

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR WESTERN ASIA

**ARAB REGIONAL TEN-YEAR REVIEW AND APPRAISAL
OF IMPLEMENTATION OF THE BEIJING
PLATFORM FOR ACTION**

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Introduction

1. Upon accepting the recommendations of the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, the Arab States proceeded to develop national strategies, work plans and programmes for

9. It is noteworthy that every Arab State is making efforts and undertaking commitments to the goal of the advancement and empowerment of women. Those efforts are undoubtedly characterized by a large measure of diversity in terms of initiatives, actions and objectives, but this report is concerned basically with surveying achievements at the level of individual countries, including, in so far as possible, achievements by civil society institutions.

10. This report is divided into two parts. Part I contains a review of Arab States' accomplishments in implementing the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly (2000), while Part II contains an appraisal of those accomplishments and a survey of current challenges and forward-looking measures for the advancement and empowerment of women and girls. The four-part questionnaire that was distributed to the several States is appended to the report.

PART ONE

REVIEW AND APPRAISAL OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS TO IMPLEMENT THE BEIJING DECLARATION AND PLATFORM FOR ACTION (1995) AND THE OUTCOME DOCUMENT OF THE TWENTY-THIRD SPECIAL SESSION OF THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY (2000)

11. Reflecting the methodology of the questionnaire to Governments, this part of the report contains four sections. The first of these is a summary overview of achievements and challenges in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. The second section contains a review of progress to date in implementation of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the further initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. The third section looks at institutional arrangements, and the fourth and final section presents a survey of the main challenges and future action to address them.

I. SUMMARY OVERVIEW OF MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS IN PROMOTING GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

12. This section begins with a general overview of major achievements in promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, followed by a brief survey of remaining gaps and challenges to the attainment of these goals.

A. MAJOR ACHIEVEMENTS

13. In most Arab States, the past five years have seen increasing concern with women's issues in all fields and sectors. Those issues have become fundamental and have been incorporated into basic development priorities. This concern is evident at both governmental and grassroots levels.

14. As a result, there have been some major achievements along the lines called for in the Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session (Beijing + 5). One of the most noteworthy of these is the adoption of a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, with tangible results in the form of an evolving social situation and increasing participation by women in various sectors.

15. Concretely, new constitutions have been adopted or existing constitutions amended to include provisions making all citizens are equal before the law in rights and duties, with no gender-based discrimination in any area of political, social, cultural or economic life. Some constitutions expressly state that it is the duty of the State to support women's rights and to enact legislation on the protection of the family and all its members and on respect for human rights. In other cases, constitutions have now been amended to make provision for development, monitoring and follow-up mechanisms aimed at ensuring that other policies and programmes on the advancement of women which may be adopted, in addition to the provisions of the constitution itself, are duly implemented. Some States have decided that their national charter should explicitly prohibit any gender-based discrimination, as was recently recommended in a formal address by a country's highest authority to the Government, emphasizing once again the necessity of enlisting women as participants in the process of national development and enhancing their status.

16. In support of their policies of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, most Arab States have joined for

monitoring and tracking the work of all governmental agencies in addressing women's issues and promoting gender equality. The mechanisms in question may be either regulatory or advisory in nature.

17. The various actors responsible for implementing the policy are held accountable through a variety of mechanisms. Most States have established independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues. Various means to this end are used, notably the filing of formal complaints.

18. In the light of the foregoing discussion, it is clear that every State has its own high-level mechanism

year. Some States, moreover, have undertaken a review of their judicial systems to ensure that women's rights are safeguarded, and have gone to great lengths to eliminate gender discrimination from the judiciary.

24. We may note in this connection that some Arab States are currently studying the justifications given for their reservations to the Convention with a view to withdrawing them, in some cases because the actual situation of women has evolved to the point where those reservations no longer apply, and in others because there have been high-level policy orientations in favour of gender equality and safeguarding human rights for women.

25. There have thus been initiatives involving both new legislation and amendments to and revision of existing legislation, with a view to bringing national law into line with the Convention. One major achievement in this area has been the decision by some States to review their family law and ensure that it guarantees gender equality in private matters, namely, in the sphere of the family; in addition, a majority of Arab States have overhauled their laws to eliminate gender-based discrimination and ensure gender equality in public matters as well, including labour law, social insurance, education, elections and vital statistics. In some States, this review of law has gone even further to include passports, income tax and certain courtroom procedures that were formerly characterized by gender-based discrimination. For the first time, some Arab States have made some forms of violence against women criminal offences. It thus appears that women have made legislative gains as a result of these changes.

