations are particularly amplified for women and girls, who face multiple forms of pre-existing discrimination and vulnerability. This is especially true for pregnant and lactating women, older persons, and those living with chronic health conditions or disabilities. According to the United Nations, at least 3,000 women in Gaza may have become widows or heads of households since

---

<sup>16</sup> ESCWA, [Arab Gender Gap Report](#), 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Inter-parliamentary Union, [Global and regional averages of women in national parliaments](#) (this categorization excludes Mauritania, the Sudan and Somalia).

<sup>18</sup> ESCWA, [Arab Gender Gap Report](#), 2020.

<sup>19</sup> OCHA, [Lebanon: Flash Update #33 - Escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, as of 7 October 2024](#), 2024.

<sup>20</sup> ESCWA, [War on Gaza 2023: the formidable human suffering](#).

October 2023.<sup>21</sup> Girls are also severely impacted in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, experiencing stricter movement restrictions, heightened insecurities in the form of intensive military raids, and unlawful arrests.

26. In the Sudan, women and girls make up the majority of the 8.5 million who have been forcibly displaced.<sup>22</sup> Displaced women face amplified protection risks, and are at higher risk of sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation. Approximately 3 million women and girls live in fear of sexual and gender-based violence.<sup>23</sup> The majority of those at risk require gender-based violence services, and sexual and reproductive health services. These numbers have spiked by 60 per cent since the war began in April 2023. Around 150,000 pregnant women cannot access prenatal or postnatal health-care services, as two thirds of health centres are not functioning. Of the 4.86 million people facing acute hunger, defined as the inability to consume enough food that places a person's life and livelihood at risk, 1.2 million are pregnant or breastfeeding women.

27. The 13-year conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has killed over 500,000 people, destroyed infrastructure, and led to mass education losses for a generation of young boys and girls, with over two million children out of school. The crisis also caused widescale displacement internally and externally. More than 60 per cent of the country's pre-war population is now displaced, and represents one of the world's largest refugee crises.<sup>24</sup> Around 7 million are internally displaced and more than 6 million are living as refugees in neighbouring countries, namely Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Türkiye.<sup>25</sup>

28. The Syrian conflict has taken a massive toll on women and girls' lives. More than 16 million people require humanitarian assistance, half of whom are women and girls in dire need of essential services, including health and reproductive health care and psychosocial support.<sup>26</sup> Many forms of violence against women, such as domestic violence and intimate partner violence, are reported, including child and forced marriage, estimated to have reached 24 per cent among Syrian refugee communities in Lebanon.<sup>27</sup> Sexual violence and exploitation are also reported in addition to technology facilitated gender-based violence.<sup>28</sup>

29. In Yemen, more than 4.5 million children and pregnant or lactating women are acutely malnourished.<sup>29</sup> In a country with the highest maternal mortality rates in the region prior to the conflict, these rates are rapidly increasing. Women and children also make up the majority of internally displaced persons with an unprecedented number of widows and female heads of households. Two thirds of Yemeni girls are married as children, before the age of 18, compared with 50 per cent prior to the conflict.

30. The humanitarian requisites of women and girls in the region are vast, requiring life-saving needs including food, shelter, clothing, clean water, access to health care and reproductive health care and medicine, and urgent gender-based violence response services.

31. Women and women-led organizations in the occupied Palestinian territory and the Sudan are expanding existing networks and supporting initiatives to deliver humanitarian aid. In the Sudan, women have created women's emergency response rooms, which are providing essential services for displaced women and girls,

---

<sup>21</sup> United Nations, [The question of Palestine](#), 2024.

<sup>22</sup> United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), [Thousands still fleeing Sudan daily, after one year of war](#), 9 April 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Care International, [Because They are women: how the Sudan conflict has created a war on women and girls](#), 2024.

<sup>24</sup> Concern Worldwide, [The Syria crisis explained: 5 things to know in 2024](#), 2024.

<sup>25</sup> ESCWA, [The status of Syrian refugee women in Egypt, Jordan and Lebanon and their priorities for voluntary repatriation](#), 2022.

<sup>26</sup> United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), [13 years on, the Syria crisis is pushing women and girls to the brink](#), 2024.

