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The role of parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement of women's economic empowerment under SDG 5 in the Arab region: Focus on care policies

A regional meeting organized by the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA), in partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and the International Labour Organization (ILO).

Wednesday, 31 January and Thursday, 1 February 2024
Online regional meeting

Summary report

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I. Introduction

The regional meeting on “The role of parliamentarians in accelerating the achievement of women’s economic empowerment under SDG 5 in the Arab region: Focus on care policies” co-organized by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) and the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), in partnership with the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women), and the International Labour Organization (ILO), aimed to address the role of parliamentarians in advancing Sustainable Development Goal 5 (SDG 5) on gender equality in the Arab region. Held virtually on Wednesday, 31 January and Thursday, 1 February 2024, the two-day meeting discussions focused on the interlinkages between gender equality and women’s economic empowerment; care policies; and human capital development and dignity; and rights of caregivers and care recipients.

Chaired by representatives of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians, the meeting comprised six sessions, and emphasized sharing best practices and strategies to promote women’s economic empowerment in the Arab region with focus on care policies.

The meeting brought together 35 parliamentarians (29 women and 6 men) from 18 Arab countries, as well as 55 observers (parliamentary staff, government officials, and representatives of international and civil society organizations).

II. Opening Session

The opening speeches were delivered by **Ms. Cynthia López Castro** (MP, Mexico; President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians); **Ms. Mehrinaz Al-Awadhi** (Leader, Gender Justice, Population and Inclusive Development Cluster, ESCWA); **Ms. Susan Michael Eldhagen** (Regional Director for Arab States, UN-Women); and **Ms. Ruba Jaradat** (Regional Director for Arab States, ILO).

The speeches emphasized the vital role of parliamentarians in advancing care-related legal frameworks and achieving SDG 5 on gender equality. They underscored the profound impact of the COVID-19 crisis on care work and on women’s economic participation, and highlighted the interconnectedness between care and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) including SDG 8 on decent work. They also stressed the importance of investing in the care economy.

III. Sessions and discussions

Day 1 sessions

Ms. Farida Ilimi Haddouche (MP, Algeria; First Vice-President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) chaired the Day 1 sessions.

Throughout the sessions, participants called for and stressed the urgency of a ceasefire in Gaza.

[Session 1: The 2030 Agenda and progress with SDG achievement in the Arab region and around the world](#)

The session was moderated by **Ms. Maisaa Youssef** (Leader, 2030 Agenda and SDG Coordination Cluster, ESCWA) who pointed out the slow progress in the SDGs 2030 indicators in the region despite the commendable efforts of the Arab States.

Ms. Jana El Baba (Sustainable Development Officer, ESCWA) presented an overview of the progress made in implementing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (2030 Agenda) in the region and referred to the 17 goals, their indicators and related policies. She highlighted the Arab States' efforts towards achieving SDGs and their targets while acknowledging persistently low development indicators attributed in part to conflicts, including the Gaza war. Her presentation on the progress in the 2030 Agenda implementation was based on findings of a forthcoming ESCWA report which shed light on legal reforms to promote gender equality and combat sexual harassment, alongside economic empowerment initiatives. Challenges in data collection and gender-based disparities were underscored, with six Arab countries ranking among the world's 20 most unequal States. Economic downturns due to conflict were pointed out, including increased unemployment, rising public debt and reduced tax revenues. Marginalization of Arab women, particularly in low-paying sectors like agriculture and fisheries, was noted as hindering SDGs achievements. Additionally, the pivotal role of Arab parliaments in overcoming challenges such as limited independence, weak oversight, political divisions, corruption, misuse of public funds, and constraints on civil liberties was emphasized, underscoring the necessity of parliamentary action for sustainable development.

Ms. Aleksandra Blagojevic (IPU Programme Manager for International Development) gave a presentation on how parliaments around the world can contribute to SDG implementation. She focused on parliamentarians' roles in global SDG implementation, stressing the importance of parliamentary participation in Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) reporting before the United Nations (UN) on the progress in SDG implementation. Efforts over the past four years and key observations were highlighted, including challenges and successes encountered by national parliaments. Based on parliamentary responses to an IPU survey on parliamentary involvement in VNRs, most respondent parliaments stated that they were informed of the process, but only half of them had been provided with a consultation plan that included a role for parliament. Although only a quarter of the submitted VNRs reference parliaments as contributors to the report, an analysis of VNRs over time shows a growing inclusion of parliaments in the process.