26. As regards financial and institutional measures, it is difficult for most Arab States to quantify the financial resources they have devoted to the advancement of women, or to determine precisely what percentage of total Government spending those resources represent, and hence are not in a position to measure their growth or shrinkage as a percentage of the national budget. However, a few States have indeed been able to quantify the costs of their various programme actions aimed at the advancement of women, thanks to their far-sighted action in establishing a financial tracking mechanism in good time.

27. Women's issues have come to account for a substantial fraction of debate in Governments and national parliaments in most Arab States, and the result has been important achievements in the field of legislation, as we have seen, with the elimination of gender-based discrimination. Those issues are also a prominent aspect of suggestions from national mechanisms, while some States have been prominent in discussing gender mainstreaming in intergovernmental forums. The result, as noted earlier, has been that those issues have been incorporated into sectoral plans and strategies that have subsequently been developed and mainstreamed in line ministries and their respective institutions and agencies. Some States have adopted a non-discriminatory approach in some of the Beijing critical areas of concern, and some, in addition, have developed gender-disaggregated databases as a springboard for planning and follow-up action. Some Arab States have established teams to monitor gender issues. These represent an important experiment in gender mainstreaming in sectoral policy and strategy development and analysis, and are a useful aid to decision-

foreign debt service on the one hand and, on the other hand, the difficult domestic economic situation and

actors in society, including both governmental agencies and civil society institutions and organizations, and the fact that there is now a widespread concern to promote the empowerment of women and participation by women in various fields on a footing of equality with men.

II. PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CRITICAL AREAS OF CONCERN

(f) In some States, inclusion of a division concerned exclusively with women and poverty in the national strategy;

(g) Preparation of a social development strategy;

(h) Creation of a general budget item expressly to provide funding for training and retraining efforts essential to combating poverty;

(i) Establishment of monitoring and follow-up mechanisms to track the implementation of the national poverty elimination strategy. A majority of Arab States have accomplished all this by enlisting all government bodies and civil society institutions as partners in the fight against poverty.

40. National poverty elimination strategies are aimed at upgrading the socio-economic situation of poor people in general, in line with the Millennium Development Goals and Targets, especially Goal 1, which is the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger. While these strategies take the family as the basic unit, women are expressly targeted under programmes that have grown out of them or may do so in the future. These strategies have also devoted particular attention to women's education, explicitly noting its effectiveness as a means of reducing the incidence of poverty.

41. Women in poverty, in particular, have been included in national strategies through a wide variety of themes, orientations and actions. The unifying thread running through this diversity is that all of them begin by seeking to identify the needs of women in poverty with a view to the development of appropriate programmes and projects aimed at protecting them, enhancing their economic and educational status and improving their health.

42. Social development strategies, for their part, have been concerned with service delivery and development, and also the modernization of services in line with the objective of women's advancement.

43. Successful programmes and projects designed to eliminate poverty, address its root causes or mitigate its impact have included the following:

(a) Broadening the scope of the social safety net (insurance and financial assistance and support) through a national fund, known variously as the social development fund, social care fund, national assistance fund or the like, established expressly for that purpose;

(b) Enhancing the situation of families and improving living standards by raising the minimum wage;

(c) Providing support for basic food items;

(d) Increasing employment opportunities through training, retraining and employment programmes for citizens of both sexes;

(e) Encouraging persons of both sexes to participate in the development process, and adopting projects aimed at encouraging individuals to set up their own businesses by making microcredit available and

(i) Designing non-discriminatory programmes aimed at empowering women heads of businesses and contractors;

(j) Lastly, with a view to enhancing women's living conditions by providing financial and organizational support for the development of income-generating activities, line ministries responsible for women's issues in some Arab States have set up savings and loan funds for women, known by such names as women's savings and loan association or women's bank.

2. *Obstacles, gaps and challenges*

44. Confronted as they are with a host of difficulties, gaps and challenges, some Arab States have been unable to fulfil the commitments they undertook at the Fourth World Conference on Women. Available indicators suggest that poverty is likely to be one of the most serious challenges for these States during the coming decade. The problems faced by many of them include:

(a) Inadequate precise statistical data on women;

(b) Inadequate precise statistical data and indicators on poverty;

(c) Lack of analytical statistical methods incorporating a gender perspective, with the result that the level of poverty among women is subject to a wide range of estimates or even guesswork.

