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United Nations Population Fund



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women



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

## **Report**

### **Launch ceremony of “Gender justice and the law: country reports 2022” Online, 13 February 2023**

#### **Executive summary**

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and the Regional Bureau for Arab States of the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) organized a ceremony to launch country reports and a regional interactive tool to follow up on developments in laws and legislation in the Arab region in the field of women's rights. The ceremony provided decision makers with the opportunity to participate in the launch of their country's reports, and to learn from the experiences of other Arab countries, so as to strengthen national legislation aimed at advancing women's rights, in line with international human rights standards. The launch ceremony was held virtually via Zoom on 13 February 2023.

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## **Introduction**

1. The “Gender justice and the law” initiative is a multi-stakeholder partnership that includes four United Nations agencies, namely ESCWA, UNDP, UN-Women and UNFPA, in addition to national stakeholders in Arab countries. The initiative uses a robust methodology to promote countries' compliance with international standards. Through the launch of country reports, this initiative aims to encourage the review of national and institutional policies to promote justice in the field of law, and to eliminate structural barriers to women's rights.
2. The initiative is the outcome of a participatory and consultative process. In 2018, 18 country reports were issued based on 27 indicators on a constitutional framework, personal status and family laws, labour laws, and sexual and reproductive rights. In 2019, a regional report was issued alongside a colour-coded map that monitored the alignment of laws with international standards and agreements. In the period 2021–2022, the four concerned organizations worked to review legislation in 17 Arab countries in terms of their alignment with international standards, based on 74 indicators emanating from the indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on gender justice, specifically indicators 5.1.1 and 5.2.6 under SDG 5.
3. The country reports address issues related to inclusive legal frameworks, public life, protection from violence against women and girls in the public and private spheres, work and economic benefits, family and personal status, and sexual and reproductive health and rights. Each category includes indicators on ways to promote, implement and monitor rights. The partners will work annually, in coordination with national authorities, to update the coding for each country on the interactive tool's platform, based on the process for developing and amending national legislation, to be launched annually at an event hosted by an Arab country, so as to facilitate the monitoring of gender justice in law regionally, and promote the exchange of experiences and ongoing discussions on the topic.
4. The tool, which has been rated as a good practice by the United Nations Secretary-General, uses a colour scheme to compare laws and public policies under each category. It provides policymakers with a map that identifies legislation that needs further attention, harmonization and/or modification, according to international standards. Users can learn about the experiences of other Arab countries in adopting and amending laws related to gender justice. The accuracy of the reports was verified using an effective methodology entailing national consultations in each country, attended by technical experts and experts from Governments, national human rights institutions, civil society organizations, and United Nations agencies. These consultations were vital as they enabled stakeholders in Arab countries to participate in the process.

### **I. Event objectives**

5. The launch of the "Gender justice and the law" country reports and interactive tool aims to facilitate knowledge sharing, raise awareness of the initiative in the Arab region and globally, and share the results with key stakeholders. At the ceremony, participants discussed ways to use country data to tackle challenges that impede gender justice by reforming laws, implementing women's empowerment initiatives, and forging strategic regional partnerships. The event also aimed to widely disseminate the updated "Gender justice and the law" reports, build momentum for the initiative and the tool, enhance stakeholder engagement, and continue to improve and benefit from the initiative. This year, Saudi Arabia hosted the regional event virtually.

### **II. Participants**

6. The event aimed to achieve broad representation from various sectors, by including representatives of Governments, judicial bodies, national women's machineries, non-governmental organizations, United Nations agencies, regional stakeholders, and the media in the Arab region.

### **III. Date and venue**

7. The launch ceremony was held virtually through Zoom on Monday, 13 February 2023 at 3 p.m. Beirut/Cairo time, and lasted two hours. The discussions took place in Arabic, and simultaneous interpretation into English and French was provided. The event was announced on the social media platforms of United Nations organizations to encourage broad participation.

### **IV. Opening ceremony**

8. The event was opened by Ms. Manar Zeaiter, Adviser on Gender Equality and Human Rights Issues at ESCWA. She welcomed participants, explained some logistical details related to the event, and introduced the five speakers at the opening session, namely the representatives of the four United Nations partner agencies and the representative of Saudi Arabia.