<sup>27</sup> United Nations, [New study finds child marriage rising among most vulnerable Syrian refugees](#) (n.d.).

<sup>28</sup> UNFPA, [13 years on, the Syria crisis is pushing women and girls to the brink](#), 2024.

<sup>29</sup> World Bank, [The central role of women in the Middle East and North Africa transition](#), 2019.

pregnant and breastfeeding women, and those affected by sexual violence and exploitation.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in the occupied Palestinian territory, women-led organizations are providing essential services to women, including psychological support, cash assistance, hygiene and dignity kits.

32. In Jordan, the Arab Network for Civic Education and the Arab Women Organization developed an education project that focuses on various learning models and pedagogical practices to increase Syrian refugee women's access to education and promote learning.<sup>31</sup>

## **B. Women with disabilities**

33. Women with disabilities encounter multiple forms of discrimination, both in legislation and practice, primarily influenced by gender roles, negative stereotypes, and a lack of opportunities. These challenges are exacerbated in times of conflict or disaster, heightening their vulnerability to sexual and gender-based violence.

34. In the Arab region, this demographic group faces significant barriers owing to insufficient disability-friendly infrastructure, which limits their mobility and accessibility. Many public buildings, transport services, and pedestrian areas are not adequately equipped to support their needs. Moreover, social stigma results in discrimination in education, employment, and social interactions, further isolating these women.

35. Economic hardships are prevalent among women with disabilities, who often experience higher levels of poverty due to limited employment opportunities and high medical expenses. When they do secure jobs, they frequently face discriminatory hiring practices, inadequate workplace accommodations, and limited opportunities for professional development, all of which hinder their employment prospects.

36. A lack of comprehensive data on women with disabilities hampers the development of responsive policies tailored to their needs. Available statistics on disability prevalence in the Arab region are inconsistent, and are generally lower than those in other parts of the world, with rates ranging from 1.5 per cent in Oman to 5.1 per cent in Morocco. Notably, higher prevalence rates among women aged 45–64 are reported, especially in Bahrain, Mauritania, Morocco, Somalia and Yemen.<sup>32</sup>

37. Many Arab countries have strengthened their legal frameworks to protect the rights of persons with disabilities, emphasizing the need for measures that ensure the full and equal enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms. Furthermore, there are ongoing efforts to involve women with disabilities in the development of policies and programmes, particularly during consultations on humanitarian response and peacebuilding initiatives.

38. While awareness and advocacy are growing, leading to increased recognition of the needs of women with disabilities, substantial improvements are still required to ensure comprehensive support and inclusion. Data collection in this area remains weak, but enhanced data could facilitate more effective interventions, ensuring that the needs of women and girls with disabilities are adequately addressed within development programmes and humanitarian initiatives.

## **C. Older women**

39. Older women make invaluable contributions to their societies that often go unrecognized and uncompensated. They play crucial caregiving roles within families, fostering cohesion and intergenerational solidarity. Many continue to work into old age to supplement household income, engage in small entrepreneurial activities, and participate in volunteer and advocacy efforts within their communities. Older

---

<sup>30</sup> Care International, [Because They are women: how the Sudan conflict has created a war on women and girls](#), 2024.

<sup>31</sup> Global Campaign for Education, [Quality education and women's rights in the Arab region](#), 2020.

<sup>32</sup> ESCWA, [Arab Digital Inclusion Platform](#).



women are also custodians of traditions, preserving and transmitting cultural heritage, wisdom and values to younger generations.

40. Today, the estimated number of individuals aged 65 and above in the Arab region is 22.8 million, accounting for 4.6 per cent of the total population, with older women representing 54 per cent of this demographic.<sup>33</sup> By 2050, this figure is projected to nearly triple to 65 million, constituting, 9 per cent of the population.

41. Examining the dependency ratios of older persons provides further insight into the implications of ageing. The old-age dependency ratio, defined as the ratio of older dependents (those over 64) to the working-age population (ages 15–64), is estimated at 6.2 per cent in 2024 and is expected to double by mid-century.<sup>34</sup> Notably, the dependency ratio for older women will rise from 4 to 7.5 per cent during this period.