45. Furthermore, the programmes developed by most Arab States in an effort to meet their obligations have been afflicted with fundamental gaps and difficulties. Some of the most serious of these are:

(a) Inadequate financial resources;

(b) The continued growth of poverty among women in recent years, and the spread of the phenomenon of the feminization of poverty;

(c) The fact that an increasing proportion of the population consists of people living below the upper and lower poverty lines in some States;

(d) Few economic opportunities for women;

(e) Limited availability of loans and the burden of interest;

(f) The impact of globalization, economic difficulties and occupation on the socio-economic situation of women.

46. None the less, a majority of Arab States say that they are determined to continue implementing the programmes referred to above, evaluate delivery methods for maximum effectiveness, meet basic needs, and pursue their efforts to raise living standards for all citizens of both sexes. They also emphasize their determination to urge the world of finance and business to encourage participation by women in economic activity, thereby achieving further socio-economic benefits for women in poverty, especially women who are responsible for supporting families or who have special needs (disabled women).

B. EDUCATION AND TRAINING OF WOMEN

1. *Policies, actions and achievements*

47. The issue of education and training is of great relevance for all the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, and consequently all Arab States have devoted particular attention to it, with considerable success in both quantitative and qualitative terms. They have many remarkable achievements to their credit in the fields of public policy, legislation, and practical actions, programmes and projects.

48. In the fields of public policy and legislative change, Arab States have sought to activate and strengthen gender equality. Many of them have adopted a meaningful, intensive political orientation in favour of qualitative upgrading of the education and training available to women, development of their education systems and enhancement of their internal efficiency with attention to gender perspectives. In general terms, these States' accomplishments may be summarized as follows:

(a) A new constitution stating expressly that education is a right of every citizen, that the State guarantees educational services for all its citizens, and that education is free and compulsory at the initial levels;

(b) A national literacy plan;

(c) A number of strategies affirming the importance of developing and broadening education and training, and narrowing the existing gap between men and women in that area. Prominent among these are girls' education strategies, basic education development strategies, literacy and adult education strategies, and strategies aimed at ensuring that information and communication technologies are included in primary and secondary school curricula. The strategies adopted by some Arab States have paid particular attention to these aspects. An anti-poverty strategy, for example, may focus on the importance of women's education and closing the gender gap. In many cases, national strategies on women have included an item on achieving objectives of this kind in their sections on human and social security.

49. Seeking to meet their commitments and implement the Millennium Goals and Targets, especially Goal 3, which is the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women, Arab States have, in general, directed their efforts in this area to the elimination of gender disparity at all levels of education, and the development of an education system that incorporates a gender perspective and is sensitive to all relevant contemporary concepts and practices.

50. Other actions taken by these States include:

(a) Increased spending on education and larger education budgets;

(b) Activation of the role of education in achieving sustainable development;

(c) Reducing illiteracy and school dropout rates;

(d) Opening new colleges and building new schools, especially in villages and remote areas, and upgrading existing school buildings;

(e) Establishing more kindergartens;

(f) Increasing school attendance rates;

(g) Increasing the length of compulsory school attendance;

(h) Integrating pupils with special needs, both boys and girls, into government-operated schools;

(i) Employing more educational support and guidance personnel.

51. Successful programmes and projects in this area have included:

(a) Elimination from school books of illustrations showing discrimination against women and textual matter demeaning to women;

(b) Revision of curricula to include some of the issues addressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and population and environmental education concepts;

- (c) Provision and distribution of school books free of charge in some States;
- (d) Availability of loans to enable girls to attend school;
- (e) Universal school health service coverage;
- (f) Development of new educational models, including one-room schools, distance learning, teleconferencing, and travelling schools for Bedouin areas, the latter being a major experiment that will enable girls to attend school while leading a nomadic life;
- (g) A transition from traditional education to electronic education;
- (h) Preparation of a project for the schools of the future, which will seek to develop both male and female pupils' skills in the field of modern electronic media;
- (i) Organization of specialized training courses for persons of both sexes in the field of adult education;
- (j) Founding of a number of centres and clubs, including centres for the gifted, measurement and assessment centres and students' clubs;
- (k) Utilization of information and communication technology to raise pupils' knowledge acquisition levels at the primary level;
- (l) Achievement of a high level of technical skill and implementation of a computer laboratory project in primary and intermediate schools for pupils of both sexes;
- (m) Provision of nourishing meals for female pupils;
- (n) Introduction of psychological and educational guidance programmes in schools;
- (o) Appointment of women as presidents and deans at a number of universities, presidents of teachers' unions, directors of departments within ministries of education, university instructors and heads of educational agencies. It thus appears that Arab States have addressed the issue of women's education and training both quantitatively and qualitatively.