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

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

[Session 2: Why is SDG 5 a catalyst for the achievement of all SDGs? How is it progressing in the Arab region?](#)

The session was moderated by **Ms. Nada Darwazeh** (Chief, Center for Women, ESCWA).

Ms. LEMONIA FOKAIDOU (Programme Specialist at UN-Women Regional Office for Arab States) gave a presentation on the importance of SDG 5 and provided a snapshot of gender equality across SDGs. She emphasized the critical importance of achieving SDG 5 as a catalyst for all other SDGs, and highlighted the pressing need to end discrimination and violence against women and girls while striving for gender equality. Globally speaking, 15% of the SDG 5 indicators have been achieved, with 61% of them at a moderate level of progress and 23% remaining significantly distant from their target.¹ The Arab region faces challenges in achieving gender equality by 2030 as existing legal barriers hinder women's economic participation in many of the region's countries. This region is no exception – 178 countries around the globe have legal barriers preventing women from full economic participation and, when compounded with other factors, lead to approximately 2.4 billion women of working age lacking equal economic opportunities.

Ms. ZEINA HILAL (Manager of the IPU Gender Partnership Programme) gave a presentation on the IPU's handbook for parliamentarians titled *The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and its Optional Protocol*. She highlighted the practical tools and case studies from various countries referred to in the handbook, urging parliamentarians to take action and utilize available support to eliminate gender discrimination effectively. Attendees were encouraged to explore the handbook thoroughly for impactful parliamentary work.

The subsequent discussion shed light on examples from several countries. Morocco has made significant strides in bolstering women's rights and gender equality by integrating principles of justice, equality and equal opportunities into the country's constitution. Moreover, Algeria's priorities regarding women's economic empowerment, and political and social rights have persisted

¹ See in: www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/gender-equality/#:~:text=With%20only%20seven%20years%20remaining,progress%20has%20been%20too%20slow.

since independence as could be evidenced by laws promoting gender equality in the workforce, supporting women's advancement in leadership roles and safeguarding them from violence. A participant from Egypt pointed out that the country's economic growth was correlated with increased female workforce participation and emphasized that achieving gender parity was a priority in Egypt's Vision 2030 action plan. Efforts to remove cultural barriers and gender-biased labour policies are underway, with collaborations between the National Council for Women and international entities like the World Bank, supported by the UK Embassy in Egypt. The aim is to enhance gender equality in the private sector through various initiatives such as evaluation, recruitment, professional development, work-life balance policies, and to combat harassment and discrimination in the workplace.

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

[Session 3: SDG 5.4 - The care economy and women's economic empowerment](#)

Ms. Nada Darwazeh (Chief, Center for Women, ESCWA) moderated the session which commenced with a practical exercise for participants conducted by **Mr. Wessel van den Berg** (Senior Advocacy Officer at Equimundo). The exercise aimed to clarify the impact of different professions and caregiving tasks on freedom in making decisions in daily life in terms of time organization and time utilization. The exercise confirmed that women bear the brunt of caregiving responsibilities, whether paid or unpaid, and lack sufficient leisure time compared to men.

Discussions stressed the imperative of men's involvement in caregiving to enhance women's economic empowerment and achieve societal balance. Furthermore, traditional gender roles were recognized as perpetuating inequality, with women predominantly assuming caregiving responsibilities. However, there is a gradual shift in the Arab region with women's increased participation in policymaking and parliaments heralding a redefinition of societal norms. Cultural norms were highlighted, emphasizing the need for equitable participation of men in household chores and childcare. The evolving role of female parliamentarians signals a departure from traditional gender roles, reflecting changing societal perceptions and paving the way for greater equality.