42. These demographic shifts pose significant challenges for the economically active population and the economy at large in supporting older individuals, and providing essential services for a dignified life. This is particularly crucial for older women, who are more likely to be widowed and less likely to participate in the labour force or benefit from protection schemes during their younger years.

43. Income insecurity remains a critical challenge for older women, stemming from their low economic participation rates during their working years, which leads to higher economic dependency. Many older individuals struggle to access quality and affordable health care. Moreover, changing social norms and demographic trends are resulting in more older adults, particularly women, living alone, while the care economy for older persons remains underdeveloped.

44. Illiteracy rates among older women can exceed 90 per cent in rural areas of some countries, severely impacting their quality of life. Furthermore, abuse against older persons, including women, is often under-reported, with global estimates suggesting that 1 in 6 older adults experiences some form of abuse.<sup>35</sup> Protection mechanisms for older individuals remain limited, and the impact of conflict and occupation disproportionately affect older persons due to their higher dependency.

45. Several Arab countries, including Algeria,<sup>36</sup> Bahrain, Egypt, Kuwait, the Sudan, Tunisia,<sup>37</sup> and the United Arab Emirates<sup>38</sup> have enacted specific legislation aimed at older persons. Other countries are integrating the needs of older adults into broader national laws and policies addressing health, education, social security, pensions and violence against women.<sup>39</sup>

46. Over the past five years, there has been an uptick in Arab countries developing or revising strategies specifically targeting older persons, including Jordan, Kuwait, the State of Palestine, the Syrian Arab Republic,

---

<sup>33</sup> ESCWA calculations based on the United Nations, [World Population Prospects, The 2024 Revision](#), 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> World Health Organization, [Abuse of older people](#), 15 June 2024.

<sup>36</sup> ESCWA, [The Population and Development Report, Issue No. 8](#), 2020.

<sup>37</sup> ESCWA and UNFPA, [Fourth review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#), 2022.

<sup>38</sup> United Arab Emirates, [Permanent Committee for Human Rights](#).

<sup>39</sup> ESCWA and UNFPA, [Fourth review and appraisal of the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing](#), 2022.

Tunisia, Yemen<sup>40</sup> and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>41</sup> However, a 2020 assessment revealed that six of these strategies inadequately addressed the intersectional and cumulative discrimination faced by older women.<sup>42</sup>

47. The unique contributions of older women can be further enhanced if countries prepare adequately for the social and economic implications of ageing. This requires empowering older women by addressing their challenges through comprehensive and integrated policies, alongside targeted interventions that adopt rights-based and life cycle approaches. Strengthening evidence-based research on older women, enacting anti-discriminatory legislation, and mobilizing resources for targeted programmes are essential steps toward this goal.

#### **D. Migrant women**

48. Migration can be a transformative experience, enhancing livelihoods, autonomy, and empowerment for women and girls. However, it can also place them in vulnerable situations, exposing them to serious violations of their human rights. Many Arab countries serve as destination countries for migrant women from Africa and Asia, who play crucial economic and social roles by supporting households and contributing to vital sectors such as tourism and hospitality.

49. Beyond their contributions to the economies of host countries, migrant women also provide vital financial support to their families and communities back home. They educate their children and enhance their home countries' economies through remittances. Despite these contributions, many migrant women endure poor working conditions, long hours, low wages, and limited labour rights. Safeguarding the rights and well-being of migrant women is essential to fostering inclusive and equitable societies.

50. There is limited sex-disaggregated data on migration. Available statistics indicate that, as at 2020, a third of the 41.1 million migrants and refugees in the Arab region were women. However, significant variations exist across countries and subregions. For instance, women comprise nearly half of the migrant and refugee population in the Mashreq and in Arab least developed countries, whereas they make up only 28 per cent in Gulf Cooperation Council countries. In terms of labour participation, women represent just 17 per cent of the region's migrant worker population, compared with a global average of 41 per cent.

51. Migrant and refugee women in the Arab region encounter numerous challenges, which can be summarized in the following four key areas. Firstly, limited employment opportunities beyond the care sector restrict women migrant workers, undermining their economic independence and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. These constraints often confine them to low-wage, informal jobs with minimal legal protections and no access to social benefits, such as health insurance. Secondly, migrant women frequently face wage discrimination and poor working conditions, particularly domestic workers who are often excluded from labour law protections. Thirdly, violence and abuse against migrant women are pervasive throughout their migration journeys. Human traffickers often target vulnerable women, luring them to unsafe and irregular pathways. Furthermore, migrant women are more susceptible to abuse in their countries of destination. Lastly, a lack of sex-disaggregated data on migration impedes the development of evidence-based, gender-responsive policies.