52. Many NGOs in these States are providing coordination with ministries of education and working in partnership with international organizations to implement women's literacy programmes and hold training courses on the gender concept and many other issues associated with the advancement and empowerment of

(e) Weak monitoring structures;

(f) Continuing disparities between urban women and women in rural areas as regards available choices and vocational training;

(g) The question of how universal education is to be maintained in the face of incessant population growth;

(h) A substantial gap between the content of education on the one hand and the labour market and socio-economic development needs on the other.

54. In an effort to address these various factors, Arab States generally are committing to increasing their education budgets, activating compulsory school-attendance legislation at the primary level, reducing illiteracy rates, closing the gender gap, modernizing their education systems to bring them into line with the knowledge economy, developing school infrastructures, and reviewing curricula with a view to upgrading them and making them more relevant. They are also committing to overhauling their vocational and technical education programmes to take account of scientific and technological innovation, the requirements of development and labour market needs, broadening computer education, activating the role of education in achieving sustainable development, developing programmes designed to support the elimination of direct fees in order to ease financial pressures on students' families, integrating the concept of gender disparities in school curricula, addressing the situation of teachers of both sexes and enabling them to deal with gender

57. A wide variety of successful programmes in this area have been implemented in all Arab States. Some of the most noteworthy of them have been:

- (a) Family planning and reproductive health;
- (b) Comprehensive free premarital medical examinations in some States;
- (c) Early detection of cancer;
- (d) Foundation of a clinic for women who have had repeated miscarriages, the first of its kind in the Middle East;
- (e) Prevention of unlicensed persons from practising medicine;
- (f) Iron deficiency anaemia, sickle-cell anaemia and hereditary blood disorders;
- (g) Foundation of a molecular genetics laboratory to investigate the causes of repeated miscarriages;
- (h) Reduced maternal mortality rates;
- (i) Increased life expectancy;
- (j) Integration of reproductive health concepts into school curricula and courses of study at colleges of medicine;
- (k) Various educational programmes in the field of health awareness;
- (l) Provision of safe drinking water;

women's groups and human rights institutions. In the same context of partnership with these organizations, States have established shelters for battered women and family protection centres, and have created directorates expressly to deal with the issue within the Government's public safety administration. They have also set up distress telephone lines for the use of women who are at risk of various forms of violence, and have provided legal guidance and psychological reassurance services. Some States have established an office expressly to receive complaints from women about gender-based discrimination.

67. The phenomenon of so-called honour killings in some Arab countries has regressed substantially in recent years. Criminal codes have been amended to provide for punishment of these crimes, and special programmes have been organized to enhance awareness of how serious they are and how important it is to eliminate them. Some institutions now offer a variety of services for threatened victims of honour killings. The phenomena of female genital mutilation and the fattening of women are also being addressed, and palpable progress has been made, as is apparent from States' efforts to disseminate awareness of how harmful these practices are, often with the support of religious leaders. Scientific seminars have been held on these sensitive issues.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

68. The efforts of Governments in the area of violence against women have encountered a number of obstacles, difficulties, gaps and challenges. Perhaps the most important of these is the prevailing socio-cultural climate: women continue to be subject to various kinds of physical, psychological and sexual abuse and violence, such as verbal abuse from husbands and relatives, compulsory childbearing, exclusion from decision-making within the family, restrictions on movement outside the home, genital mutilation of girls, fattening by means of overfeeding or by the use of chemicals, exclusion from inheritance, and unpaid farm work. Some of the remaining obstacles may be summarized as follows:

(a) The laws of most Arab States, which at present are unable to punish or deter perpetrators of violence;

(b) Reservations to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women which are still in effect, and failure to ratify the Optional Protocol to the Convention and the Declaration on Violence against Women;

(c) Reluctance of the courts to convict perpetrators of acts of violence against women in some States that have made such acts criminal offences, and difficulty in obtaining judicial reviews in other States;

(d) Scarcity of statistics and studies on the extent to which women are at risk of violence, especially within the family;

(e) Failure of victims to report incidents of violence, and limited ability of police and health facilities to shelter them;

(f) Inadequate awareness on the part of those responsible for following up cases of violence of how these issues should be dealt with;

(g) Increasing incidence of violence against women because of psychological pressure on men in situations of armed conflict or economic deterioration.