Additionally, in her presentation, **Ms. Rouba Arja** (Social Affairs Officer, ESCWA) explored caregiving in the Arab region, focusing on the region's legal and policy frameworks. She underscored women's predominant role in unpaid caregiving, impacting their workforce participation and access to paid caregiving roles. Challenges included ensuring social protection and favorable working conditions for care providers that should be addressed through policy frameworks advocating for recognition, redistribution of unpaid care and for representation of paid care workers. Efforts in the Arab region were acknowledged but deemed incomplete, necessitating the expansion of leave policies, flexible work arrangements and workplace daycare facilities. ESCWA's contributions to advancing the care economy were noted, particularly their [studies on women's economic empowerment and caregiving](#), revealing institutional shortcomings in integrating caregiving into policies and strategies, and emphasizing the need for sectoral visions and laws acknowledging intersectionality.

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

The Day 1 wrap up highlighted the challenges in the Arab region affecting the SDGs, especially gender equality and women's empowerment. The need for laws recognizing and redistributing caregiving duties to enable economic empowerment, and ensure rights and dignity for caregivers and recipients was stressed. Parliamentarians were urged to enact legislation supporting women's economic empowerment, including equal pay, protection from workplace harassment and investment in the care economy. They were encouraged to be well-informed about caregiving and associated rights to facilitate law reforms.

Day 2 sessions

Ms. Aida Naseef Ayyoub (MP, Egypt; Second Vice-President of the IPU Bureau of Women Parliamentarians) chaired the Day 2 sessions.

[Session 4: Advancing labour policies related to care](#)

Mr. Oussama Safa (Chief, Social Justice Section, ESCWA) moderated the fourth session which commenced with a presentation on international labour standards (ILS) related to care work delivered by **Ms. Zeina Mezher** (WE CARE Project Manager, ILO). The presentation emphasized the importance of adhering to ILS in achieving social justice, decent work, economic stability, poverty reduction, sustainable development and international cooperation. It highlighted the role of parliamentarians in providing input and advice on labour conventions and bilateral labour agreements before they are adopted, and the ILO's providing of necessary technical assistance to constituents and policy makers on ILS and national policy updates. Using examples from the Arab region, the ratification of the Equal Remuneration Convention was identified as a key element that parliaments could promote. The presentation also emphasized parliamentarians' role in promoting

national adherence to ILS especially of standards relevant to the care sector such as parental leave. The discussion revolved around the role of parliamentarians in contributing to evidence-based research, legislation, policy formulation, gender budget monitoring, and encouraging social dialogue between employers, workers, and governments to ensure that the standards are adopted and implemented.

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

Ms. Mayada Shreem (MP, Jordan) shared Jordan's experience in advancing legislative measures in support of caregivers, including maternal insurance and nursery care programmes under social security laws. The aim was to ensure the rights of paid care providers, and to promote gender equality and economic participation. The reform focused on unequal pay, insecure employment and short-term contracts. Amendments allocated funds for maternal social protection programmes, benefiting around 28,000 families, offering financial aid to working mothers and childcare support. The amended law mandates employers to provide childcare facilities, easing family responsibilities' redistribution. However, challenges persist such as legal compliance by employers and hesitancy by employees to claim their rights. Ministry-led awareness campaigns are crucial to educate citizens about their rights under this law. For example, Article 69 of the Labour Code protected pregnant women, individuals with disabilities and night shift workers. Yet, while it granted more work freedom for women, some criticized its vagueness, allowing ministerial intervention that could impede women's employment opportunities, contradicting anti-discrimination clauses. It was amended in 2023.

The ensuing discussion focused on the following examples and practices of the different countries. Lebanon's equal pay law provides for penalties imposed on an employer who discriminates between male and female workers. However, discrimination may occur in nominations for capacity-building programmes and training which, in turn, impact career paths and development, and women's access to managerial positions.

A participant from the Syrian Arab Republic pointed out the impact of economic crises on living conditions and healthcare, advocating for proposals supporting caregivers and parental leave. The country had introduced laws protecting children's rights and establishing agencies for the care and education of children in alternative care. Additionally, organizations focused on developing care for chronically ill and elderly individuals.

In Mauritania, efforts had been made to allocate budgets to childcare facilities, and toward the education and training of women and girls, as well as to guarantee equal pay by law.

The Arab Parliament's recent document addressed economic barriers to women's empowerment and promoted gender equality. Efforts included drafting laws and resolutions to enhance women's rights on the regional and international level, while simultaneously empowering Arab female parliamentarians and updating legal frameworks.