9. The first statement was delivered by Ms. Sarah Poole, Deputy Director of the UNDP Regional Bureau for Arab States. She noted the importance of the initiative for Arab countries, stressing that it lay at the core of UNDP work. She said that the reports showed some progress, but there was an urgent need to intensify efforts to amend legislation in a way that ensured alignment with international standards and guaranteed women's access to justice. Laws were a vital tool, given their role in enhancing the political and economic participation of women, and in protecting them from all forms of violence. She noted that in addition to amending discriminatory laws, there was also an urgent need to implement existing laws, expressing her hope that the initiative would contribute to the exchange of experiences and encourage countries to amend their legal systems.

10. Ms. Mehrinaz Elawadi, Leader of the ESCWA Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, stressed the importance of the initiative, given the violations that women in Arab countries were subjected to, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, economic crises, and the repercussions of the war in Ukraine. She said that there were many solutions, notably legislation, and that the importance of the initiative lay in that it provided decision makers and policymakers with a practical tool to review legislation and determine national reform priorities to achieve gender justice, in addition to providing a platform for multilateral dialogue on legislative systems in Arab countries.

11. Ms. Karina Nersesian, Deputy Regional Director of UNFPA, expressed her happiness with the initiative as it was the result of joint work between four United Nations agencies and a number of national partners. She said that the initiative complemented other tools aimed at eliminating all forms of discrimination and violence against women in legislation. She expressed her hope that the results would motivate countries to amend their laws. She also stressed the importance of working on the six topics included in the reports, especially the topic of sexual and reproductive health and rights, through the adoption of policies, legislation and measures that helped women access all services, without any restrictions. In the same context, and despite the remarkable progress made in the field of legislation on protection from domestic violence, there remained a strong need to make protection mechanisms available to all women. She added that partnerships between various national stakeholders should be strengthened through the initiative and maintained among United Nations agencies.

12. Ms. Susan Michael, Regional Director of UN-Women for the Arab States, said that the initiative was an opportunity for national partners to work towards eliminating all forms of discrimination against women, given that they were real challenges that hampered development and poverty reduction. She added that it was not possible to enhance women's economic participation in the Arab region, the lowest worldwide, without eliminating the violence that women and girls faced. Although many countries had made progress in terms of labour laws, there was still a great need to address many challenges, especially sexual harassment in the workplace, and to provide care services for working women, specifically organizing maternity and paternity leave and providing childcare. She concluded by stating that the initiative was an opportunity for Arab countries to respond legislatively, not only to achieve gender justice, but also to ensure inclusive human development.

13. The last statement was made by Haila Al-Mukairish on behalf of Maymouna Al-Khalil, Secretary-General of the Family Affairs Council of Saudi Arabia. She gave an overview of the country's progress in terms of laws, including the Personal Status Law, the Anti-harassment Law, and the Protection Against Abuse Law. She also stressed the country's commitment to achieving gender equality, particularly in the field of education and employment.

## **V. First session**

14. The session included a presentation on "Gender justice and the law" Initiative by Ms. Rania Tarazi, Head of the Gender Team at the UNDP Regional Office for Arab States. The presentation reviewed the development of the initiative since the adoption of the Muscat Declaration in 2016, including the preparation of national reports in 2018 based on 27 indicators, the preparation of the regional report in 2019, the current stage of establishing the coding matrix that included 74 indicators, and the preparation of reports for 17 countries. She recalled the initiative's goal, which was to change women's living conditions by amending legislation in line with international standards.

15. The second presentation was made by Ms. Salma Al-Nims, Chief of the ESCWA Gender Equality Section. She reviewed the progress achieved in all member States, key results under the six topics (general legal frameworks, legal capacity, public life, protection from violence, work, and economic benefits), and the main areas of progress and stagnation. She also discussed positive reforms and the major challenges and gaps at the level of the six topics and of countries. She focused on progress achieved in the period 2018–2022, and gave an overview of the legal landscape in the 17 countries.

## **VI. Panel discussion**

16. After the first session, a panel discussion on gender justice and law in the Arab region was held, moderated by Ms. Atidel Mejbri, Chair of the Press Council and Director of the Media Training Center at the Center of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR).

17. She welcomed participants, commended the initiative, and reaffirmed the need to amend legislation to enhance women's citizenship in Arab countries. She then introduced the five panellists.