52. Regional reforms aimed at improving working conditions for migrant workers can enhance protections and rights, especially for migrant women. It is crucial to ensure that these reform efforts are implemented in a gender-sensitive manner, so as to empower migrant women in the Arab region to leverage their knowledge,

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid; ESCWA, [The Population and Development Report, Issue No. 8](#), 2020. During the period 2020–2024, ESCWA supported several Arab countries in developing new strategies for older persons that were guided by the principle of gender-equality. The countries include Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Somalia, the Sudan, and the Syrian Arab Republic.

<sup>41</sup> United Arab Emirates, [Permanent Committee for Human Rights](#).

<sup>42</sup> UNFPA and HelpAge International, [The rights of older persons: a review of national ageing strategies in the Arab region](#), 2020.

skills, leadership styles, and networks to contribute to sustainable development in both their host and origin countries.

53. Gender-responsive policies can empower migrant women while addressing their vulnerabilities. Involving women in critical decision-making processes is another effective strategy for promoting policies that protect and empower migrant women.

54. To combat violence and abuse, countries can adopt measures against gender discrimination and gender-based violence at all stages of the migration process. They can also provide protection services for victims of human trafficking. Moreover, enhancing the collection of sex-disaggregated data on migration can support the development of gender-responsive policies and targeted interventions, which address the specific needs and challenges faced by migrant women and men.

## **E. Rural women**

55. Rural women in the Arab region face many obstacles, including limited access to education opportunities, health services, and economic opportunities. All these difficulties are further compounded by socio-cultural barriers and discriminatory practices against women and girls. Today, rural women face additional burdens related to climate change, with disproportionate effects on their health, income and well-being. While there is limited data on the percentage of women living in rural areas at the regional level, rural women in Egypt, for example, make up 57.5 per cent of the population, and approximately 49 per cent of the population in Morocco.<sup>43</sup>

56. Rural women face inequalities related to access to health care and health-care services. They often face long travel distances to reach health-care centres. In some countries, women are accompanied by male family members to health-care facilities, which can affect their access and utilization of health-care services. Female health providers are rarely available in rural regions, also limiting women's access to health care and primarily sexual and reproductive health care. Rural women also lack financial resources to access health-care services, especially in areas where public health insurance is not available to them.<sup>44</sup>

57. Women in rural regions make up the majority of agricultural and informal workers, and account for a third of all female employment in the Arab region. Women own less than 4 per cent of agricultural land, and are often excluded from decision-making in land management, limiting their ability to select and grow high yielding crops, earn income, and improve food security.<sup>45</sup> This lack of land ownership also affects their access to credit, and their use of collateral and other financial services to improve their investments and incomes.

58. Rural women, who are more likely to live in poverty, are also more likely to have insufficient water supply and sanitation facilities and are at a greater risk of experiencing hunger and low nutrition status, increasing their vulnerabilities to food insecurities. According to the World Bank, women and girls in the region spend up to six hours per day collecting water, significantly limiting their ability to participate in education and literacy programmes and in income generating activities.<sup>46</sup>

59. Illiteracy rates among women in rural regions are higher than those in urban areas. For example, 26.4 per cent of Iraqi women are illiterate, reaching 50 per cent in rural areas.<sup>47</sup> The literacy rate for women in

---

<sup>43</sup> Egypt National Census, 2017; Bank Al Maghrib and others, [Increasing women's financial inclusion and closing the women's SMES credit gap in Morocco through enabling financial policy and regulation](#), 2023.

<sup>44</sup> United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), [Situational analysis of women and girls in the MENA and Arab States region: Pillar 1 health and wellbeing key messages and recommendations](#) (n.d.).

<sup>45</sup> UN-Habitat, [Women and Land in the Muslim World](#), 2018, p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> World Bank, [The Status and Progress of Women in the Middle East and North Africa](#), 2009.