69. Arab States have undertaken various commitments in this connection: to overhaul their legislation, to foster a culture of law and to provide psychological and guidance services, among other things.

E. WOMEN AND ARMED CONFLICT

1. Policies, actions and achievements

70. Among the most important actions and accomplishments to the credit of Arab States in this area have been ratification of the four Geneva Conventions and Protocol I, the Convention on the Prohibition of the

Development, Production and Stockpiling of Bacteriological (Biological) and Toxin Weapons and on their Destruction, the Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile Use of Environmental

77. By way of enforcing women's right to work, most Arab States have executed many successful programmes and projects, notably by founding institutions aimed at promoting the development and activation of women's participation in the economic development process and setting up funds for such purposes as rural development, fostering rural development associations and supporting employment and social protection. They have also established councils and other bodies to oversee training courses and organize training programmes.

78. Successful programmes and initiatives in this area include:

- (a) Creation of a database and pursuit of the necessary research;
- (b) Women now account for a larger proportion of the total work force in both the public and private sectors and also in various industrial sectors, including trade;
- (c) Women workers are now promoted and given incentive bonuses on an equal footing with men;
- (d) Microloans for projects run by women and for market and social insurance services;
- (e) Broadening of productive family programmes and retraining to meet labour market requirements;
- (f) Enhancement of economic and social productivity within the social insurance package, and encouragement for small investment projects for women;
- (g) Establishment of more care facilities for the children of women workers;
- (h) Establishment of a rural knowledge network to transmit knowledge about information and communication technology to inhabitants of rural areas;
- (i) Provision of various social services that help women workers, and creation of more training opportunities for women in both the public and private sectors;
- (j) Establishment of businesswomen's committees in many States;
- (k) Opening of a women's stock market in some States;
- (l) Enlistment of NGOs and the private sector as partners in many programmes, and funding or support from the private sector for new private projects initiated by women;
- (m) Participation by Arab women on the boards of directors of chambers of commerce and industry, and larger numbers of women in trade unions.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

79. Difficulties and obstacles in this area include the difficult economic circumstances currently affecting most Arab States, the continuing occupation and confiscation of their land, infrastructure weaknesses, and inadequate enforcement of labour legislation, especially in the private sector, in which some provisions of that legislation are not respected. Challenges include a lack of statistics on economic participation by women, especially in the private sector, the difficulty experienced by women in obtaining credit and high interest rates, and the continuing cultural bias against employing women, paying them the same wages as men, promoting them and providing them with vocational training. In addition, much of the work done by women in the agricultural sector is unpaid, and women's work within the home is invisible. Women also find it difficult to market their products, few of the factories and offices where women work have child care facilities, there are few training or vocational development courses for women, women tend to be unaware of their rights, there is little coordination among various economic projects, and in some countries women must secure the assistance of male representatives in order to conduct their economic affairs.

80. Arab States are committing to reviewing their economic policies to accommodate women's work more satisfactorily, and to that end they are undertaking various actions, including the following:

committee established to develop and implement a national labour covenant, legal and legislative committees, a committee responsible for following up a study on the privatization of several public sectors, a committee to review complaints in connection with commercial transactions, and national committees with authority to assess scientific qualifications. Arab women are now, for the first time, holding various posts from which they were formerly excluded.

84. Support for women's participation in decision-making processes has been forthcoming, in several States, in the form of experimental national mechanisms featuring a gender perspective with a view to enhancing participation by women in comprehensive national planning processes and more women in senior administrative posts in State institutions. There have been a number of pioneering experiments along these lines.

importance of access to and control of economic resources, and equality of opportunity in various fields. A number of Arab States have undertaken reviews of those strategies and their implementation mechanisms in the light of new political and economic developments and trends in the area of the status of women over the past decade, and also in the light of studies on impl

2. Remaining obstacles, gaps and challenges

97. Major obstacles, difficulties and gaps in this area include interpretations of Islamic law that involve

women continue to be largely unrepresented in decision-making and planning posts in all fields. They are

enable them to enjoy higher standards of living. In addition, there is little concern to empower women and provide them with vocational and social training, and this acts as a barrier to their advancement and awareness in this area. This situation has left wo

and economic life. In an effort to protect girl children from violence, some governments have organized campaigns against the sexual exploitation of children, while NGOs have established children's shelters.