The role of parliamentarians in discussing and contributing to international agreements on standards was also discussed. Most often, parliament intervened after a government's input, at the time of ratification, limiting lawmakers' ability to amend bills. Also discussed was the need for internal dialogue between government, employers and workers on equal parental leave as a way of addressing discrimination against women in employment. Parliament has a pivotal role to play in fostering such dialogues and following up on implementation of established standards, including by conducting hearings, consulting civil society and receiving complaints. Awareness-raising efforts are equally important to achieve the needed reforms.

[Session 5: Opportunities created by promoting the rights of paid care workers](#)

Ms. Rouba Arja (Social Affairs Officer, ESCWA) moderated the fifth session, which included a presentation on the rights of paid care workers delivered by **Ms. Sophia Kagan** (FAIRWAY Chief Technical Advisor, ILO Regional Office for Arab States). The global workforce in paid care encompasses 381 million individuals, primarily in healthcare, education and domestic work, with women constituting a significant portion. Key elements of decent care work include recognition of unpaid care, its redistribution, representation of care workers and capacity-building for collective bargaining. It is crucial to address vulnerable groups such as domestic workers, migrants and those in the informal economy. Promising national investments in transformative care packages was highlighted, especially in the fields of education, healthcare and social work. It was necessary to analyze the financial and operational aspects of sustainable care financing, to identify gaps and promote innovative solutions. It was also needed to undertake legal and policy reviews to ensure decent work in care professions and enhance worker representation and participation in social dialogues and unions.

Parliamentary interventions and contributions on the different approaches on the promotion of policy change to ensure the rights of paid care workers followed. The discussion underscored the strategic plan of the Syrian Arab Republic to achieve gender equality, emphasizing economic empowerment, the reduction of domestic violence, increased female participation in decision-making, healthcare and access to education. Also highlighted were the obstacles encountered in Lebanon regarding adequate childcare and women's employment, including funding inadequacies and quality discrepancies between public and private daycare, and the need to advocate for a flexible labour law.

The discussion highlighted global gender disparities in wages and caregiving burdens, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and stressed the need for comprehensive political leadership, investment in gender equality and reforms of national strategies to integrate gender equality. Given that the Arab countries had these same needs, it was proposed to establish union bodies at the national level to monitor care service providers' regulations, wages and systems to ensure social-cultural improvements and that legal frameworks address the relevant societal norms.

In conclusion to the session, participants emphasized the challenge of balancing household and paid work for women and advocated for increased daycare services and female union engagement to improve policymaking. Social protection for care workers and protection from harassment at work also needed to be strengthened.

[Session 6: I care to care – Advancing equal care in and through parliament](#)

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

Ms. Koloub Faitah (MP, Morocco) gave a presentation on recent legislative reforms which, starting with the 2004 Family Code, included advancements in women's empowerment and protection against discrimination, particularly in rural areas. Strengthening gender equality in public service employment included legal enhancements to improve women's working conditions while preserving their rights and aligning with Morocco's principle of shared responsibility within families. ILO Convention 183 on maternity protection was integrated into Moroccan law on 13 April 2011. Additionally, measures have been enacted to support maternity rights and equal childcare responsibilities, including amendments to the General Regulations of Public Service granting male employees 15 consecutive days of paternity leave and extending breastfeeding leave to 24 months. Morocco is committed to furthering women's economic empowerment through initiatives such as expanding childcare facilities, improving access to transportation, enhancing workplace conditions and promoting financial inclusion.

In his presentation, **Mr. Tim Loughton** (MP, Vice-Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Fatherhood, United Kingdom) referred to work done on the promotion of fatherhood. He

highlighted changes in the UK Parliament over the past decade, including allowing members to bring their children to sessions and extending paternity leave to three months. He also emphasized the importance of legislation concerning both parents.

IV. Conclusions

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

The Arab region continues to present one of the largest gender gaps in the world, as it still exhibits one of the lowest rates of female labour force participation, which the ILO estimated to be at 19.5% in 2023. Arab women perform the bulk of unpaid care work and devote 4.7 times more than men of their time to carrying out unpaid care tasks, which negatively impacts women's labour force participation. Paid care workers, the majority of whom are women, work in less-than-ideal conditions; their work is undervalued and underpaid.

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

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

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