<sup>47</sup> UN-Women, [Supporting girls' education in Iraq: 'Now she can write her name with great pride'](#), 2019.

Morocco is only 54 per cent, compared with 75 per cent for men. Owing to a lack of education opportunities, it is believed that 90 per cent of women living in rural areas of the country are illiterate. Only 39 per cent of female young people attend school in rural Morocco, compared with 90 per cent in urban areas.<sup>48</sup>

60. Climate change impacts women, especially rural women who rely heavily on agricultural production for food security and livelihoods. Droughts, floods and unpredictable weather conditions decrease agricultural production, and increase food insecurities for rural women and their families. In the Syrian Arab Republic, for example, droughts have forced men to migrate in search for work, while women are left behind to become heads of households. Women and girls are at increased risk of malnutrition and suffer from protection risks, including gender-based violence.<sup>49</sup>

61. Women in rural areas are also disproportionately affected by water scarcity, because they are primarily responsible for collecting water for their households. The depletion of water sources, caused by drought, may force women to spend more time and travel longer distances to collect water. This increases their household burdens and decreases the time they could dedicate to earning more income or receiving an education. This also places them at greater risk of harassment, abuse or exploitation.

62. In Egypt, in 2021, the National Council for Women and the Central Bank launched a financial and digital initiative called *Tahweesha* to increase rural women's financial inclusion. The initiative supports women's savings groups to set up joint bank accounts for up to 25 members. Each member receives an e-payment card for their contributions to the savings plan. The saved funds, one accumulated with interest, are then distributed among the members. The bank offers women members benefits, including low micro loan rates and high savings interest rates.<sup>50</sup>

63. In Yemen, IOM and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) established women water user groups to address water insecurity in rural areas and water disputes. These groups are supported to negotiate water disputes to reach fair arrangements for water use between communities. IOM provides the water user groups with technical support to open blockages in water channels, and repair damaged canals to increase equal access to water sources.<sup>51</sup>

## **F. The girl-child and female young people**

64. According to the World Bank, girls between the ages of 0 and 14 make up 33 per cent of the entire population in the Arab region.<sup>52</sup> Girls face multiple disadvantages owing to their age and gender, which prevent them from receiving education and pursuing skills to help them sustain themselves and their families as adults, living healthy lives, and reaching their full potential as active and empowered citizens.

65. Girls face barriers to quality education, which is most often dependent on their social class and geographic location. Socio-cultural barriers play a large role in depriving girls from pursuing education, as families often rely on them to take on domestic roles or prevent them from attending school owing to a lack of transport or inadequate infrastructure. They are more likely to work in informal jobs, and carry the burden of unpaid care work to support their families.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>48</sup> Eurasia Review, [Education barriers in Morocco](#), 2023.

<sup>49</sup> International Organization for Migration (IOM), [Effects of climate mobility on women and girls in the MENA region](#), 2024.

<sup>50</sup> Inequality Solutions Portal, [Financial Inclusion for Rural Women: Egypt](#), 2024.

<sup>51</sup> IOM, [Effects of climate mobility on women and girls in the MENA region](#), 2024.

<sup>52</sup> World Bank Group, [Population ages 0-14, female \(% of female population\)](#).

<sup>53</sup> UNICEF, [Gender equality](#) (n.d.).

66. Adolescent girls are especially at risk of dropping out of school, marrying young and getting pregnant. At the regional level, 18 per cent of girls are married before the age of 18, while 3 per cent of girls are married before the age of 15. However, prevalence varies across the region, masking a wide variation in prevalence rates between countries that range from 3 per cent in Algeria to 32 per cent in Yemen.<sup>54</sup>

67. Young and adolescent girls are at high risk of gender-based violence, including sexual exploitation, sexual harassment, trafficking, female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and so-called honour killings. FGM, recognized globally as a harmful traditional practice, still persists in Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Somalia, the Sudan and Yemen.