2. Obstacles, gaps and challenges

111. Typical obstacles, difficulties and gaps in this area include non-enforcement of relevant laws, failure to develop a national strategy on children, not enough kindergartens and even fewer that are free of charge, the continued prevalence of female genital mutilation in some States, the gender gap in education, the cultural factor, especially in rural areas, the traditional family upbringing, early marriage, few programmes on the rights of the girl child, juvenile delinquency, violence against children in both public life and private life, the use of children as beggars, homelessness resulting from family breakup or exclusion from family protection, the sexual exploitation of children, the fate of children who are experiencing difficult situations, and disabled children confronted with a lack of adapted facilities.

112. In general, Arab States have committed to amend their legislation as required for the benefit of the girl child, to provide her with education, to provide staff members of various institutions with training in the rights of the girl child, accommodation of girl pupils in one-room schools, and elimination of discriminatory material from school books.

III. INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

113. Arab States have sought to promote gender equality as guaranteed in most of their constitutions and laws and realize it in all areas, support the empowerment and advancement of women with a view to enabling them to contribute more extensively and comprehensively to the development process as full citizens in constructive partnership, support the monitoring and implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. In pursuit of these ends, they have devoted substantial efforts to the task of developing an institutional framework, establishing numerous mechanisms and taking a variety of institutional measures. The result has been tangible progress for women, although gaps and challenges still remain.

A. NATIONAL INSTITUTIONAL MECHANISMS

114. The Fourth World Conference on Women, and the Platform for Action that was one of its outcomes, recommended action to establish national bodies and mechanisms for the advancement of women, granting them authority to plan and advocate progress toward that end and monitor the achievement of such progress (Beijing Platform for Action, paragraph 217). Pursuant to that recommendation, and in order to translate constitutional provisions relating to gender equality into institutional, sectoral and legislative policy, most Arab States, generally speaking, have established new ministries with responsibility for women and children, or else ministries with responsibilities including women's issues, such as ministries of human rights or ministries of political development. Some States have both a ministry of women's affairs and a ministry of human rights. In addition, a number of States have set up units for women's affairs within various ministries with a view to eliminating gender-based discrimination.

115. At the same time, Arab States have established national committees, agencies, councils and the like to implement programmes, provide coordination, serve in an advisory capacity and so on. The tasks for which these various bodies are responsible include:

- (a) Development of public policy in the area of women's issues;
- (b) Reviewing all current laws relating to women and redrafting or replacing any provisions with wording indicative of gender-based discrimination, or taking any other necessary action to implement the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action;
- (c) Participating in the drafting of national development plans and sectoral development plans with a bearing on women's affairs. Some States have not stopped there, but have gone on to mandate these bodies

to prepare national plans and strategies, update and develop them in response to changing circumstances and situations, monitor their implementation, and also monitor public policy actions relating to women's issues;

(d) Setting up communication networks, in some cases between these national bodies and the various

IV. MAIN CHALLENGES AND ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THEM

A. MAIN CHALLENGES

120. Excellent progress has been made in some of the Beijing critical areas of concern, such as education and health, while in others, such as women's human rights and violence against women, comparatively less progress has been achieved owing to the fact that their targets and objectives relating to the advancement of women are at variance with the dominant socio-cultural situation, and consequently the work of implementation has proceeded haltingly.

121. Accordingly, despite the programmes and projects that have been carried out to implement some areas of concern, further efforts and additional programmes, projects and measures are essential, indicating that future action will be required, depending on individual States' priorities as determined by their economic, social and political situations. Some areas of concern are more urgently in need of attention than others, notably women and poverty, women and the economy, human rights of women and violence against women. The task of implementing these areas will ultimately require more than addressing the main challenges.

122. In general, the main challenges may be summarized as follows:

- (a) Limited institutional capacities of national agencies and mechanisms;
- (b) Difficult economic circumstances, unstable political situations and inadequate financial resources;
- (c) Not enough gender mainstreaming machinery, and not enough gender awareness and training programmes;
- (d) Socio-cultural factors and extensive overlapping among the objectives of various critical areas of concern, with the result that they require an integrated approach in a multidimensional context rather than in isolation;
- (e) The nature of the international framework for addressing the situation of women, which has concentrated on shared international aspects, neglecting local and regional characteristics and the complexities of the actual situation, which are of the utmost importance in the Arab region, especially as regards the sphere of legislation.