18. Ms. Wafaa Bani Mustafa, Minister of Social Development and Chair of the Inter-ministerial Committee for Women's Empowerment in Jordan, made a presentation in which she focused on the new electoral law in Jordan, and on the key aspects of amendments implemented to enhance women's political participation. She also noted the amendment to the Constitution, especially to the title of chapter two, which had become "the rights and duties of Jordanian men and women," in addition to the sixth paragraph of article 6 that guaranteed the empowerment of women to play an important role in society. She said that the new constitutional text was an important foundation for any amendments, procedures or measures undertaken in the future. She reviewed amendments to the legislative framework of the new election law, which had expanded the participation of women by increasing the number of seats granted to them in local lists to 18, and reducing the number of local constituencies so that women now had a guaranteed seat in each constituency, in addition to allocating 41 seats to party lists. The amendments in Jordan were not limited to the constitution and the election law, but also affected the political parties law, which was a key channel to the electoral law. The Senate had approved the draft political parties law, which provided for the establishment of parties in accordance with the principles of citizenship and equality, and stipulated that 20 per cent of party founders must be women, young people and persons with disabilities.

19. Ms. Aawatif Hayar, Minister of Solidarity, Social Integration and Family of Morocco, made a presentation in which she stressed her country's commitment to ensuring gender equality through the Constitution, a system of legislation and policies, and various other measures. She reviewed key conventions and protocols that Morocco had acceded to in 2022, and the institutional framework for equality presented by the National Committee for Gender Equality, which was one of the governmental institutions concerned with

gender equality issues. She indicated the strategy of Morocco on sexual and reproductive health, noting the adoption of many programmes to protect women from violence. She also stressed the importance of harmonizing legislation with human rights standards to overcome the challenges women still faced.

20. Lebanese judge Nazek Al-Khatib highlighted the problems that prevented women from accessing justice and implementing the law. She said that Lebanon, like many countries, had adopted several laws that guaranteed access to justice, including the Law for Protection from Domestic Violence, the Law for Punishing Sexual Harassment, and the Law for Punishing Human Trafficking, but women still faced great challenges in accessing justice. Some of those challenges were related to the judiciary system, and some to services provided to assist women survivors of violence, in addition to challenges related to women themselves. Those challenges included the limited capacity of civilian judges under the restrictions imposed by personal status laws; and the fact that domestic violence was not considered a stand-alone crime or a crime against the person. She added that the law defined domestic violence and defined the family, but did not mention domestic violence as a stand-alone crime. Other challenges women faced included economic vulnerability, the failure to provide protection for non-Lebanese women, and challenges related to a lack of services, especially the absence of shelters.

21. Ms. Nehad Abulkomsan, a lawyer and Chair of the Egyptian Center for Women's Rights and an international expert on issues of gender equality and development, made a presentation focusing on the major challenges that women faced in the field of personal status in Egypt. She indicated two main challenges, the first related to the drafting of the legal text itself, and the second related to its implementation. The main problem lay in the adoption of old references that did not keep pace with developments in the family, its role and its social function, which affected the interpretation of personal status laws and civil laws, such as the issue of guardianship. She noted the reforms in family law in several Arab countries, adding that they were insufficient because they did not address gender roles and the related power dynamics within the family. Added to those problems was the challenge of procedural laws, and the difficulty of activating real protection for women in view of cultural and social challenges that limited the power of the law. Hence the importance of amending the texts, which would be a long process, and the importance of adopting procedural laws, which was a feasible approach that would help women access justice.

22. Ms. Ibtisam Al-Hilali, a member of the Iraqi Parliament and Chair of the Women's, Family and Children's Committee, reviewed developments in women's issues in Iraq, and the challenges that the country faced owing to terrorism and the COVID-19 pandemic. She also discussed the articles of the Constitution that guaranteed the protection of women, highlighting the process to approve the Law on Protection from Domestic Violence, which faced many challenges, and had not yet been approved for many reasons, despite the passage of 10 years.

23. Discussing the benefits of the reports of the "Gender justice in law" initiative, the speakers stressed the importance of the initiative in supporting countries to amend their laws, providing tools to monitor progress, following up on the implementation of laws, providing motivation, and offering evidence of problems plaguing legislation. The speakers said that the matrix and reports also encouraged the exchange of experiences between Arab countries, allowing legislators to benefit from those experiences. The reports highlighted legislative gaps, which was an essential first step to push decision makers to work on amending existing laws and enacting new ones.

24. Participants asked questions that mostly focused on the role of civil society in urging countries to enact laws, and on how to benefit from the reports.

## **VII. Close of the event**

25. Ms. Al-Nims closed the event by thanking participants, including the speakers, for their active participation. She also thanked the moderator, Ms. Mejbri, for her assistance, and expressed her wish for continued collaboration between the United Nations and Arab countries to strengthen women's human rights.

## VIII. Organizers

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