68. Conflict and climate change are impacting girls in profound ways. Today, more adolescent girls than even before are living in drought impacted communities. They fear walking to school during rainy season because of flooding, and they often migrate to seek refuge from climate impacts including fires, floods and water and food scarcity.<sup>55</sup>

69. Some Arab countries have developed programmes to increase economic support to families from disadvantaged backgrounds to help relieve some of the burdens placed on girls and adolescents. Other countries are taking steps to strengthen and enforce laws against child marriage, trafficking in persons, and gender-based violence to help curb abuses against girls and female young people.<sup>56</sup>

70. In Somalia, international and local non-governmental organizations are engaging men, women and adolescent girls and boys to change perceptions on harmful practices affecting young girls. These organizations also offer safe spaces for adolescent girls, providing life skills trainings and gender-based violence services.<sup>57</sup>

## V. Conclusion and policy recommendations

71. Women and girls in the Arab region face many obstacles to fulfilling their potential, and living healthy and productive lives. Such obstacles are primarily due to discriminatory legislative and policy frameworks and socio-cultural norms and practices that limit women's roles in the private sphere. This is no more evident than in women's participation in political and economic life, whereby the region's women rank the lowest globally.

72. Women and girls in the region are not a homogenous group, and face varying and sometimes multiple vulnerabilities depending on their age, capabilities, and displacement and migratory status. Arab countries' political instabilities, economic fragilities and environmental uncertainties are also creating additional groups of vulnerable women and girls.

73. International frameworks play a vital role in promoting gender equality and protecting the rights of marginalized populations, particularly in contexts of conflict and migration. The women, peace and security agenda emphasizes the obligation of conflict parties to refrain from using sexual violence as a weapon of war, advocating for a survivor-centred approach to gender-based violence, and highlighting the importance of women's participation in conflict resolution and post-conflict reconstruction. Similarly, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action calls for increased female involvement in decision-making during conflicts, the protection of women in armed situations, and the reduction of military expenditures. Both frameworks prioritize the elimination of human rights abuses, including gender-based violence, while addressing the specific needs of refugee and displaced women.

---

<sup>54</sup> ESCWA, UNICEF and UNFPA, [Estimating the economic costs of child marriage in the Arab region](#), 2024.

<sup>55</sup> UNICEF, [Gender and climate change](#) (n.d.).

<sup>56</sup> UNFPA, [Regional quarterly report on the Syria crisis](#), 2024.

<sup>57</sup> International Rescue Committee, [Somalia fact sheet](#), 2023.

74. Complementing these efforts, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing advocate for the rights of women across various demographics. The Convention urges States to promote substantive equality and protect women's rights, while the Plan of Action adopts a holistic approach to ageing, recognizing the unique challenges faced by older women owing to gender-based inequalities. However, the implementation of these frameworks often varies at the national level, particularly regarding the intersectionality of gender and disability. Together, these international instruments aim to foster comprehensive, gender-responsive policies that empower women and ensure that no one is left behind, addressing their rights and needs in all circumstances.

75. The present document provides an intersectional lens on women and girls in the region who have been left behind, and offers the following policy recommendations:

1. *Humanitarian support*

- Expedite humanitarian aid services for women and girls in conflict-affected countries, including access to water, fuel, food, shelter, clothing and hygiene kits.
- Scale up access to reproductive and sexual health care, and mental health-care services to all girls and women in conflict zones and among displaced populations.

2. *Legal and policy reforms*

- Implement legal reforms to eliminate discriminatory provisions in personal status and labour laws, and enforce protections against gender-based violence.
- Formulate policies that specifically address the needs of older women and women with disabilities, integrating their concerns into national strategies.

3. *Education and empowerment*

- Promote equal access to quality education and eliminate barriers to ensure that all girls attend school regardless of economic status, displacement or refugee status, or geographic location.
- Enact policies that promote girls' education and facilitate their access to school through adequate infrastructure, including facilities and transport.
- Customize and implement literacy programmes for adult females, including older women, women in conflict, rural and migrant women, and other vulnerable groups of women.
- Accelerate women's economic empowerment by promoting equal employment opportunities, fair and decent wages, and an enabling environment to increase women's employment.

4. *Economic rights for women*

- Strengthen women's entrepreneurship and facilitate access to financial services and protect inheritance rights.
- Establish non-contributory social assistance schemes for vulnerable women, including those living in rural regions, female headed households, and poor families.

5. *Data collection*

- Collect, publish and disseminate sex-disaggregated data on vulnerable groups of women, so as to tailor policies and programmes to meet their specific needs.

-----