B. ACTION TO ADDRESS CHALLENGES

125. In support of the implementation process, programmes and projects will focus on activating gender equality provisions enshrined in constitutions and other laws, revising the provisions of laws dealing with women's issues to bring them into line with international instruments that the State concerned has ratified, organizing awareness and education programmes for women, integration of gender issues in national plans and institutions, developing detailed gender-disaggregated statistics and precise indicators, promoting economic opportunities for women in poverty, providing continued training and vocational development for women to enable them to acquire modern technological skills and thereby join the labour market and upgrade their economic level, providing incentives for the development of various national mechanisms, and seeking to change the stereotyped image of women presented in the media.

PART TWO

AN APPRAISAL OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS FOR THE ADVANCEMENT AND EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN AND GIRLS, AND CURRENT CHALLENGES AND FORWARD-LOOKING MEASURES IN THAT CONNECTION

126. Part I of this report has presented a review of Arab States' efforts to implement the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action and the other initiatives and actions identified at the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly. Part II contains a summary of those efforts, an appraisal of achievements to date, and an overview of current challenges, followed by a set of proposed forward-looking measures aimed at enhancing and strengthening the implementation process during the coming five years, with a view to the advancement and empowerment of women and girls.

I. SUMMARY OF ARAB STATES' EFFORTS

A. ACHIEVEMENTS

127. Arab States have some remarkable achievements to their credit. Some of the most important of these are outlined below.

128. Arab States have adopted a policy of activating and strengthening gender equality and empowering women, with tangible results in the form of social evolution and increasing participation by women in various sectors. Some of the most noteworthy results of this policy are described in the following paragraphs.

(a) *Institutional achievements*

129. Arab States have devoted substantial efforts to the task of promoting the development of the institutional context. Those efforts have featured the establishment of a host of national mechanisms and bodies and a wide variety of institutional measures, including: (1) the introduction of new ministries responsible for women, human rights and political development; (2) the creation of units within ministries that are dedicated to women's issues, for the purpose of applying a non-discriminatory approach; (3) the establishment of high-level national mechanisms or reconfiguration of the mandates of existing mechanisms to bring them into line with the recommendations on national mechanisms in the Beijing Platform for Action.

130. These mechanisms have been entrusted with responsibility for a broad range of implementational, coordinative and advisory tasks. Some of the most important of those tasks include the development of public policy in the field of women's issues; conducting a complete review of legislation currently in force relating to women; formulating proposals for remedial action in the event that gender-based discrimination in existing legislation is found, or recommendations for the adoption of new legislation designed to implement the critical areas of concern in the Beijing Platform for Action; participation in the drafting of national development plans addressing every aspect of women's issues; direct action to prepare, update and develop national plans and strategies as changing circumstances and situations may require, tracking their implementation and monitoring the adoption of public policies relating to women's issues; the establishment of communication networks; organizing cultural meetings and training programmes; conducting essential studies; developing a gender-disaggregated database as a springboard for planning and follow-up action; and incorporating a gender perspective into the preparation of national policies, plans and strategies.

131. These various bodies are directly linked to the highest policy-making levels in the States concerned, and work on women's issues through ministries. They may take the form of a directorate or division for women's issues in ministries with responsibility for many development sectors. These national bodies and agencies include key executive-level representatives from directorates, divisions and sectors of ministries concerned with all aspects of the status of women.

132. Furthermore, some Arab States have established parliamentary committees on women and children, mandated either to propose amendments to existing legislation or to draft new law on the status of women. Another function of these committees is to discuss proposed legislation and resolutions on women drafted by other authorities before it is presented to the country's legislative body.

133. Many monitoring and tracking mechanisms to measure progress in implementation have been established in Arab States. National plans for incorporating a gender perspective into public institutions invariably include a monitoring component and appropriate mechanisms for effective action in that connection.

134. These States have also established independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues. Various means to this end are used, notably the filing of formal complaints.

135. A majority of Arab States have joined forces with NGOs to develop national plans and strategies aimed at strengthening the monitoring of implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, as well as many sectoral plans addressing various aspects of the advancement and empowerment of women, and solving any problems that arise in that connection. They include plans for the integration of women into the development process and plans for the elimination of violence against women. The national plans of action that were put in place after the Beijing Conference have now been replaced by other plans covering the subsequent period, and some Arab States have begun work on the next phase, namely, plans for the period 2005-2010.

in its capacity as a governmental authority, has been entrusted with coordination, monitoring and follow-up functions;

(d) Establishment of independent legal institutions, centres and associations mandated to call Governments to account in all matters relating to human rights. They serve as a national accountability mechanism for all forms of gender discrimination issues;

(e) Preparation of a national programme of action for the advancement of women, or development of a number of projects in pursuit of that objective over a five-year period in a framework of follow-up to the implementation of national work plans. In addition to this, some Arab States have developed a variety of sectoral plans;

(f) Preparation of a second national plan covering the next five years, and a number of States have begun work on a third plan for the period 2005-2010;

(c) Application of a non-discriminatory approach in some of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action;

(d) Execution of programmes and projects, implementation of numerous actions, and achievements in many of the Beijing critical areas of concern;

(e) Fulfilment of many of the commitments undertaken by Arab States at the Beijing Conference and in national work plans;

(f) Preparation of a variety of sectoral strategies and plans;

(g) Reforms in the area of public policy;

(h) Attainment of a number of the Millennium Development Goals and targets;

(i) Ratification of international instruments dealing with the status of women, including in particular the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women;

(j) Enactment of new legislation and amendment and revision of existing legislation to ensure gender equality in both public and private life;

(k) Gender mainstreaming and incorporation of a gender perspective into national plans and strategies and within ministries and State institutions and agencies.

C. INITIATIVES AND INDICATORS

150. Initiatives and indicators of progress in the advancement of women include:

(a) Reintroduction of scope for independent judgement in religious matters, and adoption of equality as an authoritative standard, with the result that new family law has been drafted;

(b) Addition of new provisions to criminal law, making some acts of violence against women criminal offences, such as sexual harassment and domestic violence; amendments to existing provisions of criminal law relating to crimes of honour, among other things;

(c) Establishment of institutions concerned with human rights;

(d) Allocation of funds for training and rehabilitation in general budgets;

(e) Broadening the scope of the social safety net (insurance and assistance benefits), raising the minimum wage and providing more opportunities for employment;

(f) Development of the education system and upgrading of internal capacities, being mindful to the concept of gender balance, and elimination from school books of illustrations indicating discrimination against women and textual matter demeaning to women;

(g) Reduction of existing gender gaps in all fields, promotion of family planning, reduced mortality rates among children and women, increased life expectancy at birth, increased average age of elderly women, lower total fertility rates, birth rates, infant mortality rates and maternal mortality rates, upgraded perinatal care, encouragement for the treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and early detection of breast cancer and cervical cancer;

(h) The presence of women in all sectors, including, for example, the government sector (women occupy posts as cabinet ministers and directors of government departments and agencies), the judiciary (women serve as presiding magistrates and public prosecutors), the education sector (women are university presidents and deans and directors of educational institutions, occupy senior positions in Ministries of

Education and pursue academic careers), the banking sector (women chair boards of directors), and other sectors (women head departments and divisions of many organizations, sit on policy development committees, and occupy senior posts in political parties and trade unions).

D. SHORTFALLS AND GAPS

151. While tangible progress in the matter of the status of women has unquestionably been made, there are still shortfalls: a number of Arab States have not yet been able to innovate radically and effectively in many of the critical areas of concern of the Beijing Platform for Action, and in others action aimed at expediting measures designed to empower women and promote gender equality has remained a dead letter. The most important of these shortfalls are outlined in the paragraphs below.

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(a) Women's issues have not yet been incorporated into the programmes of work of some Arab Governments, nor placed on their lists of priorities, possibly because political and economic problems tend to be regarded as more urgent;

(b) Decision-makers are not strongly committed to serious, systematic follow-up to the implementation of policies, plans and strategies, despite the fact that Governments have officially accepted their requirements;

(c) States' commitment to gender mainstreaming has been translated only to a limited extent into public policy in the form of practical plans, programmes and projbes6withm ender.2(ten)6.2(t9sc.2462 -1.091a-0.0016 Tcee.dw[

impeded implementation in the remaining areas, and most Arab States have been unable to fulfil their obligations with respect to them because of the number and variety of those challenges.

158. Prior to the feasibility of making progress in implementing any of these remaining critical areas of concern, therefore, the main current challenges must be overcome. Otherwise, the obligations of States in that connection will remain a dead letter, and matters will remain at an impasse.

159. The paragraphs below present a survey of some of the main challenges that have become apparent from our review of Arab States' efforts to implement the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome document of the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly.

